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## Exploring psychosocial factors influencing maladaptive behaviors following the break-ups of romantic relationship

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### Abstract

This study aimed to develop a comprehensive scale for assessing maladaptive behaviors following romantic break-ups and examine the experiences of university students in this context regarding psychological and relational factors with particular emphasis on the theoretical framework of Attachment Theory.

A total of 512 university students aged 18-25, who experienced a break-up within the past year, participated in the study. Measures included the Perceived Relationship Quality Components, Attachment-Based Mental Representation Scale (ABMRS), Distress Intolerance Index (DII), and Complicated Grief Inventory- Relation and Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale (PBMBS) explicitly developed within this study. The collected data were analyzed using various statistical techniques, including explanatory factor analysis (EFA), regression analysis, and mediation analysis. Results from the EFA revealed that the final version of the PBMBS consisted of 21 items across four constructs: Aggression Over Others, Dating and Sexual Act, Boundary Violation and Harassment, and Inclination to Pleasure and Denial with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .83. Hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that the increased elapsed time since the breakup, the higher scores of insecure attachment, and the Inventory of Complicated Grief, the lower scores of the Distress Intolerance Index, significantly predicted maladaptive behaviors following break-ups. Furthermore, the mediation analysis indicated a significant relationship between insecure attachment and post-break-up maladaptive behaviors, with distress tolerance mediating in this relationship. Overall, the study enhances understanding of post-break-up dynamics. The findings and implications were discussed concerning existing literature.

**Keywords:** Romantic relationships, break-ups, maladaptive behaviors, insecure attachment, distress intolerance



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## Introduction

The primary objective of this article is to make a scholarly contribution by constructing a statistically reliable measurement tool to investigate maladaptive behaviors that arise following the break-ups of romantic relationships. This section begins by clarifying the reasons for break-ups of young adults' romantic relationships and the impact on mental health outcomes. Furthermore, research findings about the emotional and behavioral reactions associated with break-ups will be explored, focusing on the Attachment Theory. Finally, this chapter introduces the specific hypotheses that will be investigated throughout this research.

## Romantic Relationships and Break-ups in Young Adulthood

The involvement in romantic relationships (Arnett, 2014) and the experience of break-ups during young adulthood are considered crucial tasks that not only shape this specific developmental period (Shulman & Connolly, 2013) but also contribute to the ability to navigate potential problems related to the future adult romantic relationships (Bravo et al., 2017). Existing research in the field indicates that university students, regardless of their gender, gain positive benefits from engaging in romantic relationships, as it has a favorable impact on their mental health (Simon & Barrett, 2010) and decreases exhibiting risky behaviors such as substance use (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010).

Terminating a romantic relationship, commonly called a "break-up," is the disconnection of a romantic bond between two individuals, leading to the discontinuation of their romantic involvement and emotional connection (Felmlee, Sprecher & Bassin, 1990). Farewells to suddenly lost beloved partners can be particularly challenging, especially for young adults. Notably, when examining the significant losses experienced by university students within the past year, non-death-related losses, such as the break-ups of romantic relationships, were found to be frequently reported (Cooley et al., 2010, 2014). This suggests that the impact of such non-death-related losses, particularly involving romantic relationships, should not be underestimated due to their profound influence on the experience of loss among young adults.

## The Outcomes of Break-ups

After a break-up, individuals often experience break-up stress, encompassing emotional and psychological distress caused by the end of the romantic intimacy (Field et al., 2009). Losing romantic relationships in emerging adulthood has a detrimental effect, leading to increased levels of depression (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999), negative emotions (Sbarra & Emery, 2005), and a rise in substance abuse (Larson & Sweeten, 2012; Salvatore et al., 2014). This study employs Attachment Theory as a theoretical lens based on young adults' behavioral reactions to loss and break-up. According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, in early childhood, a bond is formed between caregivers who provide protection, comfort, and support as a "safe haven" in times of stress and the offspring. In this relationship, the sensitivity and responsiveness of the attachment towards the baby enable the offspring to develop an internal and positive perception of their own self and others (Ainsworth, 1978). Bowlby (1973) coined the phrase "Internal Working Model (IWM)" to refer to the mental representations of the other, self, and relationship dynamics.



Conversely, an attachment formed with a who is unresponsive to the offspring's needs and lacks sensitivity during times of stress and danger leads to the offspring having a negative perception of their own self and others (Ainsworth, 1978). Studies on how adult attachment systems are activated have also demonstrated that when a threat is perceived, the brain automatically and mentally triggers representations of attachment s (Mikulincer et al., 2002).

### **The Romantic Break-ups as Loss**

According to Cooley et al. (2010, 2014), university students frequently report non-deathrelated losses, such as the break-up of romantic or friendship relationships, when asked about significant losses they have experienced in the past year. Interestingly, the reactions exhibited by individuals toward non-death-related losses are both adverse (e.g., loss of control, avoidance) and positive (e.g., resilience and personal growth).

### **Theoretical Frameworks-Attachment Theory and Separation-Attachment and Reactions to Romantic Break-up**

In the literature, examining attachment in the context of breakups involves exploring how individuals' attachment styles and behaviors are modified due to the end of a romantic relationship. Scholars have utilized diverse methods to examine the influence of attachment on the process of romantic relationship break-up and its consequences. One approach entails the analysis of individuals' attachment patterns through self-report measures, such as questionnaires or surveys, to assess their experiences and responses following a breakup. These assessments typically capture dimensions such as attachment anxiety and avoidance (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg and Van IJzendoorn, 1997; Davis et al., 2003; Teeruthroy & Bhowon, 2012).

### **The Role of Distress Intolerance**

Distress intolerance, which refers to the inability to withstand or tolerate distressing emotional states and the propensity to escape or avoid them (McHugh & Otto, 2011), exhibits significant variability among individuals and influences various aspects such as substance use, anxiety, and eating behaviors. The relationship between distress tolerance and emotion regulation is complex and noteworthy. Specifically, individuals who struggle to manage negative emotions effectively are more susceptible to developing depression and anxiety disorders (Dryman & Heimberg, 2018). Poor management of negative emotions can also have behavioral implications, as individuals with low distress tolerance may resort to avoidance behaviors such as substance abuse (Buckner et al., 2007).

### **The Present Study**

The objectives of the study were twofold. Firstly, it is aimed to contribute to the research literature by developing a statistically reliable measurement tool to explore the maladaptive behaviors of Turkish university students who have experienced a break-up of a romantic relationship within the past twelve months. Afterward, we explored the predictive factors of post-break-up maladaptive behaviors, considering gender, parental attachment concerning self-perception, relationship variables (e.g., relationship duration, break-up process, staying friends after the break-up), and psychological variables (e.g., distress intolerance).

Consequently, we examined a mediation model to explore how insecure attachment, involving



negative mental representations of the mother, father, and self, relates to displaying maladaptive behaviors after a break-up ( 1). Our hypoarticle posited that distress intolerance (Mediator) would play a mediating role in the connection between insecure attachment style (Independent Variable) and post-break-up maladaptive behaviors.

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following are study's research questions and research hypotheses in light of these objectives:

Research Question 1: What are maladaptive behaviors after romantic separation among Turkish university students?

Research Question 2: What are the psychosocial variables that predict these behaviors?

Hypoarticle 2.1: There would be a significant difference between women and men in terms of the score on post-break-up maladaptive behaviors.

Hypoarticle 2.2: There would be a significant relationship between age of the participants and their score on post- break-up maladaptive behaviors.

Research Question 3: What are the relational variables that predict these behaviors?

Hypoarticle 3.1.: The duration of the ended romantic relationship would be positively associated with post break-up maladaptive behaviors.

Hypoarticle 3.1.: The time elapsed after the break-up would be negatively associated with post- break-up maladaptive behaviors.

Hypoarticle 3.2.: T Those who perceive the ended relationship as having higher quality regarding satisfaction, commitment, trust, intimacy, passion, and love would display more maladaptive behaviors following a break-up.

Research Question 4: What is the mediating role of distress intolerance on the relationship between attachment-based mental representations and maladaptive behaviors after the breakup?

Hypoarticle 4.1.: Individuals with insecure attachment would have high scores on of distress intolerance index, which will be associated with an increase in individuals' romantic postbreak-up maladaptive behaviors.

The inclusion criteria for the study required participants to be between the ages of 18 and 25, to be university students, and to have experienced a break-up of their romantic relationship within the past twelve months or the last year. To be excluded from the study, participants had to be younger than 18 or older than 26, not experiencing a break-up of a romantic relationship past twelve months, and not enrolled in college. Therefore, 161 of the participants who have not experienced a break-up of their romantic relationship within the past twelve months were excluded.

The table below provides further demographic data about the participants.

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics**

Variable	Category	F	%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	408	79.7
	Male	104	20.3
<b>Age</b>	18-19	80	15.6
	20-21	195	38.1
	22-23	161	31.5
	24-25	76	14.8
<b>Education</b>	Associate	110	21.5
	Bachelor's	370	72.3
	Master's	32	6.3
<b>SES</b>	Very Low/Low	100	19.6
	Middle	282	55.1
	Middle-High/High	130	25.4
<b>Accommodation</b>	Family House	296	58.3
	Dormitory/Student	167	32.9
	Own/Other	45	8.9
<b>Psychiatric Diagnosis</b>	Yes	127	24.6
	No	385	75.4

This section offers information on the eight measurement tools used during the course of the study. The Relationship Information Form and the Sociodemographic Information Form are among the tools available, as are Turkish versions of the Inventory of Complicated GriefRelation Version, Distress Intolerance Index, Perceived Relationship Quality Components

Inventory, and Attachment-Based Mental Representation Scale. The Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale was another measure developed specifically for this study by the researchers.

### **Sociodemographic Information Form**

The form was developed by the researchers to gather descriptive information regarding the participants' age, gender, education level, socioeconomic status, the university and department they attended, the current cities in which they reside, and their histories of psychotherapy, psychiatric, and chronic physical treatment.

### **Relationship Information Form**

The researchers created this form to encourage participants to discuss details about recently ended romantic relationships and the break-up process. The questions on this form start with a question about whether they have experienced a break-up of a romantic relationship within the past twelve months and move on to questions regarding how the recent relationship ended, the duration of the romantic relationship, and how much time has passed since the breakup. The perceived reasons for the break-up were also asked with an open-ended question.

### **Procedure**

Following the TEDU Human Research Ethics Committee's approval, the study was carried out employing an online questionnaire consisting of all forms and scales created by an online survey tool (i.e., Qualtrics).

Announcements stressing the purpose of the research and the inclusion criteria were periodically shared on social media platforms with the goal of reaching out to potential participants via the convenience sampling method. Participants who met the inclusion criteria received the informed consent form. Participation in the study was voluntary, and each participant was able to end the survey at any time. At the beginning of the relationship information form, the participants were asked whether they have experienced a break-up of a romantic relationship within the past twelve months or not. Those who answered “Yes” to the romantic break-up question were able to pass on to the other questions of the survey, while those who answered “No” received a thank you message and were prevented from accessing the survey. After the data was collected, the survey filling times and IP addresses were monitored, the questionnaires filled in a short time, filled out more than once from the same source, and the surveys that were not completed were removed from the data set to increase the reliability of the data since it was collected online.

### **Results Psychometric Validation of the Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale Examining the Suitability for Factor Analytic Procedures**

The generated data set (N=512) is initially evaluated for suitability for the factor analysis technique using several assumptions before exploring the factor structure of Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale (PBAB). First of all, a sample size of 512 in this study is regarded as excellent, as Comrey and Lee (1992) described when the sample size required for factor analysis is more than 500. In addition, the missing values in the existing data were checked beforehand, as mentioned.



## Exploring Factor Structure and Items of The Scale

Elbows in the scree plot were assessed and factors with an eigenvalue over 1 were selected to determine the factor structure of the Post Break-up Maladaptive Scale.

Based on the elbows points and the theoretical background, it is presumed that the values are more than one and that there are 5 subscales, and A parallel analysis by O'Connor, 2000) was conducted to corroborate the number of these subscales..

*Factor 1 (Aggression Over Others)*

*Factor 2 (Dating and Sexual Act)*

*Factor 3 (Boundary Violation and Harassment)*

*Factor 4 (Inclination to Pleasure and Denial)*

During the development of the Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale, 32 items were eliminated from the item pool. As a result, EFA was repeated on the remaining 35 items of the scale, taking into consideration the possibility that the items remained in the scale will change due to a change in factor loadings. The PCA with direct oblimin rotation analysis was repeated after focusing on the five components using parallel analysis and theoretical background. The results are shown in Table 1.

There are significant correlations observed among the subscales, but it is noted that the correlations are generally small. This indicates that the scale has the capacity to measure the distinct components of this construct without overlapping with each other. In other words, it demonstrates the rationale behind dividing the construct into subscales and provides evidence of the overlap among the subscales.

## Discussion

The study attempted to accomplish two key goals. Its primary goal was to construct a valid and trustworthy evaluation tool to evaluate maladaptive behaviors that occur after romantic relationships break up in order to contribute to the body of existing research material. Second, the study sought to identify predictors of post-breakup maladaptive behaviors among Turkish university students, taking into account variables such as gender, relationship aspects (e.g., duration, break-up process), and psychological factors (e.g., distress intolerance). The study specifically examined a mediation model to determine how insecure attachment, including negative mental representations of the mother, father, and self, leads to the development of maladaptive behaviors after a separation.

## The Scale Development Study Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale

The "Aggression Over Others" subscale has six items. These items all relate to the bad features of the former partner, as well as the various ways in which these traits are displayed and shared with others. According to attachment theory, it can be suggested that people who are dealing with the stress brought on by a break-up display cognitive dissociation from the attachment or ex-partner in the context of the break-up. Therefore, these actions have their origins in this disconnection and might be accompanied by the feeling of anger.



The subscale “Dating and Sexual Act” consists of five items. After separation, people with an anxious attachment style frequently try to reestablish the lost connection immediately (Davis, 2000). It can be argued that these inclinations result from their inability to manage the high stress levels they experience. As a result, their behaviors frequently lead to the replacement of the person lost through the break-up with a new relationship with someone else (Davis et al., 2003). Therefore, the items on this subscale aim to assess the behaviors like dating and having sex with someone to start a relationship. Additionally, the ex-partner is the target of these actions, and the intent is to punish or enrage them.

The subscale "Boundary Violation and Harassment” consists of six items. These items include staying in touch with the ex-partner, stalking them, and getting information about them via others. These points rest on a preoccupation with the break-up of the relationship. It is known that individuals with anxious attachment styles are cognitively preoccupied with their past relationships and continually watch for signs of interest from their ex-partners (Shaver & Hazan, 1993). This subscale offers a useful measurement device to assess these certain behaviors.

### **Predictors of Maladaptive Behaviors Following Break-ups of Romantic Relationships**

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to predict post-breakup maladaptive behaviors. The first step of this analysis aimed to determine the contributions of demographic variables and variables related to the past relationship in predicting these behaviors. According to the results of the analysis, variables such as gender (female or male), age, educational status, the duration of the ended romantic relationship and perceived relationship quality did not significantly predict these behaviors. However, the income level, and the elapsed time since the break-up predicted these behaviors.

### **Discussion of the Mediation Model**

This study's findings shed light on the role of distress intolerance in mediating the relationship between perceived parental attachment and maladaptive behaviors following the break-up. Our findings show that those who report higher levels of insecure attachment are more likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors following a break-up. Furthermore, we discovered that distress intolerance partially mediates this relationship, implying that individuals with higher insecure attachment scores (with negative maternal and paternal attachment-based mental representations and self-perception) have a lower tolerance for distress, increasing the likelihood of engaging in maladaptive behaviors during the post-breakup process.

### **Theoretical Implications**

It was noted in the introduction that the end of romantic relationships generates a sense of separation and loss and that individuals go through phases such as numbness, despair, yearning, disorganization, and reorganization, as outlined by Bowlby. In addition to the study's findings,



attachment theory will be used once again to dive into more detail about how the reactions to break-up connect to the internalized working model in the attachment systems of the adults.

Bowlby (1973) states that the attachment system is an activated function in individuals during times of stress. Individuals respond to stress by seeking closeness with significant others who can help them manage it. These responses are accompanied by basic emotions such as anxiety and anger, indicating that some action needs to be taken to cope with the situation (Bowlby, 1973). If the significant others sought for support in managing stress fail to provide adequate responses, the individual experiences increased anger and helplessness, leading to detachment from those individuals. In the case of romantic break-ups, the person who was once the attachment no longer serves as a source of comfort during times of stress; instead, they become the source of stress. Therefore, a romantic break-up leads to activations or deactivation of attachment systems based on how the break-up distress is managed.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The study is not without methodological limitations. Firstly, the measurement of the developed scale relies on self-report data, which can be subject to biases. Participants may provide responses that they perceive as socially acceptable since the items in the scale include an aggression context. Moreover, break-up experiences are often asked related to retrospectives. In this study, participants were explicitly asked questions about their experience in the need to recall the process following the end of their significant romantic relationships within the past year. Retrospective recall of maladaptive behaviors and emotions related to break-ups can be influenced by memory biases or personal interpretations over time. This can impact the reliability and validity of the measurement. Further studies might be conducted with a longitudinal design to assess the impact of break-ups on young adults over time. This would allow researchers to track participants' behaviors, especially starting from the initiation of a romantic relationship until the formation of a new romantic relationship with someone.

Secondly, the research was conducted with a specific sample using the convenience sampling method. Therefore, the majority of our sample consisted of female university students aged between 18 and 25. Even though the sample represents diverse regions of Turkey, it restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Different age groups, cultural contexts, and relationship types should be considered when interpreting and applying the measurement in diverse populations. To address this, future research could consider expanding the age range to encompass both young adults and adults who may exhibit different behaviors and responses to a break-up.

Finally, only one scale was used in the study to assess maladaptive behaviors following the break-ups. There were no complementary measures or instruments to capture similar criteria or behavioral responses in this content. Despite its high-reliability values and positive correlation to the Inventory of Complicated Grief- Relation Scale, the study hardly utilizes established other measurement tools. Researchers can strengthen the study's methodology and enhance the overall quality of the results by including measures widely used and validated in previous research.

## Conclusion

The results of the study indicated that Post Break-up Maladaptive Behaviors Scale was highly reliable with 21 items ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The study also examined the maladaptive behaviors following romantic break-ups by integrating anxious, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment patterns into a broader framework of insecure attachment, which encompasses negative perceptions of self, mother, father, and their interactions. This perspective allows us to understand how individuals' internal working models, based on the representation of self, affect their behaviors in the face of various attachment-related stressors, such as separation from the romantic partner.

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