

Attachment Styles and Emotional Connectivity in Indonesian Long Distance Relationships: A Cultural Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how adult attachment styles shape relationship satisfaction among Indonesian university students in long distance romantic relationships (LDRs). Using a qualitative phenomenological design with seven participants aged 20–24, the research explored lived experiences of communication, intimacy, trust, and cultural values. Findings revealed that securely attached individuals displayed consistent communication, emotional openness, and resilience, whereas avoidant and fearful-avoidant individuals struggled with self-disclosure, emotional closeness, and satisfaction. Indonesian collectivist norms moderated attachment expressions, emphasizing emotional restraint and family-oriented decision making. The study highlights the cultural adaptation of attachment theory, showing how trust and intimacy are mediated by sociocultural expectations and digital communication. Practical implications include the need for culturally tailored therapeutic interventions, such as Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) and teletherapy. Future research should involve more diverse samples and longitudinal or mixed-method designs to deepen understanding.

Keywords: Attachment Style, Long Distance Relationship, Emotional Intimacy, Self-Disclosure, Communication Technology, Collectivist Culture.



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INTRODUCTION

Long distance relationships (LDRs) have become increasingly prevalent among Indonesian university students due to the geographic spread of higher education institutions, coupled with the mobility required for academic and professional advancement. Many students must leave their hometowns to pursue tertiary education in urban centers, creating scenarios where they must manage romantic relationships remotely. This demographic trend is reflective of global patterns, wherein young adults, particularly university students, are often faced with maintaining romantic connections over distance (Amelia, 2020). Technological advancements ranging from messaging applications to video conferencing tools have facilitated the maintenance of emotional intimacy,

yet the psychological processes that underpin satisfaction in such arrangements remain underexamined in Indonesia.

Attachment theory provides a useful lens for understanding satisfaction in LDRs. Securely attached individuals typically show intimacy and resilience, while those with anxious, avoidant, or fearful-avoidant tendencies face greater challenges in regulating emotions and resolving conflict (Bois et al., 2021; Siste et al., 2020). In digital contexts where physical presence is replaced by virtual interaction, these dynamics are often intensified.

Prior research emphasizes that communication quality, frequency, and emotional depth strongly predict LDR satisfaction. Securely attached individuals engage in meaningful exchanges, whereas avoidant partners often withdraw, increasing strain. Digital tools such as video calls and chats can enhance or hinder these outcomes depending on interpersonal tendencies (Waterman et al., 2017).

However, the psychological underpinnings of LDR satisfaction cannot be fully understood without acknowledging cultural influences. Indonesia is characterized by collectivist social values that emphasize group harmony, familial obligations, and emotional moderation. These values shape how individuals express affection, manage conflict, and prioritize relationships. Emotional restraint, a common trait in collectivist societies, may inhibit open discussions of dissatisfaction or emotional needs. Additionally, the expectation to maintain family approval in romantic matters adds another layer of complexity to attachment behavior (Kotera et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on attachment and relationship satisfaction, most existing models are rooted in Western individualistic paradigms that do not fully translate to Indonesian relational norms. Studies from non-Western contexts remain scarce, and even fewer have integrated technology mediated communication with attachment frameworks in culturally specific ways. There is a notable lack of empirical work that explores how technology interacts with culturally moderated attachment styles to influence relationship satisfaction, particularly in the context of Indonesian university students (Maulana et al., 2020).

This study addresses this gap by examining how attachment styles shape communication, intimacy, and trust in Indonesian LDRs through a phenomenological approach, while situating these dynamics within local cultural norms.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how attachment styles influence relationship satisfaction in Indonesian long distance relationships (LDRs). The phenomenological method was selected for its focus on lived experience and subjective meaning making. It allows for an in depth understanding of participants' internal perspectives, emphasizing how they interpret their own emotional and relational experiences within the specific context of LDRs (Robertus et al., 2022).

Seven individuals (aged 20–24), all currently in LDRs of at least one year, were purposively sampled from two Indonesian university hubs: Surabaya and Diponegoro University (Undip). The sample was chosen for its potential to provide rich, varied insights into how emerging adults navigate romantic attachment in physically separated relationships. Participant diversity was considered in terms of gender, attachment orientation, and length of relationship to improve the breadth of interpretive data (Rehman et al., 2024).

Semi-structured interviews elicited participants' reflections on communication, intimacy, trust, and satisfaction, guided by adult attachment theory and the ASI framework (Kadir & Bifulco, 2016). Chronological narration was encouraged to ease discussion of sensitive experiences (Male et al., 2022).

Attachment styles were inferred using a qualitative adaptation of the ASI. The interviews explored indicators of security, anxiety, avoidance, and fearfulness through relational examples. Participants were asked about their comfort with emotional closeness, patterns of dependency, responses to conflict, and experiences of trust and self-disclosure. Based on thematic patterns and narrative consistency, each participant was categorized under one of the primary adult attachment classifications: secure, anxious preoccupied, avoidant, or fearful avoidant (Amadi, 2021, p. 202).

Thematic analysis was conducted in several stages. First, interviews were transcribed and reviewed for initial impressions. Codes were developed inductively, focusing on meaning units related to emotional connection, communication behavior, and satisfaction outcomes. Two independent coders analyzed the data and reached consensus through iterative comparison, enhancing intercoder reliability (Philip et al., 2023). Themes were then refined and categorized under the broader analytical lens of attachment theory.

To ensure rigor, multiple triangulation strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing participant interviews across different attachment styles and relationship durations. Investigator triangulation was applied by involving multiple researchers in coding and interpretation to minimize subjectivity (Brown et al., 2015). Member checking was implemented by sharing preliminary findings with participants, allowing them to verify thematic accuracy. An audit trail of analytical decisions was maintained to enhance transparency and replicability (Philip et al., 2023).

Quantitative reliability strategies were integrated where feasible. For example, intercoder agreement rates were calculated and maintained above 80% consistency. These measures provided a quantitative validation layer within the qualitative framework, reinforcing the study's methodological credibility (Ooi et al., 2022).

Ethical approval was obtained from the affiliated university's research board. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured confidentiality, and provided written consent. They were also given the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Interviews were anonymized, and data were securely stored.

Overall, this methodology supports a holistic, culturally sensitive exploration of LDRs among Indonesian university students, providing a solid foundation for interpreting the nuanced role of attachment in shaping romantic satisfaction across physical distance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Communication as Emotional Bridge

Communication frequency emerged as a pivotal factor for maintaining emotional closeness in LDRs. Participants who engaged in daily check ins, either through video calls or messaging, reported heightened feelings of connection and trust. These practices provided reassurance and reduced relational uncertainty. Several respondents highlighted the emotional comfort derived from routine digital rituals, such as morning greetings or bedtime video calls, which replaced the absence of physical proximity. This finding supports existing literature suggesting that higher communication frequency correlates with stronger emotional bonds (Hammonds et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2020).

Variety of communication platforms also influenced outcomes. Participants who combined video calls, instant messaging, and voice notes reported greater capacity for emotional expression and conflict resolution. Video calls were often described as more intimate due to the visibility of facial expressions and tone. Respondents adapted platform use to fit preferences and schedules. (Newman et al., 2023).

Gender and cultural influences further shaped communication preferences. Female participants tended to initiate communication more frequently and valued emotional openness, while male participants emphasized pragmatic updates. This aligns with findings that collectivist norms and gender roles affect emotional expression and digital behavior in LDRs (Anisti et al., 2023; Billedo et al., 2020).

Self Disclosure and Trust

Trust and self-disclosure were tightly interwoven in participants' narratives. Individuals with secure attachment styles consistently engaged in reciprocal self-disclosure, fostering a deeper emotional connection. They described their ability to discuss vulnerable topics, such as fears about the future or emotional insecurities, without apprehension. This transparency was pivotal in reinforcing commitment and emotional reliability, particularly in the absence of physical reassurance (Fatimah, 2018).

In contrast, participants with avoidant or fearful avoidant attachment styles described significant barriers to emotional expression. These individuals reported discomfort in discussing feelings and often limited communication to surface level topics. As a result, their partners perceived them as emotionally distant, which diminished trust and led to conflict. One participant noted preferring text based conversations because they felt "less exposed," highlighting how technological mediation can both aid and hinder emotional closeness depending on attachment orientation (Tsai et al., 2016).

Participants mentioned strategies such as scheduled disclosure times and shared digital journals. Structured yet flexible routines were said to encourage emotional engagement without overwhelming either partner. Consistent, meaningful conversations even brief ones were described as helpful in rebuilding trust after misunderstandings (Fhitrah & Afdal, 2021; Naz, 2021).

Attachment Based Satisfaction Perception

Attachment style played a significant role in shaping overall relationship satisfaction. Participants with secure attachment styles reported stable satisfaction and fewer relational anxieties. They viewed physical separation as a manageable challenge rather than a threat, attributing this to their high emotional resilience and open communication patterns. Their satisfaction was bolstered by confidence in their partner's responsiveness and mutual commitment (Muassomah et al., 2020).

Conversely, individuals with anxious preoccupied or fearful avoidant styles often described fluctuating satisfaction levels, frequently influenced by communication quality and perceived responsiveness. Anxiously attached participants required frequent affirmations and reassurance, sometimes resulting in communication overload. Avoidant individuals withdrew during periods of tension, exacerbating emotional disconnection. This dichotomy underscores how insecure attachment styles impair emotional regulation and increase relational volatility (Turner & Prince, 2020).

Securely attached individuals also demonstrated superior emotional coping strategies. They balanced independence with intimacy and maintained realistic expectations regarding contact frequency. Techniques such as self-reflection, problem solving, and empathy were common coping mechanisms that enabled them to navigate relational stressors more effectively (Newman et al., 2023). In contrast, insecure individuals often misinterpreted neutral partner behavior as rejection, leading to unnecessary conflict.

Finally, perceived partner responsiveness emerged as a critical factor. Those who felt heard and emotionally validated by their partners reported higher satisfaction, regardless of attachment style. However, securely attached individuals were more likely to perceive neutral or delayed responses positively, attributing them to external circumstances rather than personal rejection. This interpretive flexibility contributed to greater emotional stability and satisfaction (Fhitrah & Afdal, 2021).

Overall, the results highlight that attachment styles profoundly shape how individuals experience and interpret relationship dynamics in LDRs. Secure attachment fosters resilience, while insecure attachment introduces vulnerabilities that amplify emotional distance. Communication frequency, trust building routines, and the intentional use of digital tools emerged as key mediators of satisfaction, offering pathways for intervention and support.

Communication Frequency and Synchrony in Attachment Regulation

This study highlights how attachment styles shape relational outcomes in Indonesian LDRs, particularly through communication. Secure attachment promoted intimacy and resilience, while insecure orientations amplified relational strain. These findings align with prior research

emphasizing the importance of frequent, meaningful interaction for sustaining intimacy in distance settings (Hammonds et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2020) that emphasizes the importance of frequent, meaningful interaction for sustaining emotional intimacy in geographically separated romantic relationships.

Beyond frequency, communication synchrony defined as the timing and responsiveness of exchanges was found to significantly shape satisfaction levels. Couples who could engage in real time video calls or prompt back and forth texting sessions reported feeling more connected, supported, and emotionally understood. Synchronous digital interaction appeared to reduce feelings of isolation and fostered a sense of immediacy, replicating aspects of co presence despite the lack of physical proximity (Ruppel et al., 2017). As participants reflected, the ability to respond to each other's emotional cues in real time provided reassurance and helped defuse potential misunderstandings before they escalated.

Cultural Norms and Attachment Expression in Indonesian LDRs

A key contribution of this study lies in its exploration of how collectivist cultural norms in Indonesia influence attachment expression and communication patterns. In Indonesian culture, interpersonal harmony, indirect emotional expression, and familial interconnectedness are highly valued. These sociocultural principles manifest in romantic relationships through behaviors such as avoiding direct confrontation, prioritizing group or family opinions, and managing emotions with restraint. Participants often noted difficulty expressing dissatisfaction or initiating emotionally difficult conversations not because of a lack of feeling, but due to internalized norms surrounding emotional moderation and deference.

These tendencies were especially pronounced among participants with insecure attachment styles. Anxiously attached individuals reported suppressing their concerns to avoid seeming overly emotional, while fearful avoidant individuals described withdrawing rather than expressing vulnerability. These behaviors, though protective within the cultural framework, often resulted in unmet emotional needs and communication breakdowns. In this way, the study affirms that attachment styles cannot be analyzed in isolation from cultural scripts, which shape not only the content but the acceptability of certain relational behaviors (Kotera et al., 2024).

Self Disclosure, Trust, and Gender Differences

Self-disclosure emerged as another core mechanism in attachment and relational functioning. Participants with secure attachment styles demonstrated comfort in sharing personal and emotional experiences, using disclosure to affirm their relational commitment and deepen mutual trust. Conversely, participants with avoidant and fearful avoidant attachments described hesitancy to reveal vulnerable feelings. This reluctance, often framed as a desire to avoid conflict or maintain independence, hindered emotional closeness and led to misunderstanding or perceived emotional neglect.

The gendered dynamics of these behaviors added additional complexity. Female participants were generally more expressive, initiating emotionally laden conversations and taking the lead in routine digital interactions. Male participants tended to limit conversations to practical or schedule oriented exchanges, which while efficient often lacked emotional depth. These patterns

correspond to regional gender socialization that emphasizes emotional restraint for men and emotional caretaking for women (Anisti et al., 2023). Such role expectations can exacerbate mismatches in communication style, especially when one partner seeks emotional support while the other defaults to task resolution.

Notably, strategies such as digital journaling, scheduled emotional check ins, and intentional question prompts helped couples overcome disclosure hesitancy. Participants who adopted structured but flexible communication routines were better able to build trust and manage relational uncertainty, suggesting that even for those with insecure attachment, trust building is possible with effort and tools tailored to their emotional patterns.

Practical Implications and Therapeutic Models

These findings inform therapeutic strategies. Adapted Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) and teletherapy can help couples develop secure bonds across distance. Psychoeducational programs that raise awareness of attachment and cultural influences may further support relational growth in LDRs.

Teletherapy, facilitated through video conferencing and integrated with relationship focused exercises, can be a valuable modality for couples separated by distance. Role play scenarios, communication coaching, and guided reflection sessions were mentioned by participants as potentially helpful resources. Some also expressed interest in relationship apps or structured communication prompts that could facilitate deeper emotional conversations without overwhelming either partner.

Moreover, psychoeducational programs aimed at increasing awareness of attachment styles and cultural influences on emotion expression could further empower couples to navigate their differences constructively. Programs that combine individual reflection with couple level exercises may provide the scaffolding needed for sustainable relational growth in LDR contexts.

Cross Cultural Relevance and Future Directions

Cross-culturally, this study affirms that attachment processes are universal but expressed differently across cultural contexts. In Indonesia, satisfaction is tied not only to emotional disclosure but also to harmony and familial approval. Future research should explore these dynamics across relational forms and through longitudinal or mixed-method designs.

Future research should further explore how these cultural scripts interact with attachment tendencies across diverse populations and relational forms. For instance, comparing romantic attachment in LDRs with familial or platonic long distance ties could illuminate whether communication and emotional needs differ by relational category. Mixed method or longitudinal designs may also reveal how attachment behaviors evolve over time, particularly in response to cultural shifts or digital communication innovations.

In sum, this discussion underscores that Indonesian LDRs are shaped by a dynamic interplay of psychological dispositions, technological affordances, and cultural scripts. Attachment style remains a foundational lens through which relational behaviors and outcomes can be understood, but it must be examined in tandem with cultural norms and digital practices that mediate its

expression. Recognizing these layers of influence opens the door for more culturally sensitive theories, practices, and policies that honor the complexity of long distance emotional connection in an increasingly mobile and digitally mediated world.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that attachment styles significantly influence how Indonesian university students navigate long distance romantic relationships (LDRs). Secure orientations fostered resilience, intimacy, and trust, whereas insecure orientations amplified emotional distance and relational strain. Importantly, collectivist cultural norms shaped how attachment was expressed, emphasizing harmony, family involvement, and emotional restraint.

The main contribution of this research is the integration of attachment theory with the cultural context of Indonesian LDRs, showing that universal psychological constructs such as trust and intimacy are mediated by local values and digital practices. This highlights the need for culturally grounded adaptations of attachment-based models.

Practically, the findings suggest that therapeutic approaches such as Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) and teletherapy should be tailored to local communication norms and gendered expectations. Psychoeducational programs that help couples recognize attachment tendencies and cultural influences may further strengthen relational satisfaction and durability.

Future studies should expand to larger and more diverse samples, employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and explore other forms of distance-based relationships, including familial and platonic ties. Such work will deepen understanding of how attachment, culture, and digital mediation interact to shape relational well-being in an increasingly mobile and interconnected world.

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