

# Trust Difficulty in Intimate Relationships: Understanding the Impact of Insecure Attachment and Flirting Styles

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## Abstract

Trust is essential to healthy intimate relationships, yet many individuals struggle to establish and maintain it. Guided by attachment theory, this study examined whether insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant) predict trust difficulty, and whether these associations are mediated by flirting styles (traditional and polite). Gender was explored as a potential moderator. A secondary analysis was conducted on data from 1,293 adults who completed a cross-sectional online survey measuring attachment, flirting styles, and trust difficulty. Regression, mediation, and moderated mediation analyses were performed using PROCESS macro. Both attachment styles positively predicted trust difficulty, respectively. Anxious attachment was associated with greater use of traditional flirting, and avoidant attachment with polite flirting. These flirting styles, in turn, predicted increased trust difficulty, indicating partial mediation. Gender moderated only the traditional flirting pathway, with a stronger effect for men. Findings suggest that attachment insecurity may contribute to trust difficulty through distinct early-stage communication behaviours that, while intended to initiate intimacy, may unintentionally undermine it. These insights underscore the importance of targeting maladaptive communication, particularly during the early stages of relational development, in clinical interventions.

## Keywords

flirting, attachment, trust difficulty, sabotage, gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Human beings are inherently social, and meaningful connections are vital to mental, emotional, and relational well-being (Apostolou *et al.*, 2018; Kansky, 2018). Intimate relationships, in particular, strongly contribute to life satisfaction and psychological health by reducing depression, enhancing happiness, and promoting overall well-being (Durham, 2010; Kardan-Souraki *et al.*, 2016). Despite these benefits, intimate relationships often end, with many individuals repeating unhelpful patterns in cycles of initiation and dissolution (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020, 2021; Peel *et al.*, 2019).

### Relationship Sabotage

Relationship sabotage refers to self-defeating attitudes and behaviours that undermine intimate connections (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020; Peel *et al.*, 2019). These patterns often stem from insecurity, such as fear, low self-esteem, and mistrust, and trigger defensive coping behaviours like withdrawal or control, escalating conflict and risking relationship breakdown. A core aspect of relationship sabotage is trust difficulty, often rooted in past betrayal or trauma and closely linked to insecure attachment (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020, 2021). Such experiences reinforce existing insecurities, prompting behaviours like jealousy or partner control that erode intimacy.

Trust difficulty consists of four components: partner pursuit, lack of trust, jealousy, and partner control (Peel *et al.*, 2019). Partner pursuit includes clingy, reassurance-seeking behaviours often associated with anxious attachment (Claes *et al.*, 2019; Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). Lack of trust and jealousy reflect unresolved relational wounds, leading to uncertainty and low commitment (Durham, 2010). Partner control involves coercive or manipulative behaviours that restrict autonomy and are sometimes linked to domestic and family violence (Arikewuyo *et al.*, 2021). Together, these dynamics disrupt communication and contribute to relationship failure.

## Understanding the Role of Trust in Intimate Relationships

Trust is essential for stable, satisfying relationships and is built on predictability, dependability, and confidence in a partner (Arikewuyo *et al.*, 2021; Durham, 2010). It requires vulnerability and is strengthened through effective communication, particularly self-disclosure, which fosters empathy and emotional closeness (Claes *et al.*, 2019). Securely attached individuals disclose more easily, trust more readily, and report greater satisfaction, while those with insecure attachment often struggle to express needs, increasing relational uncertainty (Campbell & Stanton, 2019; Hammonds *et al.*, 2020). Interventions that enhance communication, empathy, and problem-solving have been shown to promote trust (Kardan-Souraki *et al.*, 2016). This study builds on prior work by examining how attachment insecurities manifest through communication and how this influences trust difficulty. Rather than viewing trust difficulty solely as a reaction to past betrayal, it is conceptualised here as a dynamic process shaped by ongoing interpersonal interactions.

Gender is also considered a moderating factor. Durham (2010) found that men reported higher trust than women, challenging assumptions that women are more trusting due to emotional investment. These differences may reflect distinct socialisation, emotional needs, and responses to relational conflict, e.g., men were more distressed by sexual infidelity, women by emotional betrayal. Such patterns likely shape communication, interpretations of partner behaviour, and the development or erosion of trust.

### Attachment Theory

Attachment theory suggests that early caregiver-child interactions shape adult relationship patterns through internal working models of self and others (Bowlby, 1969; Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). Secure attachment develops through consistent caregiving and fosters trust, while inconsistent or unavailable caregiving often leads to insecure attachment, typically anxious or avoidant (Marrero-Quevedo *et al.*, 2018).

Anxious attachment is marked by negative self-views and fear of abandonment, prompting reassurance-seeking (Bartholomew &

Horowitz, 1991). Avoidant attachment involves emotional distancing and distrust of others, despite a positive self-view (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2013). Both styles, characterised by hyperactivation or deactivation, are linked to reduced trust in partners (Campbell & Stanton, 2019).

Gender may influence these patterns: women more often report anxious traits, while men tend toward avoidance, reflecting gendered social norms around emotional expression and autonomy (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). While these differences are generally small, they may affect how trust-related behaviours, like reassurance-seeking or distancing, are enacted and interpreted under stress.

Although attachment styles can shift through later experiences (Hepper & Carnelley, 2012), they often persist and shape communication into adulthood (McNelis & Segrin, 2019). Few studies have explored how these styles manifest in early-stage interactions, such as flirting, which is a gap this study aims to address.

## **Initiation of Romantic Engagement through Flirting**

Flirting is a key communication tool for initiating intimate relationships, often combining nonverbal and verbal cues (Cameron & Shabgard, 2023; Hall & Xing, 2014; McBain *et al.*, 2013). While typically seen as light-hearted, different flirting styles vary in their effectiveness at fostering attraction and trust (Hall *et al.*, 2010). Hall *et al.* (2010) identified five distinct styles, traditional, polite, physical, sincere, and playful, some of which are more conducive to lasting connections. If insecure attachment shapes flirting behaviour, it may also influence the development of trust. This study examines that link, focusing on how anxious and avoidant attachment may manifest through flirting styles, and how this interaction undermines trust in intimate contexts.

Two flirting styles are especially relevant to insecure attachment: traditional and polite (Hall *et al.*, 2010; Hall & Xing, 2014; McBain *et al.*, 2013). Traditional flirting aligns with gendered norms, men pursue, women signal subtly, and may reflect anxious attachment, particularly among women who fear rejection or struggle with self-disclosure (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These patterns can inhibit relationship progression and, over time, erode trust if excessive reassurance is sought.

Polite flirting is reserved, cautious, and emotionally restrained. While socially acceptable, it may signal disinterest and hinder deeper connection (Cameron & Shabgard, 2023; Hall & Xing, 2014). This style parallels avoidant attachment, marked by emotional distance, indirect communication, and self-reliance, traits that can limit the openness needed to build trust (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Campbell & Stanton, 2019). Other styles of flirting, such as physical, sincere, or playful, are less clearly associated with anxious or avoidant patterns and were therefore not the focus of this study.

## Objective

This study examined whether insecure attachment styles would predict trust difficulty in intimate relationships and whether flirting styles would mediate this relationship. It also explored whether gender would moderate these effects. Specifically, it was hypothesised that:

1. Anxious and avoidant attachment predicts trust difficulty.
2. Anxious attachment predicts traditional flirting; avoidant attachment predicts polite flirting.
3. Traditional and polite flirting mediates these respective relationships, with effects moderated by gender.

This research aimed to clarify how early communication patterns link attachment insecurity to trust issues, offering insights for clinical interventions targeting maladaptive communication and relationship sabotage, ultimately promoting healthier, more enduring intimate relationships.

## METHOD

### Recruitment and Participants

Data was originally collected by the second author between April and December 2023 using snowball sampling via the researcher's website, social media, and professional networks. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Southern Queensland (H20READ042 v7), with secondary analysis approved by the University of Technology Sydney (G-36-2024). Participants ( $N = 1293$ ; age 18–74,  $M = 32.39$ ,  $SD = 11.06$ ) had current or prior romantic experience. Most were female

(78.0%), heterosexual (77.6%), and based in Australia (88.6%). The sample included 20.7% males, 1.2% non-binary individuals, and one undisclosed gender. Relationship status was mixed, with 73.0% in committed relationships and 27.0% single.

## Procedure

This study used secondary data from a broader investigation into relationship sabotage to examine how anxious and avoidant attachment, along with traditional and polite flirting styles, influence trust difficulty. A cross-sectional design was used, with participants completing a voluntary, anonymous online survey. Informed consent was implied upon proceeding, following a detailed information sheet outlining procedures, risks, and confidentiality. The survey took approximately 20 minutes and involved self-report measures collected at a single time point.

## Measures

### Relationship Sabotage Scale (RSS)

The RSS (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021) is a 12-item scale assessing self-defeating behaviours in relationships. Only the four-item Trust Difficulty subscale was used, with items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Internal consistency was acceptable ( $\alpha = .65$ ; inter-item  $r = .33$ ), exceeding the original  $\alpha = .60$ . CFA of the full scale supports a stable three-factor structure (CFI = .96, RMSEA = .04) with good convergent and discriminant validity. Higher scores indicate greater trust difficulty.

### Revised Flirting Styles Inventory (FSI-R)

The FSI-R (Hall *et al.*, 2010; Hall & Xing, 2014) is a 23-item measure of flirting across five dimensions; only the Traditional and Polite subscales (five items each) were analysed. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The original 26-item version showed strong validity and reliability for the Traditional subscale ( $\alpha = .86$ ; loadings = .65 – .90; CFI = .95, RMSEA = .053). Hall and Xing's (2014) revision improved

generalisability. In the present study, reliability was lower (Traditional  $\alpha = .60$ ; inter-item  $r = .18$ ), though the subscale maintained its theoretical profile, supporting construct validity. The Polite subscale showed modest reliability in prior studies ( $\alpha = .68 - .77$ ) and captured reserved, rule-based flirting. Although internal consistency was poor in this sample ( $\alpha = .50$ ; inter-item  $r = .17$ ), previous evidence supports its convergent and discriminant validity. Higher scores indicate stronger alignment with the respective flirting style.

### Experiences in Close Relationships Scale – Short Form (ECR-SF)

The ECR-SF (Wei *et al.*, 2007) is a 12-item measure of adult romantic attachment, assessing anxiety and avoidance across two 6-item subscales rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Internal consistency in this study was adequate (Anxiety  $\alpha = .74$ ; Avoidance  $\alpha = .80$ ), aligning with original values ( $\alpha = .78, .84$ ). Validation studies confirmed a stable two-factor structure (CFI = .93, RMSEA = .05), test-retest reliability ( $r \approx .70$ ), and strong construct validity through correlations with emotional regulation, coping, and mood. Higher scores indicate stronger alignment with the respective attachment style.

### Data Analysis

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Version 26. Following data cleaning and assumption testing, four linear regressions assessed the direct effects of anxious and avoidant attachment on trust difficulty and flirting styles. Mediation was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples, followed by moderated mediation analyses (Model 59) to examine gender as a moderator. Standardised coefficients and 95% confidence intervals were reported. Demographics were excluded as covariates due to limited theoretical relevance.

Based on Sim *et al.* (2022), a minimum of 560 participants is needed to detect a small effect ( $f^2 = 0.02$ ) in mediation with 80% power at  $\alpha = .05$ . Given the exploratory nature of this research and the limited prior evidence, the target sample size was based on small effect detection. The achieved sample ( $N = 1293$ ) falls well above the recommendation, supporting adequate statistical power.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analysis

An initial sample of 1330 participants was screened for data integrity and inclusion criteria. Following the removal of cases due to duplicate IP addresses ( $n = 22$ ), missing data ( $n = 1$ ), ineligibility due to age or relationship experience ( $n = 10$ ), and implausible or patterned responses ( $n = 4$ ), the final analytic sample comprised  $N = 1293$  participants.

### Assumption Testing

Assumptions for linear regression and mediation analysis were evaluated. All assumptions were met except for the assumption of homogeneity. A square root transformation was applied to the dependent variable, improving residual spread, though minor heteroscedasticity remained. As a result, a heteroscedasticity-consistent standard error estimator (HC3) was used in all mediation analyses (Davidson & MacKinnon, 1985), which provides robust estimates under conditions of non-constant variance (Dawson, 2016).

### Hypothesis Testing and Analysis

#### Hypothesis 1

To test Hypothesis 1, two linear regressions were conducted. Higher anxious attachment scores significantly predicted higher trust difficulty, accounting for 26.6% of the variance,  $F(1, 1291) = 467.48, p < .001, R^2 = .27, \beta = .52, t = 21.62, p < .001$ . Avoidant attachment also significantly predicted higher trust difficulty, though it accounted for only 3.0% of the variance,  $F(1, 1291) = 40.56, p < .001, R^2 = .03, \beta = .18, t = 6.37, p < .001$ . According to Cohen's (1988) effect size guidelines,  $\beta = .10 - .29$  as small and  $\beta \geq .50$  as large, the effect of anxious attachment was large, while avoidant attachment showed a small but significant effect. These results supported Hypothesis 1.

## Hypothesis 2

To test Hypothesis 2, two linear regressions examined whether anxious and avoidant attachment predicted traditional and polite flirting, respectively. Anxious attachment significantly predicted traditional flirting,  $F(1, 1291) = 48.90, p < .001$ , explaining 3.6% of the variance ( $R^2 = .04, \beta = .19$ ). Avoidant attachment significantly predicted polite flirting,  $F(1, 1291) = 24.01, p < .001$ , explaining 1.8% of the variance ( $R^2 = .02, \beta = .14$ ). These findings supported Hypothesis 2, with higher attachment scores predicting greater use of corresponding flirting styles. However, both effects were small based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines.

## Hypothesis 3

To test Hypothesis 3, two mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS Model 4 with a HC3 estimator (Davidson & MacKinnon, 1985; Hayes, 2022). Both traditional ( $\beta = .13, t = 5.15, p < .001$ ) and polite flirting ( $\beta = .11, t = 3.96, p < .001$ ) significantly predicted trust difficulty, though with small effect sizes. Bootstrapped indirect effects (5,000 resamples) confirmed significant mediation: anxious attachment influenced trust difficulty via traditional flirting ( $ab = .025, 95\% \text{ CI } [.014, .038]$ ), and avoidant attachment via polite flirting ( $ab = .015, 95\% \text{ CI } [.006, .025]$ ). Anxious attachment and traditional flirting explained 28.3% of variance in trust difficulty (1.7% more than anxious attachment alone); avoidant attachment and polite flirting explained 4.3% (1.3% more than avoidant alone).

Moderated mediation (Model 59) showed that only the Traditional  $\times$  Gender interaction was significant ( $B = -.15, t = -2.09, p = .037$ ), with the link between traditional flirting and trust difficulty strongest for men. Though the added variance was small ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.2\%$ ), the confidence interval excluded zero. Conditional indirect effects were significant for men ( $ab = .033, \text{ CI } [.019, .047]$ ) and women ( $ab = .017, \text{ CI } [.009, .025]$ ), but negligible for non-binary participants. The male–female contrast was also significant ( $ab \text{ difference} = -.004, \text{ CI } [-.008, .000]$ ). No moderated mediation emerged for the avoidant–polite–trust pathway.

Total and direct effects were significant for both attachment styles: anxious ( $c = .516, c' = .490, p < .001$ ), and avoidant ( $c = .175, c' = .160, p < .001$ ), indicating partial mediation. Traditional flirting

accounted for 4.84% of the total effect of anxious attachment; polite flirting accounted for 8.56% for avoidant attachment. These results partially supported Hypothesis 3, showing that flirting styles partially mediated the attachment–trust link, with gender moderating only the traditional flirting pathway.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined whether anxious and avoidant attachment predict trust difficulty, whether these effects are mediated by traditional and polite flirting styles, and whether gender moderates these pathways. Findings partially supported the hypotheses. Insecure attachment was linked to greater trust difficulty, partially mediated by corresponding flirting styles. However, gender only moderated the traditional flirting–trust link, with a stronger effect for males.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, both attachment styles significantly predicted trust difficulty, supporting attachment theory (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019). Anxious attachment was the stronger predictor, likely due to reassurance-seeking behaviours that directly undermine trust (Campbell & Stanton, 2019), while avoidant strategies like withdrawal may have subtler effects. Differences in how trust is measured may also explain mixed findings across studies.

In support of Hypothesis 2, anxious attachment predicted traditional flirting and avoidant attachment predicted polite flirting. Although effects were small, they suggest attachment shapes early-stage communication, alongside other factors like motivation and personality (Hall *et al.*, 2010; Cameron & Shabgard, 2023).

Hypothesis 3 was partially supported: both flirting styles partially mediated the attachment–trust relationship, highlighting how attachment-related insecurity can manifest through early relational behaviours that undermine trust. These findings align with prior research linking insecure attachment to maladaptive communication and reduced intimacy (Harper *et al.*, 2006; Claes *et al.*, 2019).

Gender moderated only the traditional flirting pathway, with stronger effects for men, consistent with some research suggesting men's lower emotional investment may heighten trust issues (Durham, 2010) but contrasting studies where traditional flirting was more maladaptive

for women (Hall *et al.*, 2010). Overall, the findings underscore how attachment and early communication styles shape trust, and the importance of considering gender in these dynamics.

### **Strengths of the Current Study**

This study is the first to demonstrate that flirting styles mediate the relationship between insecure attachment and trust difficulty. While prior research has focused on direct predictors like relationship dissatisfaction, this study highlights communication, specifically flirting, as a behavioural mechanism linking psychological vulnerability to relational outcomes. These findings suggest that trust is not solely shaped by past experiences but also by early-stage communication patterns. Traditional flirting may reflect anxious attachment through reliance on gender norms and inhibited self-expression, while polite flirting may reflect avoidant attachment through emotional distancing (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Campbell & Stanton, 2019; Hall *et al.*, 2010). However, as relationships progress, other communication behaviours (e.g., conflict management, self-disclosure) may play a more central role in trust development. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how the influence of flirting evolves over time. This study also relied on self-reported flirting behaviour. Future research should explore how partner-perceived flirting influences trust, particularly when polite flirting is misinterpreted as disinterest. A dyadic approach would offer deeper insight into how flirting styles are experienced and interpreted within relationships, and how they shape or destabilise trust.

### **Clinical Implications**

These findings have important clinical implications. The link between insecure attachment, maladaptive communication (e.g., indirect or inhibited flirting), and trust difficulty highlights the value of communication-focused interventions. Therapy that helps clients recognise and address attachment-related behavioural patterns can improve relational outcomes. Attachment-based approaches that promote emotional expression, self-disclosure, and relational attunement have been shown to enhance intimacy and trust (Berry & Danquah, 2016; Burke *et al.*, 2016; Kardan-Souraki *et al.*, 2016).

Additionally, constructive communication has been linked to greater relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being (Pereira *et al.*, 2022), supporting the use of such interventions to foster more secure, trusting relationships.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Despite novel findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, effect sizes were small, and much variance in trust difficulty remains unexplained, suggesting other mechanisms, such as self-disclosure, may play a more central role. Self-disclosure fosters openness and emotional closeness (Claes *et al.*, 2019; Durham, 2010) and has been shown to mediate the attachment–trust link (Hammonds *et al.*, 2020). Flirting styles associated with greater relational success, like sincere and physical flirting, tend to involve more self-disclosure than traditional or polite styles (Hall *et al.*, 2010), warranting further investigation of self-disclosure as a potential mediator.

Second, generalisability is limited due to a predominantly female, Australian sample, which may have reduced power for detecting gender moderation and limits applicability to broader populations. Third, reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias and inaccuracies (Lavraka, 2008; Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). Fourth, some subscales, particularly polite flirting, showed low reliability, limiting the robustness of results and indicating the need for scale refinement.

Lastly, the trust difficulty measure may have aligned more with anxious traits (e.g., jealousy, partner monitoring) than avoidant traits (e.g., withdrawal, fear of dependence), potentially explaining the stronger association with anxious attachment. Future research should use broader trust measures capturing both hyperactivating and deactivating distrust, and adopt longitudinal, mixed-method, and dyadic designs to clarify temporal relationships and deepen conceptual insight.

## CONCLUSION

This study is the first to examine how insecure attachment styles, flirting styles, and trust difficulty interact in intimate relationships. Findings partially supported the proposed hypotheses, showing that

insecure attachment influences trust difficulty both directly and indirectly via flirting styles, with gender moderating the traditional flirting–trust link. Although flirting styles served as partial behavioural mediators, their modest effects suggest other factors also shape trust. Still, the study advances theory by linking attachment insecurity to early-stage romantic communication, offering a foundation for future research and informing interventions aimed at fostering secure, trusting relationships.

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