

The Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence and its Association with Adult Attachment Styles among University of Nairobi Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is globally recognized as a critical public health and human rights concern. This issue is especially prevalent among university students. However, there is still insufficient empirical evidence on the psychological dimensions of IPV from the perspective of attachment theory. Specifically, more research is needed on how attachment styles influence IPV victimization within academic settings. This analytical cross-sectional study aimed to assess the association between IPV victimization and adult attachment styles, along with relevant sociodemographic factors. Data collection employed validated and standardized instruments, including the adapted Adult Attachment Scale and WHO scale to measure attachment styles and IPV, respectively. Additionally, a designed sociodemographic scale assessed respondents' attributes. The study targeted undergraduate students at the University of Nairobi, with data collected electronically using Kobo Collect software from a sample of 445 students (38.7% male, 61.3% female). Data analysis, performed using STATA version 17, revealed that the majority of participants (81.3%) were aged between 18 and 25 years, with an overall IPV prevalence of 41.1%. Bivariate correlational analyses demonstrated significant positive associations between IPV prevalence and both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Students with anxious attachment styles were four times more likely to experience IPV compared to those with secure attachment ($p < 0.001$, $OR = 3.99$, 95% $CI: 2.4-6.7$). Similarly, participants with avoidant attachment styles were twice as likely to experience IPV compared to those with secure attachment ($p = 0.02$, $OR = 2.15$, 95% $CI: 1.1-4.1$). Among sociodemographic factors, cigarette smoking ($AOR = 4.0$, $p = 0.038$) and marijuana use ($AOR = 2.4$, $p = 0.026$) showed significant associations with IPV experience. However, gender, age, and course of study demonstrated no significant associations with IPV. Recommendations for further research and policy implications are discussed herein.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence victimization, attachment styles, secure attachment, avoidant attachment.

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant concern in community health and is recognized globally as an urgent issue that constitutes a fundamental violation of human rights (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). IPV, also referred to as domestic or spousal abuse, includes any behavior by a current or former partner—such as a husband, wife, boyfriend, or girlfriend—that causes psychological, physical, sexual, or emotional harm (WHO, 2012). Breiding (2015) further defines IPV as involving various forms of abuse, including psychological, physical, and sexual violence, as well as stalking, often involving tactics of intimidation.

IPV is prevalent among young people, particularly university students, who may face abusive dynamics in their romantic relationships. Studies indicate that romantic relationships in young adults are not always characterized by “puppy love” but can often include elements of abuse (Klencakova et al., 2023). IPV among young adults has been shown to lead to negative outcomes, such as mental health challenges, economic instability, and academic struggles. For instance, a study by Koyugi and Kabuka (2003) examining IPV among students in technical institutions in Kenya’s Nyanza province found high rates of both victimization and perpetration, with prevalence rates between 80% and 97% across male and female participants. The study concluded that IPV, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, was pervasive and had a damaging effect on victims' self-esteem and emotional healing.

Empirical evidence suggests that certain psychological factors, like attachment style, are critical in understanding IPV (Mohammadi & Spencer, 2024; Munoz, 2021; Spencer et al., 2021). While external factors are often the focus in addressing IPV, intrinsic factors like attachment style may be just as influential. Attachment styles, which develop from early-life interactions, shape how individuals perceive and engage in relationships. A secure attachment typically forms through consistent care, warmth, and nurturing during childhood, while insecure attachment styles—such as anxious or avoidant—are often linked to neglect or a lack of affection during upbringing (Bowlby, 1958). These early experiences may lead to insecure attachment patterns in adulthood, influencing behaviors in intimate relationships. Other determinants such as witnessing violence in childhood, have also been shown to contribute to insecure attachments that can later affect relationships (Tussey et al., 2022).

Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory (Maree, 2022) emphasizes that young adults (generally aged 20 to early 40) are in a critical phase known as “intimacy versus isolation,” where they strive to form intimate relationships. Failure to successfully navigate this stage can lead to isolation and difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal bonds. Erikson’s theory suggests that young adults, often during their university years, may face challenges in building stable relationships, especially if earlier developmental stages were unresolved. This context is crucial for understanding the social and emotional struggles that can underlie IPV among university students.

According to Kline (2009), dating is an essential part of young adults’ social development and a vital aspect of university life. However, dating during this period can be fraught with conflict, as young adults learn to navigate and establish healthy interpersonal dynamics. Kline emphasized that this stage can sometimes involve complicated, painful, and potentially risky experiences. Many young adults may not even recognize some of these negative experiences as abuse or violence, leading to increased vulnerability to IPV.

IPV often begins in youth and continues through early adulthood, frequently manifesting in dating, cohabitation, or marriage and involving controlling behaviors that may lead to emotional, financial, sexual, and physical abuse (Kline, 2009, as cited in Spencer, 2021). Research suggests that some populations of undergraduate students are at greater risk for IPV, underscoring the importance of understanding demographic and contextual factors related to IPV cases as reported in various media platforms.

Cases of Intimate Partner Violence among Tertiary Students

Intimate partner violence (IPV) among tertiary students is increasingly prevalent worldwide, affecting both male and female students. While IPV is commonly associated with gender-based violence, it spans a range of abusive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Unfortunately, universities are no exception to IPV's reach, and cases across different regions illustrate the alarming rise in IPV incidents among students.

In one instance in the United Kingdom, a 26-year-old Hull University student was physically assaulted and ultimately killed by her boyfriend, a fellow student, after she refused to engage in sexual intercourse. Reports noted that her boyfriend stabbed and strangled her, illustrating the extreme dangers posed by IPV in student relationships (Brooke, 2007). Similarly, in India, a tragic case involved a student at Karur Engineering College who was killed by her boyfriend after rejecting his proposal. Police sources revealed that he was intoxicated at the time of the offence (Jaisankar & Sundar, 2016).

Across Africa, IPV cases among university students are also on the rise, with numerous instances reported in Nigeria. Media outlets have highlighted how IPV cases, often involving physical attacks and even murder, stem from minor disputes and illustrate the urgent need for effective intervention (Dachen, 2015). Kenyan campuses have also seen a rise in IPV incidents, commonly referred to as “passion killings,” which have led to student protests and calls for stronger measures against IPV (Sun Reporter, 2013). For example, at Kenya’s Maasai Mara University, a 22-year-old third-year female student was found dead in her rented house. Friends reported that her ex-boyfriend had recently visited her, allegedly to reconcile, but evidence at the scene suggested a violent altercation had occurred before her death (Shikuku & Keter, 2016). This case prompted outrage among students, who demanded swift police action.

Similarly, at Moi University, a 21-year-old second-year education student was stabbed multiple times by her ex-boyfriend in her hostel. During the attack, he locked the door and threatened her friends not to interfere. Other students eventually intervened, preventing him from taking his own life, though he attempted suicide shortly afterwards (Ollinga, 2015). Another tragic instance involved a recent graduate from Kenyatta University who was killed by her boyfriend just 10 days after graduation. The assailant allegedly reacted violently after she ended their relationship, citing his financial support throughout her education (Mbuvi, 2016).

Cases of IPV among university students reveal complex underlying issues, including jealousy, substance abuse, and financial dependency, which may fuel violent behavior. According to Njenga (2016), Kenyan universities are gradually becoming “traps of fatality” for some students who experience IPV, emphasizing the urgent need for preventive and protective measures. Interviews with students at the University of Nairobi revealed widespread psychological, sexual, and physical abuse, with most incidents affecting female students. In one particular case, a male student assaulted his girlfriend in a public space after suspecting infidelity, resulting in her fleeing to the administration block for safety before being attacked further (Njagi, 2012).

Numerous studies support that attachment styles, psychological traits, and early experiences of violence may contribute to IPV in young adult relationships. Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory suggests that individuals in early adulthood are in a critical developmental phase, where successful relationship-building is crucial for avoiding isolation and ensuring positive interpersonal relationships (Maree, 2022). Young adults who have experienced adverse attachment patterns or trauma may struggle to navigate relationships healthily. This complexity suggests that IPV is influenced not only by situational factors but also by deeper psychological underpinnings that warrant careful exploration and intervention.

These cases underscore the serious implications of IPV among tertiary students, with many resulting in severe injury or death. Reports from various regions and universities reveal that IPV is an escalating problem affecting students globally. Effective intervention requires that institutions, policymakers, and community health organizations work together to address IPV, implement preventive measures, and provide supportive resources for students experiencing violence in their intimate relationships.

The prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among university students remains underexplored, especially concerning its association with attachment styles. Limited research has examined the psychological factors, such as attachment styles, influencing IPV among this demographic. From the foregoing, this study seeks to assess the association between IPV prevalence and attachment styles among university students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

An analytical cross sectional survey design was implemented in the study. This design allows the collection of data at a single point in time which is key in analyzing potential correlations providing insights into patterns and possible causal relationships without establishing causality directly (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

Participants and Procedures

The study employed a sample of 445 undergraduate students (38.7% male, 61.3% female). Respondents were

drawn from 10 faculties across two University of Nairobi campuses; the Main Campus and the Kenyatta National Hospital campus. Of these, 81.3% were between the ages of 18 and 25, while the remainder were aged 26 to 30. Inclusion criteria specified undergraduate students aged 18 and above with either current or past intimate partners. A multi-stage sampling technique was utilized to ensure a representative distribution across all faculties. Ethical approval was obtained from the university’s Ethics Research Committee (KNH-UON-ERC) and the National Council of Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Data collection was conducted via an online survey administered on the Kobo Collect Platform. Participants provided informed consent before completing the survey and were assured of both anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Instruments

Social Demographic Questionnaire

The socio-demographic questionnaire was used to collect socio-demographic data. The attributes of interest in this study included the course of the study, age, gender, relationship status, intimate partner violence in the past or current relationship, income or allowance range and any substance use.

Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins, 1996)

To measure adult attachment style the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) was used. The scale was ideal as it was formulated on a sample of undergraduate scholars that measures adult attachment styles anxiety, anxious and secure attachment style (Collins, 1996). This scale is an 18 item- five-point Likert scale ranging between “Not characteristic of me “(1) to “Very characteristic of me” (5). The tool has been proven as a reliable and valid measure of attachment styles. In the initial study, Collins (1996) reported Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of $\alpha = .69$ for Close, $\alpha = .75$ for depend, and anxiety score of $\alpha = .72$. Within two months period AAS Test-retest correlations were $r = .68$ for Close, $r = .71$ which reflects good reliability and validity. Scoring involves the computation of a global score.

WHO Intimate Partner Violence (Undie et al., 2012).

The WHO Intimate Partner Violence Scale (Undie et al., 2012) was employed to assess the IPV prevalence in the sample. The tool is a 12-item dichotomous scale (Yes, No) assessing IPV in both current and past relationships. The IPV scale measures three types of intimate partner violence which are emotional, physical and sexual violence. The tool was a reliable measure of the respondents, IPV prevalence levels. Scoring involved the computation of global scores as well as scores at the respective dimensions assessed in the study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The collected data were exported from the Kobo Collect Platform to STATA version 17 for analysis. Data analysis involved descriptive analyses, bivariate analyses between IPV and attachment styles and multivariate logistic regression analyses on the associated social demographic attributes and IPV.

Descriptive Analyses

The respondents’ demographic attributes were assessed, and the findings highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Analyses

Variable		Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Age	18-25y	153 (89.0)	209 (76.6)	362 (81.3)
	26-30y	19 (11.0)	64 (23.4)	83 (18.7)
Educational Course	Health Sciences	49 (28.5)	85 (31.1)	134 (30.1)

	Arts and Social	99(57.6)	146 (14.6)	245 (55.1)
	Engineering	24 (14.0)	42 (15.4)	66 (14.8)
Substance Use	Alcohol	43 (25.0)	80 (29.3)	123 (27.5)
	Cigarette	6 (3.5)	13 (4.8)	19 (4.3)
	Marijuana	17 (9.9)	37 (13.5)	54 (12.1)

Note. n (Male) = 172; n (Female) = 273; N = 445

As shown in Table 1, the majority of students (81.3%) were between 18 and 25 years old, with the remaining 18.7% aged between 26 and 30. In terms of educational programs, 55.1% of respondents were enrolled in arts and social sciences, followed by 30.1% in health sciences, and 14.8% in engineering. Further on, alcohol was the most used drug (27.5%) with female respondents having comparatively higher proportions of people consuming drugs.

The students further provided information on IPV prevalence and attachment style. Analyses on the proportions of respondents who have experienced IPV are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Prevalence of IPV by Genders

Dimension	Male	Female	Total
Emotional violence	29.1%	30.0%	30.9%
Sexual violence	14.0%	22.7%	19.3%
Physical Violence	22.7%	23.8%	23.4%
All the above forms of IPV	39.5%	42.1%	41.1%

Analyses on Table 2 showed that nearly half (41.1%) of the students had experienced IPV from previous or current relationships. Emotional abuse (30.9%) was the most prevalent form of IPV among the students followed by physical violence (23.4%). Notably female respondents reported marginally higher proportions of IPV in all its forms. However, they were substantially more predisposed to sexual violence (22.7%) as opposed to males (14%).

Descriptive analyses on attachment styles are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Attachment Styles by Gender

Dimension	Male	Female	Total
Anxious attachment style	54.1%	59.3%	57.3%
Secure attachment style	26.7%	23.4%	24.7%
Avoidant attachment style	19.2%	17.2%	18.0%

Table 3 highlights that a majority of the respondents had anxious attachment (57.3%) whereas the least had avoidant attachment style (18.0%). There were higher proportions of female respondents with anxious attachment style (59.3%) as compared to male respondents (54.1%). More male respondents (26.7%) had a secure attachment style than females (23.4%). A similar pattern was shown in the avoidant attachment style.

Hypothesis Testing

Linear logistic regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between IPV and the select social demographic factors. The findings are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlation Between Select Social Emotional Factors and IPV

Variable	P > z	aOR	P > z	95% Interval CI	
Gender	0.589	1.001	0.996	0.644	1.557
Age		0.787	0.457	0.418	1.480
Educational Level (Bachelors, Diploma)		1.787	0.206	0.727	4.393
Course (Health Sciences, arts, engineering)		0.702	0.353	0.332	1.482
Year of Study (Year 1, 2, 3, and 4).		1.450	0.408	0.602	3.496
Alcohol Use	0.001*	1.666	0.065	0.970	2.863
Cigarette Use	0.001*	4.008	0.038*	1.077	14.918
Marijuana Use	0.001*	2.402	0.026*	1.110	5.195

As outlined in Table 4 cigarette (aOR= 4.0, p = 0.038) and marijuana smoking (aOR = 2.4, p= 0.026) were the only social emotional factors significantly related to ever experiencing IPV. Whereas alcohol intake in association with IPV was almost significant by (aOR =1.66, p = 0.06). Students who smoke cigarettes were 4 times more likely to have experienced IPV, compared to those who did not smoke. Those smoking marijuana were 2.4 times more likely to have experienced IPV compared to those who do not smoke marijuana. Whereas students who drank alcohol were a twice as likely to have experienced IPV as compared to those who did not.

Further, bivariate correlational analyses were performed to assess the statistical significance of the relationships between the different forms of IPV and the attachment styles. Pearsons' Product Moment Correlation Test was performed at 95% confidence interval. The findings on the same are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Correlation between Attachment Styles and the Forms of IPV

Variable	IPV	Sexual Violence	Emotional Violence	Physical Violence
Anxious Attachment Style	.24***	.15**	.27***	.13**
Avoidant Attachment Style	-.05	.07	-.06	.04
Secure Attachment Style	-.24***	.11*	.11***	.12*

Note. *** = Correlation Significant at .001(2- Tailed); ** = Correlation Significant at .01(2- Tailed); * = Correlation Significant at .05(2- Tailed).

Anxious attachment style demonstrated a significant positive correlation with overall IPV ($r(443) = .24, p < .001$), with the strongest association specifically with emotional violence ($r(443) = .27, p < .001$), and weaker yet significant correlations with sexual ($r(443) = .15, p < .01$) and physical violence ($r(443) = .13, p < .01$). Avoidant attachment style did not show significant correlations with any form of IPV, indicating weak or non-significant relationships across IPV types. Secure attachment style had a significant overall negative correlation with IPV ($r(443) = -.24, p < .001$), suggesting a reduced likelihood of IPV for individuals with secure attachment. However, it showed weak but significant positive correlations with specific forms of IPV:

sexual ($r(443) = .11, p < .05$), emotional ($r(443) = .11, p < .001$), and physical violence ($r(443) = .12, p < .05$). These findings imply that while secure attachment may generally offer protection against IPV, certain risks may still persist across different IPV forms.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) and its association with adult attachment styles among undergraduate students at the University of Nairobi. The findings revealed a concerning IPV prevalence rate of 41.1%, with significant associations between attachment styles and IPV experiences. Notably, students with anxious attachment styles were four times more likely to experience IPV compared to those with secure attachment, while those with avoidant attachment styles showed twice the likelihood of IPV experiences.

The observed IPV prevalence aligns with recent studies conducted in the United States and Africa, which reported similar rates ranging from 43.1% to 47% (Anikwe et al., 2023; Fatehi et al., 2022). However, this rate is substantially higher than previous studies conducted at the University of Nairobi and other Kenyan institutions, which reported prevalence rates of 22.3% to 29% (Memiah et al., 2020; Njagi, 2012). This increase may reflect improved reporting mechanisms, particularly through anonymous online data collection methods, which potentially reduced underreporting due to privacy concerns and fear of retaliation.

Regarding attachment styles, the study found that 57.3% of participants exhibited anxious attachment, followed by secure (24.7%) and avoidant (18.0%) styles. This distribution pattern aligns with developmental theories, particularly Erik Erikson's framework, which suggests that young adults prioritize intimacy over isolation, potentially manifesting in anxious attachment behaviors (Gold & Rogers, 2016). Gender differences in attachment styles were notable, with females showing higher rates of anxious attachment (59.3% vs. 54.1% in males) and males displaying higher rates of avoidant attachment (19.2% vs. 17.2% in females). These findings support existing literature on gender-specific attachment patterns and may reflect socialized gender roles in emotional expression and relationship dynamics (Gibby & Whiting, 2021).

The strong association between anxious attachment and IPV victimization corroborates previous research (Maferi & Danila, 2021; McClure & Parmenter, 2020), suggesting that anxious attachment may serve as a risk factor for IPV experiences. This relationship was particularly pronounced for emotional and sexual violence, indicating that attachment-based interventions might be crucial in IPV prevention strategies. The negative correlation between secure attachment and IPV suggests that fostering secure attachment patterns could serve as a protective factor against IPV.

Regarding sociodemographic factors, substance use emerged as a significant correlate of IPV experiences. Specifically, cigarette smokers were four times more likely to experience IPV, while marijuana users showed 2.4 times higher likelihood. These findings align with previous research suggesting substance use may either precede IPV victimization or serve as a coping mechanism following abuse (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2021). Notably, gender, age, and educational course did not show significant associations with IPV experiences, challenging some previous findings but potentially reflecting evolving patterns in youth relationships.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings underscore the interplay between attachment styles and IPV experiences among university students. The high prevalence of IPV and its strong association with insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, suggests the need for targeted interventions that address both relationship dynamics and attachment patterns. Future research should explore longitudinal relationships between attachment styles and IPV, particularly focusing on the potential protective role of secure attachment.

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