Attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during first year.

Aidan McDonagh

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Higher Diploma in Psychology at Dublin Business School, School of Arts, Dublin.

Supervisor: Dr. Marianne Breen

March 2019

Department of Psychology

Dublin Business School
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Declaration

‘I declare that this thesis that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of H. Dip Psychology is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.’

Signed: Aidan McDonagh
Student Number: 10337466
Date: 18/03/2019
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Pauline Hyland for her guidance and assistance in Research Project classes throughout the year. She could not have been more approachable and helpful. Thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Marianne Breen. She was constantly supportive, always encouraging and her advice was invaluable in helping me to complete this thesis. I would also like to thank the many participants that took the time to complete questionnaires. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Mick and Bernie. Their unrelenting support meant that I could complete this project to the very best of my ability. Thanks for everything, Mam and Dad.
1. Abstract

The study sought to examine the relationship between attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during the transition to university. Participants (N=114) were required to be undertaking their first year of full-time university. Eligible participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire posted to Facebook. The questionnaire was comprised of self-report instruments designed to provide a measure of attachment-related avoidance/anxiety, self-esteem, perceived social support and stress. Pearson’s correlation coefficients found significant negative relationships between attachment-related avoidance and levels of self-esteem and perceived social support. Pearson’s correlation coefficients also found significant negative relationships between attachment-related anxiety and levels of self-esteem and perceived social support as well as a significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety and stress. Further research with a larger sample is recommended in order to increase generalisability. Replication of findings may support the development of support structures for students transitioning to university.
2. Introduction

A significant proportion of students experience low self-esteem and stress whilst making the transition to university (Bhujade, 2017). The purpose of this study was to explore the transition to university from an attachment perspective. Significant life changes are likely to act as stressors which can trigger attachment-related thinking and behaviour, whereby an individual will consider physical and emotional closeness to attachment figures (Simpson, Rholes, Campbell & Wilson, 2003). The transition to university is an example of one such change. During the transition to university, students are often expected to form new peer relationships, which become important for the fulfilment of attachment needs. Therefore, an individual’s general attachment style is likely to hold significant influence over their experience of this period (Lopez & Gormley, 2002). The study aims to contribute to literature regarding this challenging transitional period by examining the relationship between attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during this time.

2.1 Attachment Theory:

John Bowlby’s attachment theory suggests that infants are biologically programmed to seek physical and emotional closeness with a caregiver (attachment behaviour) and that early experiences with caregivers give rise to a system of thoughts and expectations about the self and others (Bowlby, 1969). This system, called the internal working model (IWM), reflects the responses of the caregiver to the child (Prior & Glaser, 2006). The IWM continues to develop with time and will guide the individual’s feelings, thoughts and expectations in later relationships (Bowlby 1988). Stress activates attachment behaviours whose goal is to regain proximity to the caregiver. For most children, attachment behaviours are activated many times a day, but with a responsive caregiver or ‘secure base’, these incidents last for relatively short periods (Simmons, Gooty, Nelson & Little, 2009).
Mary Ainsworth facilitated empirical testing of Bowlby’s ideas by devising a laboratory procedure known as the Strange Situation. The Strange Situation involved a sequence of separations and reunions between infant-parent pairs. The moderate stresses inherent in this process were intended to prompt attachment behaviour from the infant. Depending on how they attempted to regain proximity to the caregiver upon reunion in the Strange Situation, infants were categorized as having one of three attachment styles: secure, avoidant or ambivalent (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). Criticisms of Ainsworth’s Strange Situation have mainly focused on the fact that the procedure is confined to the artificiality of a laboratory (Pederson & Moran, 1996). Researchers have also expressed concerns that the Strange Situation may not be psychologically equivalent for all infants. Infants accustomed to non-parental care may not perceive the situation as stressful and, therefore, may not engage in attachment-related thinking or behaviour (Clarke-Stewart, Goossens, & Allhusen, 2001). The current study sought to address such issues by examining individuals’ attachment-related thinking when exposed to the real life stressor of beginning university. This is a stressful experience that is equally novel for all participants and is, therefore, more likely to elicit attachment behaviour across the entire sample. Each of Ainsworth’s attachment styles represents a different IWM of the self and others (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Further research by Mary Main and Judith Solomon identified a fourth attachment pattern, called disorganised attachment (Main & Solomon, 1986). Avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized attachment behaviours are broadly classified as ‘insecure’ attachment styles as they may compromise development (Lee & Hankin, 2009).

2.2 Attachment Styles:
Consistently responsive caregivers encourage secure attachment behaviour in which children approach their carers positively. Responsive caregiving means children develop an IWM of the self that feels loved (Fear, 2017). Responsive caregivers who acknowledge the emergence of mental states in their children reflect back the infant’s internal world. This action takes the infant’s aroused condition and organises it for them. In this way, children begin to develop an understanding of their own emotional make up. Caregivers who help children reflect on feeling states are providing them with the understanding to handle their own and other people’s emotions (Fonagy et al., 2000).

When attachment behaviour appears to agitate caregivers, children are likely to develop avoidant attachment styles. Proximity to the attachment figure is best attained by avoiding shows of obvious attachment behaviour. Avoidant children, although in a state of arousal, deny or do not communicate their stress. Children in avoidant relationships have missed out on the opportunities to reflect on the nature of feelings and they will have difficulty identifying and handling their own emotional states and that of others as a result (Fonagy, 2001). Children categorised as avoidant have an IWM in which the self is characterised as unloved. Other people are represented as unavailable at times of need (Oldmeadow, Quinn & Kowert, 2013).

When caregiving is inconsistently responsive, children often develop an attachment style described as ambivalent. Children amplify their distress in order to increase the chances of retrieving emotional closeness to an otherwise unresponsive carer (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010). All the effort to obtain some kind of response from the caregiver comes from the child. The inference here is that the infant self is not worthy of automatic love. Other people are experienced as unreliable (Colonnesi et al., 2011). The only state that seems to ensure a
response is one of extreme arousal. It is very difficult for children to reflect on, and regulate their feelings under such caregiving conditions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008).

Disorganised attachment behaviours are more likely when caregivers are experienced as either abusive or neglectful. Whatever behavioural strategy the children use, it fails to ensure security. The child’s attachment behaviour appears to lack direction and might show mixes of avoidant and ambivalent responses (Main & Solomon, 1986). Children who find it difficult to organise an attachment strategy that achieves caregiver proximity also find it difficult to manage their arousal (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Care which is unresponsive or traumatic is likely to see children developing models of themselves as unworthy and others as unavailable (Becnel, 2012). The children’s defences become activated so that as much threatening information as possible (dangerous carer, being abandoned) is omitted from consciousness. Many negative experiences and feelings therefore are not reflected upon (Howe, 2006).

2.3 Adult Attachment:

Attachment styles reflect the thoughts and expectations that make up working models. After early childhood, these attachment styles tend to persist into adulthood. Any changes in attachment styles tend to be brought about by a change in caregiving, attachment figure or following therapy (Waters, Weinfield & Hamilton, 2000). Four styles of attachment have now been identified in adults: secure, anxious – pre-occupied, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant. These roughly correspond to infant classifications (Levy, Ellison, Scott & Bernecker, 2011). Adolescence through to adulthood usually sees a change in the choice of the main attachment figure, away from parents to friends and spouses (Howe, 2011). This is particularly true as young adults begin university and they become more reliant on their new peer group for emotional support. The transition to university is a significant life change which is likely to act
as a stressor that will trigger attachment-related thinking and behaviour (Bryant, 2016). Therefore, an individual’s general attachment style may prove pivotal to their adjustment during this transitional phase. Some previous research has considered the relevance of attachment styles during transitional life phases. Scharf, Mayseless and Kivenson-Baron (2004) considered the association between attachment representations and successful adjustment to mandatory military service in Israel. However, this research was carried out in a very different cultural context and examined the importance of attachment relationships with parents. This research did not consider the relationship between attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during a transitional life phase. Low self-esteem and stress have been identified as issues for students making the transition to university and, therefore, should be a focus of research (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). The majority of adult attachment research has focused overwhelmingly on attachment in romantic relationships (Becnel, 2012). The current study sought to expand research to explore the potential importance of an individual’s general attachment style during a transitional life phase, in an Irish context.

2.4 Adult Attachment Styles:

Adult attachment styles are often identified through self-report measures or the semi-structured Adult Attachment Interview. For the purposes of this research, the Experiences in Close Relationships - Relationships Structures Scale (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary & Brumbaugh, 2011) was used. This is a self-report questionnaire which produces a score for attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. A self-report measure was chosen due to constraints on time and resources. Donbaek and Elklit (2013) state that the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of the scale correspond closely to the IWM’s of the self and others underlying Ainsworth’s Strange Situation Classifications. People who score high on
attachment-related anxiety tend to worry about whether others are available and responsive. People who score high on attachment-related avoidance prefer not to rely on others or open up to others. Scores on these dimensions are indicative of an adult’s attachment style.

Many of the benefits related to secure attachments in childhood continue to be present in adults who have experienced secure relationship attachments. The IWM of the secure adult is one in which there is a positive view of self and others. Secure adults are willing to look for support in times of stress (Mills-Koonce et al., 2011). They can reflect on their own thoughts and feelings and remain capable of managing their own emotions. They correctly decipher how they affect other people and how other people affect them and participate in successful peer relationships as a result (Fonagy, 2001). Adults classified as secure score low on attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance.

The adult form of avoidant is sometimes described as dismissive-avoidant. Dismissive-avoidant adults defensively dismiss attachment-related information by not engaging with issues of emotional vulnerability (Richards & Hackett, 2012). The IWM represents the self as independent. Adults classified as dismissive-avoidant, therefore, score low on attachment-related anxiety (Becnel, 2012). Dismissal of the importance of emotions in the self can be seen in dismissive-avoidant adults. This poor reflective function means that dismissive-avoidant adults will experience greater difficulty coping adequately with social situations and the emotions they generate. The prospect of rejection is the cause of caution, meaning dismissive-avoidant adults score high on attachment-related avoidance. Dismissive-avoidant adults are not good at asking friends for support (King & Werner, 2012).
The adult version of ambivalence is commonly referred to as the anxious pattern. As with children, the main features of individuals classified as anxious include deep anxiety about the value of the self. People with an anxious attachment style feel unable to take other people’s support for granted (Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004). Adults classified as anxious, therefore, score high on attachment-related anxiety. Constant feelings of anxiety mean that attachment behaviours tend to be displayed at full strength. These individuals score low on attachment-related avoidance. Hyper activated attachment strategies mean an intensification of distress and an inability to regulate escalating arousal (Marganska, Gallagher & Miranda, 2013).

The fearful-avoidant adult fears both intimacy and abandonment, following on from disorganised attachment patterns in childhood (Park et al., 2004). The abuse and neglect suffered in their childhood makes them highly reactive to stress experienced in the context of close relationships. Fearful-avoidant individuals often attempt to deal with dysregulating emotions defensively by dissociating themselves from negative thoughts and feelings. As a result, relationships can be characterised by a chaotic mixture of ambivalent and avoidant strategies. They score high on measures of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. At first, they plunge into the relationship and then withdraw defensively, in favour of independence. Trust is low and levels of dissatisfaction with peer friendships is therefore high (Howe, 2011).

2.5 Self – Esteem:

Self-esteem reflects an individual's overall evaluation of his or her own worth. This evaluation also draws on others’ appraisal of oneself (Minev, Petrova, Mineva, Petkova & Strebkova, 2018). Attachment theory proposes that attachments to others and the IWM of these helps to establish judgments about one’s own self-worth. (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2013). Attachment security initiated by repeated exchanges with consistently available attachment
figures results in representations of the self as worthy. Lack of attachment figure responsiveness is likely to contribute to vulnerable self-esteem (Caron, Lafontaine, Bureau, Levesque & Johnson, 2012).

More than 60 studies have explored links between self-esteem and attachment style. The majority of these studies measured these constructs through self-report measures. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was most commonly used to measure self-esteem. Nearly all the studies found that anxious participants have lower self-esteem than their secure equivalents (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). This is to be expected, hypothetically, because attachment anxiety goes hand in hand with being doubtful about one’s own self-worth. Studies have also found a significant negative correlation between attachment-related avoidance and self-esteem, suggesting that individuals scoring high on attachment-related avoidance are also vulnerable to low self-esteem. Attachment theory does not necessarily predict this with respect to dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant individuals because of their defensive tendency to reject thoughts of negative self-aspects from consciousness. However, much research suggests that these defences are not always effective in averting doubts over self-worth. Mikulincer, Dolev and Shaver (2004) found that such defence mechanisms fail when the mental resources needed to maintain thought suppression are taxed by a high cognitive load. When cognitively taxed by an effortful cognitive task, avoidant individuals were unable to prevent the activation of negative self-representations. Treboux, Crowell and Waters (2004) found that both attachment-related avoidance and anxiety were negatively correlated with self-esteem. Gentzler and Kearns (2004) listed similar findings.

Similar to much adult attachment research, these studies only explored attachment with respect to romantic partners. Students beginning university are reliant on attachment
relationships with their peer group generally and not just romantic partners (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008). Many first year college students report low levels of self-esteem (Bhujade, 2017). Evidence suggests that vulnerable self-esteem is associated with attachment insecurity (Treboux et al., 2004). Therefore, general attachment to others is a concept that is of particular importance as individuals begin college and attempt to form attachment relationships with new peers. The stressful transition to third level education is also likely to activate attachment-related thinking and behaviour (Bryant, 2016). This is further reason to explore the relationship between attachment and self-esteem at this time.

2.6 Perceived Social Support:

Perceived social support is the perception that social support is available when required (Sarason, Pierce, Shearin, Sarason & Walze, 1991). Social support has been outlined as an important protective factor that assists students in making the transition to university (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Attachment-related differences in mental representations of other people have obvious implications for perceiving others’ supportiveness. More than 40 independent studies have shown that attachment security is associated with perceptions of support availability. Moreover, the majority of this research found that insecure adults, both anxious and avoidant, reported less available support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In the main, this research measured levels of perceived social support using self-report measures such as the Perceived Social Support Scale (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988).

In an experiment conducted by Collins and Feeney (2004), romantic couples were brought into the lab and one member of the couple was told that he or she would complete a stressful assignment (giving a videotaped speech). The couple was then observed for five minutes. Next, the couple was separated, and support was manipulated by having the non-
speechmaking partner copy either two clearly supportive notes or two ambiguously supportive notes to send to the speechmaking partner. The speech giver then read these notes and graded both their supportiveness and the partner’s behaviours during the prior interaction. Insecure study participants rated the ambiguous notes as less supportive than secure participants. Participants scoring higher on attachment anxiety or avoidance rated their prior interaction as less supportive than would be expected on the basis of judges’ ratings of the interactions. It seems that ambiguously supportive notes reactivated negative working models of others. The study indicates that insecurely attached people are inclined to perceive a partner’s behaviour as less supportive.

Studies such as this suggest that insecurely attached people tend to perceive others’ supportiveness somewhat negatively, when compared to securely attached individuals. However, such research focuses on the relationship between romantic attachment and perceived support. The current study wishes to extend research to examine the relationship between individuals’ general attachment style and perceived social support. Perceived social support is an important protective factor as people transition to university (Friedlander et al., 2007). There is excellent evidence that attachment insecurity is associated with lower perceived social support (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). General attachment to others is, therefore, a concept that is of particular importance as individuals begin college and attempt to form attachment relationships with new peers, not just romantic partners (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007). Collins and Feeney (2004) carried out their research under controlled conditions, using a laboratory stressor to trigger attachment thinking and behaviour. The current study looked instead at the relationship between attachment representations and perceived social support while participants experienced the real life stressor of transitioning into university. It is hoped, therefore, that greater validity will be associated with the results of the study.
2.7 Stress:

Stress is defined as ‘a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive and behavioural changes’ (Baum, 1990). The level of stress experienced is connected to the individual’s view of the situation and ability to cope with the stressor (Baum, Fisher & Solomon, 1981). Individual differences in attachment styles affect how people perceive stressful events and manage the experience of stress.

Repeated interactions with responsive attachment figures mean secure people develop positive expectations about the availability of social support (Raikes & Thompson, 2008). Secure people are not prone to negatively biased evaluations of situations. Constructive appraisals are sustained by positive beliefs about the self and the world (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). When a secure person encounters stimuli that might provoke stress, he or she can place the negative event in perspective and organise support from people with additional resources for reducing its stressful effects. People scoring high on attachment-related avoidance (dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles) prefer not to risk allowing emotion to be acknowledged consciously. Defensive inhibition is directed mainly at emotions such as anxiety and stress, because these emotions can cause unwanted activation of the attachment system (Richards & Hackett, 2012). Emotional suppression often interferes with problem solving and accurate appraisal. For these people, who stress self-reliance, support seeking in times of need is perceived as uncomfortable (Marganska et al., 2013). Anxiously attached individuals often consider negative emotional states to be consistent with attachment goals. Anxiously attached people attempt to garner attachment figures’ attention by amplifying emotions that implicitly emphasize vulnerability (Esbjorn, Bender, Reinholdt-Dunne, Munck & Ollendick, 2012). Hyper activation of negative emotions sometimes renders problem solving irrelevant.
Previous studies have explored participants’ level of stress during stressful events. Stress has been measured using self-report measures similar to the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) and physiological measures of salivary cortisol levels (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer & Florian, 1997; Ditzen et al., 2008). Self-report measures were employed in the current study due to constraints on time and resources. Previous research has found attachment security to be associated with lower levels of stress, whereas attachment insecurities—anxiety, avoidance, or both—were associated with heightened levels of stress (Birnbaum et al., 1997). Similar findings were reported by Ditzen et al. (2008). In this study, 63 healthy men who were married or cohabiting were exposed to a standardized psychosocial stressor (Trier Social Stress Test). The Trier Social Stress Test consists of a five minute job interview and a subsequent serial subtraction task performed out loud in front of an unknown panel of one man and one woman (Kirschbaum, Pirke & Hellhammer, 1993). Both high anxious and high avoidant attachment were associated with increased stress.

Overall, data supports the hypothesis that secure people’s positive appraisals and reliance on constructive ways of coping alleviate stress. Data also indicates that anxious or avoidant attachment can inhibit effective coping and increases the intensity of stress (Ditzen et al., 2008). As has been to shown to be often the case, this research focused on romantic attachment. The current study examined attachment relationships generally and not just attachment to romantic partners. Secure attachment has been shown to correlate negatively with high stress levels (Birnbaum et al., 1997; Ditzen et al., 2008). Therefore, general attachment relationships which students are expected to form with their new peer group are likely to assume critical importance as students undertake the stressful transition to university. The study conducted by Ditzen et al. (2008) used the Trier Social Stress Test (a laboratory
procedure) to induce stress among research participants. The current study looked at a real life stressor (the transition to university) which is likely to trigger attachment-related thinking and behaviour. It is assumed, therefore, that greater validity will be associated with the results.

2.8 The Current Study:

A significant number of students have reported feeling stressed and experiencing low self-esteem during the transition into university (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). According to attachment theory, young adults are expected to expand their relationship network and to further develop their capacity for mature intimacy with peers as these relationships become more central in their affective world (Scharf et al., 2004). These expectations are particularly obvious and pronounced during the first year of university when the majority of students enter an unfamiliar social environment. The stressful transition to university is likely to activate attachment-related thinking and behaviour (Simpson et al., 2003). A student’s general attachment style is therefore likely to play an important role in how they experience this important life phase. It is for these reasons that the current study examined the relationship between attachment styles and levels of stress, perceived social support and self-esteem at this time.

Previous research has considered the relevance of attachment styles during transitional life phases (Scharf et al., 2004). Scharf et al. (2004) considered the association between attachment representations and successful coping with developmental tasks of emerging adulthood in an Israeli context. Specifically, their adjustment to mandatory military service. However, this research was carried out in a very different cultural context. Other research which has examined the relationship between attachment representations and the variables listed did so in the context of romantic attachment relationships and often using artificial stressors to activate attachment-related thinking and behaviours (Collins & Feeney, 2004;
Ditzen et al., 2008). The current study expands research to include general attachment relations, which are particularly relevant as students are introduced to a new peer group at the beginning of university (Freeman et al., 2007). By considering the impact of a real life stressor (transition to university), it is hoped greater validity can be associated with the results of this research. Following this discussion, a number of hypotheses have been devised:

1. There will be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and self-esteem.

2. There will be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and perceived social support.

3. There will be a significant positive relationship between attachment-related avoidance and stress.

4. There will be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and self-esteem.

5. There will be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and perceived social support.

6. There will be a significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety and stress.
3. Methodology

3.1 Participants:

A convenience sample was employed in this study, with an aspect of snowball sampling. Participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire which was posted and shared on the social networking site, Facebook. An information sheet at the beginning of the questionnaire outlined that participants were required to be undertaking their first year of a full time university course, having completed their Leaving Certificate in the previous academic year and that participants were also required to be over 18 years of age. The information sheet explained that participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Research participants (N=114) ranged in age from 18-69, with a mean age of 23.14 (SD = 9.00). The majority of participants were between 18 and 20 years of age (57.9 %). Of the respondents, 75 were female (65.8 %) and 39 were male (34.2 %). Out of the sample, 80 participants were non-international students (71.4%) and 32 were international students (28.6%).

3.2 Design:

A quantitative approach was taken for this study using a correlational design. Students were asked to complete a number of quantitative self-report measures which were designed to measure the variables of attachment-related avoidance/anxiety, self-esteem, perceived social support and stress. Correlational designs search for relationships between variables as opposed to causation or differences. For hypothesis one, the predictor variable was attachment-related avoidance and the criterion variable was self-esteem. For hypothesis two, the predictor variable was attachment-related avoidance and the criterion variable was perceived social support. For hypothesis three, the predictor variable was attachment-related avoidance and the criterion variable was stress. For hypothesis four, the predictor variable was attachment-related anxiety and the criterion variable was self-esteem. For hypothesis five, the predictor variable was
attachment-related anxiety and the criterion variable was perceived social support. For hypothesis six, the predictor variable was attachment-related anxiety and the criterion variable was stress.

3.3 Materials:

The information sheet was shown at the beginning of the questionnaire (See Appendix 1). The information sheet detailed the purpose of the study, the procedure involved and appropriate participation requirements. Once students consented to participation, they were asked to answer demographic questions relating to gender, student type (non-international or international student) and age (See Appendix 2). Following these demographic questions, students completed self-report questionnaires designed to provide a measure of attachment-related avoidance/anxiety (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011), self-esteem (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965), perceived social support (MSPSS: Zimet et al., 1988) and stress (DASS-21: Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). A debrief page was included at the end of the survey, which gave the contact details of various support services should the survey have led to any negative feelings for participants (See Appendix 7).

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures questionnaire (ECR-RS; Fraley et al, 2011) is a self-report instrument that provides a measure of attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety in close relationships in general (See Appendix 3). The Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures questionnaire (ECR-RS) consists of nine items which examine participants’ perception of how they think, feel and behave in such relationships. The first six items form the subscale linked to attachment-related avoidance while the last three items constitute the subscale linked to attachment-related anxiety. An example of an item relating to avoidance is, “I usually discuss my problems and concerns with others”. An example of an item relating to anxiety is, “I often worry that other
people do not really care for me”. For each item, participants are asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they believe the item describes their feelings about close relationships in general (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Two scores, one for attachment-related avoidance and the other for attachment-related anxiety, should be computed. The avoidance score can be computed by averaging items 1 - 6, while reverse keying items 1, 2, 3, and 4. The anxiety score can be computed by averaging items 7 - 9. Therefore, a mean score is established for both, with a range of 1-7. Higher scores indicate greater levels of attachment-related avoidance or attachment-related anxiety with regard to close relationships in general. According to Fraley et al. (2011), the ECR-RS has good internal reliability. The cronbach’s alpha for the global anxiety score was .80, and the cronbach’s alpha for the global avoidance score was .88. A validation of the measure conducted by Moreira, Martins, Gouveia and Canavarro (2015) provided additional evidence of the reliability and validity of ECR-RS, suggesting that it is an adequate measure of attachment dimensions in adulthood.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess the self-esteem of participants (See Appendix 4). Participants are asked to respond to ten statements dealing with general feelings about themselves. Statements include, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” and “I am able to do things as well as most other people”. Participants are asked to indicate on a four-point Likert scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with each item (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). For positively worded statements, responses are scored; 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree. Five statements (2, 5, 6, 8 and 9) are negatively worded and thus are reversed scored. With regards to these negatively worded questions, such as “At times, I think I am no good at all”, responses that express disagreement are consistent with high self-esteem. The scores for the ten questions are summed to give a measure of the respondent’s level of self-esteem. Scores can range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. According to Robins,
Hendin and Trzesniewski (2001), the RSE has good internal reliability. Cronbach’s alpha for the measure ranged from .88 to .90 across six assessments. Robins et al. (2001) also demonstrated support for the construct validity of the measure.

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS: Zimet et al., 1988) was used to assess participants’ levels of perceived social support (See Appendix 5). It can be divided into three subscales that measure levels of perceived social support from family, friends and significant others. For this research, the ‘friends’ and ‘significant other’ subscales were used. These subscales contain four items each. An example of an item from the ‘significant other’ subscale is, “There is a special person around when I am in need”. An example of an item from the ‘friends’ subscale is, “My friends really try to help me”. Participants are asked to indicate on a seven-point Likert scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with each item (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). A score for perceived social support from friends (FRI) and significant others (SO) can be calculated by averaging the scores of the subscales’ items. Therefore, a mean score is established for perceived social support from friends and significant others, with a range of 1-7. Higher scores indicate greater perceived social support from friends and significant others. According to Zimet and colleagues (1988), the MSPSS has good internal reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .88 for the total scale. Similarly, good internal reliability was also found for the three subscales; SO (α = .91), FAM (α = .87), and FRI (α = .85). Zimet et al. (1988) also reported that the scale demonstrated adequate construct validity.

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 Items (DASS-21: Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) consists of three subscales designed to measure depression, anxiety and stress (See Appendix 6). For the purposes of this study, only the ‘stress’ subscale was used. This has been designed to measure the negative emotional state of stress. The ‘stress’ subscale consists of seven items. An example of an item from this subscale is, ‘I found it hard to wind down’.
Participants are asked to indicate how much they feel each statement applied to them over the previous week by using a four-point Likert scale (0 = Did not apply to me at all; 3 = Applied to me very much, or most of the time). A score for ‘stress’ is obtained by summing the responses of the subscale’s items. Since the DASS-21 is a short version of the DASS (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), which consists of 42 items, the final score of the subscale needs to be multiplied by two. Total scores for ‘stress’ can, therefore, range from 0-42. This score can be transferred to the DASS profile sheet which provides severity labels. A score of 0-14 within the ‘stress’ subscale would be considered ‘normal’, a score of 19-25 would be considered ‘moderate’ and a score of 26-33 would be considered ‘severe’ (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Henry and Crawford (2005) reported Cronbach’s alpha values of .88 for the Depression subscale, .82 for the Anxiety subscale, .90 for Stress subscale and .93 for the overall measure. Henry and Crawford (2005) also found that the DASS-21 demonstrated adequate construct validity.

3.4 Procedure:

An online questionnaire was posted to the social networking site, Facebook. The online questionnaire was created using Google Forms. An information sheet was presented at the beginning of the online questionnaire. The information sheet explained that the researcher was conducting a study examining the relationship between attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during the first year of university and that participation involved completing the questionnaire that followed. The information sheet explained that the research would be examined as part of a final year thesis. At this stage, participants were made aware that the questionnaire should take approximately 10 – 15 minutes to complete. The information sheet outlined that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, anonymous and that participants had the right to withdraw at any time prior to submitting the questionnaire. Participation requirements were also defined at this stage.
Participants were made aware that contact details for support services would be made available to them on a debrief sheet at the end of the questionnaire, should any negative feelings arise as a result of participation in the study. Contact details for the principal researcher and supervisor were provided at the end of the information sheet. Once participants consented to participation by completing the mandatory consent question, they were asked to complete a number of demographic questions. Participants were then asked to complete the relevant psychometric questionnaires. Once the questionnaire had been submitted, participants were taken to a debrief sheet. Participants were thanked for their participation and contact details for support services were listed. The data from the online survey was downloaded and coded into SPSS version 25 for statistical analysis.

3.5 Ethics:

Ethical approval for this study was initially sought from Dublin Business School Department of Psychology Ethics Committee. The Code of Professional Ethics of the Psychological Society of Ireland (Psychological Society of Ireland, 2011) was adhered to throughout the study. The information sheet detailed the purpose of the study, the procedure involved and appropriate participation requirements. The information sheet also explained the potential risks and benefits of the study. A potential benefit that was mentioned was that the study could provide information which would help improve student support structures. A potential risk was that some questions might cause negative feelings. Participants were required to complete a mandatory consent question prior to commencing the study, thereby ensuring informed consent. The information sheet outlined that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, anonymous and that participants had the right to withdraw at any time prior to submitting the questionnaire. Due to the anonymous nature of responses, participants were informed that it would not be possible to withdraw data once it had been submitted. Once the survey had been submitted, participants were taken to a debrief sheet where information was
provided about relevant support services, should the survey have led to any negative feelings for them. Data from the study was stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed one year after submission of research.
4. Results

4.1 Introduction:

SPSS, version 25 was used to run statistical analysis. The results section will include both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics will seek to describe and summarise the data by providing frequency information about the appropriate demographic variables as well as the mean and standard deviation of psychological measures used. Information about the reliability of the psychological measures used will also be included in this section. The inferential statistics will describe the results of parametric testing (Pearson’s correlation coefficients) and discuss whether hypotheses can be accepted or rejected based on these results.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics:

4.2.1 Sample Demographics:

The descriptive statistics for demographic data are shown in Table 1. Out of 114 participants, 75 were female (65.8%), and 39 were male (34.2%). The average age (mean) of participants was 23.14 (SD=9.00). The youngest participant was 18 years of age and the oldest was 69 years of age. Sixty six of the participants were aged 20 or under (57.9%) and 45 of the participants were aged 21 or over (39.5%). Three participants did not report their age. Out of the sample, 80 were non-international students (71.4%) and 32 were international students (28.6%). Two participants did not provide student type.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.2 Psychological Measures:

The descriptive statistics for the four psychological measures used are shown in Table 2. The mean score for attachment-related avoidance was 3.56 (SD=1.07). The range of possible scores for attachment-related avoidance was 1-7. Therefore, the mean score of 3.56 was mid-range and this indicates that a moderate level of attachment-related avoidance was evident within this sample. The minimum and maximum scores recorded for attachment-related avoidance were 1.33 and 6.83. The mean score for attachment-related anxiety was 4.08 (SD=1.77). The range of possible scores for attachment-related anxiety was 1-7. Therefore, the mean score of 4.08 was mid-range and this indicates that a moderate level of attachment-related anxiety was evident within the sample. The minimum and maximum scores recorded for
attachment-related anxiety were 1 and 7. The mean score for self-esteem was 27.81 (SD=6.01). The range of possible scores for self-esteem was 10-40. Therefore, the mean score of 27.81 was high and this suggests that a high level of self-esteem was present within the sample. The minimum and maximum scores recorded for self-esteem were 14 and 39. The mean score for perceived social support was 5.19 (SD=1.37). The range of possible scores for perceived social support was 1-7. Therefore, the mean score of 5.19 was high and this suggests that a high level of perceived social support was present within the sample. The minimum and maximum scores recorded for perceived social support were 1 and 7. The mean score for stress was 21.86 (SD=9.89). The range of possible scores for stress was 0-42. Therefore, the mean score of 21.86 was mid-range and this indicates that a moderate level of stress was evident within the sample. The minimum and maximum scores recorded for stress were 0 and 42.

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Measures.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoidance</strong></td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>6.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anxiety</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Esteem</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
<td>27.81</td>
<td>6.01</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>39.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSS</strong></td>
<td>113</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stress

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>113</td>
<td>21.86</td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*PSS= Perceived Social Support.

All of the items in the psychological measures were tested for their internal reliability using SPSS (See Table 3). The Cronbach’s Alpha values for all of the measures used indicate a high score. This verifies the internal reliability of the measures used as evidenced by research in the past (Fraley et al., 2011; Robins et al., 2001; Zimet et al, 1988; Henry & Crawford, 2005).

Table 3: Reliability of Psychological Measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Social Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Friends subscale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Social Support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Significant Other subscale)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Social Support</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Inferential Statistics:

Pearson’s correlation coefficients were ran in order to examine the relationship between attachment-related avoidance/anxiety and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress. This section will describe the results of these parametric tests and provide additional
analysis with regard to whether hypotheses can be rejected or accepted. Table 4 summarises the correlations between variables.

4.3.1 Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and self-esteem. A Pearson correlation coefficient found a weak significant negative relationship between attachment related avoidance (M=3.56, SD=1.07) and self-esteem (M=27.81, SD=6.01) (r (111) = -.24, p<.01). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The results reveal that an increase in attachment-related avoidance relates to a decrease in self-esteem. This relationship can account for 5.76% of variation of scores.

4.3.2 Hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2 stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between attachment related-avoidance and perceived social support. A Pearson correlation coefficient found a strong significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance (M=3.56, SD=1.07) and perceived social support (M=5.19, SD=1.37) (r (111) = -.57, p <.01). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The results reveal that an increase in attachment-related avoidance relates to a decrease in perceived social support. This relationship can account for 32.49% of variation of scores.

4.3.3. Hypothesis 3:

Hypothesis 3 stated that there would be a significant positive relationship between attachment-related avoidance and stress. A Pearson correlation coefficient found no significant relationship between attachment-related avoidance (M=3.56, SD=1.07) and stress (M=21.86, SD=9.89) (r (111) = -.03, p >.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.
4.3.4 Hypothesis 4:

Hypothesis 4 stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and self-esteem. A Pearson correlation coefficient found a strong significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety (M=4.08, SD=1.77) and self-esteem (M=27.81, SD=6.01) (r (110) = -.59, p<.01). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The results reveal that an increase in attachment-related anxiety relates to a decrease in self-esteem. This relationship can account for 34.81% of variation of scores.

4.3.5 Hypothesis 5:

Hypothesis 5 stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and perceived social support. A Pearson correlation coefficient found a weak significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety (M=4.08, SD=1.77) and perceived social support (M=5.19, SD=1.37) (r (110) = -.24, p <.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The results reveal that an increase in attachment-related anxiety relates to a decrease in perceived social support. This relationship can account for 5.76% of variation of scores.

4.3.6 Hypothesis 6:

Hypothesis 6 stated that there would be a significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety and stress. A Pearson correlation coefficient found a moderate significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety (M=4.08, SD=1.77) and stress (M=21.86, SD=9.89) (r (110) = .36, p <.01). Therefore, the null hypothesis can be rejected. The results reveal that an increase in attachment-related anxiety relates to an increase in stress. This relationship can account for 12.96% of variation of scores.
Table 4: *Correlation Table.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>-.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Social Support</td>
<td>-.57**</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.36**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **. Correlation is significant at .01 level (2 tailed). *. Correlation is significant at .05 level (2 tailed).
5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction:

A notable number of students have reported experiencing low self-esteem and stress whilst making the transition to university (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014). The transition to university means students are often expected to form new relationships, which become important for the fulfilment of attachment needs (Simpson et al., 2003). Major life changes such as this transition are also likely to act as stressors which can trigger attachment-related thinking and behaviour (Bryant, 2016). As a result, an individual’s attachment style will most likely play a significant role in their experience of this period. In order to contribute to a better understanding of this challenging transitional period, the study aimed to examine correlations between attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during this time.

5.2 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Previous Theory and Research:

5.2.1 Hypothesis 1:

Results of analysis supported the first research hypothesis which predicted a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and self-esteem. This finding is consistent with previous research (Trebourx et al., 2004; Gentzler & Kearns, 2004). High levels of attachment-related avoidance usually result from having experienced rejection in relationships with attachment figures. Individuals scoring high on attachment-related avoidance attempt to suppress negative working models of the self in order to evade reminders of these past rejections and maintain self-esteem (Howe, 2011; Richards & Hackett, 2012). Mikulincer et al. (2004) found that such defence mechanisms fail when the mental resources needed to sustain thought suppression are strained by a high cognitive load. The transition to university is an example of a situation which usually places a high cognitive load on an
individual. This may indicate why there is a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and self-esteem amongst the sample in this study.

5.2.2 Hypothesis 2:

The second research hypothesis predicted a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and perceived social support. Results supported this hypothesis and were consistent with previous literature (Collins & Feeney, 2004). High levels of attachment-related avoidance are associated with a history of a lack of attachment figure responsiveness or in more extreme circumstances, abuse or neglect. Such attachment relationships result in negative working models of others (Park et al., 2004; King & Werner, 2012). During the stressful transition to university, individuals are expected to form new relationships with peers which are important for the fulfilment of attachment needs. This means that this transition is likely to trigger attachment-related thinking and, therefore, reactivate negative working models of others for those scoring high on attachment-related avoidance (Simpson et al., 2003; Lopez & Gormley, 2002). This possibly demonstrates why there is a significant negative relationship between attachment-related avoidance and perceived social support amongst the sample in this study.

5.2.3 Hypothesis 3:

Results did not support the third research hypothesis which predicted a significant positive relationship between attachment-related avoidance and stress. These results contradict previous research such as Ditzen et al. (2008). People scoring high on attachment-related avoidance prefer to deny that they are feeling stressed because this state is associated with activation of the attachment system and negative experiences in attachment relationships (Richards & Hackett, 2012). The fact that those scoring high on attachment-related avoidance do not acknowledge that a situation (such as the transition to university) is a source of stress
makes it very difficult for them to consider effective means of reducing its stressful impact (Marganska et al., 2013). A fear of rejection also means those scoring high on attachment-related avoidance are reluctant to ask others for support during stressful events and are, therefore, likely to experience stress more intensely (Howe, 2011; King & Werner, 2012). However, the data from the present study did not support this argument. This may be due to avoidant individuals’ tendency to deny that they are experiencing stress and the fact that the study relied on self-report measures to measure this variable. It is worth noting that Ditzen et al. (2008) employed physiological measures of stress, whereby, they assessed salivary cortisol levels before and after exposure to a stressor.

5.2.4 Hypothesis 4:

The fourth research hypothesis predicted a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and self-esteem. Findings supported this research hypothesis and are consistent with previous studies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment-related anxiety tends to develop in reaction to inconsistently responsive attachment figures (Park et al., 2004). Closeness to such attachment figures is usually only achieved through exaggerated attachment behaviour, implying that the individual is not unconditionally valued by the attachment figure. This is why attachment-related anxiety typically goes hand in hand with doubts over self-worth (Caron et al., 2012). Significant life changes such as the transition to university are likely to act as stressors which will reignite these attachment-related worries, particularly seeing as this transition is accompanied by the need to form new attachment relationships with peers (Scharf et al., 2004; Bryant, 2016). This suggests why there is a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and self-esteem amongst the sample in the current study.

5.2.5 Hypothesis 5:
Results supported the fifth research hypothesis which stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and perceived social support. This finding is in keeping with preceding research (Collins & Feeney, 2004). Attachment-related anxiety is a consequence of relationships in which attachment figures are experienced as unreliable. Anxiously attached individuals do not, therefore, express confidence in the support of others (Colomnesi et al., 2011). Attachment-related thinking is initiated by stressors. These representations of others’ supportiveness are, therefore, likely to be reactivated by a major life change such as the transition to university (Simpson et al., 2003). The need to establish new attachment relationships with peers is another reason why attachment-related thinking is likely to be prevalent at this time (Lopez & Gormley, 2002). These are the likely reasons why there is a significant negative relationship between attachment-related anxiety and perceived social support amongst the population sampled.

5.2.6 Hypothesis 6:

The final hypothesis predicted that there would be a significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety and stress. Results of analysis supported this hypothesis and are also supportive of existing literature (Ditzen et al., 2008). High levels of attachment-related anxiety are born out of a fear that attachment figures will not respond to efforts to gain emotional closeness (Brumariu & Kerns, 2010). The transition to university requires that individuals form new attachment relationships (Scharf et al., 2004). This experience is, therefore, particularly stressful for those scoring high on attachment-related anxiety. Anxiously attached individuals attempt to gain attention from attachment figures by amplifying emotions that imply vulnerability. Those scoring high on attachment-related anxiety sustain this type of attachment strategy by ruminating over every little worry and anxiety (Esbjorn et al., 2012). Anxiously attached people employ attachment strategies which will cause them to magnify the
anxieties of what is already a stressful transition. This may illustrate why there is a significant positive relationships between attachment-related anxiety and stress in the current sample.

5.3 Strengths:

A significant strength of this study is that it addresses a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between general attachment styles and the variables of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during the transition into university. Low levels of self-esteem and high levels of stress have been reported by a significant number of students during the transition to university (Bhujade, 2017). The transition to university is likely to trigger attachment-related thinking and behaviour. This transition is a stressful life change that requires individuals to form new attachment relationships (Wei, Russell & Zakalik, 2005). Previous research has found significant relationships between attachment styles and the variables listed, but this research has been in the context of romantic relationships and used artificial stressors to activate attachment-related thinking (Mikulincer et al., 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Ditzen et al., 2008). The current study examined the relationship between these variables whilst students experienced the real life stressor of beginning university and considered participants’ general attachment style at this time. General attachment to others (and not just romantic partners) is particularly important as individuals begin university and depend on their new peers to fulfil attachment needs (Guarnieri, Smorti & Tani, 2014). Research which has considered the importance of attachment styles during transitional life phases has taken place in different cultural contexts and explored variables different to those examined in the current study (Scharf et al., 2004; Wei et al., 2005). The current study, therefore, offers a unique and original contribution to the literature built around this challenging transitional period.

Another strength of the current study is that it employed psychological instruments which have been used widely in previous research and have demonstrated good internal
reliability (Fraley et al., 2011; Robins et al., 2001; Zimet et al, 1988; Henry & Crawford, 2005). Research was carried out in accordance with The Code of Professional Ethics of the Psychological Society of Ireland (Psychological Society of Ireland, 2011). Issues such as informed consent, anonymity, right to withdraw and debriefing were all taken into account. The study is replicable. Replicability is an important principle of science and, therefore, replicability is another strength of the current study (Asendorpf et al., 2013).

5.4 Limitations:

A number of limitations exist with regard to the current study. Due to limitations surrounding time and resources, a convenience sample was employed. This convenience sample cannot be taken as representative of the entire population of Irish first year university students which means that results of the study cannot be used to create generalizations relating to this population (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). A second limitation of this study is that data was only collected at one time point, during the first term of university. It is not clear how the relationship between the variables listed may fluctuate over a long period of time (Wei et al., 2005). Caution must, therefore, also be exercised in generalizing to other transition experiences that may activate attachment-related thinking and behaviour (e.g. beginning secondary school).

Self–report measures were used to collect data in this study. Disadvantages of self-report measures include phenomena known as response biases. This refers to research participants’ tendency to respond to questions on some basis other than the specific item content. For example, participants may respond in such a way that presents them in what they perceive to be a more favourable light, even if these responses do not reflect how they actually think or behave (McDonald, 2008). Another concern regarding the reliability of self–report measures is that inaccurate self-perceptions may provoke biased responding because people
are predisposed toward self-enhancement (McDonald, 2008). Individuals scoring high on attachment-related avoidance are likely to engage in defensive self-enhancement in an attempt to maintain self-esteem and to avoid negative self-representations that might arise as a result of rejection which has occurred in previous attachment relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Due to the rejecting nature of these previous attachment relationships, they are also unlikely to acknowledge the experience of stress as this is associated with activation of the attachment system (Richards & Hackett, 2012). This means self-report instruments may not provide an accurate measure of avoidant individuals’ self-esteem or stress levels.

5.5 Future Research:

Future research should seek to expand the sample in order to be more representative of the Irish first year student population and so that it can create generalizable results. It is also suggested that studies that are similar to the present study be conducted among first year student populations internationally in order to examine potential cross cultural differences in results. A longitudinal study examining the relationship between the variables listed in the current study during other transitional experiences (e.g. beginning secondary or a new job) will be beneficial in determining whether the relationship between these variables tend to fluctuate through one’s lifetime. It is also recommended that future research consider expanding the number of ways in which variables are measured. For example, assessing salivary cortisol levels could produce a more objective measure of stress than self-report measures, particularly when attempting to measure the stress levels of those scoring high on attachment-related avoidance (McDonald, 2008). A final suggestion for future research is the inclusion of qualitative research questions in questionnaires in order to gain further insight into what contributes to students’ experiences of low self-esteem and stress during the transition to university.
5.6 Implications and Applications:

The current research reported significant negative relationships between attachment-related avoidance and levels of self-esteem and perceived social support during the transition into university. The study also found significant negative relationships between attachment-related anxiety and levels of self-esteem and perceived social support at this time, as well as a significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety and stress. These results reinforce the need for further research (as discussed in the previous section) in order to develop a better understanding of how individuals of varying attachment styles are likely to experience this challenging transitional period.

Replication of findings from the present study would suggest a number of important practical applications. Research should inform parenting programs. Parenting programs could focus on advising parents of the significance of their children’s early attachment to them and the potential value of secure attachment styles as they undertake the transition into college (Guarnieri et al., 2014). Further research may also be significant in highlighting to university staff the associations between insecure attachment styles and low self-esteem, low perceived social support and stress during the transition to third level education. An awareness of such associations may lead to the development of an increased number of support structures (e.g., counselling services) which will help students negotiate attachment-related issues. It has been suggested that institutions which implement activities that aim to socialize students will support the development of secure attachment styles in their students (Kaya, 2010). Replication of findings from the present study should be used to emphasise the potential value of such activities.

5.7 Conclusion:
Research has indicated that a notable number of students report experiencing low self-esteem and stress during the transition to university (Bhujade, 2017). The current study sought to examine the transition to university from an attachment perspective. A significant life change such as the transition to university is likely to act as a stressor which will activate attachment-related thinking (Wei et al., 2005). Previous research has outlined significant relationships between attachment styles and the variables of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress (Trebourx et al., 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Ditzen et al., 2008). However, this research has focused on attachment in romantic relationships and has only subjected participants to artificial stressors. The current study explored the relationship between the general attachment style of students beginning university and the variables listed. General attachment style is important at this time as students are expected to form relationships with peers and not just romantic partners (Guarnieri et al., 2014). The study found significant negative relationships between attachment-related avoidance and levels of self-esteem and perceived social support amongst students beginning university. The research also found significant negative relationships between attachment-related anxiety and levels of self-esteem and perceived social support at this time, as well as a significant positive relationship between attachment-related anxiety and stress. Further research may have important practical applications. Further research could facilitate the development of appropriate support structures in third level institutions, to assist students with attachment-related issues.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1:

Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

My name is Aidan McDonagh. As part of the requirement for the completion of a Higher Diploma in Arts in Psychology at Dublin Business School, I am conducting a study examining the relationship between attachment styles and levels of self-esteem, perceived social support and stress during the first year of University. This research is being conducted as part of my final year thesis and will be submitted for examination. After submission, I will also present a poster of my research within the premises of Dublin Business School. This research is intended to provide information that will be of benefit to students beginning university, student support services and the wider psychological community.

Participation in the study involves completing the questionnaire that follows. The questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Please note that participation is completely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate in this research. You may withdraw from the study at any time before submitting the questionnaires. Please note that responses will be anonymous. For this reason, it will not be possible to withdraw from participation after the questionnaire has been submitted. The questionnaires will be securely stored and data from the questionnaires will be stored on a password protected computer. Data will be destroyed one year after the research has been submitted.

Participants must be over 18 years of age. Participants must also be currently undertaking their first year of a full time university course, having completed their Leaving Certificate in the previous academic year.

While the questionnaire asks some questions that might cause some negative feelings, it has been used widely in research. If any of the questions do raise any negative feelings for you, contact details for some useful support services are included at the end of this survey.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the principal researcher, Aidan McDonagh, by e-mail: ___________. My supervisor can be contacted at _____________.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
Do you consent to participate in this research?

Yes [ ]    No [ ]
Appendix 2:

Demographic Questions

Gender:
Male [ ] Female [ ]

Age: ____

What kind of student are you?
International student [ ] Non-International Student (An Irish student studying in Ireland) [ ]
Appendix 3:
The Experiences in Close Relationships- Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary & Brumbaugh, 2011).

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which you believe each statement best describes your feelings about close relationships in general.

It helps to turn to people in times of need.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I usually discuss my problems and concerns with others.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I talk things over with people.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I find it easy to depend on others.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I don’t feel comfortable opening up to others.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I often worry that other people do not really care for me.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I’m afraid that other people may abandon me.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

I worry that others won’t care about me as much as I care about them.
Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree
Appendix 4:

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965).

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement:

1 = Strongly Disagree  
2 = Disagree  
3 = Agree  
4 = Strongly Agree

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

At times I think I am no good at all.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

I am able to do things as well as most other people.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

I certainly feel useless at times.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree

I wish I could have more respect for myself.
Strongly Disagree  1  2  3  4  Strongly Agree
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

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| Strongly Disagree|   |   |   |   | Strongly Agree

I take a positive attitude toward myself.

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| Strongly Disagree|   |   |   |   | Strongly Agree
Appendix 5:

We are interested in how you feel about the following statements. Read each statement carefully. Indicate how you feel about each statement using the following scale:
1 = Very Strongly Disagree
2 = Strongly Disagree
3 = Mildly Disagree
4 = Neutral
5 = Mildly Agree
6 = Strongly Agree
7 = Very Strongly Agree

There is a special person who is around when I am in need.
Very Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strongly Agree

There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
Very Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strongly Agree

I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.
Very Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strongly Agree

My friends really try to help me.
Very Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strongly Agree

I can count on my friends when things go wrong.
Very Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strongly Agree

I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.
Very Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Strongly Agree

There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.
I can talk about my problems with my friends.

Very Strongly Disagree           1           2           3           4           5           6           7           Very Strongly Agree
Appendix 6:

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS 21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) - ‘Stress’ Subscale.

Please read each statement and select a number 0, 1, 2 or 3 which indicates how much the statement applied to you over the PAST WEEK. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

The rating scale is as follows:

0 = Did not apply to me at all
1 = Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time
2 = Applied to me to a considerable degree or a good part of time
3 = Applied to me very much or most of the time

I found it hard to wind down.

Did not apply to me at all 0 1 2 3 Applied to me very much or most of the time

I tended to over-react to situations.

Did not apply to me at all 0 1 2 3 Applied to me very much or most of the time

I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy.

Did not apply to me at all 0 1 2 3 Applied to me very much or most of the time

I found myself getting agitated.

Did not apply to me at all 0 1 2 3 Applied to me very much or most of the time

I found it difficult to relax.

Did not apply to me at all 0 1 2 3 Applied to me very much or most of the time

I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing.

Did not apply to me at all 0 1 2 3 Applied to me very much or most of the time
I felt that I was rather touchy

Did not apply to me at all  0  1  2  3  Applied to me very much or most of the time
Appendix 7:

Debrief Sheet

Thank you for your answers. Your response has been recorded. If you feel that answering this survey has raised some issues for you, please consider contacting some of the support services listed below, or speak to a friend, family member or professional.

Aware:

Call on: 1800 80 48 48

Available: Monday – Sunday, 10am to 10pm.

Samaritans

Call on: 116 123

Available: 24hrs a day, 7 days a week.