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**MACHIAVELLIANISM TRAIT AMONG MALAYSIAN
YOUNG ADULTS: AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT
TENDENCIES AND PERCEPTION OF TRUST TOWARDS
CLOSE FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES**

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Abstract:

This quantitative study aims to further explore individuals' perception of trust within the Malaysian young adults' context. Trust is measured based on two components: close friends and acquaintances. Individual differences are examined based on the Machiavellianism trait (i.e., low, neutral and high Machiavellianism) and the avoidant attachment styles (i.e., dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant attachment styles). 290 participants aged between 18 to 39 years old were recruited to complete an online survey. Correlation and one-way ANOVA(s) were conducted to analyse the data obtained. The present study found significant differences among those with low, neutral, and high Machiavellianism trait regarding their perception of trust specifically towards close friends. The Machiavellianism trait is also a negative predictor upon trust towards close friends. However, trust towards acquaintances is only marginally significant on each Machiavellianism level hence this relationship should be further explored in future studies. On the other hand, individuals with higher avoidant tendencies self-reported lower trust towards others regardless of their relationship (i.e., close friends versus acquaintances). The avoidant attachment styles are also negative predictors upon trust towards close friends. This study can serve as a reference for professional counsellors in assisting their clients in building trust. Limitations and future research are discussed.

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Avoidant Attachment, Close Friends, Machiavellianism, Trust, Malaysian Young Adults



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Introduction

Why did Batman kill Superman in the movie titled *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice*? Any avid fan would say that it is because the overly suspicious Batman would do absolutely anything and everything to protect his beloved town, Gotham, from danger. But are such acts indication that he trusts no one — even his closest friends? Likewise, was his action influenced by the lack of a secure family base as a child? Distrust towards others have long been a manifestation of the Machiavellianism trait (Christie & Geis, 1970; Láng & Birkás, 2014; Pelz, 2025) as well as the insecure attachment styles (Bowlby, 1982; Fraley, 2002; Bloxsom et al., 2021). However, little is known about the individual differences in the perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances among these individuals.

In a report of the culture and leadership survey (part of GLOBE project), it was found that Malaysians have a higher level of institutional and in-group collectivism, where members of an organization or family are loyal, cohesive and express pride in being a member (GLOBE, 2020, In-group collectivism section). It should be noted that these levels were above average when compared to other countries. Moreover, Malaysians were found to be indirect in their communication to avoid offending others (Haq, 2020; Ismail et al., 2025) as their assertiveness level is less than average (GLOBE, 2020). Especially since Malaysians prioritize the maintenance of harmony and emphasize a collectivistic culture, they believe that being outspoken and straightforward could be seen as an insensitive behaviour (Bakar & Mustaffa, 2008). These findings suggest that Malaysians may not be truthful with their friends when the group harmony might be at stake.

Machiavellianism (Mach)

Ever since Niccolo Machiavelli published his essay “The Prince” in the early 16th century, his name has become an infamous term designated to describe individuals who are guileful, manipulative and have a disregard for conventional morality (Christie & Geis, 1970; Pelz, 2025; Ramsay, 2012). Those higher in the Mach trait (high Mach) are known to perceive others as tools for exploitation (Christie & Geis, 1970; Czibor et al., 2017) therefore it has been established that they have lesser intimacy with the people around them (Ináncsi et al., 2015). As they tend to be more concerned with maximizing their own benefit even at the cost of others (Berezkei, 2015; Czibor et al., 2017; Ramsay, 2012), they are often viewed as untrustworthy by the people around them (Berezkei, 2015). Nevertheless, they also have a higher distrust towards others (Ináncsi et al., 2015; Láng & Birkás, 2014), that reflects the insecure attachment styles as well (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Bowlby, 1982; Fraley, 2002).

Besides, Mach is very susceptible to family functioning (Jonason et al., 2014; Láng & Abell, 2018; Pelz, 2025) and is the most easily shaped by one's environment among the Dark Triad traits (Vernon et al., 2008), especially during child development (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Láng and Abell, 2018). Moreover, higher Mach have an innate hesitancy to form long-term intimate relationships (Christie & Geis, 1970; Ináncsi et al., 2015). This is because an unpredictable environment reinforces the need for autonomy and emotional detachment, both of which serve as their defence mechanism (Ináncsi et al., 2015; Láng & Abell, 2018; Richardson & Boag, 2016). Christie and Geis (1970) also suggested that their emotional detachment is an essential factor of Mach, to which Ináncsi et al. (2015) proposed that it seemed to be associated with both the anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Hence, this shows a possible influence of the attachment styles on Mach.

Attachment Theory

Attachment styles provide a framework for the differences in individuals' schemas that were developed during childhood (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Bowlby, 1982; Nickisch et al., 2020). Early childhood experiences and repeated learned experiences shape children's perception about themselves, others, and relationships (Brewer et al., 2018; Campbell & Stanton, 2019; Shahab et al., 2021). Insecure attachment styles are developed as responses towards the fear that others cannot be trusted for comfort and support when needed, which may pose a serious problem in the building of relationships (Bowlby, 1982; Fraley, 2002; Shahab et al., 2021). This includes the anxious, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles (Nickisch et al., 2020). As extensive research had indicated a positive association between Mach with the dismissive and fearful-avoidant attachment styles (Ináncsi et al., 2015; Jonason et al., 2012; Nickisch et al., 2020; Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021), the current study focuses in examining the avoidant attachment styles.

The dismissive-avoidant attachment style is characterized by their withdrawal from others because they value a higher level of self-sufficiency (Fraley, 2002; Nickisch et al., 2020). These individuals usually have a negative view of others but a positive view of themselves (Bernadon et al., 2011; Passanisi et al., 2015). On the other hand, fearful attachment style is a combination of the anxious and avoidant attachment styles. This refers to individuals who have a negative view on both them and others, as shown in their distrust towards others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bernadon et al., 2011). Their fear of rejection is often accompanied by the perception that they are unworthy to be loved, which have led to insecurities in their close relationships (Khaleque, 2025; Radkiewicz & Skarżyńska, 2021).

Concept of Trust

Two common components of trust are: (1) having confident positive expectations of others, and (2) a willingness to be vulnerable (Rousseau et al., 1998). Based on Lewis and Weigert's (1985) conceptualization of trust, trust can be differentiated into cognitive, affective and behavioural trust. The current study focuses on cognitive and affective trust. Cognitive trust is built upon the knowledge of an individual's attributes, which contributes to a rational decision of trust; whereas affective trust is based on emotional bond, which is rooted in the belief that the actions of both parties are motivated by mutual interests (Stedham & Skaar, 2019). As trust is gradually deepened, affective trust becomes more relevant than cognitive trust because the shared belief in the relationship is that betrayal would bring emotional pain to both individuals (Legood et al., 2023; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). In fact, Khodarahimi et al.'s (2016) found that

mistrust among Malaysian young adults reflects their emotional orientation, especially among those in the insecure attachment style categories. As such, emotions play a huge role within their interpersonal relationship, particularly in the aspect of trust.

Still, friendships can differ in terms of closeness. This raises the question of whether individuals who lack trust differ in their perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances? Kitts and Leal (2021) found that the “friend” label is central to building mutual trust among people, which includes expectations that their friend cares for them. In fact, both researchers also found that trusting their friend would not hurt them was ranked as the best defining feature of a good friendship. This aligns with Mayer et al.’s (1995) model of trust where benevolence towards the trustor is a factor of the trustee’s trustworthiness. Besides, Hruschka (2010) mentioned that trust is a signature feeling within close relationships whereas an indifferent attitude towards others in their time of need is common among casual relationships. Hence, the current study aims to investigate whether the “close friend” label would affect the perception of trust as well, especially among individuals with the avoidant attachment styles.

Besides, trust was found to be significantly and negatively correlated with anxiety dimensions (i.e., fear of abandonment) (Ináncsi et al., 2015). Consistent with this finding, Khodarahimi et al. (2016) found a significant negative relationship between mistrust (among anxiously attached individuals) and social support within the Malaysian context. Since the fearful attachment style is a combination of anxious and avoidant components (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bernadon et al., 2011), the lack of trust among these individuals might extend even to close interpersonal relationships, which reflects the overlapping characteristic of Mach and avoidant attachment styles. In terms of trust towards acquaintances, there is currently a lack of literature that is associated with these variables. However, as those with higher Mach are generally distrustful (Ináncsi et al., 2015; Láng & Birkás, 2014), their lack of trust may extend to acquaintanceship. As the concept of trust is often ambiguous with little research (Campbell & Stanton, 2019; Ozawa & Sripad, 2013), it remains a gap in the literature.

Present Study

The research on Mach, attachment styles and trust has always been conducted primarily in the Western context where societies are generally more individualistic (Frías et al., 2013; Keller, 2012; Pelz, 2025). This leaves an understudied context within the collectivistic culture such as Malaysia despite the possibility of a stronger effect regarding attachment theory in this context (Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021). This is critical because cultural context affects the way a child thinks, make decisions and act when encountering different issues (Kim & Kim, 2021; Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021). For example, parents exert more control over their children in a collectivistic society (Bejanyan et al., 2015), which may influence the child’s attachment style (Collins & Read, 1990). Although modifiable, this attachment style is unlikely to change over time (Fraley, 2002; Piquart et al., 2013) because it influences the child’s social perception to interpret similar events in a consistent manner (Collins, 1996).

A meta-analysis by Piquart et al. (2013) revealed that securely attached children were less likely to maintain their attachment security, especially when they face high social risk. Nevertheless, children with avoidant tendencies tend to maintain their insecurities throughout adulthood (Campbell & Stanton, 2019). Hence, the study of childhood attachment styles remains useful and highly influential in the study of adult relationships (Collins, 1996; Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021). Kim and Kim (2021) also found that collectivistic societies tend to

have more trust within close relationships but have a hostile stance towards unfamiliar individuals (referred to as 'acquaintances' in this study). They also suggested that Western cultures may be more conducive to the production and maintenance of general trust. Hence, the current study aims to examine the Malaysian context to broaden the literature on Mach, avoidant attachment styles and trust within a collectivistic society (GLOBE, 2020).

Furthermore, to our knowledge at this point of writing, there were only few studies that investigated individual differences in the perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances with regard to these variables. This literature gap is particularly relevant to Malaysians as they have confessed to hold stereotypes and distrust towards people of other races due to the absence of mutual understanding (Chie, 2019). Malaysian communities are also often segregated based on ethnicity, preventing the fostering of interracial friendships (Welsh, 2020). Moreover, this study focuses on the young adults age group (18 to 39 years old), to understand their psychosocial need (trust), which is a crucial component of their current psychosocial stage (Intimacy vs. Isolation) based on Erikson's theory of psychosocial needs (McLeod, 2018). Thus, the current study aims to investigate individual differences (dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles) among those who are either low, neutral or high Mach on their perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances.

The research questions of this study are as follows: (1) Is there significant association between Mach, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles? (2) Is there significant difference between dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles regarding their perception of trust? (3) Is there significant difference between the perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances among low, neutral and high Mach? The hypotheses that guide this study are: (1) There will be significant associations between Mach, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles (2) There will be significant difference between dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles regarding their perception of trust (3) There will be significant difference between the perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances among low, neutral and high Mach. Figure 1 shows the conceptualization of the present study.

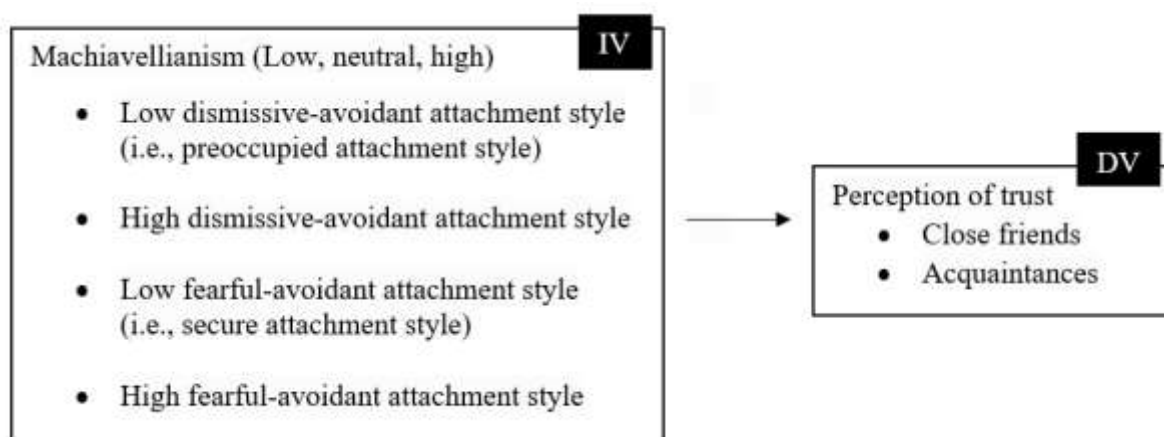


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Present Study

Methods

Sampling and Participants

Participants are recruited through convenience and purposive sampling (Andrade, 2021) among Malaysians, aged 18 to 39 years old, through online social media platforms and the Malaysian Association Psychology Students (MAPS) forum. G*Power 3.1 a priori power analysis is used to determine the sample size of this study. With 80% power and an alpha of 0.05, 179 observations are needed to detect a medium effect (partial eta squared = 0.06). With 10% attrition rate, the current study aims to recruit at least 197 participants. In the actual study, 340 participants were recruited. Nevertheless, data of participants who do not fulfil the inclusive criteria or are outliers were removed as part of the data cleaning process, resulting in a total of 290 participants in the final sample. Table 1 below shows the demographic details of participants in the study.

Table 1: Demographic Variables of Participants in the Current Study ($n = 290$)

Demographic Variables	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age			21.8	3.0
Gender				
Male	100	34.5		
Female	189	65.2		
Others	1	0.3		
Ethnicity				
Bumiputera / Malay	36	12.4		
Chinese	235	81.0		
Indian	19	6.6		
Employment Status				
Part-time	9	3.1		
Full-time	202	69.7		
Combination (Studying and working)	40	13.8		

Procedure and Materials

Approval was obtained from Taylor's University Human Ethics Committee prior to conducting the study. Then, 22 participants were recruited to complete a pilot study to ensure that the measures used are reliable, not too lengthy and contain good clarity. The duration to finish this survey is approximately 10 minutes. Participants who withdraw, fail to complete the survey, and do not meet the study criteria are not included in the data analyses. After obtaining acceptable reliability in the pilot study, the actual recruitment begins from 9 April 2022 and ends on 6 May 2022. Correlation analyses are conducted using IBM SPSS version 26, to investigate possible associations between Mach and the avoidant attachment styles. The interactions between the independent variables (i.e., Mach, avoidant attachment styles) and the dependent variable (i.e., trust) are probed using one-way ANOVA(s).

Machiavellian Personality Measure

The Machiavellian personality measure is adapted from the Machiavellian Personality Scale (MPS) (Dahling et al., 2008). The measure has a total of 16 items in the form of 7-point Likert scale. The descriptions of each point are as follows: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (somewhat disagree), 4 (neutral), 5 (somewhat agree), 6 (agree) and 7 (strongly agree). Three categories of Mach are used in this study, low Mach ($-1 SD$ below mean), neutral (mean), and high ($+1 SD$ above mean). A sample item is “I enjoy having control over other people” and reverse-coded items are adapted into each subscale. The overall Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the original measure is 0.82, with each subscale having a reliability score ranging between 0.70 to 0.83 (Dahling et al., 2008). The adapted scale obtained an acceptable Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.79 in the pilot study, and 0.75 in the present study.

Adult Attachment Measure

The adult attachment measure is adapted from the Revised Adult Attachment Scale- Close Relationships Version (Collin, 1996). The measure has 18 items in the form of 5-point Likert scale, which is adapted into 7-point Likert scale with same descriptions as the previous measure. In the original measure, scores of the Close and Depend subscales are computed to determine the level of comfort in relationships. The higher the computed scores, the higher the comfort in interpersonal relationships. To operationalise the scale into the present study, items in the Close and Depend subscales are reverse-coded and vice versa to determine participants' level of avoidance (i.e., adapted avoidance subscale). Consequently, the higher the computed scores of the subscales, the higher the level of avoidance.

A sample item of the adapted item is “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others” whereas a sample item of the adapted reverse-coded item is “I find it relatively easy to get close to people”. All items in the measure are adapted to indicate close relationships as per the instruction of the original author. As the original measure categorizes participants into four attachment styles (i.e., secure, preoccupied, dismissive and fearful attachment style), Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) four-category model of adult attachment are adapted into the present study to operationalise the measure. In this model, the relationships between the secure and fearful attachment style as well as between the preoccupied and dismissive attachment style were proven to be significantly negative.

Hence, categorization of participants' attachment styles in the present study are as follows: (1) secure attachment style is categorized as low fearful-avoidant attachment style (2) preoccupied attachment style is categorized as low dismissive-avoidant attachment style (3) fearful attachment style is categorized as high fearful-avoidant attachment style and (4) dismissive attachment style is categorized as high dismissive-avoidant attachment style. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the original subscales range between 0.78 to 0.85 (Collins, 1996). In the pilot study, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient obtained for the adapted avoidance subscale is 0.76 and 0.71 for the anxiety subscale. The reliabilities of both subscales are deemed as acceptable. In the present study, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the adapted avoidance subscale is 0.82 while the coefficient of the anxiety subscale is 0.87.

Trust In Close Friends Measure

The trust in close friends' measure is adapted from the Trust in Close Relationships Scale (Rempel et al., 1985). The measure has 17 items in the form of 7-point Likert scale, with same descriptions as the previous measures. A sample item is "My close friend behaves in a very consistent manner". Two items are excluded in the current study as they imply the context of a romantic relationship. Remaining items are adapted to indicate a close friend's relationship. The original measure did not include reverse-coded items hence negative items are adapted as reverse-coded items. The overall Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the original measure is 0.81, with each subscale ranging between 0.70 to 0.80 (Rempel et al., 1985). The adapted scale obtained a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.88 in the pilot study, and 0.67 in the present study.

Trust In Acquaintances Measure

The trust in acquaintances measure is adapted from the Trust in Close Relationships Scale (Rempel et al., 1985). The items in this measure are identical to the trust in close friend's measure, with the exception that all indicators of close friends are adapted into indicators of acquaintances. For example, the item "When I am with my close friend, I feel secure in facing unknown new situations" is adapted to "When I am with my acquaintance, I feel secure in facing unknown new situations". The adapted scale obtained an acceptable Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.93 in the pilot study, and 0.76 in the actual study.

Results

The current study classifies scores of MPS into low, neutral and high Mach. The cut-off point is determined by dividing the range between the minimum and maximum MPS score into three categories. Scores of low Mach ranges from 1.94 to 3.15, neutral Mach from 3.16 to 4.36 and high Mach from 4.37 to 5.56. As for the avoidant attachment measure, the mean score for each subscale (avoidant and anxiety) becomes the cut-off point, in accordance with the scoring of the original measure (Collins, 1990). Scores lower than the mean are considered as a low score for the subscale and vice versa. Participants who score low in the avoidant subscale and high in the anxiety subscale are categorized as having a low-dismissive attachment style. On the opposite end, those who score high in the avoidant subscale and low in the anxiety subscale are categorized as having a high-dismissive attachment style. Participants who score low in both subscales are categorized as having a low fearful-avoidant attachment style whereas those who score high in both subscales are categorized as having a high fearful-avoidant attachment style. Refer to Table 2 for the categorization of participants for the MPS and the Revised Adult Attachment Scale- Close Relationships Version.

Table 2: Categorization of Participants for the Machiavellian Personality Scale and the Revised Adult Attachment Scale- Close Relationships Version

Machiavellian (Mach) Personality Scale (MPS)	Adult Avoidant Attachment Style	<i>n</i>	%
Low Mach	Low dismissive	10	19.6
	High dismissive	5	9.8
	Low fearful	28	54.9
	High fearful	8	15.7

Neutral Mach	Low dismissive	32	17.3
	High dismissive	32	17.3
	Low fearful	58	31.4
	High fearful	63	34.1
High Mach	Low dismissive	6	11.1
	High dismissive	12	22.2
	Low fearful	9	16.7
	High fearful	27	50.0

Inferential Analyses

Prior to inferential analyses, visual inspection is conducted on the normality of data through histogram and stem-and-leaf plot. Outliers are excluded. Results for the correlation analyses and one-way ANOVA(s) are statistically significant, with an alpha score of .05 or .01. Explorative analyses (chi-square and linear regression(s)) are statistically significant.

Mach is significantly and positively correlated with both the avoidant subscale, $r(290) = .28$, $p < 0.001$ and the anxiety subscale, $r(290) = .16$, $p = 0.008$. Besides that, Mach has a significant inverse relationship with participants' trust in close friends, $r(290) = -.14$, $p = 0.021$. The higher the level of Mach, the lower the level of trust towards close friends. The avoidant subscale of the adult attachment style also has a significant positive relationship with the anxiety subscale, $r(290) = .48$, $p < 0.001$. However, it has a significant negative relationship with trust towards close friends, $r(290) = -.34$, $p < 0.001$ as well as towards acquaintances, $r(290) = -.18$, $p = 0.003$. Hence, the higher the avoidant component, the lower the trust towards close friends and acquaintances. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is accepted.

One-way ANOVA is conducted to examine trust towards close friends according to the avoidant attachment styles, $F(3, 286) = 7.676$, $p < 0.001$, partial eta squared = 0.075. Significant differences were found (see Figure 2). Post hoc comparison using Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the high fearful-avoidant attachment style ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.58$) is significantly lower than the low dismissive-avoidant attachment style ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.57$) and the low fearful-avoidant attachment style ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.58$) (refer to Figure 3). This shows that participants with the high fearful-avoidant attachment style trust their close friends less than the other styles. There is no significant difference between the avoidant attachment styles regarding trust in acquaintances. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is only partially accepted.

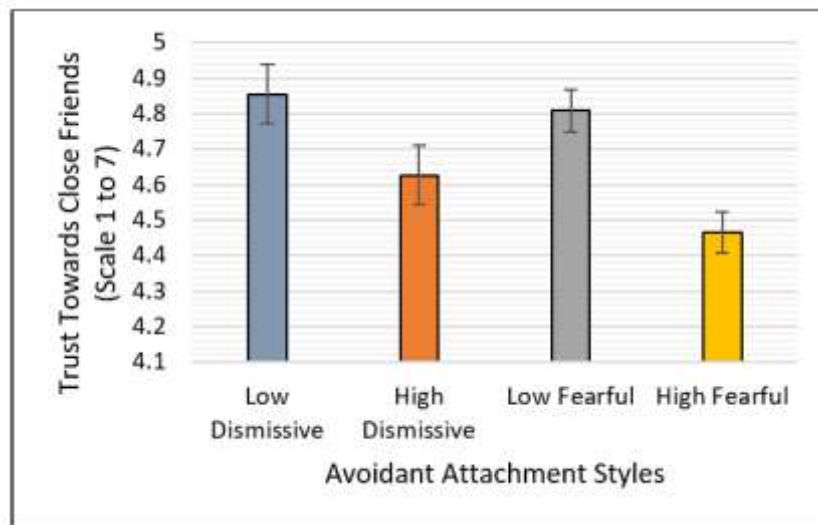


Figure 2: Relationship Between Avoidant Attachment Styles and Trust Towards Close Friends

To examine participants' trust towards close friends according to the Mach levels (i.e., low, neutral and high Mach), one-way ANOVA is conducted, $F(2, 287) = 4.216, p = 0.016$, partial eta squared = 0.029. Significant differences are found (see Figure 3). Post hoc comparison using Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for low Mach ($M = 4.88, SD = 0.60$) is significantly different from neutral Mach ($M = 4.64, SD = 0.60$) and high Mach ($M = 4.58, SD = 0.55$) (refer to Figure 2). Hence, low Mach trust their close friends more than neutral or high Mach. In terms of trust towards acquaintances, another one-way ANOVA is conducted, $F(2, 287) = 2.523, p = 0.082$, which is not significant, indicating no differences on levels of Mach upon trust towards acquaintances. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is only partially accepted.

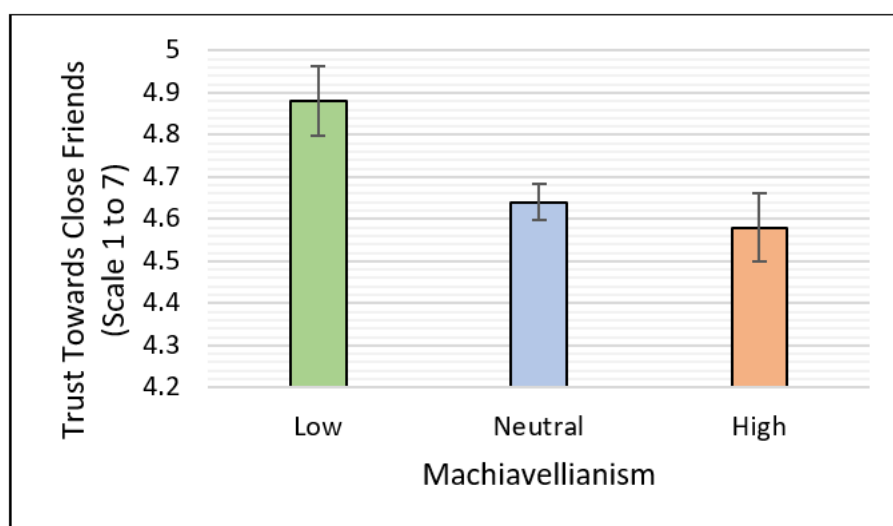


Figure 3: Relationship Between the Machiavellianism Scale and Trust Towards Close Friends

A chi-square test for independence (with Pearson Chi-Square) indicates significant association between Mach and the avoidant attachment, $\chi^2(6, n = 290) = 24.92, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V =$

0.207. In the current sample, low Mach are more likely to be in the low fearful-avoidant attachment style category, with a proportion of 54.9%. On the other hand, neutral Mach are more likely to be in the high fearful-avoidant attachment style category, with a proportion of 34.1%. Lastly, high Mach are more likely to be in the high fearful-avoidant attachment style category, with a proportion of 50.0%. Caution should be taken as the effect size is small.

A significant regression equation was found, $F(1, 288) = 5.39$, $p = 0.021$, with $R^2 = 0.018$. Mach is a negative predictor upon trust towards close friends, $b = -0.118$, $SE = 0.051$, $t = -2.32$, $p = 0.021$. Trust towards close friends decreases as Mach increases. However, Mach only explain 1.8% of variance in trust. As for the trust toward acquaintances, no significant relationship was found, $b = 0.061$, $SE = 0.058$, $t = 0.987$, $p = 0.325$. Thus, Mach does not predict trust towards acquaintances. On the other hand, the avoidant attachment styles significantly predicted participants' trust towards close friends, with $F(2, 287) = 19.19$, $p < 0.001$ with $R^2 = 0.112$. Trust towards close friends decreases as the level of avoidant tendency increases. Both the avoidant and anxious components of the avoidant attachment style explain 11.2% of the variance in this trust. Trust towards close friends decreases with the increase of the avoidant component of attachment style, $t(287) = -5.88$, $p < 0.001$. When controlling for the avoidant component of the attachment style, the anxiety component did not predict participants' trust towards close friends, $t(287) = 1.11$, $p = 0.266$. This could be due to the significant association between anxiety and avoidant components, $r(290) = .48$, $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The current study aims to examine individuals' perception of trust within the Malaysian young adults' context while specifying the differences in terms of close friends and acquaintances in relation to Machiavellianism and avoidant attachment styles. In regard to the hypotheses, present findings

- 1) accept Hypothesis 1 as there are significant positive associations between Machiavellianism, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles
- 2) partially accept Hypothesis 2 as there is significant difference between dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles regarding their perception of trust towards close friends (not for acquaintances domain)
- 3) partially accept Hypothesis 3 as there is significant difference between the perception of trust towards close friends among low, neutral and high Mach whereas the perception of trust towards acquaintances among each level of Mach is marginally significantly different.

Machiavellianism and Trust

The findings of the current study provide empirical evidence supporting past research, where a higher level of Mach is associated with lower level of trust. Nevertheless, this applies to relationships with close friends only, where low Mach trust more than neutral and high Mach. This inverse relationship resonates with the findings of Ináncsi et al. (2018) who posited that high Mach have an innate distrustful view within close relationships; this could be due to the risky environment that can make them vulnerable. This aligns with Rousseau et al.'s (1998) definition of trust, which is the willingness to be vulnerable. Since they are unable to trust their close friends, high Mach demonstrate a self-protection orientation of autonomy and emotional detachment to avoid rejection or abandonment within close relationships (Ináncsi et al., 2015;

Ináncsi et al., 2018; Láng & Abell, 2018; Pelz, 2025; Richardson & Boag, 2016). This is paired with the lack of emotional security that most high Mach have faced with neglecting or rejecting parents (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Láng and Abell, 2018). Therefore, this may have formed a vicious cycle of distrust and negative experiences that are detrimental as high Mach are prone to focus more on negative past experiences (Birkás & Csathó, 2015). Although the current findings of Mach only significantly predicted 1.8% of trust towards close friends, it has nonetheless provided empirical data regarding the topic in the Malaysian context.

On the other hand, trust towards acquaintances is marginally predicted by Mach. In other words, low, neutral and high Mach have slight differences in their level of trust towards acquaintances. This is an interesting finding as Dunning et al. (2014) found that across six studies, the decision to trust follows an internal moral standard rather than societal norms. This means that individuals trust because they think it is what they should do. As their participants were from the same university, it is possible to infer that some of them were acquaintances. From this perspective, high Mach should have had a significantly lower level of trust towards acquaintances due to their disregard for conventional morality (Christie & Geis, 1970; Ináncsi et al., 2015; Ramsay, 2012). However, the findings of the current study indicated otherwise. Nonetheless, Mach is not a significant predictor of trust towards acquaintances in the current study, possibly due to the current cultural context that had influenced the interpersonal social orders within the society (Dunning et al., 2014).

Avoidant Attachment Styles and Trust

In line with past studies, the avoidant component of the avoidant attachment styles is negatively correlated with trust level towards close friends and acquaintances (Bowlby, 1982; Fraley, 2002). This denotes that those with higher avoidant tendencies lack trust towards others regardless of their relationship. Thus, the findings have provided empirical evidence which reinforces the finding that distrust is a key indicator of the insecure attachment styles (Bloxsom et al., 2021; Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer, 1998; Legood et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Specifically, the current study reveals that those with the high fearful-avoidant attachment style trust their close friends less as compared to those with the low dismissive and low fearful-avoidant attachment style. This aligns with past findings where fearfully attached individuals view themselves and others negatively hence are insecure even within close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Bernadon et al., 2011; Radkiewicz & Skarżyńska, 2021). Those with the low dismissive and low fearful-avoidant attachment styles hold a positive view towards others, hence may be more trusting in close relationships (Bernadon et al., 2011; Nottage et al., 2022). In terms of trust towards acquaintances, there were no significant differences between the avoidant attachment styles. Although there are currently no studies done regarding this association, it can be argued that the components of trust might have influenced the level of trust. The current study investigates trust in terms of its cognitive and affective aspects, which are based on the knowledge of one's attributes and emotional bond respectively (Legood et al., 2023; Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Stedham & Skaar, 2019). As these requirements are not fulfilled within a relationship with an acquaintance, it may be suggested that both the cognitive and affective trust are absent thereby leading to a lower level of trust regardless of the individual's attachment style.

Furthermore, the avoidant and anxious components altogether predict 11.2% of the level of trust towards close friends. However, the anxiety component by itself neither predicts nor correlates with that level of trust in the current study. This is interesting as Ináncsi et al. (2015) found that trust is significantly and negatively correlated with the fear of abandonment (i.e., anxiety component). A plausible explanation is that members of a collectivistic society such as Malaysia tend to trust those with whom they have a close relationship (Kim & Kim, 2021). This is coupled with a positive view of others that is characteristic of anxiously attached individuals (Bernadon et al., 2011; Nottage et al., 2022). However, as individuals higher in the fearful-avoidant attachment style (combination of avoidant and anxious components) view others negatively, it may have impacted the predictive value of the anxious component in the present study. As past findings have demonstrated a possibility of a stronger effect regarding attachment styles in a collectivistic culture (Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021), this again reiterates the importance of studying trust in a collectivistic context.

Implications

The current study extends past findings by providing empirical evidence of a positive relationship between Machiavellianism and the avoidant attachment styles in a collectivistic society such as Malaysia. The distinction regarding the perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances also further explores this understudied concept based on the Machiavellianism trait and the avoidant attachment styles in Malaysia. Therefore, these findings are a primary source of information validating the application of Western concepts (i.e., Machiavellianism, attachment styles and trust) in a collectivistic culture.

The findings of the present study can serve as a reference for professional counsellors to assist their clients in building trust. Since acquaintances typically denote the start of a friendship, these findings help in the understanding of the differences in the perception of trust towards close friends and acquaintances among individuals with each level of the Machiavellianism trait, particularly those aged between 18 to 39 years old. This is especially important because they are in the Intimacy vs. Isolation stage based on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, where trust is crucial to form intimate long-term relationships (McLeod, 2018). With these findings as references, psychology professionals can be guided in the improvement of their clients' daily lives, especially for high Mach who often find it difficult to trust others and form intimate interpersonal relationships (Christie & Geis, 1970; Gondal et al., 2020). Since cultural context and attachment styles are critical in influencing the way one thinks, make decisions and act when encountering different issues (Kim & Kim, 2021; Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021), these findings also serve as a reference of factors affecting the perception of trust among young adults.

Limitations and Future Studies

The present study has a low predictive ability (1.8%) of Mach on the perception of trust towards close friends. This may be due to factors that were not investigated in the current study (e.g., perceived social support). Besides, the current research design may not fully address the ambiguity of the concept of trust as it relies solely on self-report measures, which risks social desirability bias that may be more prevalent in a collectivistic society such as Malaysia (Kim & Kim, 2013). Moving forward, future studies can utilize qualitative studies to provide a deeper understanding on trust and its relationship with other factors (e.g., past experiences within close relationships and perception towards acquaintances). This can increase accuracy as it allows

researchers to probe deeper into the attitudes and beliefs regarding this topic through non-verbal cues. The relationship between these variables should also be explored further within different settings such as organisational work or managerial leadership to increase its practicality and applicability.

Conclusion

By investigating the influence of Mach and attachment styles on the perception of trust among young adults in the Malaysian context, the current study found significant difference between the Mach levels regarding trust towards close friends. Individuals with higher avoidant tendencies lack trust towards others regardless of their relationship (close friends versus acquaintances). These findings provide empirical evidence regarding these relationships within the Malaysian context that is collectivistic, shame-based and prioritizing harmonious relationship. Nonetheless, the predictive values of the examined variables remain statistically low in the present study. Hence, future studies could address these relationships through qualitative research among Malaysian young adults who are higher on Mach, with the aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of their psychological processes such as lived experiences and perception. These would benefit the counselling field in Malaysian context.

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