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Understanding Attachment Styles and Their Influence on Relationships: A Case Study of the Pearson Family in “This Is Us”

Anavi Wattal

Abstract

The paper works upon the dimensions of attachment styles affecting interpersonal relationships. It has been done through a case study analysis of the Pearson family in an American television series- “This is us”. Through it, the author aims to examine how the characters specific attachment styles- secure, avoidant, anxious or disorganized affect their relationships, behaviours, challenges as well as emotional responses in various familial and romantic contexts. The theory examines how an early caregiver influences the adult relationships of a person and how their emotional lives are influenced. The Pearson family acts as a narrative case study in order to study the effect of attachment styles on human connections. The findings show Jack’s fearful avoidant behaviour, Rebecca’s anxiety, Kevin’s jealousy, Kate’s self worth issues and Randall’s need for perfectionism. Also, how Jack’s death further intensifies each character’s attachment issues. It establishes the fact how early childhood shapes the attachment styles which in turn shape the adult relationships. The series promotes broader discussion on emotional health. The research highlights the importance of media as a lens for exploring psychological concepts though is limited to western context.

Keywords: *attachment theory, This is us, pearson family, case study, psychology, relationships*

1. Introduction

Intersection of psychology and media provides a captivating lens to explore the complex human behaviour, specifically the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. As narrative media, television brings greater than simply entertainment; it is a mirror reflecting a complicated network of social, psychological, and emotional variables that shape human interaction.

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth both are credited for their joint work which came to the light in the world as the Attachment theory. Bowlby (1969) described attachment as “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings”. This theory provides a framework to understand in depth how people form connections emotionally throughout their life span and how they maintain it.

It is visible that the interaction with the primary caregiver forms the concept of expectations and behaviours in an individual’s life. Early bonds form the foundation for a person’s attachment style. It becomes crucial to understand the attachment style dynamics as it influences trust, dependence, emotional health and conflict resolution over the years.

In recent years, we have seen series being incorporated with different psychological aspects such as “As we See it”, an amazon original which delves into lives of three protagonists with autism spectrum. It peeks into the challenges they deal with and how they celebrate their own unique journey moving forward to acceptance and independence (Peretz,2022). Similarly, one show that incorporates attachment styles at a deeper level is - NBC’s This is us. The show follows the Pearson family across generations and is expanded into 6 seasons (Fogelman, 2016).

Cherry (2024) talks about how a relationship is a connection between two people which can be positive or negative in nature. Often, relationships are termed as romantic when referring to being in a relationship, it is not necessarily the case. Also, it does not always mean that physical intimacy, emotional attachment, commitment or all together are involved. There are different types of relationships though can be categorized into major six - platonic, romantic, codependent, casual, open and toxic relationships.

2. Review of Literature

Attachment styles help us understand the thoughts and behaviour of other people and has been a widespread topic of interest for researchers as well as common people. Relationships in a person’s life plays a vital role in his or her life. A person seeks different types of relationships ranging from close and intimate relationships to distant and challenging ones. It affects a person’s physical and mental health in many ways.

2.1 Attachment Theory

Bowlby (1969) suggested that attachment is crucial for a child's survival. The infant might have a primary attachment which is usually the mother of the infant and a hierarchy of attachment follows for other people which can be father, grandparents etc. He argues that the attachment with the mother is different from the attachment with other relationships. He also talks about how if attachment figures are disrupted can have major long-term irreversible consequences. This is termed as maternal deprivation which refers to the loss of the mother or failure to develop attachment.

According to Freud's theory of Psychosocial development (1938), the infants in their oral stage of development become attached to their mothers as they are the primary source for fulfilling their oral needs. The infant interacts through the mouth and the mother's breast is the first object of libido for the infant. Based on behavioural psychology, attachment is viewed as a learned or modeled behaviour. It views attachment as a result of the feeding relationship between the infant and mother.

Attachment theory was further developed by Mary Ainsworth in the 1970s and introduced her groundbreaking "strange situation" study. This study revealed the intense effect of attachment on behaviour. Researchers observed children as they were required to respond to a situation without the primary caregiver and then were reunited. Based on the study categorized the attachment styles into three categories- secure, ambivalent-insecure and avoidant-insecure (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Main and Solomon (1986) added the fourth style of attachment called disorganized-insecure attachment based on their research.

		Model of self	
		Positive	Negative
Model of other	Positive	Secure Trusts others and feels worthy of others' attention	Preoccupied Idealises others, emotionally needy, seeks reassurance
	Negative	Dismissing High-self-worth, compulsively self-reliant	Fearful Approach-avoidance, fears intimacy

Table 1 : Attachment styles based on model of self and others

Source: Wearden et. al, (2005)

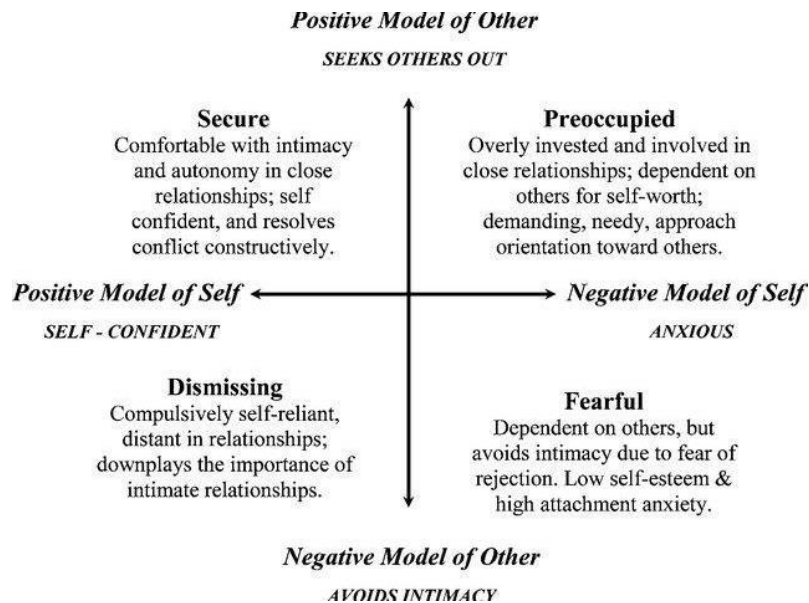


Fig. 1: Bartholomew's two dimension, four prototype model of adult attachment

Source: Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991)

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) viewed the attachment styles along two dimensions- attachment related to anxiousness and attachment related to avoidance.

Attachment related to anxiety- It refers to the extent to which the partner loves the other person which causes apprehension. These people usually fear being abandoned by their partner. Whereas, attachment related to avoidance refers to whether the person can trust or depend on others. The

people who score high on this parameter usually are uncomfortable opening up and fear that depending on other people will limit their autonomy (Fraley et. al, 2015).

This categorizes four types of attachment styles in adults- secure, preoccupied/anxious, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant attachment (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

2.1.1 Secure attachment

These types of adults score low on both the dimensions. These people trust their partners and do not worry excessively about the other person. The person has a healthy style of attachment and is open about his/her emotions. They project both themselves and others in a positive manner. They rely on their partners and vice-versa.

2.1.2 Anxious attachment

Anxious attachment is also known as pre-occupied attachment. These people are low in attachment related to avoidance but score high on attachment related to anxiousness. These people often think that the other person might cheat on him/her and are prone to jealousy. They might feel that their partner does not love them enough or not at all.

2.1.3 Avoidant attachment

It is a dismissive-avoidant attachment. These people score low on the attachment related to anxiousness but score high on the attachment related to avoidance. The person does not trust the other person and trusts only himself/ herself. Such a type of attachment dismisses the existence of a relationship, as the person is not able to depend on others. Also, if they have to depend, it makes them uncomfortable.

2.1.4 Disorganized attachment

It is also called fearful-avoidant attachment. These people score high on both attachment related to avoidance as well as anxiousness. These people want closeness in the relationship but do not want to get emotionally involved. The person has trust issues and does not trust himself/ herself with respect to social skills in order to maintain the relationship (Lally & Valentine French, 2021).

2.2 Attachment styles and relationships

Attachment styles have a significant impact on how individuals assess stress and engage in a relationship. Securely attached people report lower stress levels and have more emotional resilience and thus, foster a healthy and stable relationship. Secured attachment helps an individual to have a more stable and committed partnership. It helps in managing conflicts and open emotional dialogue, also fostering mutual support. In divergence, that is not the case with insecure attachment styles (Kidd et. al, 2011).

Preoccupied attached people usually have high stress and cortisol levels. They are hyper-vigilant in nature and need constant reassurance from their partner. They are very possessive which can strain the relationship. For anxious attached people there is a lot of dependency and emotional turmoil involved. The clinginess becomes a major reason for straining in the relationship as there is an anxious cycle of strong desire for closeness along with the fear of abandonment. Avoidantly attached people avoid intimacy in order to maintain their independent life. This often results in a distant relationship due to the emotional unavailability. They tend to withdraw during conflict and are emotionally distant. Fearful attached people have chronic adaptation to stress. Furthermore, anxious attached people feel less satisfied with their relationship due to their expectations along with need for approval and reassurance. However, securely attached people have the highest level of satisfaction in their relationship. This highlights how attachment can predict relationship stability (Simpson, 1990; Campbell & Marshall, 2011).

2.4 Research Gap

The literature above examines the impact of attachment styles on relationships. This has been done by many studies conducted to determine the future of relationships. Though, a significant gap remains in exploring how attachment styles are represented through the media particularly in family-based narrative.

2.5 Research questions

- How do attachment styles manifest in the family dynamics in the media?
- What influence do different attachment styles have on the interpersonal relationships within the Pearson family?

3. Methodology

The academic paper follows a qualitative approach by providing a case study focusing on the Pearson family from *This is us*. A qualitative methodology will do justice to the in-depth study of individual and relational aspects which might be ignored in the quantitative study. The family displays various attachment styles which will be analyzed in the case study. It will answer how these patterns were developed over time and will help in gaining insights how relationships portrayed mirror real life dynamics. The study has used the series “*This is us*” as a secondary data source.

“*This is us*” has a rich narrative which is based on multiple generations and different relationship dynamics. The show has complex storytelling along with flashbacks in between which help the viewer relate on how the character's response is based on a past event in his/her life. Thus, how the past shapes attachment style and emotional reactions over time. The experiences of the family whether it's the trauma, love, loss or resilience provides a compelling case which can be analyzed in context to the influence of the early caregiver on the adult behaviour and relationships. It can provide thorough exploration of attachment in different relationships whether it be parental, siblings or romantic relationships.

The case study will help in analyzing each character's attachment style and its impact on the relationship. It will also capture the family's inter-generational dynamics. Key members of the family- Jack, Rebecca, Kevin, Kate and Randall- are examined from their upbringing, relationships, and interactions with one another. Scenes and episodes are chosen based on key events that illustrate the characters' emotional weaknesses, responses, and attachment-related behaviours. Character analysis is implemented as a framework to comprehend how their attachment styles influence their relationships, this analysis is contextualized within the theoretical framework of attachment theory. This approach provides a structured means of observing attachment behaviour in a controlled fictional environment.

4. Case Study

The case study examines the Pearson family members from “This is us”, focusing on how attachment styles shape the backgrounds and relationships of each character. It will investigate Jack and Rebecca’s marriage, their parent-child relationships and sibling dynamics as the key focus. Also, highlighting the profound impact of Jack’s death on the characters’ attachment style and relational behaviour (Fogelman, 2016).

4.1 Character Profiles

4.1.1 Jack Pearson

Jack was brought in an adverse environment. He had an alcoholic and abusive father. This deeply rooted upbringing based on a volatile family dynamic shaped his attachment style. While his mother tried to emotionally protect Jack, she failed to protect him from abusive and destructive behaviour of his father, which left Jack with a complex pattern of fearful-avoidant attachment. He scores high on both attachment and avoidance tendencies. He was committed to become a supportive husband and nurturing father and counter his father’s abusive tendencies. Jack’s avoidant attachment can be seen by him using work and alcohol as a coping mechanism and allowing himself to emotionally distance from family life pressure. He wants a “perfect” family image though sometimes this makes him distant from Rebecca and his children, though he actively avoids repeating his father’s destructive behaviour.

4.1.2 Rebecca Pearson

Rebecca’s family background is overprotective and conservative which influences her attachment style and makes her a person who strongly looks for validation and approval from her family. She desired for independence as her parents were very restrictive and denied Jack as her partner at first. This led to her distancing herself from certain societal and family norms. However, Rebecca exhibits anxious attachment tendencies, which can be seen through her fear of losing her bond with the children. This especially can be noticed in the case of Kate, whom she tries to mold into a specific person according to her likeliness. Rebecca was not able to complete her aspirations and establish herself as a singer. She has a conflicted role as a mother as she juggles between pursuing her dreams and becoming a “so called good mother”- devoting herself to her family. Her need for closeness also paved her way towards her attachment to Jack, whom she views as a grounding figure among the chaos of her anxieties.

Her relationship with Miguel, Jack's best friend, offers insight on how attachment styles are evolving in nature. After the children grow up, she no longer uses them to solely define her identity and becomes independent. This allows her to explore a new phase in her life. Miguel has also gone through similar rejection from his family as he was blamed for the divorce from his first wife. Both Rebecca and Miguel share a sense of grief and long for a connection, which acts as the basis of their relationship. They mutually support each other as they cherish and keep Jack's memories alive together. Though soon other layers add up as Rebecca is diagnosed with Alzheimers and Miguel becomes her caregiver. It marks her moving towards a different stage of attachment as she is no more anxious and increasingly depends on Miguel for emotional and physical support.

4.1.3 Kevin Pearson

Kevin has an avoidant attachment style as he felt overshadowed by Randall in his childhood. Kevin in the series learns to confront and tries to find a genuine connection within his different romantic relationships. He engaged in multiple short term relationships, during his career as an actor. These relationships were short lived and unfulfilling. Relationships with Olivia and Solane determine the pattern of attraction for Kevin but he is not able to connect due to fear of intimacy. He searches for external validation while struggling to maintain meaningful relationships. Madison comes as a turning point for Kevin as he embraces fatherhood and confronts his avoidance tendencies. He paves his way towards becoming an emotionally responsible person.

4.1.4 Kate Pearson

Kate is primarily anxious as she deals with self-worth struggles and insecurities. She enters into a toxic and turbulent relationship with Marc in her early twenties and even gets pregnant. Marc is portrayed as an abusive and manipulative partner who benefits out of Kate's low self-esteem. Marc's behaviour at first acts as her anxious attachment but later fuels her need for personal growth. Kate grows into a beautiful mother and has aspirations in music as well as education. Her journey with Jack, her visually impaired son and Toby helps her confront her insecurities and develop a secure attachment. She later divorces Toby as the marriage failed to get along with her journey towards self-empowerment.

4.1.5 Randall Pearson

Randall is defined in the show by his intense need for security, belongingness and success. He has a unique position in the Pearson family as he is an adopted child. His attachment style is primarily anxious as it is shaped by his desire to fit in as a black child raised in a white family both in the family and society. He as a father is highly protective of his daughters especially with respect to Tess and Deja. Sometimes, his protective nature becomes overbearing and he loses control. Eventually, he learns to trust more and control less.



Fig. 2: Family tree- This is us

Source: Steinmann (2020)

4.2 Attachment Style Analysis - Romantic Relationships

4.2.1 Jack and Rebecca

Their marriage involves complex interplay of attachment dynamics. Jack's fearful avoidant attachment roots for both anxiety and avoidance. He wants to perfect his role of a husband and father while emotionally distancing himself from his family. His fear of repeating his father's mistakes fuels his anxiety to become a capable husband but at times he confronts with his avoidant self by withdrawing himself from his emotional struggles. On the other hand, Rebecca displays

anxious attachment especially when she sees Jack emotionally distant and if he is focusing on his work. Despite these challenges, Jack and Rebecca support each other. Jack supports Rebecca's passion for music and singing. Whereas, Rebecca admires Jack's commitment to the family despite having unresolved childhood traumas. Jack's workaholic nature leads to a separation for a short period of time along with intensifying anxiety for Rebecca. Though, in the end Rebecca confronts him and they both mutually decide to grow and demonstrate a close bond among the different attachment insecurities.

4.2.2 Randall and Beth

Randall's relationship with Beth is most stable and enduring in the series as it has deep love, commitment and mutual respect for each other. However, Randall's anxious nature sometimes leads to conflicts between the two. Especially in the Season 3 Episode 17: "R & B" where Randall's desire to fix things comes up against Beth's need for her own career and space. Beth's own secure attachment style helps balance Randall's anxieties and creates a partnership where both gradually grow together.

4.2.3 Kevin and Sophie

Sophie was Kevin's childhood sweetheart and his first significant relationship, as he longs for a relationship and struggles with commitment. Both of them undergo a series of breakups and patch ups. Kevin tries to reconnect with Sophie in the Season 2 Episode 6: "The 20s" after a failed marriage but his fear of commitment and self-destructive tendencies hurt her again.

4.2.4 Kate and Toby

Kate's relationship with Toby paves her way towards self-acceptance. Initially, it is seen that Toby provides her with the emotional support and validation she craves for and his humorous and outgoing nature helps in keeping her insecurities in check. However, their marriage later struggles with challenges of mental health and self-identity. Ultimately, in the Season 6 Episode 9: "The Hill", Kate confronts herself and realizes her dependence on Toby and her fear of failure. Their relationship evolves as both realize the need of supporting each other while accepting the need for individual growth.

4.3 Parent-Child Relationships

4.3.1 Jack and Kevin

Jack's relationship with Kevin is affected by his desire to instill strength and resilience in his son. But his emotionally distant tendencies created friction as Kevin seeks for his father's approval. This develops avoidant attachment style in Kevin as he interprets Jack's unavailability as lack of interest. Jack often withdraws from his emotional vulnerability which leads to Kevin looking for validation outside the family. Kevin's accident further intensifies this as he struggles with self worth and relationships in his adulthood. He still has the unresolved feelings which are rooted from his attachment to Jack.

4.3.2 Rebecca and Kate

Rebecca's anxious attachment is evident in her relationship with Kate. She attempts to mold Kate and make her a reflection of herself. We often see parents trying to push their children to fulfill the desires which they were not able to fulfill in their childhood maybe due to lack of resources or their parents did not allow. The same case can be seen with Rebecca and Kate, this has led to a strained relationship between the two. Rebecca criticizes Kate's weight and her career choices reflect how she wants to be relevant in her life; rather, it leads to her distancing herself from Rebecca. It highlights Rebecca's anxious attachment and Kate's response as she feels inadequate in the eyes of her mother and gets frustrated in her quest to become independent.

4.3.3 Jack and Randall

Jack's relationship with Randall is based on the deep sense of responsibility, Jack attempts to ensure that Randall feels accepted and valued within the family. Jack's anxious side gets in control with Randall as he tries to provide stability and security. However, Jack's occasional emotional withdrawal leaves Randall feeling out of place sometimes and contributes to Randall's anxious attachment. His need for approval and perfectionism stems from this and impacted him with his adult relationships. He has an intense drive to succeed along with accepting the complexities of being an adopted child and feeling different from his siblings.

4.4 Sibling Dynamics

4.4.1 Kevin and Kate

Kevin and Kate's relationship is a beautiful blend of mutual support and rivalry. Both the siblings struggle with self-worth which stems from their individual relationship with their parents. Kevin's avoidant attachment style makes him reluctant to open up to Kate while Kate's anxious attachment leads her to Kevin to validate herself. They are strengthened by their shared experiences but sometimes it leads to misunderstandings as especially when Kevin feels she receives more attention from their parents.

4.4.2 Kate and Randall

Kate and Randall contrast each other as Randall seeks her closeness while Kate's insecurities prevent her from fully reciprocating back. Both have different needs as well as emotional tendencies which leads to a bit of distance between the two. As Randall pushes himself towards excellency, Kate struggles with her self-worth making it difficult to understand each other's perspectives.

4.4.3 Randall and Kevin

Both have quite opposite attachment styles which can be seen throughout the show as they have different life experiences. Kevin often dismissed Randall's emotional needs owing to his avoidant behaviour as he perceived Randall's achievements as a threat to him. Randall tries his best to seek acknowledgement from Kevin but Kevin's emotional distance hindered his connection. The sibling rivalry hinders the connection and makes it difficult for them to converge as brothers.

In the Season 1 Episode 15: "Jack Pearson's Son", Kevin has an emotional yet powerful moment with his brother Randall as he experiences a severe anxiety attack. Randall's work pressure escalates and leads him to breaking down at his office. Kevin leaves the theater where he was about to give his first opening performance as he has an intuition that something is wrong with Randall. His arrival is surprising but at the same time comforting for Randall as there is a complication between the two. Kevin provides him the support he needs and this scene marks an important shift in their relationship. Kevin, who seems to have an avoidant nature, cares for Randall. Also, implying Randall's vulnerability. This scene depicts how a secure response to anxious attachment can allow to develop a foundation of trust and dependability in a relationship.

4.5 Jack's Death and its Impact

Jack's death was a part which was known to the viewer but was very sudden and unexpected. This further intensified the attachment insecurities and adult relationships. For Rebecca, Jack's death increased her protective nature and emotional dependency on her children seeing anxious attachment. Kate struggles to navigate her life as she holds onto the unresolved guilt of his passing. Maybe, if she had not asked him to go back, he would have been alive. This loss also bonds her with Miguel as she finds comfort in the shared grief.

Kevin turns to unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance abuse as he loses his primary source of validation which was Jack. The death leaves Kevin without a role model and compounds his avoidant tendencies. This fuels his resistance towards deepening emotional relationships. This can be seen through Kevin being involved in hookups and casual relationships rather than serious relationships. Randall experiences an increase in his anxious tendencies along with it he assumes the role of "protector" for his mother Rebecca. This responsibility further intensifies his tendency of becoming a perfectionist.

Kate internalizes her father's death as a personal loss fueling her struggles for self-worth and insecurities. She tries to look for his father's protector role in other people and tries to mimic his support. She often compares others to her father and fears losing her closed ones. One such example is the Super Bowl scene. Kate sits with Jack's ashes as a ritual watching the Super Bowl on a Sunday, while Toby watches her. This is a deeply emotional moment as it delves into complex grief Kate has held onto after Jack's death. It symbolizes how she celebrated him and at the same time feels the burden of his loss. Toby recognizes her feelings and gives her space without interfering. The scene shows how Kate still has not let go of Jack. It also represents a secure attachment response from Toby's side as he does not interfere and makes Kate feel emotionally safe.

5. Findings and Discussion

CHARACTER	ATTACHMENT	CAUSE	(EARLY	EFFECT	ON
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NAME	STYLE	CHILDHOOD)	RELATIONSHIPS
Jack Pearson	Fearful-avoidant	Father's abusive behaviour and Mother's overprotective nature	Become "perfect" husband and father
Rebecca Pearson	Anxious	Controlling family	Seek independence
Kevin Pearson	Dismissive-avoidant	Jealous of Randall, fear of being left out	Avoids intimacy or long term relationships
Kate Pearson	Anxious	Weight insecurities	Self-worth issues
Randall Pearson	Anxious	Need to fit in the white family as a black child	Perfectionism and success

Table 2 : Character's attachment style, reason and its effect

Source: Author

Pearson family's attachment styles reveal significant patterns that underscore the impact of early relationships on adult relationships. Jack's fearful avoidant and Rebecca's anxious nature creates tensions which affect their children with Kevin developing avoidant tendencies, Kate struggles with self-worth issues and Randall exhibits perfectionism and strong need for approval. Their attachment styles get affected due to Jack's death rather get further intensified. The series highlights how childhood experiences shape relationships and identity. This helps viewers recognize and address attachment issues. The media representation encourages empathy and introspection of one's own behaviour and relationship struggles. The insights observed are beyond fiction and are observed in real life as well. "This is us" offers the opportunity to identify and manage attachment related challenges and resonates with viewers having similar issues and if these issues cannot be managed on their own, one should consider therapy as an option. Based on previous research, this study confirms the established relationship between attachment and its influence on adult relationships.

6. Directions for future research

The study used the fictional narrative of the Pearson family to understand the attachment styles and interpersonal relationships. Future research can consider exploring attachment styles through other media depictions, such as family-based dramas. Researchers can look for attachment styles impacting specific relationships like between parents, brothers and sisters, foster parents, adopted children and others. This will provide more detailed insights into determining a broad pattern among people. Also, different cross-country or region shows can be analyzed which will help in determining whether culture has a role to play in this situation. Also, a comparative analysis can be done on the media portrayed relationships in the shows and real-life based relationships. It would help in generalizing the research and assess the accuracy and reliability of the characters based portrayal of attachment styles. Thus, direct whether these depictions are merely for the script of the serial or can provide perspective description of human relationships. The research has an important limitation that it is dominantly based on western context, rooted in the American cultural setting of the series- “This is us”. The portrayal might vary depending on different cultural context as western and non-western cultures are quite different like the west focuses on an individualistic approach whereas India focuses on a collective approach for identity. Similarly, other differences exist which will affect the generalization for the Indian population. Therefore, researchers should take an Indian perspective into consideration. Both attachment dynamics between the western and non-western world can be compared. This will promote more inclusive research of the attachment theory and its effect on interpersonal relationships.

7. Conclusion

The series “This is us” helps in enhancing the public understanding of the psychological concepts and encourages viewers to reflect on their own emotional health and their behaviours in a relationship. Studying attachment styles through media representations makes the complex psychological concepts easy to understand, interpret and is accessible to a broader audience. Attachment styles do not remain same for a lifetime and can be changed intentionally or unintentionally as in the case of Rebecca. It also highlights how one’s attachment style influences the challenges and growth of family and romantic relationships.

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