



Family Mealtime Emotional Climate, Attachment, and Perceived Stress: A Cross-Cultural Study of India and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Family mealtimes are occasions when family members eat together in the same place and at the same time, and serve as an opportunity to interact and build bonds. Adolescence and young adulthood are usually the critical developmental stages, characterised by significant psychological, emotional and social change. This is when individuals tend to rely on family members to help them work through stress and attachment. The emotional climate during a family meal helps individuals. The present research was carried out on a sample of 61 respondents, of whom 5 were excluded because they did not meet the requirement of living with another family member. The study employed four questionnaires, namely, the Perceived Stress Scale, the Family Mealtime Questionnaire, the Attachment Style Questionnaire, and the Emotional Climate Questionnaire. The participants' ages ranged from 14 to 32 years. Indian participants had reported a significantly higher family emotional climate than United Kingdom participants. Family emotional climate was negatively associated with perceived stress. The family emotional climate was negatively associated with avoidant and anxious attachment. Perceived stress was positively associated with avoidant and anxious attachment insecurity. Finally, family mealtime structure shows no significant relationships. The findings highlight that the emotional quality of family interactions may be more important than the structural aspects of family mealtimes in understanding perceived stress and attachment. They also emphasise the importance of considering cultural context when examining family relationships and emotional experiences.

Keywords: *Attachment; Family Mealtime; Perceived Stress; Cross-Cultural Comparison; Mealtime Structure*

1. Introduction:

Adolescence and young adulthood are widely described as critical development stages which are characterised by significant psychological, emotional and social change (Eccles et al., 2003). In such times, individuals tend to seek independence but also rely on family relationships for emotional support,

guidance, and stability (Baltes & Silverberg, 2019). The quality of family interactions during these years is critical and is associated with outcomes such as interpersonal functioning, psychological well-being, and emotional regulation (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023).

Families may continue to function as an important socialising context which influences how individuals end up interpreting relationships and manage emotional experiences, despite increasing autonomy (Ito et al., 2022)

Many families miss an important, frequent aspect of family interactions: family mealtimes. Family mealtimes are occasions when family members eat together in the same place and at the same time, typically with one caregiver present (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023). A review by Snuggs & Harvey showed that shared family meals are linked with stronger family relationships, better communication and improved psychosocial well-being among children and adolescents. Although the same review highlights how family meal times are conceptualised and measured. It also suggests that factors beyond frequency, like the quality of the interaction, may be important for understanding these consequences. From this, the question arises of whether the emotional climate of shared family meals may be associated with attachment styles and stress regulation during adolescence and young adulthood.

1.1 Emotional Climate of Shared Family Meals

The emotional atmosphere is heavily referenced during shared family meals. Additionally, the interpersonal qualities affect the emotional qualities present during mealtime interactions (Hérot, 2002). Examples include emotional responsiveness, verbal and nonverbal communication, and the degree of support or conflict present. Ito et al. (2022) suggested that mealtimes create opportunities for communication and interaction, which is a good contribution towards psychosocial development.

Often, family mealtimes are heavily linked to psychosocial well-being among new adults. This includes frameworks such as personal growth and positive relationships (Chen et al., 2025). Such findings show that shared family meals are possible in contexts where factors such as emotional support and communication are involved (Ito et al., 2022). Additionally, in 2023, Snuggs & Harvey demonstrated that family mealtimes help initiate conversations about everyday experiences and challenges, thereby strengthening family relationships.

Furthermore, the emotional quality of these interactions can influence how individuals experience family support (Montpetit, 2016). An example of this is that positive mealtime environments are often characterised by open communication, and their responsiveness is linked to greater emotional expression. On the other hand, environments characterised by conflict or disengagement are associated with reduced communication (Ito et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the aspect which remains underexplored in this niche is the extent to which emotional climate can predict developmental outcomes.

1.2 Attachment Styles in Adolescence and Young Adulthood

An interesting construct for understanding how early and ongoing relationships with caregivers may influence emotional development is attachment theory. In 1969, John Bowlby proposed that interactions with caregivers can help adolescents and young adults form internal working models. This can help individuals guide their expectations of trust, emotional availability, and support. These ideas were advanced by Mary Ainsworth et al. (1978), whose Strange Situation studies identified patterns of secure and insecure attachment.

However, later research suggested extending the attachment theory to adolescence and adulthood. In 1987, Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver suggested that attachment styles can influence emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning beyond childhood. Secure attachment has been linked to

emotional openness and many more adaptive coping strategies. On the other hand, insecure attachment styles have been associated with avoidance, anxiety and relational difficulties (Hazan & Shaver, 1987)

Even though attachment patterns are recognised and developed early, research suggests that these patterns can be continuously shaped by ongoing experiences (Bowlby, 1969). Family interactions during adolescence, including those that occur during shared meals, can be relevant in contexts such as reinforcing attachment-related expectations. Ito et al. (2022) report that repeated family interactions are associated with stronger perceived family relationships. This may be relevant to attachment processes, although direct evidence linking the mealtime emotional climate to attachment styles remains limited (Ghadieh, 2025).

1.3 Stress Regulation in Adolescents and Young Adults

Stress is often described as a psychological and physiological response to demands perceived as exceeding an individual's coping resources (Motzer, 2004). Many adolescents and young adults are exposed to a range of stress-inducing factors, including academic demands, identity development, social relationships, and uncertainty about future goals (Zheng et al., 2025). Saifi et al. (2022) suggest that such stressors may be associated with increased vulnerability to emotional difficulties during this developmental period.

Stress regulation often refers to the processes by which individuals manage their responses. Snuggs & Harvey (2023) state that family environments can shape stress and regulation through emotional support and co-regulation processes. A construct in which support like this is present is shared family meals. Saifi et al. (2022) found an inverse relationship between the frequency of family meals and the severity of depressive disorder among medical students. The participants who reported a higher frequency of family mealtimes had lower levels of depressive symptoms. Such findings have been interpreted to suggest that shared meals can be linked with emotional support and better well-being. However, the researchers stated that the study's correlational design does not allow for causal conclusions.

1.4 Linking Emotional Climate, Attachment, and Stress Regulation

Existing research suggests that stress regulation and attachment styles are related frameworks (Nolte et al., 2011). The emotional climate within a family or caregiving environment influences how safe, supported and understood an individual feels (Chambers et al., 2001). Factors such as secure attachment have been linked to more adaptive stress regulation, whereas insecure attachment can be linked to increased stress reactivity or avoidance of support (Eilert and Buchheim, 2023). A context that can involve both attachment-related processes and stress regulation strategies is shared family meals. The emotional climate of such interactions may influence how individuals communicate, seek support, and cope with stress (Emotional Support Skills). Yet, Snuggs & Harvey (2023) highlight that most existing research focuses on meal frequency rather than interaction quality, and that few studies examine these variables together.

In contrast, a hostile, neglectful, or unpredictable emotional climate may contribute to insecure attachment patterns, which makes it more difficult to manage emotions and cope with stress (Riggs, 2019). Secure attachments promote effective stress regulation by helping individuals develop adaptive coping strategies and confidence in seeking support during challenging situations (Svanberg, 1998). Conversely, insecure attachment is often associated with heightened stress responses, emotional dysregulation, and increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Wang, 2023). Overall, the quality of early emotional experiences and attachment relationships provides the foundation for how individuals regulate stress throughout their lives, underscoring the importance of nurturing, supportive caregiving environments for healthy emotional development (Bubb, n.d.).

Existing research demonstrates an association between family meals and positive developmental outcomes; most of this literature focuses on meal frequency rather than their emotional quality. There is limited verifiable research which examines how the emotional climate of shared family meals can predict attachment styles and stress regulation, especially among adolescents and young adults. Furthermore, many of these researchers adopt methods that integrate attachment and stress regulation into a single, highly similar construct. This gap proposes the need for literature which moves beyond behavioural measures of family interaction and instead examines the affective and relational dimensions of shared family meals.

2. Methodology

2.1 Aim of the Present Research

The aim of this research is to investigate the extent to which the emotional climate of shared family meals can predict attachment styles and stress regulation in adolescents and young adults. It is guided by the attachment theory and frameworks of stress regulation. This study seeks to explore how everyday family interactions at mealtimes contribute to emotional security and coping capacities at critical stages of development. Family mealtimes often feature recurring social interactions in which emotions, communication patterns, and relational dynamics are expressed. By studying the emotional tone of such interactions, this research seeks to understand the potential role of these factors in shaping an individual's emotional bonds and the way they may cope with stress during early adulthood.

2.2 Participants:

This study was conducted on a total sample of 61 responses, aged between 14 and 32 years. 30 of these responses were from the United Kingdom, and 31 were from India. 5 of the 61 participants were excluded because they did not meet the criterion of living with a family member. Hence, a total of 56 participants were included in the study, with 28 from each country. The overall sample was mainly women, with 35 in total from both countries, and 21 men from both countries. In terms of age, most participants were between 14 and 18 years of age. The Indian sample had 20 participants aged 14 to 18, and the United Kingdom sample had 13 participants aged 14 to 18. The 19-25 age group had 13 participants, and the 26-32 age group had 10. Overall, in terms of family structures, the nuclear family was the most common, with 25 participants, followed by joint families with 24. The smallest family structure that filled out the form was single-parent households, with 7 participants cumulatively choosing this family structure. In India, there were 16 participants from nuclear families, and participants from the United Kingdom reported mainly having joint families, with 15 participants reporting that family structure.

2.3 Instrumentation:

- a) Perceived stress scale (Cohen et al., 1983): A 10-item questionnaire that measures perceived stress across different situations. The statements ask respondents to mention their thoughts and feelings over the last month. All the items are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = Never to 4 = Very Often. Reverse scoring exists for four statements. An example of an item in the scale is, "In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?"
- b) The study used the Family Mealtime Structure Questionnaire (FMSQ), developed by du Plessis et al. (2025). This is a self-report questionnaire with 19 statements that measure the levels of structure in family mealtimes, including routines, parental control, mealtime distractions, and family eating together. The Participants respond to each statement using a Likert scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. An example of one of the statements is "my family usually eats meals together"/ Some items were reverse-scored to help reduce bias in the responses. These responses will be used to assess different aspects of a family mealtime structure.

- c) This study uses the Attachment Style Questionnaire - Short Form (ASQ_SF), which was developed by Alexander, Feeney, Hohaus, and Noller (2001). This questionnaire is a self-report instrument with 29 statements designed to measure individuals' attachment styles in relationships. It uses a 6-point Likert scale, with participants indicating their level of agreement with each statement on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To reduce bias, some responses are reverse-scored. The responses are used to assess different attachment patterns in interpersonal relationships.
- d) To measure the emotional climate created during family meals, 8 statements were developed and grouped into 4 sub-dimensions: warmth & emotional support, communication & expression, psychological safety, and conflict & tension. Cronbach's alpha was tested for the scale, and it was 0.81. For two items, reverse scoring was present. An example item from the scale is "I feel cared for by my family during shared meals."

2.4 Research Design

This research uses a correlational and cross-sectional design to identify relationships between variables without manipulating them at a single point in time. Furthermore, it is comparative, examining differences across age groups and genders. Moreover, the study is a cross-cultural comparison between India and the United Kingdom, which helps account for variations in family practices and emotional expression. The data for this study were collected using a self-administered Google Forms questionnaire created by the researcher. This allowed for a more efficient and anonymous data collection

2.5 Data collection procedure:

Data were collected via a Google Form, a structured questionnaire that included Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions. Before distribution, the survey was thoroughly reviewed to ensure that the questions aligned with the research objectives. The Google Form was circulated through online social media communities and sent to potential respondents. The participants gave consent and were informed of the right to withdraw and that their responses would remain anonymous. The data collection was conducted between February 2026 and May 2026. Participants responded via their own devices, and their responses were collected and recorded in Google Forms. And upon closing the survey, the form was exported to a Google Sheet, where 5 of the 61 participants were filtered out for failing to meet the form's requirements.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This research strictly adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the study. Firstly, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants by providing a detailed consent statement at the beginning of the Google Form. Secondly, participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequence. Thirdly, participants living with family members were eligible, ensuring the relevance of responses. Finally, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by not collecting information that could identify participants, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

Additionally, participation in the study was completely voluntary, and respondents had the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Participants living with family members were eligible, ensuring the relevance of responses. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by not collecting information that could identify them, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

3. Findings of the Study

Table 1 shows Demographic Characteristics of Participants by country of residence (N = 56)

Variable	Category	United Kingdom n (%)	India n (%)	Total n (%)
Gender	Male	12 (42.9)	9 (32.1)	21 (37.5)
	Female	16 (57.1)	19 (67.9)	35 (62.5)
Age Group	14–18 years	13 (46.4)	20 (71.4)	33 (58.9)
	19–25 years	8 (28.6)	5 (17.9)	13 (23.2)
	26–32 years	7 (25.0)	3 (10.7)	10 (17.9)
Family Structure	Joint family	15 (53.6)	9 (32.1)	24 (42.9)
	Nuclear family	9 (32.1)	16 (57.1)	25 (44.6)
	Single-parent household	4 (14.3)	3 (10.7)	7 (12.5)

A total of 56 participants were included in the study, comprising 28 participants from the United Kingdom and 28 participants from India. As shown in Table 1, the overall sample consisted predominantly of females (62.5%, $n = 35$), while males accounted for 37.5% ($n = 21$). Female participants represented a greater proportion of both the United Kingdom sample (57.1%, $n = 16$) and the Indian sample (67.9%, $n = 19$). With respect to age, most participants belonged to the 14–18 years age group (58.9%, $n = 33$), followed by the 19–25 years age group (23.2%, $n = 13$) and the 26–32 years age group (17.9%, $n = 10$). The Indian sample had a higher proportion of participants aged 14–18 years (71.4%, $n = 20$) than the United Kingdom sample (46.4%, $n = 13$). Regarding family structure, nuclear families constituted the largest category in the overall sample (44.6%, $n = 25$), closely followed by joint families (42.9%, $n = 24$). Participants from India were more likely to report living in nuclear families (57.1%, $n = 16$), whereas participants from the United Kingdom were more likely to report living in joint families (53.6%, $n = 15$). Single-parent households represented the smallest proportion of the sample (12.5%, $n = 7$).

Table 2 Independent-Samples *t* Tests Comparing Participants from the United Kingdom and India on Study Variables

Variable	United Kingdom M (SD)	India M (SD)	<i>t</i> (54)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Family Mealtime Structure	58.46 (3.27)	57.89 (8.13)	0.34	.732	0.09
Emotional Climate	26.18 (4.63)	28.93 (5.50)	-2.03	.048*	0.54
Perceived Stress	20.61 (4.23)	22.46 (7.59)	-1.13	.263	0.30
Avoidant Attachment	31.21 (6.52)	36.46 (12.77)	-1.94	.058	0.52
Anxious Attachment	23.21 (7.71)	25.07 (7.94)	-0.89	.378	0.24

Independent-samples *t* tests were conducted to examine differences between participants from the United Kingdom and India on family mealtime experiences, family emotional climate, perceived stress, and attachment dimensions (see Table 2).

The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in family emotional climate scores between the two groups, $t(54) = -2.03$, $p = .048$, $d = 0.54$. Participants from India ($M = 28.93$, $SD = 5.50$) reported significantly higher family emotional climate scores than participants from the United Kingdom ($M = 26.18$, $SD = 4.63$). The effect size was moderate according to Cohen's (1988) criteria.

No significant differences were observed between participants from the United Kingdom and India in family mealtime experiences, $t(54) = 0.34$, $p = .732$, $d = 0.09$. Similarly, there were no significant group differences in perceived stress, $t(54) = -1.13$, $p = .263$, $d = 0.30$, or anxious attachment, $t(54) = -0.89$, $p = .378$, $d = 0.24$. Effect sizes for these variables ranged from small to negligible.

Although the difference in avoidant attachment did not reach statistical significance, $t(54) = -1.94$, $p = .058$, participants from India ($M = 36.46$, $SD = 12.77$) reported somewhat higher avoidant attachment scores than participants from the United Kingdom ($M = 31.21$, $SD = 6.52$). The associated effect size ($d = 0.52$) indicated a moderate magnitude difference, suggesting a potential trend that may warrant further investigation with a larger sample.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants from India reported significantly more positive family emotional climates than participants from the United Kingdom, while no statistically significant cross-national differences were observed for family mealtime experiences, perceived stress, or attachment dimensions.

Table 3 Pearson Correlations Among Family Mealtime Structure, Emotional Climate, Perceived Stress, and Attachment Dimensions (N = 56)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Family Mealtime Structure	—				
2. Emotional Climate	-.03	—			
3. Perceived Stress	-.09	-.35**	—		
4. Avoidant Attachment	.13	-.36**	.59***	—	
5. Anxious Attachment	.11	-.36**	.38**	.28*	—

***Note.** Values represent Pearson's correlation coefficients. $p < .05$. $p < .01$. $p < .001$.

Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among family mealtime structure, emotional climate, perceived stress, avoidant attachment, and anxious attachment.

Emotional climate was significantly and negatively associated with perceived stress, $r(54) = -.35$, $p = .008$, indicating that participants who reported a more positive emotional atmosphere during family meals tended to report lower levels of perceived stress. Emotional climate was also negatively correlated with avoidant attachment, $r(54) = -.36$, $p = .007$, and anxious attachment, $r(54) = -.36$, $p = .007$, suggesting that greater attachment insecurity was associated with less positive emotional experiences during family meals.

Perceived stress demonstrated a strong positive association with avoidant attachment, $r(54) = .59$, $p < .001$, and a moderate positive association with anxious attachment, $r(54) = .38$, $p = .004$. Additionally, avoidant and anxious attachment were positively correlated, $r(54) = .28$, $p = .034$. No significant relationships were observed between family mealtime structure and emotional climate, perceived stress, avoidant attachment, or anxious attachment (all $ps > .05$).

This pattern of findings suggests that the emotional quality of family meals may be more important than their structural aspects. While the frequency or regularity of family mealtime practices was unrelated to stress and attachment dimensions, participants who perceived a more positive emotional climate during family meals reported lower stress levels and lower attachment insecurity.

Furthermore, attachment insecurity was associated with poorer psychological functioning. Individuals with higher avoidant and anxious attachment scores reported greater perceived stress, with avoidant attachment demonstrating the strongest association. These findings are consistent with attachment theory, which proposes that insecure attachment orientations are associated with difficulties in emotional regulation and increased vulnerability to psychological distress.

Overall, the results suggest that the emotional experience surrounding family meals, rather than mere participation, may be more closely linked to psychological well-being and attachment-related processes.

4. Discussion

This research analysed the cross-cultural differences in family mealtime experiences, emotional climate, perceived stress, and attachment dimensions between Indian and British participants. The results highlighted that Indian participants had a much higher family emotional climate score than the participants from the United Kingdom. These results can indicate much broader cultural differences between collectivist and individualist societies. Mesquita (2001) argued that emotions in a collectivist culture are more strongly integrated into interpersonal relationships and social connectedness, whereas emotions in an individualist culture are often experienced as individual psychological states. Similarly, Vishkin et al. (2022) found that collectivist cultures tend to place greater emphasis on emotions that strengthen and maintain social relationships, whereas individualist cultures place greater value on emotions that promote personal autonomy and self-expression. India is usually characterised by stronger collectivist values than the United Kingdom; family interactions may hold greater emotional significance and foster a warmer atmosphere during shared family meals (Mesquita, 2001; Vishkin et al., 2022). Additionally, examining family relationships across two different cultural contexts has demonstrated that collectivist orientations strengthen the association between family closeness and positive emotional outcomes (Kim et al., 2020). As Indian participants reported higher emotional climate scores, this is consistent with existing research and underscores the importance of interpersonal connectedness and family relationships within a collectivist culture.

This study found a negative association between family emotional climate and perceived stress. Participants who reported a more positive emotional atmosphere during family meals tended to report lower stress levels. Gervais and Jose (2023) had findings consistent with this research. Their research found that stronger family connectedness predicted lower stress-triggering problems among adolescents over time. Their findings suggested that supportive family relationships can reduce vulnerability to stress by promoting healthier coping mechanisms and reducing maladaptive coping processes. The current findings indicate that positive emotional experiences within a family context may act as a protective factor against stress. Moreover, Morris et al. (2007) proposed that the emotional climate of a family plays an empirical role in emotional development and regulation, which influences how individuals respond to and manage stressful experiences. Hence, participants who experienced greater support, warmth and positive emotional engagement during family meals can possess stronger emotional resources for managing perceived stress.

Additionally, emotional climate was also significantly negatively associated with both avoidant and anxious attachment dimensions. Participants who reported more positive family mealtime emotional climates exhibited lower levels of attachment insecurity. This finding is consistent with the tripartite model proposed by Morris et al. (2007). This model emphasises the importance of the family's emotional climate. This includes attachment relationships, family expressiveness, and parenting style in shaping emotional development and regulation. Attachment theory posits that repeated emotional experiences, responsiveness, and support foster the development of secure attachment representations. Conversely, inconsistent or emotionally unsupportive environments can lead to attachment insecurity (Mikulincer, 2003). Recent findings suggest that family mealtimes are characterised by positive emotional engagement and warmth, which can reinforce a sense of security and connectedness, thereby reducing both avoidant and anxious attachment tendencies. These associations support existing theoretical perspectives, which highlight the role of an emotionally supportive family environment, which helps foster security (Morris et al., 2007).

The results further highlighted that perceived stress was associated positively with anxious and avoidant attachment. The strongest relationship was observed for avoidant attachment. These findings are consistent with previous research, which suggests that attachment insecurity is associated with emotional difficulties and poorer coping responses during stressful situations. Morris et al. (2007) argued that emotional family processes contribute a lot to the development of emotional regulation capacities, which in turn influence individuals' responses to stress. Individuals with insecure attachment patterns may have fewer effective emotion regulation strategies. Individuals who face insecure attachment patterns can possess fewer effective emotional regulation strategies, which increases their vulnerability to perceived stress. Furthermore, Kim et al (2020) found that stronger family relationship quality was associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms and distress, particularly within collectivist contexts. In conclusion, the findings suggest that secure and supportive family relationships can act as an important protective factor against emotional distress, whereas attachment insecurity may contribute to elevated stress experiences.

Interestingly, family mealtime structure was not significantly associated with emotional climate, perceived stress, avoidant attachment or anxious attachment. Although previous research has frequently emphasised the benefits of family meals, the current findings suggest that the structural aspects of mealtimes can be less important than the emotional experiences which occur during them. Dallacker et al. (2018) found that greater family meal frequency was associated with several positive outcomes. However, it also acknowledged that broader family characteristics, including family functioning and family environment, may partially explain these links. In 2007, Morris et al. suggested that the family's emotional climate exerts a much stronger influence on emotional development and regulation than behavioural routines alone. Therefore, while regular family meals may create opportunities for family interaction, current findings suggest that the emotional quality of those interactions may be more closely related to perceived stress and attachment dimensions than to the frequency or structure of family meals.

Correspondingly, Morris et al. (2007) proposed that the emotional climate of a family exerts a stronger influence on emotional development and regulation than behavioural routines alone. Therefore, while regular family meals may create opportunities for family interaction, the current findings suggest that the emotional quality of those interactions may be more closely related to perceived stress and attachment dimensions than the frequency or structure of family meals themselves (Mikulincer, 2019).

To encapsulate the findings of this research, the emotional climate around family meals is associated with perceived stress and attachment dimensions more than with the structural characteristics of family mealtimes. Indian participants reported a significantly higher positive family emotional climate than the British participants. This underscores the cultural differences in the role of interpersonal relationships and emotional experiences within the collectivist and individualist societies (Mesquita 2001; Kim et al., 2020). In both cultures, positive family emotional climates were associated with lower perceived stress and lower attachment insecurity, supporting existing theoretical and empirical literature, focusing on the importance of emotionally supportive family environments in shaping emotional experiences and attachment-related processes (Morris et al., 2007; Gervaise & Jose, 2023)

5. Conclusion

This research investigated whether family mealtime experiences differed across cultures and how family emotional climate and mealtime structure related to perceived stress and attachment dimensions. The Indian participants reported significantly higher family emotional climate than the United Kingdom participants. Family emotional climate was negatively associated with perceived stress. Family emotional climate was negatively associated with avoidant and anxious attachment. Perceived stress was positively associated with attachment insecurity. Family mealtime structure showed no significant relationships. From this, it can be derived that the emotional quality of family interactions appeared to be more

influential than the structural characteristics of family meals. The emotional atmosphere surrounding family meals may be a stronger correlate of stress and attachment than meal frequency or organisation. Cultural differences affect emotional climate, but the relationship between emotional climate, stress and attachment was consistent across both groups.

This adds to the limited literature examining family mealtimes from both a cultural and psychological perspective. It also demonstrates the importance of considering the emotional aspect of family interactions rather than only behavioural routines. This research also provides cross-cultural evidence by comparing participants from India and the United Kingdom. It extends previous attachment-family-systems research to the context of family mealtimes. Research on family meals should focus on the quality of interaction rather than simply on meal frequency. Family emotional climate may be an important consideration when studying stress and attachment. And, cross-cultural differences should be considered when examining family relationships. Overall, the findings suggest that the emotional climate experienced during family mealtimes is more strongly associated with perceived stress and attachment dimensions than the structural characteristics of family meals, highlighting the importance of emotionally supportive family interactions across cultural contexts.

5.1 Limitations of the study

This study had several limitations that must be acknowledged. The small sample size of participants limits the generalisability of the findings and reduces the ability to detect minute cultural differences. This research has a cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference. Additionally, reliance on self-report measures can introduce social desirability and response biases. Furthermore, there may be cultural differences in expressing emotions, which can influence participants' responses. Also, as the research utilised convenience sampling, the sample of the research may not accurately represent the broader populations of either country. Individuals with internet access and an interest in the topic were more likely to participate. Correspondingly, self-report measures were used, which may have led to responses being influenced by demand characteristics, recall bias, or differences in how participants interpreted questionnaire items. At last, all variables were measured using the same questionnaire during the same session, which may have led to correlations driven by common method variance rather than by individuals reflecting on true relationships. Lastly, there was no pre-existing scale which measured emotional climate during family mealtimes. For that purpose, the present research had to rely on self created questions, which were not validated and can further limit the scope of the study.

5.2 Future recommendations:

Firstly, future studies should allocate a longer data collection period and recruit participants through multiple platforms to increase response rates. Additionally, a larger sample size should be used to improve statistical power and increase the generalisability of findings. Furthermore, future studies should employ longitudinal designs to examine how family emotional climate, stress, and attachment change over time and to understand causal relationships better. Moreover, future research should include participants from a wider range of collectivist and individualist cultures or examine cultural variables at the individual level. Also, future studies can use probability -based sampling methods, such as stratified or random sampling. This will allow the researcher to obtain a more representative sample. Future research should combine self-report questionnaire interviews, observations of family interactions and reports from parents and siblings to reduce sample bias. Finally, future studies should collect data from multiple sources or at different time points and, where possible, incorporate objective or behavioural measures to reduce common method variance.

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