

Gender Differences in the Expression of Sadness in Romantic vs. Platonic Relationships

Ms. Priyanshi Sanjay Patel¹, Ms. Aarini Madan Gupta²

^{1,2}Student, Psychology, Ahmedabad University

Abstract

This study explores how men and women articulate sadness differently in romantic and same-sex friendships, examining both verbal and nonverbal forms of expression. Earlier research affirms that women are more emotionally expressive than men, but they have not examined the extent to which relationship context shapes this gendered emotional expression. Relying on theory in emotional regulation and gender role socialization models, this study uses a mixed-methods design. This mixed-methods investigation examined gender differences in nonverbal expression of sadness in romantic and platonic relationships. The qualitative component was semi-structured interviews of 20 participants (10 males, 10 females; 18-40 years old) that revealed that women had more obvious nonverbal cues (e.g., tearfulness, expressive movements) especially in romantic relationships compared to men who inhibited them, especially in platonic relationships. The quantitative component included 50 participants (ages 18–50) who completed the Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES) and Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire (BEQ). Women scored significantly higher than men on both the EES ($M = 4.2$ vs. $M = 2.8$) and BEQ Negative Expressivity ($M = 5.1$ vs. $M = 3.4$). A significant interaction effect showed that women in romantic relationships had the highest nonverbal expressivity ($M = 5.4$), while men in platonic contexts had the lowest ($M = 3.2$). Women also reported higher Impulse Strength ($M = 4.7$ vs. $M = 3.9$), with the highest scores among romantic females ($M = 4.8$). Results emphasize the importance of gender socialization and relational circumstances in expressing emotions and the importance of using both qualitative and quantitative methods of interpreting complex emotional behaviors.

Keywords: Gender differences, sadness expression, romantic relationships, platonic friendships, non-verbal communication, emotional expressivity, mixed-methods, gender roles

Introduction

The expression of emotions is an important component of human interaction and presents a defining feature of the character and quality of the relationships. Sadness which is a fundamental human emotion can be expressed by means of verbal and nonverbal communication and has important interpersonal functions which include eliciting sympathy and indicating vulnerability. Past research repeatedly demonstrates that women tend to be more emotionally expressive than men (Brody & Hall, 2000), a distinction commonly explained by gender role socialization and biological differences. Yet few studies have investigated how the nature of a relationship romantic or platonic influences these gendered expressions of sadness.

In intimate relationships, individuals also experience vulnerability expression relative to stronger emotional connection and perceived support of the partner (Cutrona et al., 1997). However, platonic

relationships especially same-sex friendships with male counterparts, might be governed by a ban on the expression of feelings.

The study takes into account the question of the existence of a gender difference in expressing sadness depending on the relationship contexts. The recognition of these dynamics will help us to comprehend patterns of emotional communication, and their impacts on the satisfaction of relationships and psychological well-being. Previous studies have established that women express feelings, particularly sadness and fear more than men do (Fischer and Manstead, 2000). Such difference is rooted in brought up by socialization as well as in biological makeup. Men are taught to bury the vulnerable feelings so as to claim the conventional masculinity norms (Levant et al., 2003), whereas women are encouraged to share and communicate their feelings.

Clark and others (2001) also indicated that emotional expression is also a considerable element of the relational context. People tend to reveal their negative feelings in love relationships than in friendships. Derlega et al. (1993) also discovered that self-disclosure also depends on the level of intimacy of the relationship with romantic partners receiving more emotional openness.

Method

In this study, a mixed-method design has been adopted in an attempt to understand the gender variation in the expression of sadness in two forms of interpersonal relationships, i.e. romantic and platonic relationships. Qualitative and quantitative data was taken to determine the non-verbal and verbal expression of emotions, respectively. The participants were chosen with the help of purposive sampling, i.e., people that were in a romantic or close platonic relationship were selected. In the qualitative part, 20 participants were chosen (10 of them in a romantic relationship and 10 in platonic friendships) and the gender ratio in every category was the same (5 men and 5 women). In the quantitative part, there were 50 people (25 men and 25 women) who used the self-report measures. The participants in the two relationship contexts were evenly divided, and this gave the ability to draw a comparison on the basis of gender and type of relationship.

Hypotheses

Interaction Between Gender and Relationship Context in Nonverbal Expression- the difference in nonverbal sadness expression between romantic and platonic contexts will be greater for men than for women (i.e., men may show more nonverbal cues in romantic relationships than platonic ones, whereas women's expression levels remain more stable across contexts).

1. Non-verbal Expression (Qualitative Component): In order to assess non-verbal expressions of sadness, 20 participants were interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The questions of the interview asked the participants to recall emotionally evocative experiences in their existing relationship. The interviews took place in a quiet, distraction-free environment, were recorded with the participants' permission, and lasted about 20–30 minutes. Non-verbal indicators facial expressions, gestures, posture, and tone of voice were observed and subsequently analyzed by applying thematic and observational analysis strategies.

2. Verbal Expression (Quantitative Component):

Two standardized self-report measures were employed to assess verbal emotional expressivity:

- Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES): The scale measures to what degree people express their emotions through visible displays during communication.

- Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire (BEQ): This measure assesses three aspects of emotional expression: positive expressivity, negative expressivity, and impulse strength, both the intensity of the emotional experience and the degree to which people express those emotions outwardly.

Each participant in the quantitative arm completed both the EES and the BEQ. Responses were collected digitally through a secure survey platform and scored using standard scoring protocols.

Procedure

Participants were first assigned to either the romantic or platonic group based on their self-identified relationship status. For the qualitative phase, interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis with a specific focus on non-verbal expressions of sadness.

For the quantitative phase, participants completed the EES and BEQ at their convenience through online forms. All the questions are taken from the standard scale only and its scoring done through the manual. All responses were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Data from both components were integrated during analysis to explore patterns in the verbal and non-verbal expression of sadness across gender and relationship context.

Results

Qualitative Findings: Non-verbal Expression of Sadness: Based on thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews of participant responses, several clear gendered patterns emerged in the expression of sadness across romantic and platonic relationships. Men, particularly those in romantic relationships, described a greater emotional vulnerability and intensity in romantic contexts than in platonic ones. As an example, the male participants stated that when they were with romantic partners, they could afford to be more emotionally "unpolished and vulnerable with them, to be more expressive and open, or even physically tense, softer voiced, and avoids eye contact when with friends. A theme that recurred was increased emotional safety and intimacy experienced in romantic relationships, which facilitated men in reducing their emotional defences. Yet, even in close, friendship relationships, men tended to label their sadness as stress or fatigue instead of directly labelling the emotion, in keeping with traditional masculine norms against open emotionality. Some showed Emotional Withdrawal. males reported consciously holding back tears or using humor to deflect emotional intensity.

In contrast, women in platonic relationships expressed sadness openly and consistently, with less variability between relational contexts. Female participants reported that their nonverbal cues like facial expressions, voice tone, or withdrawal were naturally and openly displayed, regardless of whether they were speaking to a friend or a partner. For them, expression was less about the context and more about emotional authenticity and relational trust. Interestingly, part of the female respondents said that they believed that gender does play into the expectation of feelings, but they explained that they are incapable of concealing their feelings, indicating that they are culturally or personally open-minded that overrides such demands.

When comparing both groups in terms of the interaction between gender and relationship context in nonverbal expression, findings support the hypothesis that men exhibit more variation in nonverbal sadness expression depending on relationship context than women. The difference between male participants was quite significant, with them usually concealing or covering sadness in the presence of friends and letting it be more overt in the presence of romantic partners (e.g., bent posture, lower voice, emotional fatigue). By contrast, women's nonverbal displays of sadness stayed fairly stable for both

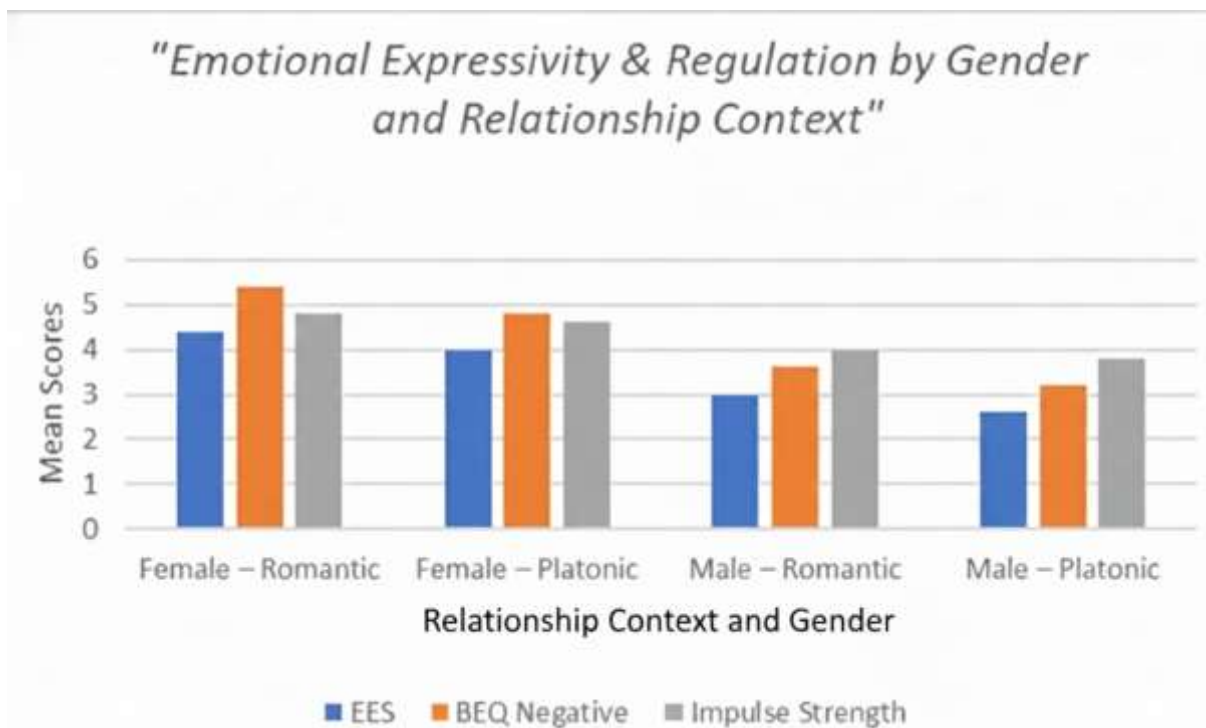
romantic and platonic relationship contexts, supporting a more universally stable expression style across relational context. This suggests that there is a specific emotional space that the romantic relationship situation provides that men can express vulnerability but women are more overall expressive in relational situations.

Quantitative Findings: Verbal Emotional Expressivity

Participants completed the EES and BEQ, with results analyzed using excel.

BEQ & EES Scores:

Group	EES Mean (SD)	BEQ Negative (SD)	Impulse Strength (SD)
Female – Romantic	4.4 (0.6)	5.4 (0.6)	4.8 (0.6)
Female – Platonic	4.0 (0.7)	4.8 (0.7)	4.6 (0.6)
Male – Romantic	3.0 (0.9)	3.6 (0.9)	4.0 (0.7)
Male – Platonic	2.6 (0.8)	3.2 (0.8)	3.8 (0.8)



Graph:1 Shows Mean scores for Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES), Negative Expressivity (BEQ Negative), and Impulse Strength by gender and relationship context (romantic vs. platonic).

Interpretation

The data shows that there are significant gender distinctions and relationship-context influences on emotional expressivity and regulation. The women always scored higher than men in all measures and situations related to relationships, which implies that they are more expressive and aware of emotional

impulse. In the case of EES scores, which are a measure of general expressivity of emotions, females in romantic relationships had the highest score ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 0.6$), consequently, the score of females in platonic relationships was the lowest ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.7$). Males in contrast were significantly less expressive with romantic males scoring an average of 3.0 ($SD = 0.9$) and platonic males scoring lower at 2.6 ($SD = 0.8$). This highlights that women express emotions more openly than men, and that men tend to express slightly more in romantic contexts than platonic ones, whereas women's expressivity remains relatively stable across relationship types.

The pattern is similar for BEQ Negative Expressivity, which reflects nonverbal sadness expression. Again, females in romantic relationships had the highest mean score ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 0.6$), while males in platonic contexts had the lowest ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.8$). The negative expressivity of men was a bit higher in romantic situations ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.9$), which confirms the hypothesis that men could be more emotionally secure or even provoked to express themselves in romantic and not platonic relations. However, women showed consistently high levels of negative expressivity regardless of the relationship context.

In terms of Impulse Strength, which refers to the intensity of emotional experience, the highest scores were also observed among females in romantic relationships ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 0.6$), followed closely by females in platonic ones ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 0.6$). Males were once more lagging behind with romantic males getting 4.0 ($SD = 0.7$) and platonic males 3.8 ($SD = 0.8$). This implies that not only are women more open in showing their emotions but they can even be more intense.

Interaction Between Gender and Relationship Context in Nonverbal Expression

The results support the hypothesis that the difference in nonverbal sadness expression (BEQ Negative Expressivity) between romantic and platonic contexts is greater for men than for women. The men have a higher mean BEQ score in platonic (3.2) compared to romantic (3.6) and the difference between platonic and romantic is less in women (4.8 and 5.4). It implies that the nonverbal expressive manifestation of men is more relational context sensitive and women have relatively high and constant levels of expression regardless of the type of relationship.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate gender variations in the expression of sadness in the two interpersonal contexts of romantic and platonic relationships with a mixed-methods design involving qualitative observations of nonverbal communication in addition to quantitative self-report verbal emotional expressivity.

Interpretation of Findings

The results corroborate the assumptions that women in general are more expressive of sadness than men and that context in relationships matters. Romantic relationships, with greater emotional safety and intimacy, allow more open expression of sadness in both men and women. Men in friendship, however, are still constrained by the social demands on the traditional gender roles, and they are probably restricted by social constraints in masculinity and emotional control. These findings align with the gender socialisation theory of Brody and Hall (2000) and extend the findings of Clark et al. (2001) by providing empirical evidence to the moderating effect of relationship context on the expression of emotion. Qualitative data also add richness to the analysis, with not just the frequency but also the style of

expression varying men use more nonverbal suppression or deflection styles, particularly in friendship contexts.

The results suggest that females consistently displayed greater emotional expressivity than males, both non-verbally and verbally. In the qualitative component, female participants showed more overt vulnerability, particularly in romantic contexts, often expressing sadness through facial cues, gestures, and vocal tone. In contrast, males exhibited more emotional withdrawal, with minimal facial expressiveness and closed body posture, reflecting traditional gender norms that discourage emotional vulnerability in men (Brody & Hall, 2008).

The quantitative results supported these patterns. Females scored significantly higher than males on both the Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES) and the Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire (BEQ) across all dimensions, especially in negative expressivity and impulse strength. Notably, relationship type per se did not have a significant impact on expressivity, but an interaction effect between gender and relationship type was observed on negative expressivity, with women in romantic relationships showing the highest scores. This implies that intimacy and emotional closeness in romantic situations may promote greater openness to express challenging emotions such as sadness, particularly among women.

Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Combined, the results from both methods show that gender is a more important factor than relationship type in determining how sadness is expressed. The interaction effect which has been noted in romantic situations however points to the relational processes that influence the expression of emotions intimacy may make people more vulnerable, especially those who are already more socially conditioned to express emotions (i.e. women). The combination of both semi-structured interviews and standardized scales provided a rich level of understanding for emotional expression. While the self-report measures indexed how participants personally felt their emotional inclinations, the observational data illuminated very subtle, and often unconscious, non-verbal responses that might not otherwise be reported.

Implications

The implications of these findings on emotion-centered therapy, relationships counseling and gender-based communication training are evident. Understanding the role of gender expectations on expression of emotions can help practitioners to achieve healthier expressions of emotion in romantic and platonic relationships. The research also highlights the significance of the relationship context in emotional disclosure and provides insight into how variation in social roles affects expression behavior.

Limitations and Future Directions

One of the weaknesses of the study is that the sample size in the qualitative component is comparatively small, and it may not reflect the entire spectrum of non-verbal emotional behavior. Secondly, even though efforts were made to include gender balance, the study did not take into consideration gender-diverse or non-binary experiences, which should be taken into account in subsequent research to gather a more representative picture.

Moreover, the cross-sectional study design restricts causal or time change conclusions. Cross-cultural comparison and longitudinal designs would allow more insight into socialization, interpersonal processes, and personality's influence on emotional expression.

Conclusion

This study investigated differences between genders in the expression of sadness in romantic and friendship relationships using a mixed-methods design. Findings were that women expressed sadness more overtly than men, both verbally and non-verbally, with greatest expressivity found in romantic relationships. Men showed greater emotional constraint, employing less subtle or withdrawn modes of expression.

These trends indicate that gender socialization remains an important predictor of how people communicate emotional vulnerability, with relationship closeness a secondary but significant predictor. The qualitative and quantitative data provided richer and multifaceted view of such dynamics and emphasized the utility of mixed-methods approaches in the exploration of complex emotional behaviors.

By highlighting both what is being said and the manner in which it is communicated via body language, expressions, and intonation this research adds to current debates within emotional psychology, interpersonal communication, and gender research. Future research can expand using these results with more diverse gender identities, types of relationships, and cultural environments to more effectively reflect the nature of emotional expression in daily life. Future research should also pay attention to longitudinal designs and cross-cultural comparisons.

References

1. Vesic, A., Micovic, A., Ignjatovic, V., Lakicevic, S., Colovic, M., Zivkovic, M., & Marjanovic, M. (2021a). Hidden sadness detection: Differences between men and women. 2021 Zooming Innovation in Consumer Technologies Conference (ZINC), 237–241. <https://doi.org/10.1109/zinc52049.2021.9499261>
2. Feiring, C., Milaniak, I., Simon, V. A., & Clisura, L. (2017). Gender and negative emotion during narratives about romantic conflict: Links to conflict strategies. *Journal of Relationships Research*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2017.9>
3. Kothari, R., Skuse, D., Wakefield, J., & Micali, N. (2013). Gender differences in the relationship between Social Communication and emotion recognition. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 52(11). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2013.08.006>
4. Deng, Y., Chang, L., Yang, M., Huo, M., & Zhou, R. (2016). Gender differences in emotional response: Inconsistency between experience and expressivity. *PLOS ONE*, 11(6). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0158666>
5. Simon, R. W., & Nath, L. E. (2004). Gender and emotion in the United States: Do men and women differ in self-reports of feelings and expressive behavior? *American Journal of Sociology*, 109(5), 1137–1176. <https://doi.org/10.1086/382111>
6. Van Poecke, L. & Van den Bulck, J. (1998). Gender Differences in the Nonverbal Expression of Negative Arousal. *Communications*, 23(1), 43-60. <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.1998.23.1.43>
7. Hall, J. A., Carter, J. D., & Horgan, T. G. (2000). Gender differences in nonverbal communication of emotion. *Gender and Emotion*, 97–117. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511628191.006>
8. Kring, A. M., & Gordon, A. H. (1998). Sex differences in emotion: Expression, experience, and physiology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(3), 686–703. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.74.3.686>

9. Kring, A. M., Smith, D. A., & Neale, J. M. (1994). Individual differences in dispositional expressiveness: Development and validation of the Emotional Expressivity Scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66(5), 934–949. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.66.5.934>
10. Peters, B. J., Overall, N. C., & Jamieson, J. P. (2014). Physiological and cognitive consequences of suppressing and expressing emotion in dyadic interactions. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 94(1), 100–107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpsycho.2014.07.015>
11. Fischer, A., & LaFrance, M. (2014). What drives the smile and the tear: Why women are more emotionally expressive than men. *Emotion Review*, 7(1), 22–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914544406>
12. Volume 4 (2016). *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research* | Vol 4 | Iss 1. (n.d.). <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol4/iss1/>
13. Brody, L. R., & Hall, J. A. (2000). Gender, emotion, and expression. In M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of Emotions* (2nd ed., pp. 325–414). Guilford Press.
14. Fischer, A. H., & Manstead, A. S. R. (2000). Gender and emotions: Social psychological perspectives. In A. H. Fischer (Ed.), *Gender and Emotion* (pp. 71–94). Cambridge University Press.