Adult attachment and profile images on Chinese social networking sites: A comparative analysis of Sina Weibo and WeChat

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ABSTRACT
Research on the association between attachment and profile images posted on social networking sites (SNSs) has been limited to Facebook and the results have been inconsistent. The current research further considered the link between attachment theory and impression management theory to improve understanding of the relationship. In addition, two large SNSs in China, Sina Weibo and WeChat, were compared. Results show that compared to securely attached individuals, insecure users of both Sina Weibo and WeChat are more likely to use a dyadic photo of themselves and their romantic partner as their profile image. This effect also emerges when using observer codes for participants’ profile images. However, compared to avoidant WeChat users, avoidant Sina Weibo users are more likely to use a dyadic profile image of themselves with their partner. This type of SNS can moderate the relationship between attachment avoidance and posted profile images, but not the relationship between attachment anxiety and profile images. Finally, explanations of attachment as a predictor, the moderating effect of the type of SNS, limitations of the current study, implications, and areas for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Most social networking sites (SNSs) allow users to create a profile image to represent themselves (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), providing opportunity for self-presentation (Krämer & Winter 2008). Since self-presentation is considered a strong motivator behind Facebook use (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), it is important to study SNS users’ profile images. A SNS profile image is a public representation of the self because SNS users can see each other’s profile images without the necessity of “friending” each other or interacting further. Examining the profile images of those involved in romantic relationships, one may find that some people post dyadic photos of themselves and their partner as their profile image on SNS, whereas others do not. That is, people may differ widely in their desire to make their romantic relationship known to others on SNSs through their profile images. The notion of relationship visibility shows the centrality of relationships in the self-images conveyed to others (Emery, Muise, Dix, & Le, 2014). SNSs enable relationship visibility through profile images, relationship status postings, and status postings relating to one’s partner. However, the current research only focuses on profile images.

The images that individuals post on SNSs constitute a type of behavioral residue, the physical traces left in the environment by our daily actions (Gosling, 2008). Such behavioral residue has been linked to psychological phenomena such as personality and relationship satisfaction (Reis & Gosling, 2010; Saslow, Muise, Impett, & Dubin, 2013). Therefore, although focusing on the use of profile images cannot fully reflect users’ behaviors on SNSs, investigating users’ profile images is useful for indirectly studying their behaviors. Previous studies have suggested a link between profile image, posted relationship status on Facebook, and adult attachment (Emery et al., 2014; Saslow et al., 2013). However, previous studies have demonstrated several inconsistent results and limitations. The two studies in the current research further investigate the link between attachment theory and impression management theory to examine the relationship between SNS users’ adult attachment and their posted dyadic profile image (profile image using photo of SNS users with their romantic partner). In addition, two large social networking sites in China, Sina Weibo and WeChat, were compared.
2. Literature review

2.1. Adult attachment

At first, attachment theory was mostly used to explain the affectational bonds between infants and their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). Subsequently, scholars proposed that adult romantic love can also be considered as part of an attachment process and conceptualized this kind of affectational bond as adult attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The early bond that individuals share with their attachment figures shapes their internal working models of themselves, others, and relationships, which influence cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response patterns in subsequent close relationships.

Currently, researchers tend to use methods based on two continuous dimensions of the internal working model, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, to measure adult attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Cassidy, 2003; Collins & Allard, 2007). Attachment anxiety reflects one's degree of anxiety related to one's being abandoned in relationships, while those who are high in attachment avoidance tend to dismiss or avoid intimate relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Therefore, higher scores on the two dimensions indicate lower attachment quality. Four attachment patterns have been defined by their position on the anxiety and avoidance dimensions: secure (low anxious-low avoidant), preoccupied (high anxious-low avoidant), dismissive (low anxious-high avoidant), and fearful (high anxious-high avoidant). The current research focuses on the two dimensions of an individuals’ internal working model instead of the four patterns because this is a more appropriate measure for assessing linear relationships between attachment and profile image use (Oldmeadow, Quinn, & Kowert, 2013).

With individual differences in the two dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance, attachment shapes thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in romantic relationships (Collins & Allard, 2007). Attachment theory is also a particularly useful framework for explaining SNS behavior (Hart, Naailing, Bizer, & Collins, 2015). Previous studies have also found that adult attachment can predict online social network affect, cognition, and behavior (Rom & Alfasi, 2014), as well as Facebook-related jealousy and surveillance in romantic relationships (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013). To sum up, adult attachment may be a useful framework for explaining the use of dyadic profile images on social networking sites. Moreover, the use of a particular profile image on a SNS can also be seen as a process of impression management (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Pennington, 2010).

2.2. Impression management

Individuals may be concerned with others’ perceptions of them and tend to control the impressions others form of them. Impression management, also known as self-presentation, plays an important role in interpersonal behavior. The two-component model (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) proposes that impression management is composed of two discrete processes: impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation refers to the degree to which individuals are motivated to control how others perceive them and is influenced by the goal-relevance of the impressions one creates, the value of desired outcomes, and the disparity between current and desired images; impression construction refers to how individuals change their behavior to influence others’ impressions of them and is determined by their self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, target values, and current social image.

On social networking sites, users can manage others’ impression of them more strategically than in off-line face-to-face communication (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). The traditional forms of impression management used to construct and display identity have shifted to include not just speaking or writing, but also displaying one’s identity through posting photographs on SNSs (Pennington, 2010). As a public representation of the self, a SNS profile image provides opportunity for self-presentation (Kramer & Winter 2008). Therefore, it is possible that individuals who are less satisfied in their relationships would post a dyadic profile image as an impression management strategy to appear happier in their relationships (Saslow et al., 2013).

2.3. Adult attachment and profile image use

Previous research proposed that relationship visibility stems from adult attachment (Emery et al., 2014). SNSs enable relationship visibility through various types of behavioral residues (Gosling, 2008). However, the current research only focuses on the posted profile image because this is a more public representation of the self than are other types of behavioral residue. According to impression management theory, people manage others’ impression of them to decrease the disparity between their current self-image and their desired self-image (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Insecurely attached individuals were found to have discrepancies between their actual and ideal selves (Mikulincer, 1995). Therefore, both anxious and avoidant individuals are presumed to have a strong motivation to manage others’ impressions on SNSs. However, the impressions they construct through their profile image may be different. Anxious individuals yearn to be accepted and loved by their partners (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and include their partners in their self-concept (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991), so they may want to use dyadic profile images to show their desired images, while avoidant people dislike closeness and desire independence (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and are less likely to include their partners in their self-concept (Aron et al., 1991), so they may tend to use non-dyadic profile images to avoid undesired images. Previous research investigated the profile pictures and relationship status postings of Facebook users and found supporting evidence that avoidant individuals showed low relationship visibility, whereas anxious individuals showed high relationship visibility (Emery et al., 2014).

However, another study did not find a significant correlation between adult attachment and the tendency to use dyadic profile images on Facebook, but rather, indicated that the more satisfied individuals felt with their relationships, the more likely they were to use a dyadic profile image (Saslow et al., 2013). Given that attachment anxiety and avoidance are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Etcheyverry, Benjamin, Tsui-Feng, & Wei, 2013; Pistole, Clark, & Tubbs, 1995; Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010), neither anxious nor avoidant individuals may want to use dyadic profile images. Given the inconsistencies in the above findings, further research is needed to clarify the relationship between adult attachment and the use of SNS dyadic profile images.

2.4. Differences in publicity between Sina Weibo and WeChat

The two previous studies cited above (Emery et al., 2014; Saslow et al., 2013) focused on Facebook users. Given that people are more likely to manage others’ impressions in public situations than in private ones (House, 1980; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982; Li & Guo, 1995), different types of SNS may also provide different degrees of publicity in the same way as off-line social situations do. Therefore, generalizing the conclusions from Facebook to other SNSs, such as
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