



Full length article

Keeping tabs: Attachment anxiety and electronic intrusion in high school dating relationships



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 August 2015

Received in revised form

23 November 2015

Accepted 2 December 2015

Available online 16 January 2016

Keywords:

Digital dating abuse

Social media

Electronic aggression

Attachment

Adolescents

ABSTRACT

Social media have become significant contexts for dating relationships among high school students. These media, which allow for increased visibility of dating partners' information and constant connectivity, may put teens at risk for problematic digital dating behaviors. This study sought to replicate and expand on research with college students to examine the association between attachment insecurity (relationship anxiety and avoidance) and electronic intrusion in high school dating relationships. Electronic intrusion (EI) is the use of social media to intrude into the privacy of a dating partner, monitor a partner's whereabouts and activities, and pressure a partner for constant contact. A survey study of 703 high school girls and boys found that higher levels of attachment anxiety were associated with more frequent perpetration of EI for both girls and boys. Therefore, especially for anxiously attached teens, social media may create a "cycle of anxiety" in which social media serve as both a trigger for relationship anxiety and a tool for partner surveillance in an attempt to alleviate anxiety.

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Digital media use among adolescents is frequent, varied, and integrated into their daily life and relationships. Data indicate that 77% of adolescents have a cell phone, and that 95% of teens ages 12–17 are on the Internet (Lenhart, 2012). Teens are also avid users of social media, with data indicating that 80% of teens aged 12–17 have a profile on a social networking site (e.g., Twitter) (Lenhart et al., 2010). Forty percent of Facebook users visit the site several times a day (Duggan & Smith, 2013), and most adolescents report using social media daily (Lenhart et al., 2010).

Social media are particularly relevant for high school students' social relationships, during a developmental period in which emotional regulation is maturing and capacity for romantic intimacy is a primary concern (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Buhrmester, 2009). We posit that attachment orientation, a universal underlying system of emotional regulation and orientation towards intimacy, may influence the experience and interpretation of digital dating behaviors among high school

students. The nature of social media may put teens, especially teens with insecure attachment orientations, at risk for problematic dating behaviors. Previous research on college students has found that social media may serve as a trigger for relationship jealousy and anxiety and provide opportunities and tools for surveillance (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013; Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015).

In our previous study, we found that college women and men reporting higher levels of attachment anxiety were more likely to engage in electronic intrusion (EI) in their dating relationships, and college women reporting higher levels of avoidance were less likely to engage in EI (Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015). Electronic intrusion is a common form of "digital dating abuse," which is the repeated use of social media to harass, pressure, threaten, or coerce a dating partner (Futures without Violence, 2009; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, in press). EI is an umbrella term for all digital dating abuse meant to monitor or invade the privacy of dating partners using digital media (Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, in press). Problematic dating behaviors and abuse in early dating relationships have been linked to experiencing further relationship abuse across the lifespan (see Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008 for a review). Therefore, we sought to replicate and build on previous work with college students to investigate whether the association between

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attachment insecurity and EI occurs in a younger sample of high school students.

1. Attachment orientation and dating relationships

One important developmental factor that may contribute to the likelihood to engage in electronic intrusion behaviors is romantic attachment orientation. Attachment theory provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the relationship schemas adolescents might carry into their dating relationships that influence the way they interact with and experience on-line and off-line romantic experiences. Along with gender, attachment orientation may be a useful developmental lens for exploring the context and meaning ascribed to digital dating behaviors.

Attachment theory is a framework for the development of relational patterns across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969). Based on the qualities of the caregiver–infant relationship, distinct attachment classifications emerge that shape the infant's expectations of close relationships (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Inconsistent or unavailable caregivers may cause infants to utilize dysfunctional regulation schemas in an attempt to reduce their anxiety, and this results in their developing anxious or avoidant attachments (Izard & Kobak, 1991). These internal working models developed in childhood become the way in which an individual cognitively interprets intimacy throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1979; 1980).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized adult romantic attachment through the use of a self-report questionnaire to measure individual's attachment insecurity on two dimensions: anxiety and avoidance. Hazan and Shaver (1987) characterized individuals with an anxious attachment style as quick to fall in love but constantly worrying that their partner does not feel the same. In contrast, in their conceptualization, avoidant adults distanced themselves from potential partners in an attempt to soothe their apprehension about depending on another person.

Research on adult attachment among adolescents finds that attachment anxiety and avoidance influence the characteristics and quality of romantic relationships. Adolescents with insecure attachment often seek out dating relationships, but once they are in a relationship, tend to experience emotional distress from struggling to trust their partner or see themselves as worthy of love (Davila, Steingberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004). Shorey et al. (2008) further posited that individuals with insecure attachment orientation are especially at risk for dating violence because their relationship templates often include dominance, control, and jealousy.

Attachment theory does not predict differences in attachment orientation based solely on gender, and research often finds no significant gender differences in attachment orientation (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Rothbard & Shaver, 1994; Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008). However, some evidence supports that the quality of women's sexual relationships is more strongly associated with attachment anxiety, whereas the experience of men's sexual relationships is associated with their reported level of attachment avoidance (Cooper et al., 2006; Del Giudice, 2009). Research has also found links between attachment anxiety and avoidance and aspects of femininity and masculinity, respectively (Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996; Shaver, Papalia, Clark, Koski, Tidwell, & Nalbonem, 1996).

Among adolescents and young adults, insecure attachment styles tend to be associated with negative relationship characteristics and lower satisfaction with relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991). Theoretically, anxious individuals, who are accustomed to inconsistent caregiving, engage in intimacy-seeking behaviors and are preoccupied with ensuring

fidelity and closeness with their partner. In addition, anxiously attached adolescents may escalate conflict, perceive conflict to be more severe, be more distressed by relationship conflict, and experience more jealousy in their relationships (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Downey, Bonica, & Rincon, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Avoidant individuals, who may attempt to alleviate anxiety about intimacy in relationships by engaging in behaviors that create distance and avoid closeness, have been found to provide less emotional support to partners and respond to jealousy with fear and sadness (Buunk, 1997; Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997). This body of research suggests that insecure attachment styles are associated with negative relationship characteristics.

2. Digital media use in dating relationships

With their widespread daily use, digital media have become a significant context for dating relationships (e.g., Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013; Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Trepte & Reinecke, 2013). Digital media are influential for initiating new relationships, promoting communication and closeness between dating partners, terminating romantic relationships, and integrating partners' social lives (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013; Fox et al., 2014; Pascoe, 2011). Digital media allow dating partners to instantly communicate with their entire social network, gain greater access to information about their dating partners' whereabouts and activities, and maintain constant contact with dating partners at any hour. Dating interactions that were once private are now moved into public spaces. Media theorists discuss these digital media characteristics in terms of greater visibility of information, persistence of content once it is posted or sent, and connectivity to partners at any time and from any location (Fox et al., 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

Research has found both positive and negative effects of digital media on dating relationships, and has often restricted these analyses to examining a single media platform. Instant messaging and texting have been associated with positive relationship quality and closeness among both adolescents and college students (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013; Pettigrew, 2009). However, on-line gaming or using the Internet for entertainment has been shown to have a negative effect on relationship quality with romantic relationships (Blais et al., 2008). Because media platforms are rapidly changing, and patterns of use are evolving, it may be premature to characterize the impact of any particular platform in terms of its association with relationship behavior and satisfaction. The current study, therefore, used an inclusive definition of digital media to study digital dating behaviors.

3. Electronic intrusion and related digital dating experiences

The connectivity, visibility, and persistence of digital media communication also puts adolescents at risk for several types of negative digital dating experiences (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; Burke, Wallen, Vail-Smith, & Knox, 2011; Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, in press). Adolescents may feel pressure to be "perpetually connected" to dating partners via digital media, making it difficult to maintain boundaries and independence (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011; Fox et al., 2014). Public exposure of dating interactions may cause embarrassment or humiliation, and digital media can act as both the trigger for and the context in which dating conflicts occur (Fox et al., 2014; Melander, 2010). Research has also shown that

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