



Attachment style, social skills, and Facebook use amongst adults

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that online communication may benefit those high in social anxiety. The current study examined Facebook use from the perspective of adult attachment theory, exploring relationships between attachment anxiety and avoidance and Facebook use. Social skills have been found to be related to attachment style and internet use thus we also examined the role of these skills. A diverse sample of adult participants ($N = 617$; 50.1% female) completed a self report questionnaire measuring attachment dimensions, social skills, and Facebook use and experience. In line with predictions grounded in attachment theory, we found that individuals with high attachment anxiety used Facebook more frequently, were more likely to use it when feeling negative emotions and were more concerned about how others perceived them on Facebook. High attachment avoidance was related to less Facebook use, less openness and less positive attitudes towards Facebook. These relationships remained when social skills were controlled. These results suggest that Facebook may serve attachment functions and provide a basis for understanding how online communication may be related to attachment styles.

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1. Introduction

With the growth in popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter, new forms of social interaction have emerged that differ in important ways from the offline interactions more typically studied by social psychologists. Over a decade ago McKenna and Bargh (2000) highlighted four characteristics that differentiate online from offline social interactions: increased anonymity, reduced importance of physical appearance, reduced barriers due to geographical distance, and greater control over the time and pace of interactions. These characteristics, McKenna and Bargh speculated, could make online social interactions particularly appealing to certain types of people, such as those suffering from social anxieties that handicap them in offline interactions. In the past few years considerable research has investigated the psychological characteristics of internet users, particularly SNS users, with a focus on the personality correlates and psychological outcomes of internet use (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Confirming McKenna and Bargh's suspicions, there is growing evidence that social anxiety may play an important role in the use of SNSs (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009; Caplan, 2007).

In the current study, we explored the use of Facebook from the perspective of adult attachment theory, examining whether there exist relationships between attachment style and Facebook use. A number of characteristic features of Facebook (and other SNSs), including maintaining geographically distant relationships,

maximizing control over the pace and time of interactions, and enabling perpetual contact with a social network, suggest that Facebook could potentially serve needs for belonging, closeness and security for those with high levels of attachment anxiety and/or avoidance. To explore this possibility, an online survey was administered to a large and demographically diverse sample of the general adult population, eliciting data on respondents' attachment styles, social skills, and use and experience with Facebook. These data revealed reliable and theoretically consistent relationships between attachment style and Facebook use that lend support to the hypothesis that the use of Facebook is influenced to some extent by attachment style, particularly attachment anxiety. This, in turn, suggests that Facebook may provide a sense of closeness or belonging that satisfies attachment needs in individuals who are otherwise anxious or avoidant in close personal relationships.

1.1. Psychological correlates of Facebook use

Dozens of papers have been published on the social and psychological correlates of Facebook use and attitudes (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Some demographic correlates have been reported, including gender, ethnicity, and parental education (Hargittai, 2008; Moore & McElroy, 2012), as well as cross cultural differences (Buote et al., 2009; Caplan, 2007). The majority of research, however, has focused on personality correlates of Facebook use (Moore & McElroy, 2012; Ross et al., 2009; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010). All studies report significant associations between personality traits and aspects of Facebook use, supporting Amichai-Hamburger (2002) claim that personality

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is a major factor in internet use. Although the results across studies are not always consistent, taken together they implicate at least extroversion, shyness and self-esteem. Extroversion associates with more time on Facebook and larger friendship networks, whereas shyness and low self-esteem associate with smaller friendship networks but more intensive Facebook use (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Orr et al., 2009).

These patterns suggest Facebook use may serve different functions for different people, on the one hand satisfying extroverts' needs for social stimulation and large networks, and on the other hand facilitating social interaction and a sense of belonging amongst shy individuals and those with low self-esteem. Based on a review of the literature, Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) suggest Facebook use is motivated by two fundamental needs, the need for self-presentation and the need to belong. In support, they cite evidence that a sense of disconnection motivates Facebook use, and that Facebook use may increase a sense of connection and self-esteem (Sheldon, Abad, & Hirsch, 2011; Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Kwok, 2010). Thus, there is converging evidence to suggest that social networking sites like Facebook may offer a form of social connecting that is particularly appealing to certain types of individuals whose needs for belonging and connection with others are not fully realized in offline social interactions.

While Facebook may not offer the anonymity and invisibility that characterized the chat rooms and newsgroups to which McKenna and Bargh (2000) referred, it does offer social interaction without physical proximity and enables greater control over the time and pace of interactions. In addition, particularly with the use of mobile devices, individuals can connect to Facebook virtually anytime, anyplace and anywhere, a characteristic we have referred to elsewhere as the 'Martini Effect' (Quinn & Oldmeadow, submitted for publication). These characteristics, more so than anonymity or physical appearance, may make online social interactions particularly appealing for individuals who are anxious about personal closeness or physical intimacy, who anticipate rejection from others, and who therefore tend to avoid developing close personal relationships. These kinds of response sets are described and explained by adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

1.2. Adult attachment theory

Adult attachment theory stems from Bowlby's (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980) work on children's attachment to their primary caregiver, extending the principles of child-parent attachment to close personal relationships in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Infants' and children's experiences with attachment figures shape their working models about themselves, others and relationships, which influence cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response patterns in attachment-relevant contexts. These working models are characterized along two dimensions, referred to as attachment anxiety and avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Collins & Allard, 2004). When needs for comfort and security are consistently satisfied the infant develops a secure bond towards the attachment figure characterized by a positive view of the self as lovable and of others as dependable. However, if needs are not met by the attachment figure a working model develops in which the individual fears and expects rejection from attachment figures. Individuals with this type of model are high in attachment anxiety, defined as an anxious or fearful preoccupation with relationships (Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). If the experience of neglect is repeated consistently enough the individual may develop a working model of others as untrustworthy and undependable, and of the self as autonomous and self-sufficient. They may then avoid developing close relationships, which they fear will only lead to disappointment. Individuals with this type of working model are

high in attachment avoidance, defined as a tendency to dismiss or avoid intimate relationships (Smith et al., 1999).

Attachment theory was developed to explain children's attachment to primary care givers, but it has been successfully adapted to explain adult relationships more generally, and romantic partnerships in particular (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The working models developed in the context of primary caregivers during childhood generalize to other kinds of social relationships during adulthood. Individuals high in attachment anxiety have a hyper activated attachment system. They expect and fear rejection from others, so are particularly vigilant in detecting cues to untrustworthiness or rejection, and particularly sensitive to criticism and conflict. They may be particularly concerned with managing their self-presentation, engage in behaviors designed to reinforce relationships (e.g. gift giving), and seek regular confirmation of close others' responsiveness. Individuals high in attachment avoidance have a deactivated attachment system. They down-regulate their needs for closeness and reinforcement from others and avoid situations that activate the attachment system. They tend to avoid developing intimate relationships and are more likely to be socially isolated. The patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that characterize attachment anxiety and avoidance suggest, firstly, that online social interactions may be particularly attractive to individuals with attachment insecurities and, secondly, that individuals high in attachment anxiety and avoidance may use SNSs such as Facebook in different ways.

1.3. Attachment style and Facebook use

In the domain of interpersonal relationships Facebook may offer advantages over offline interactions for individuals high in attachment anxiety and/or avoidance. For example, having the ability to carefully manage self-presentation could be a particularly attractive feature of Facebook for individuals high in attachment anxiety, who desire closeness but anticipate and fear rejection. By managing how they present themselves to others, through text, pictures, links, etc., such individuals may feel more confident in their ability to maintain interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the ability to control the time and pace of interactions and to maintain relationships without physical proximity could appeal to individuals high in attachment avoidance, who tend to avoid closeness and value their autonomy. Thus, online social interactions, and Facebook in particular, may contain a number of features that facilitate the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships for individuals high in attachment anxiety and/or avoidance. Previous research has alluded to this possibility, as individuals with an anxious or avoidant attachment report approaching and responding to online and offline friendships differently (Buote et al., 2009).

Another way in which Facebook may appeal to individuals with attachment issues is by providing a sense of belonging to a social network. Research shows that social network site use can increase a sense of belonging amongst both adults (Sheldon et al., 2011) and children (Quinn & Oldmeadow, in press). Facebook provides a means of staying in touch with what others are doing, observing relationships between others, and maintaining one's own presence within the network (through wall posts, messages, pokes, etc.). This may appeal to those whose attachment issues extend to social relationships more generally, such as social groups. Very little research has been done on attachment to social groups. However, Smith et al. (1999) reasoned that individuals develop working models of themselves in relation to groups that parallel those underlying interpersonal attachment styles. They developed a measure of group attachment by adapting an existing measure of interpersonal attachment, and found moderate correlations between interpersonal and group attachment anxiety and avoidance. These findings suggest that attachment styles are not restricted to

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