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The role of attachment style in building social capital from a social networking site: The interplay of anxiety and avoidance

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on attachment theory, the present study examines the attachment styles of individuals relative to two ways of building social capital – bonding social capital and bridging social capital. In trying to relate attachment theory to the use of SNS, the present study argues that bonding social capital is reflected in the use of SNS for forming attachment bonds from trust-based strong ties, while bridging social capital is reflected in the use of SNS for causal affiliations among more socially distant people. The conceptual model was validated through an online survey completed by 368 Facebook users. Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated several results. First, avoidance attachment was significant and negatively predictive of both bonding social and bridging social capital. Second, both bonding social capital and bridging social capital reported by respondents appeared to be greatest under conditions of low anxiety attachment coupled with low avoidance attachment. Third, levels of Facebook usage were significant and independently predictive of bridging social capital.

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1. Introduction

A very recent study by Egan and Moreno (2011) reported an interesting observation that people tend to use online social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook as outlets for relieving their concerns. The finding is notable because the study demonstrates that seeking out comfort or emotional support by individuals manifests in the development of interpersonal relationships with others through the use of SNS.

Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), the present study seeks to relate the perspective of attachment styles to the use of SNS. This work was inspired by the idea that, "[in] adulthood, attachment appears to be driven less by biological needs... and more by interpersonal needs..." (Welch & Houser, 2010, p. 354). In this study, attachment styles are examined relative to two ways of building social capital – bonding social capital and bridging social capital – in order to address how SNS are used for two different purposes (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In trying to relate attachment theory to the use of SNS, the present study argues that bonding social capital is reflected in the use of SNS for forming attachment bonds from trust-based strong ties, while bridging social capital is reflected in the use of SNS for causal affiliations among more socially distant people (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Williams, 2006).

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to develop a conceptual framework for identifying the role of individual differences in attachment styles in building bonding and bridging forms of social capital from SNS, and second, to determine the validity of the framework by testing a series of research hypotheses. A survey study was utilized to collect sample data. The next section reviews attachment theory, attachment styles, and bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Development of the conceptual framework and a series of research hypotheses follow, and the design of the survey study and empirical findings are subsequently discussed. Conclusion is presented in the final section.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attachment theory

Attachment theory has its origin in understanding the development mechanism of strength of feeling between infants and their main caregivers (i.e., attachment figures) (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Attachment refers to "[...] an enduring affectional [or devotional] bond of substantial intensity" (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987, p. 428). A basic tenet of this theory is that infants are motivated to engage in attachment behavioral systems that promote and maintain their proximity to attachment figures in order to achieve "felt security" (Sroufe & Waters, 1977), particularly in times of defense against separation or loss (Bowlby, 1988; Meredith, Ownsworth, & Strong, 2008; Wilkinson, 2004). The theory postulates that repeated interactions between infants and attachment figures contribute to the development of an 'internal working model' of attachment. It is an internal representation, or mental model, of the understanding of the infants themselves and their attachment

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figures (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). If secure attachment is established due to responsive, sensitive, and consistent caregiving by attachment figures, for example, then the infants are likely to form positive internal working models of themselves as worthy of care and of others as available, trustworthy, and not rejecting of them (Lopez, 2001; Patterson, 1997; Zilber, Goldstein, & Mikulincer, 2007). Conversely, infants develop negative models of themselves as unlovable as a result of more unresponsive and unreliable interaction with their attachment figures. Those with negative internal models tend to develop a fear of interpersonal rejection, and consequently, the expectation of rejection motivates them to become reluctant to close, intimate, or dependent relationships with others in order to avoid rejection (Keefer, Landau, Rothschild, & Sullivan, 2012; Mikail, Henderson, & Tasca, 1994; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

2.2. Attachment style: Anxiety and avoidance

Importantly, internal working models developed during infancy are assumed to inspire coherent and adaptive patterns of attachment behaviors and expectations in other interpersonal relationships throughout the life span of individuals (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta, & Feeney, 2003; Klohnen & John, 1998; Main, 2000; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Rholes, Simpson, Tran, Martin, & Friedman, 2007). Moreover, individuals who demonstrate social behaviors in much the same patterns as the attachment behaviors of their infancy have stability in their attachment styles (Bartholomew, 1993). Attachment style is described as "[...] the propensity to establish affectional bonds with other people [that] guide behavior and perception in relationship[s]" (Bakker, Van Oudenhoven, & Van Der Zee, 2004, p. 388). A number of studies have been framed around attachment styles to understand a wide variety of social relationships, including friendship (Bippus & Rollin, 2003), romantic relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Moore & Leung, 2002), marriage (Senchak & Leonard, 1992), mentorship (Bernier, Larose, & Soucy, 2005), and online relationships (Ye, 2007).

Several attachment styles have been conceptualized as important indicators of early childhood attachment patterns and subsequent behavior (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Solomon, 1986; Main et al., 1985). In the context of attachment styles in adulthood, a four-category model of attachment styles has received considerable attention in the field of social science (Bartholomew, 1993; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Meredith et al., 2008). The model is built upon two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance, with particular reference to the internal working models of self and others. For example, classifications of high anxiety or low anxiety reflect negative or positive views of self, whereas classifications of high avoidance or low avoidance are associated with negative or positive attitudes toward others, respectively. Thus the model is crossed with two levels of anxious attachment and two levels of avoidance attachment, yielding four possible categories of attachment styles. The four possible attachment styles are (1) secure (low anxiety and low avoidance), (2) preoccupied or anxious–ambivalent (high anxiety and low avoidance), (3) dismissing or dismissing-avoidant (low anxiety and high avoidance), and (4) fearful or fearful-avoidant (high anxiety and high avoidance) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

2.3. Social capital

Social capital – broadly, social networks – is conceptualized as a set of actual or potential resources embedded in relationships among social actors of mutual acquaintance in a group (Bourdieu, 1986; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). The basic idea behind social capital is that an individual can gain value through accumulating relationships with other people (Coleman, 1988). In general, the more resources people access when needed, the greater social capital individuals believe they possess, and consequently, the greater chance that they can achieve their goals (Paxton, 1999; Yang & Farn, 2009).

The notion of social capital has been used in a wide range of social science settings (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Due to the nature of its ambiguity and multi-dimensionality, a variety of different operationalizations and variables have contributed to the different representations of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Although there has been much debate about the utility of simple dichotomized assertion (Lin, 2008), a conceptualization of opposing bridging and bonding forms of social capital has gained wide acceptability in literature (Ellison et al., 2007; Ko & Kuo, 2009; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Bonding social capital refers to resources obtained from within-group ties (Yuan & Gay, 2006). Bonding social capital builds strong links between like-minded people, such as groups of close friends or families (Schuller, Baron, & Field, 2000). In contrast, bridging social capital is a pattern of resources that can be accessed through external ties with people. Bridging social capital builds weak, loose, or fragile connections between heterogeneous groups lacking internally cohesive or emotionally close relationships (Granovetter, 1982).

2.4. Bonding and bridging forms of social capital and the use of a social networking site

In the context of SNS, development of bonding social capital can be found in cases where users create relationships with others in order to share values and prospective goals. The benefits of bonding social capital include emotional support and ample resources whenever needed (Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). On the other hand, SNS users tend to expand their social networks by inviting others to join and/or by gaining access to the contacts of others, which corresponds to the development of bridging social capital. A study by Donath and Boyd (2004) indicated that current technology affords SNS users a way to increase the size of weak ties over distance. From a system-oriented point of view, for example, advancement in Web technologies is presumed to easily create weak and distant ties due to great control over user customization of interface appearance, navigation, and privacy settings (Yonder & Stutzman, 2011). Several studies have discussed the potential for large networks of these weak ties. Studies by Ellison et al. (2007) and Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) pointed out that bridging social capital may provide individuals with a source of useful information or new perspectives about one another. Florida (2002) and Ulhøi (2005) noted that openness to new ideas relies greatly on weak social ties. Taking the ideas of existing studies into account, the present study argues that bonding social capital developed in the context of SNS is the product of tangible resources based on interpersonal trust-based strong ties, while bridging social capital reflects causal affiliation-based weak ties among SNS users.

3. Development of hypotheses

3.1. The relationship between attachment style and bonding social capital

There is an important distinction between attachment behaviors and attachment bonds. The former denotes forms of behavior that attract, promote, and maintain proximity to the attachment figures of individuals, while the latter refers to the interpretation of relationships with attachment figures by individuals (Flaherty ?tul?> & Sadler, 2011, p. 115). The use of SNS by individuals

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