# Exploring similarities and differences between online and offline friendships: The role of attachment style

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ABSTRACT

The present study merges the fields of attachment and friendships and compares these in online and offline environments. Although currently we know a great deal about the importance of friendships and attachments for healthy development, there is no research to guide our understanding of how attachment style and friendship characteristics are evidenced in online contexts. Participants completed surveys to assess attachment style, friendships (online and offline), as well as interactions with friends and friendship quality. The extent to which individuals sought out online friends did not differ as a function of attachment style. Friendship quality differed as function of attachment style, while differences among attachment styles for other friendship characteristics resulted only when context (online versus offline) was simultaneously considered.

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## 1. Introduction

Online social interaction has become a focal point for discussion in today's society. For example, articles concerning Facebook, Myspace or other online interaction mediums, with titles such as "My-Space can bring shy kids out of their shells" (msnbc, 2008), "Yahoo to offer single user profile" (the Globe and Mail, 2008) and "Oxford University fines students with the aid of Facebook" (The Times online, 2008), are commonplace in both online and hardcopy news outlets. Given the surging interest and use of the Internet as a medium for engaging in social interactions, it is surprising how little research is available to explain how social relationships function in online and offline contexts and for whom social interactions are or are not enhanced through online interactions. This is especially true of friendships, even though friends provide one of the most important social relationships throughout development (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Richey & Richey, 1980). Friends can act as role models, supporters, advisors, reference groups, listeners, allies, critics, and companions (Buote et al., 2007; Richey & Richey, 1980; Tokuno, 1986). Friendship relationships provide a context for acceptance, sense of belonging and assistance (Buote et al., 2007; Tokuno, 1986; Weiss, 1974). Given the vast number of opportunities to form friendships in online contexts, it is important to examine whether online friendships differ from traditional offline face-to-face friendships. In addition, the study further examines whether online or offline friendships differentially benefit individuals with different social histories. Specifically, the study compares friendships on and offline for individuals with differing attachment styles.

Attachment theory has been widely studied in past literature (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Schindler, Thomasius, Sack, Gemeinhardt, & Kuster, 2007; Tanaka et al., 2008). Developed by Bowlby (1969), attachment theory assumes that all individuals are born with behavioural control systems that aid with survival (Bowlby, 1969). Initially, these systems guide infants and children to engage in survival-based behaviours such as those that allow the child to maintain close proximity to the primary caregiver, and to seek food and warmth from their caregiver. These early interactions of the child and caregiver allow the child to develop an internal working model of the world. In turn, these internal working models guide the child's thoughts, behaviours, and affect, and permit the infant to have a set of expectations of how others will behave and react; essentially, how a relationship functions (Weimer, Kerns, & Oldenburg, 2004). Bowlby (1969) believed that the primary caregiver acted as a "secure base" from which the child could explore their surroundings and return to if they experienced fear, illness or fatigue or if the distance between the self and the caregiver was too large. This conceptualization of a "secure base" that one turns to in time of vulnerability is valuable in making the distinction between an attachment figure, and simply a relationship, whether it be a friend, playmate or peer. While a child seeks their attachment figure in time of need, a child seeks a playmate when he is happy, content and confident that his/her caregiver is in close proximity (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, the difference between an attachment figure and a non-attachment figure is reflected in the desire for the attachment figure when undergoing a difficult time, and the need for proximity.

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During adolescence and adult life, shifts in attachment figures typically occur. While the adolescent remains attached to the primary caregiver, he/she typically also becomes strongly attached to persons outside the family (Bowlby, 1969). It is believed that the attachment relationship that adolescents and adults have is at least partly a reflection of their attachment (or internal working models) as infants, and that the initial parental attachment style is predictive of attachment in other non-parental relationships throughout the lifespan, such as romantic relationships and friendships (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Zimmerman, 2004). As such, the manner in which adolescents interact with this new attachment figure should mirror childhood behaviours (Bowlby, 1969). Just as young children will possess relationships that are not specifically attachment relationships, adolescents will have attachment relationships and non-attachment relationships. Attachment relationships would be somewhat parallel to early childhood attachment relationships, in that in time of need, or when undergoing a crisis or difficult time, the adolescent would seek out their attachment figure, perhaps a best or close friend. Non-attachment figures, perhaps more superficial friendships, might be sought out when one wants to have fun, is happy, and has no immediate concerns or fears.

Attachment style can be organized into four categories (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) based on two dimensions (See Fig. 1). The first dimension provides a model of the self, in which the self is viewed either positively or negatively.

A positive view of self is reflected in a sense of worthiness of love and support whereas a negative view sees oneself as not meriting love and support from others. The second dimension of self presents a model of others, wherein others are perceived either positively or negatively. A positive view of others is manifested in the belief that others are trustworthy, available and accepting, while a negative view of others leads to the belief that others are unreliable and rejecting. Together, this model results in four attachment styles-one *Secure* style and three *Insecure* styles (i.e., Preoccupied, Dismissing and Fearful). An individual characterized as having a *Secure* attachment style has a positive view of themselves and of others, and therefore, feels worthy of others' love and support, views others as responsive and accepting and is comfortable with intimacy and closeness. An individual having a *Preoccupied* attachment style has a negative view of themselves but a positive view of others, which leads to a sense of personal unworthiness with respect to love and support, but a sense that others are responsive and accepting. As a result, this individual strongly depends on others' acceptance to feel positively about him/herself. To achieve self-acceptance, this individual would try to gain the acceptance of others and this would most probably be evidenced through seeking excessive closeness. A *Fearful* attachment style is distinguished by both a negative view of the self and a negative view of others. This style is similar to the preoccupied attachment style in feelings of unworthiness of love and support, however the fearful attachment style also leads to the belief that others are rejecting and untrustworthy. As a result, a fearful individual avoids relationships with the goal of protecting the self, as s/he typically feels s/he will eventually be disappointed by the relationship.

The *Dismissing* attachment style is characterized by a positive view of the self and a negative view of others, leading this individual to dismiss the importance of relationships and try to remain independent (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Some past research has been conducted on the association between attachment style and traditional face-to-face friendships. Overall, individuals with a secure attachment style seem to fare best. They report greater companionship (Saferstein, Neimeyer, & Hagans, 2005), cooperativeness (Schulman, Elicker, & Sroufe, 1994), intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), emotional closeness (Zimmerman, 2004) and friendship quality (Liebermam, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999), and lower conflict (Liebermam et al., 1999) than insecurely attached individuals. In addition, secure individuals are typically socially competent (Schulman et al., 1994) and have good conflict resolution skills (Liebermam et al., 1999). Among individuals with insecure attachments, those with a preoccupied attachment style report similar levels of companionship to secure individuals (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005) have highly intimate friendships, display emotional expressivity and rely on others, which likely reflects their strong desire to validate themselves through excessively close relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). This is also evident in much higher levels of self-disclosure than those with secure styles (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005). Interestingly however, preoccupied participants report less satisfaction with their relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, 1994). Dismissing and fearful styles, on the other hand, experience very different relationships with their friends. Specifically, they experience lower levels of companionship (Saferstein et al., 2005). In addition they report challenges with self-disclosure and intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991) while experiencing higher levels of friendship conflict (Saferstein et al., 2005). Further, individuals with dismissing styles demonstrate lower levels of emotional expressivity, care-giving and reliance on others than those with secure attachments (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These findings with "face-to face"/"offline" friendship underscore the important contribution of attachment style to friendship relationships. The current study explores whether these findings transfer to an "online" context.

Online social exchanges occur through many diverse outlets, including, blogs, chat rooms emails, networking, gaming, personal profile sites (e.g., Facebook). Indeed, research indicates that one of the predominant uses of the Internet is for interpersonal communication (Gross, 2004; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). In addition, those who use the Internet for chatting and social exchange purposes are among those who use the Internet most heavily (Dryburgh, 2001; NetValue, 2002, as cited in Brignall & Valey, 2005). Among adolescents and young adults, many report developing both close and casual friendships online (14% and 25%, respectively; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002).

Preliminary investigations of these "new" types of friendships yield contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, consistent with *displacement theory*, online friendships are depicted as "weaker" relationships (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001) as evidenced through less interdependence, understanding, commitment and self-disclosure, as well as less convergence of social networks and less discussion, with exchanges being limited to a smaller variety of topics (Chan & Cheng, 2004; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Scott, Mottarealla, & Lavoy, 2006). In strong contrast to these findings, other researchers endorse online friendships as an alternate venue for experiencing positive, beneficial relationships that are meaningful, close and long lasting (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

Given the vast body of research that documents the impact of underlying constructs such as attachment for relationships in gen-

| | Model of Self (Dependence) | |
|---|---|---|
| | Positive (low) | Negative (high) |
| Model of Other (Avoidance) — Positive (low) | Secure | Preoccupied |
| Negative (high) | Dismissing | Fearful |

**Fig. 1.** Bartholomew and Horowitz' adult attachment model.