



Young adults' use of communication technology within their romantic relationships and associations with attachment style



Jennifer N. Morey^{a,*}, Amy L. Gentzler^a, Brian Creasy^b, Ann M. Oberhauser^c, David Westerman^d

^a Department of Psychology, West Virginia University, United States

^b Department of Psychiatry, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, United States

^c Department of Geography and Center for Women's Studies, West Virginia University, United States

^d Department of Communication Studies, West Virginia University, United States

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ABSTRACT

In an online survey with two cohorts (2009 and 2011) of undergraduates in dating relationships, we examined how attachment was related to communication technology use within romantic relationships. Participants reported on their attachment style and frequency of in-person communication as well as phone, text messaging, social network site (SNS), and electronic mail usage with partners. Texting and SNS communication were more frequent in 2011 than 2009. Attachment avoidance was related to less frequent phone use and texting, and greater email usage. Electronic communication channels (phone and texting) were related to positive relationship qualities, however, once accounting for attachment, only moderated effects were found. Interactions indicated texting was linked to more positive relationships for highly avoidant (but not less avoidant) participants. Additionally, email use was linked to more conflict for highly avoidant (but not less avoidant) participants. Finally, greater use of a SNS was positively associated with intimacy/support for those higher (but not lower) on attachment anxiety. This study illustrates how attachment can help to explain why the use of specific technology-based communication channels within romantic relationships may mean different things to different people, and that certain channels may be especially relevant in meeting insecurely attached individuals' needs.

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1. Introduction

Technology has become an integral part of the way that people communicate with one another, even within romantic relationships, which are one of the most intimate types of relationships an adult can have. Despite the prevalence of mediated communication, the reasons for choosing particular channels of communication as well as implications of using particular channels are not well understood. In this paper, we suggest that attachment theory may provide critical insight into one reason why adults might use different channels when communicating with romantic partners, and why the use of these technologies may be differentially associated with individuals' romantic relational quality depending on their attachment style.

1.1. Attachment

The formation of attachment relationships is important to humans across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1973) from the first attach-

ment relationships between infants and their caregivers to pair bonds between significant romantic partners in adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The attachment style that one develops is partially based on interactions with early caregivers, particularly how the parent responds to the child's distress (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Individuals use their early relationships as a template by which they approach future relationships (Bowlby, 1973; Fraley, 2002; Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005). Thus, the term attachment style represents relatively stable behavioral patterns within one's close relationships. The primary and innate strategy for a baby or young child is to seek out help from others when he or she perceives danger or is distressed. Ideally, a child would experience a history of supportive and responsive attachment figures, so that the child is likely to develop effective regulatory strategies, including an ability to cope with stressful events and knowledge that he or she can rely on others when needed (e.g., Bowlby, 1973). This outcome is referred to as developing a secure attachment style. As adults, individuals who are higher in attachment security are more likely to be in long-term, stable relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and generally report more frequent positive and less frequent negative emotions, as well as greater trust, satisfaction, interdependence, and commitment in their

* Corresponding author. Address: 53 Campus Drive, Morgantown, WV 26506-6040, United States. Tel.: +1 304 933 9887.

E-mail address: jmorey@mix.wvu.edu (J.N. Morey).

relationships (e.g., Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Collins & Read, 1990; Feeney, 1994; Simpson, 1990).

If parents are less responsive, then children develop a secondary strategy, which is often differentiated into one of two forms of attachment insecurity, either anxiety or avoidance (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Children may develop a more anxious attachment pattern due to unpredictability in the parental relationship (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In other words, if a child's primary caregiver is inconsistently responsive, the child may develop hypervigilance about their caregiver and have difficulty establishing a sense of security. Anxious attachment is linked to the tendency to exhibit heightened distress levels and a desire to have attachment figures close by or available, though they remain concerned about others' dependability to meet their attachment needs (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Within adults' romantic relationships, research shows that they prioritize intimacy but often have trouble establishing it to their desired levels (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1991) and they tend to have lower satisfaction than securely attached individuals (e.g., Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; Stackert & Bursik, 2003). In addition, evidence indicates that their romantic relationships are also more conflictual than are relationships of securely attached couples, most likely due to anxious individuals' intense emotional reactions and to how critical their relationships are to their own well-being (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005).

Avoidant attachment may also develop from maladaptive caregiving responses, particularly rejecting caregivers who dismiss the infant's bid for attention or help (e.g., Ainsworth et al., 1978). These children learn to inhibit signs of distress because their attachment figures tend to withdraw their attention when the children show distress (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Cassidy, 1994; Main et al., 1985). Avoidant individuals are often uncomfortable with emotional intimacy and relying on others for support due to their negative views of others as untrustworthy or unsupportive. In adulthood, people who are more avoidantly attached tend to limit intimacy in their romantic relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1991), report less satisfaction with their relationships (e.g., Collins, 1996; Stackert & Bursik, 2003), and provide less support to their partners (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2001; Rholes, Simpson, & Oriña, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002). Attachment theory therefore provides a useful framework to understand individual differences in technology-based communication among romantic partners.

1.2. Relationships and communication technology

While adults can certainly function without being physically close to their partners, having their partners be emotionally available and supportive remains a real concern. This concern is often mitigated by electronic communication where people now have a host of communication options at their fingertips. A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that 66% of 18–29 year olds now have smartphones (Rainie, 2012). Research also indicates that electronic communication is frequent within romantic relationships (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008), and is particularly useful for long distance relationships (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stephen, 1986). Many different technologies are utilized in this process, from e-mail to social media (for a review, see Tong & Walther, 2011). Electronic communication is also found to enhance mutual self-disclosure and emotional intimacy (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), and greater cell phone use among college students with a romantic partner was associated with more love and commitment and decreased relational uncertainty (Jin & Peña, 2010). Some past research has examined motivations for selecting specific types of technology, for example

with the content of messages dictating whether individuals chose telephone communication (for discussing urgent matters across relationship types) or email (for communicating important but not urgent matters with acquaintances; Tillema, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010). However, we believe that an examination of attachment may help to further explain individuals' use of communication technology in their romantic relationships.

Even though attachment ties directly to why people prefer and establish different levels of intimacy and availability with relationship partners, few studies have examined the connection between attachment and communication technology. One study reported that with younger adolescents, problematic Internet use was found to relate to greater alienation with fathers and less trust (Lei & Wu, 2007). In another study, no link between attachment style and breadth and depth in online interactions with romantic partners was detected (Ye, 2007). Jin and Peña (2010) found that attachment was unrelated to texting frequency, but participants with high scores in avoidance communicated by phone significantly less than individuals lower on avoidance, and this link was particularly true for those who also had lower anxiety scores. Other recent research focusing on sexual text messages, or sexting, has detected significant links to attachment. Weisskirch and Delevi (2011) found that attachment anxiety was linked to propositioning sexual activity through text messaging for individuals in a relationship as well as positive attitudes and acceptance regarding sexting behavior. Also in a college-student sample, Drouin and Landgraff (2012) reported an association between anxious attachment and sending sexual text messages, and between avoidant attachment and sending both texts and pictures with sexual content. Our study extends the current literature by more comprehensively assessing communication technology use (including in-person communication, phone use, texting, email, and social networking site usage) among romantic partners. In addition, within the current study we examine the role of attachment as a moderating variable between technology usage and relationship quality, and incorporate data from two cohorts collected 2 years apart (2009 and 2011).

1.3. The present study

The main goal of the present study was to use an individual differences approach, by applying attachment theory, to better understand individuals' use of communication technology within their romantic relationships. Attachment was measured by participants' scores on avoidance and anxiety attachment dimensions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998). Our sample of college students is appropriate given that many individuals were expected to be in romantic relationships and to commonly rely on various technologies to communicate with partners. The survey data were collected from two different groups of college students – one in Spring 2009 and the other in Spring 2011. We did not expect that associations among attachment, relationship quality, and communication frequency would change across the cohorts, although mean differences in the frequency of channels used to communicate with one's partner may vary. We suggest that our use of two samples assessed 2 years apart may be especially important in this field given that technological advances and changes in accessibility may result in less stable trends. This approach allows us to address how communication rates within romantic relationships may change across a short time period as well as elucidate what patterns are similar over time.

We examined qualities of romantic relationships that were expected to be particularly relevant to both one's attachment and to patterns of communication: relationship satisfaction, intimacy, support, and conflict. Based on substantial prior psychological

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