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Individual differences in attachment are associated with usage and perceived intimacy of different communication media

Britney M. Wardecker^{a,*}, William J. Chopik^b, Margaret P. Boyer^c, Robin S. Edelstein^a^a University of Michigan, USA^b Michigan State University, USA^c University of California Santa Barbara, USA

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is vital to the health and functioning of romantic relationships. Technology use is becoming more pervasive, making it more important than ever to understand which forms of media enhance communication in close relationships. People differ in which communication methods they prefer, and it is important to understand how people perceive and use various media. Our study uses an attachment theory framework to explore how people perceive the intimacy of different media and their preferred methods of communication with romantic partners. We collected online survey data from partnered individuals regarding their romantic attachment orientation, perceptions of the intimacy of various media (face-to-face, phone call, text message, email), and preferred use of those media for communicating with romantic partners. People with a more avoidant attachment orientation (i.e., who prefer self-reliance over interdependence) were less likely to prefer communication methods that are generally perceived as more close and immediate (e.g., face-to-face); however, our findings suggest that avoidant individuals prefer not to use these methods because they perceive them to be *less* intimate and *less* likely to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Our findings suggest that certain forms of communication may be more beneficial for avoidant individuals and their romantic relationships.

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1. Introduction

Effective communication is vital to the health and functioning of romantic relationships (Vangelisti, 2015). Couples frequently engage in face-to-face communication with one another as a way to maintain their relationships (Billeto, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015). However, communication is not limited only to face-to-face interactions; technology has become an increasingly popular way for romantic partners to communicate. For instance, over 82% of young adults report that they check in with their romantic partner multiple times a day via text messaging (Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, & Coyne, 2013). As couples increasingly communicate using different forms of technology, it is more important than ever to understand which channels of communication may be most beneficial for individuals and their romantic relationships.

Ostensibly, people likely consider communication via certain

forms of technology to be more intimate than others. For example, most would agree that receiving a romantic rejection via a telephone conversation is probably more intimate than receiving such information through a text message. Do our assumptions about the intimacy of different kinds of technology map onto people's actual perceptions of intimacy? As yet, only limited research has addressed such issues. Specifically, we do not yet have empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that certain forms of technology are perceived to be more intimate than others, or that more intimate technologies are used more often than less intimate technologies. The current study addresses these questions by assessing how people perceive the intimacy of different forms of communication and how those perceptions are associated with their preference to use those communication media. Further, although communication is clearly necessary in romantic relationships, there are important individual differences in the extent to which people feel comfortable with close and intimate contact (Brennan, Clark, et al., 1998; Brennan, Wu, et al., 1998). Adult attachment orientation, or an individual's characteristic approach toward close relationships (Brennan, Clark, et al., 1998), can help us understand how people choose to communicate with their

* Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.

E-mail address: bwardeck@umich.edu (B.M. Wardecker).

romantic partner.

We used an attachment theory framework to address several questions about individual differences in technology's role in communication in close relationships. First, we explored how often people use different forms of technology (frequency), how intimate they consider different forms of technology (perceived intimacy), and which technology they would prefer to use when communicating with their partners (preference). Second, we examined whether participants preferred a particular technology medium to communicate positive information (saying, "I love you" to a partner) versus negative information (arguing with a partner) and the degree to which participants considered a conflict resolved using a particular medium. Finally, we examined attachment-related differences in frequency, perceived intimacy, and preferences for different technologies. We focused on face-to-face communication, phone calls, text messaging, and email messaging because previous research had identified these methods as the most common forms of communication in romantic relationships (Jin & Peña, 2010; Luo, 2014; Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013).

In the following sections, we briefly review the relevant links between adult attachment and communication.

1.1. Adult attachment and communication media

Attachment orientation can influence important aspects of communication in romantic relationships (e.g., emotional responses to relationship-challenging events; Niehuis, Reifman, Fischer, & Lee, 2015); however, relatively little is known about how attachment orientation is associated with use of technology in romantic relationships. Attachment theory was originally conceptualized to describe the emotional bond between an infant and his or her primary caregiver and the anxiety that occurs upon separation from that caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). Psychologists later noted the many similarities between a child's first relationship with caregivers and subsequent relationships with romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Over the last several decades, these observations have contributed to the emergence of attachment theory as a dominant framework for understanding thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in romantic relationships across the lifespan (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Attachment researchers also highlight the importance of individual differences in the quality of close relationships across the lifespan, otherwise known as *attachment orientation*.

An individual's attachment orientation is conceptualized by their position on two relatively independent dimensions: attachment-related avoidance and anxiety (Fraley & Waller, 1998). *Attachment avoidance* is characterized by discomfort with closeness and intimacy (Edelstein et al., 2004). Highly avoidant individuals tend to be less invested in their romantic relationships; they are less responsive to their partner's needs and strive to maintain emotional independence from their partner (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998). *Attachment anxiety* is characterized by concerns and fears of abandonment (Campbell & Marshall, 2011). Highly anxious individuals tend to worry about losing their partner, are sensitive to signs of rejection, and tend to be highly invested, overinvolved, and controlling in their romantic relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2001). Individuals who report low levels of both avoidance and anxiety are considered *secure* and feel comfortable depending on and trusting their romantic partner.

Individual differences in attachment have been linked with communication strategies in close relationships in theoretically consistent ways. For instance, in romantic relationships, avoidant individuals tend to shy away from forms of communication that (presumably) allow for greater closeness and intimacy. Morey et al. (2013), for example, found that avoidant individuals are less likely to use phone calls and text messaging and more likely to use email

messaging to communicate with their romantic partners. Perhaps surprisingly, Morey et al. (2013) found that, for avoidant individuals, greater use of text messaging with relationship partners was associated with more positive relational outcomes (i.e., greater relationship satisfaction and intimacy/support) and greater use of email was associated with greater relationship conflict. These findings suggest that avoidant individuals might use methods of communication that lead to more relationship conflict, or perhaps they perceive relationships as more conflictual and thus are more likely to use more "distant" forms of communication. Based on these findings, we hypothesized that avoidant individuals would be more likely to use and prefer email and less likely to use and to prefer face-to-face, phone call, and text messaging to communicate with their partner. We expected these associations would hold regardless of whether the content of the message they were communicating was positive or negative.

Attachment anxiety is associated with more ambivalent motivations for technology use. In some cases, similar to patterns found for avoidant individuals, anxious individuals report less frequent phone use in romantic relationships (Morey et al., 2013). In other cases, attachment anxiety has not been related to use of technology in romantic relationships, such as phone calls and/or text messaging (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Jin & Peña, 2010; Luo, 2014; Weisskirch, 2012). The inconsistent (and often lack of) associations between anxiety and technology may not be surprising in light of anxious individual's relational motivations. In some circumstances, technology use could exacerbate some of anxious individuals' anxieties if their desire for intimacy is not reciprocated (Emery, Muise, Dix, & Le, 2014). On the other hand, anxious people could be dissatisfied with any type of communication. Based on the competing motivations of anxiously attached individuals, no specific predictions were made about the relationship between attachment anxiety and perceptions of technology.

In the current study, we examined how individual differences in adult attachment orientation were associated with people's perceptions of intimacy, frequency of use, and preference for different methods of communication with a romantic partner. Most previous research on attachment and technology use in romantic relationships has focused on the frequency with which individuals use various forms of communication (e.g., Luo, 2014). Morey et al. (2013), for example, suggest that avoidant individuals use the forms of communication that preserve a comfortable amount of distance with their romantic partner. However, these authors did not directly assess how intimate (close or distant) participants considered each form of communication. Are people more likely to use a technology with their partner because they find it more or less intimate, and does preference vary as a function of attachment orientation? The current research seeks to examine these questions. Additionally, the little work to date that has examined attachment orientation and frequency of technology use in romantic relationships has often been limited by the fact that their samples included primarily college undergraduates and women (e.g., Jin & Peña, 2010; Morey et al., 2013). Further, these studies often failed to account for the valence (positive or negative) of the communication between partners and did not directly measure how effective participants consider different technologies (e.g., for resolving relationship conflict). Our study extends previous research by documenting which forms of media are considered more "distant" versus "intimate", examines the potential mechanisms that account for the association between attachment orientation and preferences for different media, includes both men and women, and is more diverse with respect to age and relationship experiences.

We hypothesized that avoidant individuals would be *more* likely to use and prefer email and *less* likely to use and prefer face-to-face,

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