Attachment theory as a framework for explaining engagement with Facebook

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A B S T R A C T

Research on the relation between personality and styles of engagement with social media is surprisingly limited and has generated mixed results. The present research applied attachment theory to illuminate individual differences in styles of Facebook engagement. Two studies (N = 583) supported a mediational model explaining various forms of active Facebook use as stemming from attachment anxiety, which predisposes individuals to sensitivity about social feedback, thereby leading them to engage in attention-seeking social media behavior. These results held while controlling for extraversion, neuroticism, and self-esteem. Attachment avoidance predicted restrained Facebook use, primarily due to its association with (low) extraversion. These findings resolve inconsistencies in previous research and demonstrate that attachment theory is a particularly useful framework through which to study the influence of personality on social-media behavior.

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1. Introduction

As social media has become a principal mode of social interaction in the past decade, self-expressive profiles and postings on sites such as Facebook have become an outlet for individuals' motivated social behavior. Even casual users likely notice that individuals exhibit different patterns of social media behavior; for example, some people post frequent "status updates" that range from reporting mundane daily activities to espousing polemical opinions, whereas others take a reticent or pragmatic approach, visiting social media sites to view others' activity, but infrequently engaging beyond that.

One question that naturally arises is how these different patterns—we will call them "active" versus "restrained" social media use—relate to personality. In the present research, we use adult attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) to illuminate one way in which personality can explain individual differences in social-media behavior. Specifically, we examine how adult attachment style predicts patterns of engagement with Facebook.

Based on dispositional differences in the functioning of the attachment system—a behavioral regulatory system that mediates close relationships—attachment style reflects individuals' characteristic cognitions, emotions and behavior in close relationships

(i.e., with parents, romantic partners), and it also predicts different ways of interacting with acquaintances and strangers (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a comprehensive review). Two dimensions, *anxiety* and *avoidance*, characterize individuals' attachment styles. These "insecure" attachment dimensions reflect, respectively, hyperactivation of the attachment system, or augmented intimacy-seeking behaviors; and deactivation of the attachment system, or reduction of intimacy-seeking behaviors and augmented self-reliance. *Secure* attachment is defined by low anxiety and low avoidance, reflecting comfort with both intimacy and independence. According to attachment theory, individuals develop anxiety and/or avoidance in order to manage chronic concerns about interpersonal loss, rejection, or abandonment. In turn, these traits are influential across a range of intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts, in which anxious attachment predisposes individuals to strive to earn others' affection and avoidance predisposes individuals to try to suppress relational needs. Given that attachment style reflects fundamental social motivations, it seems a likely candidate to explain personality-based variance in socially oriented behaviors on social-media platforms.

1.1. The present research in context

Prior research on personality and social-media use has tended to focus on the "Big Five" personality traits, but such findings have been mixed. Seidman (2013) suggested that the mixed results may stem in part from a focus on behavioral variables, and

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recommended an additional focus on motivational variables. We concur, and we further suggest that some of the vagaries in prior research may have been due to the fact that the Big Five are relatively broad personality superfactors that may not be the most precise predictors of specific tendencies (as opposed to general classes of tendencies).

We think attachment style is a better candidate to explain some aspects of social media engagement. The Big Five personality traits share variance with attachment style (e.g., Noftle & Shaver, 2006). Therefore, the lack of a direct measure of attachment style in most prior research may account for some of the mixed findings, as when researchers are led to attribute some characteristics to Big Five dimensions that are more closely related to attachment style, or fail to find relationships because the Big Five dimensions are not the best predictors. For example, Seidman (2013) found that neuroticism predicted self-disclosure on Facebook, which may have resulted from neuroticism's association with attachment anxiety; by contrast, neuroticism was not associated with acceptance-seeking, whereas attachment anxiety should be.

To our knowledge, only three previous studies examined relationships between attachment style and social media use. These studies were limited in important ways. In one study, Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Hudiburgh (2012) reported that, whereas extraversion predicted intensity of Facebook use, "self-esteem, attachment style, and other FFM [Five Factor Model] personality traits…were not significantly related to Facebook use" (p. 298; note that the null findings for four of the Big Five traits gives another example of the mixed results in this area). However, the authors conceded that marked participant attrition and the use of a sample that was homogeneous in terms of age (17–24 years), gender (mostly female), and location (the Rocky Mountain region) limited generalizability. To this we would add that the Facebook "intensity" measure was a single-factor scale reflecting frequency of use rather than the style of use (e.g., posting, commenting, and "liking").

In another study, Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Johnson (2013) used attachment and Big Five personality traits to predict Facebook use. This time, they applied structural equation modeling, and in contrast to their prior study, they found a (negative) indirect effect of attachment style (through extraversion) on extent of Facebook use. However, the structural model was peculiar in two ways. First, it treated attachment as a single dimension (insecurity vs. security), whereas the vast majority of research treats anxiety and avoidance dimensions separately and finds that they exert independent effects (including Jenkins-Guarnieri et al.'s 2012 study). Indeed, anxiety and avoidance frequently exhibit strikingly and complexly different relations to other constructs, particularly interpersonal ones (c.f., Hart, Hung, Glick, & Dinero, 2012). Second, the model was unusual because it treated attachment insecurity as an antecedent to extraversion and neuroticism, whereas the latter traits are traditionally viewed as existing alongside attachment style. No research we know of suggests that adult attachment style causes extraversion and neuroticism, which are highly heritable (e.g., Plomin & Caspi, 1999), whereas adult attachment style is probably not (Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, & Holland, 2013). In fact, it is likely that major traits are reciprocally influential and are most appropriately treated as covariates (sharing variance but also having unique qualities).

A third study yielded results most consistent with the reasoning that motivated the present research (described below): attachment anxiety was associated with more frequent Facebook use, more "comfort seeking" on Facebook (i.e., using Facebook primarily when experiencing negative emotions), and more concern about being socially evaluated on Facebook (Oldmeadow, Quinn, & Kowert, 2013). However, the study did not control for related personality dimensions such as neuroticism, nor did it examine

potential process models of the mechanisms mediating relations between Facebook use variables.

In sum, research relating personality to social-media engagement has been flawed and has produced an inconsistent array of findings. We attempted to improve on prior research by (a) using demographically heterogeneous samples, including a cross-cultural sample, (b) developing hypotheses derived from attachment theory about the psychological *mechanisms* that explain why anxiety and avoidance (independently) predict different patterns of social-media engagement, (c) examining multiple specific dimensions of social-media engagement, not simply extent of use, while (d) controlling simultaneously for traits that are known to share considerable variance with attachment style and are the most obvious third variables that might explain associations between attachment style and other constructs (cf. Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005; Noftle & Shaver, 2006): extraversion (negatively related to avoidance), neuroticism (positively related to anxiety), and self-esteem (negatively related to anxiety).

1.2. Overview of studies and hypotheses

Anxiously attached individuals' worries that their close relationship partners will reject them leads to compulsive proximity- and intimacy-seeking. Consequently, they tend to be sensitive to others' opinions of them (e.g., Park, Crocker, & Mickelson, 2004; Srivastava & Beer, 2005), and they tend to disclose personal information about themselves early in relationships and engage in other behaviors aimed at rapidly attaining intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Together, these tendencies are sometimes described as "excessive reassurance seeking"; that is, anxious individuals' concerns about others' affection compel them to engage in behaviors designed to elicit positive feedback (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005).

Such a personality profile suggests that in a social-media format such as Facebook, attachment anxiety should predict greater need for positive feedback and hence greater concerns about managing others' impressions (cf. Oldmeadow et al., 2013). In turn, because Facebook is a forum where individuals interact with "friends," and are likely to generally expect to receive positive feedback in the form of "likes" and comments (especially to the extent that they are motivated to receive feedback; Hepper, Hart, Gregg, & Sedikides, 2011), anxiously attached individuals' sensitivity to feedback should predict more expressive, attention-seeking behaviors (and more activity in general), aimed at generating positive feedback. In short, anxiously attached individuals' sensitivity to feedback should lead them to engage more actively on Facebook.

By contrast, avoidant individuals' discomfort with intimacy and consequent denial of relational needs leads them to maintain a "safe" distance from relationship partners, and to eschew interactions that might involve dwelling on or discussing emotions. Hence, attachment avoidance should predict restrained Facebook behaviors and minimal concerns about feedback from others.

In two studies, we measured attachment style, extraversion and neuroticism, and self-esteem, as well as Facebook engagement variables tapping sensitivity to feedback and several dimensions of Facebook engagement, including feedback seeking (extensive and frequent posting on a range of topics), general activity (time spent on Facebook, frequency of commenting and liking behaviors), and attention from others. In both studies, we hypothesized that attachment anxiety would predict more active, attention-seeking Facebook behaviors, mediated by anxious individuals' concerns about social feedback. We also hypothesized that attachment avoidance would predict more restrained Facebook use, due to those individuals' tendency to suppress relational concerns.