



The relationships among attachment style, personality traits, interpersonal competency, and Facebook use

Michael A. Jenkins-Guarnieri^{a,*}, Stephen L. Wright^a, Lynette M. Hudiburgh^b

^a University of Northern Colorado, 501 20th Street, Greeley, CO 80639, United States

^b Miami University, 501 E. High Street, Oxford, OH 45056, United States

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ABSTRACT

Among emerging adult populations, the increasingly prevalent use of online social media, such as Facebook, and its relationship to individual personality traits and interpersonal relationships are of growing interest to researchers. The current study sought to investigate how attachment style, personality traits based on the Five Factor Model, and self-esteem were related to perceptions of interpersonal competency and Facebook use. Using data collected from 463 emerging adults in college, we conducted three hierarchical multiple linear regression models which suggested that (a) extraversion was positively related to Facebook use, (b) attachment style, extraversion, agreeableness, and openness were positively related to two aspects of interpersonal competency, and (c) Facebook use was negatively related to competence with initiating interpersonal relationships. Future directions for research and practical implications are also discussed.

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As computer technology has become more accessible and affordable, new forms of media are playing an increasingly prominent role in the lives of young Americans. Brown (2006) wrote that young adults in the beginning of the 21st century “could be known as the new media generation” (p. 279) as they are increasingly engaged with some type of media for more hours than any other behavior. For college-aged populations, some of this increased use manifests in online social media and online social networking sites (SNSs), with Facebook.com becoming the most popular outlet. Facebook can be considered “nearly universal” on today’s college campuses (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 228), with over 900 million active users at the end of March in 2012 and more than half of all users logging in on any specific day (Facebook, 2012). As college-aged adults increasingly incorporate Facebook into their daily experience (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011), social behavior, and interpersonal relationships, new research must seek to better understand the nature and implications of this use and the characteristics of users.

Facebook has become the most used SNS in college-aged populations (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011), comprised of young adults going through what Arnett (2000) conceptualized as a developmental period of “emerging adulthood.” Arnett described this life stage as a time of intense identity exploration, as young adults strive to form a stable sense of self, based on their burgeoning values and personality characteristics.

In addition, these young adults sink more deeply into both platonic and romantic relationships, seeking companionship to match the characteristics of their own emerging adult identities. Arnett summarized this period as one of intense “change and exploration,” as emerging adults “examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews” (p. 479). Montgomery (2005) echoed the views of other researchers in stating that many of the traditionally adolescent developmental undertakings, such as forming an identity and developing intimacy with peers, extend past traditional developmental stages of adolescence into Arnett’s conceptualized period of emerging adulthood.

For emerging adults of this media generation, developmental tasks related to social behavior and interpersonal competencies are being conducted online (Brown, 2006), often through sites like Facebook. Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008) suggested that initiating interpersonal relationships and developing intimacy in close relationships are two primary goals of SNS use, while emotional support may be an integral part of this type of intimacy (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006). Similarly, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found that SNS users maintain established social connections, develop relationships, and communicate interpersonally. Consistent with Arnett’s (2000) theory, these behaviors reflect how developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, such as exploring social relationships, developing a stable social self, and forming an interpersonal communication style, are carried out through SNS like Facebook. Since this new online social media now seems to play a prominent role in the developmental social and interpersonal processes associated with emerging adulthood (Peluchette & Karl, 2010; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), many social scientists and

* Corresponding author at: University of Northern Colorado, 501 20th Street, Michener L-149, Campus Box 79, Greeley, CO 80639, United States. Tel.: +1 970 351 1632; fax: +1 970 351 1052.

E-mail addresses: Michael.Jenkins@unco.edu (M.A. Jenkins-Guarnieri), Stephen.Wright@unco.edu (S.L. Wright), hudibulm@muohio.edu (L.M. Hudiburgh).

others are calling for more research into the nature and extent of its role in social behavior and interpersonal competency.

Personality traits, interpersonal competence, and online social behavior

Personality characteristics found to form early on and be more stable throughout an individual's development have been shown to affect social behavior and interpersonal relationships. For example, relationship quality has been associated with Bowlby's (1969) attachment style (Brennan & Shaver, 1993; Schmitt et al., 2009), Five Factor Model (FFM) personality traits (Barelds, 2005), and global self-esteem (Luteijn, 1994). Applied to online social behavior, Whitty and Gavin (2001) suggested that both online and real world relationships are formed due to personality characteristics and personal values. In addition, personality characteristics have been found to predict the intensity and nature of many different forms of electronic interpersonal communication, from cell phone use (Butt & Phillips, 2008) to email (Swickert, Hittner, Harris, & Herring, 2002) and Internet activity (Jackson et al., 2003).

Attachment style, interpersonal competency, and Facebook use

Attachment theory recognizes the impact of early relationships between child and caretaker on a child's personality and lifestyle (Bowlby, 1969). The quality of a child's attachment determines the level of security with which that child explores the world, and these early relationships form the models from which future relationships in adolescence and adulthood are developed (Bowlby, 1969). Using Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1998) more recent conceptualization of attachment style, individuals can vary from low to high on two components of attachment: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment anxiety reflects how intensely relational or environmental stressors activate attachment needs, and attachment avoidance refers to a person's desire for closeness in important relationships. Both infant and adult attachment styles reflect the behavioral and emotional mechanisms employed by the individual to support health and well-being by fostering nurturing as well as protection from others (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Researchers have linked adult attachment style with many forms of interpersonal behaviors and competencies from satisfaction in romantic love, friendships, and emotional functioning (Fraley & Shaver, 2000) to social self-efficacy (Wright & Perrone, 2010). Early work by Kenny and Rice (1995) suggested that attachment style was associated with interpersonal communication and social behavior in college-aged adults, while recent work by Wei, Russell, and Zakalik (2005) supported this association between attachment style and interpersonal competency as well. Although research has yet to investigate in depth the relationship between attachment style and social behavior online, attachment style's salient connection to social behavior in offline relationships suggests its association with social behavior online as well.

Personality traits, interpersonal competency, and Facebook use

Although much more research is needed in this area, Ozer and Benet-Martínez's (2006) review suggested that strong empirical evidence links FFM personality traits to aspects of interpersonal competence and important relationship outcomes. These traits have been linked to practical elements of social interactions such as body posture and eye contact (Cuperman & Ickes, 2009), subjective experience with social interactions (Berry & Hansen, 2000), and relationship satisfaction (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Applied to online contexts, some researchers have found that FFM personality traits such as Extraversion determine the type and frequency of Internet use for social purposes (Tosun & Lajunen, 2010). For example, Ross et al. (2009) found that FFM traits related to Facebook use, although less so than expected. Most recently, Correa, Hinsley, and de Zúñiga (2010) used a national sample in looking at the relationship between extraversion,

neuroticism, and openness to experience and online social media use. The authors found that these three personality traits were significantly related to frequency of use, echoing similar findings by Ross et al. Specifically, they found that extraversion and openness to experience were positively associated with social media use while neuroticism was negatively related to its use.

Global self-esteem is another personality variable that has been strongly associated with relational quality (Murray, 2006) as well as social behavior (Mruk, 2006). In addition, self-esteem has been connected to FFM traits (Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001), interpersonal communication (Swann & Seyle, 2006), and Facebook use (Steinfeld et al., 2008). For example, Zywicka and Danowski (2008) supported the role of self-esteem in online social behavior in their study on offline and online popularity. Their results suggested that individuals with higher self-esteem and extraversion are more popular both on Facebook and in the real world. Therefore, self-esteem may be an important personality variable to include in investigations into Facebook use and interpersonal competency.

Facebook use and interpersonal competency

Peris et al. (2002) stated that the Internet has become primarily a social technology that fulfills relational needs, and recent work by Buote, Wood, and Pratt (2009) also supported its primarily social purpose. Subrahmanyam et al. (2008) found that emerging adults use sites like Facebook to connect with friends made offline, and others have found that Facebook relationships seem to mainly support relationships previously formed offline (Buote et al., 2009; Pempek et al., 2009). However, some work has suggested that relationships formed online may exist primarily online as often as those relationships that manifest both offline and online (Ellison et al., 2007). Mesch and Talmud (2006) argued that the perceived quality of a relationship relies less on the mode of communication (i.e., online or offline) than the social similarities between the two people.

Online social behavior and interpersonal competency may be more intertwined than previously believed. Valkenburg and Peter (2008) found that increased interpersonal communication online was associated with higher levels of real world social competence. Ellison et al. (2007) found that greater social capital was associated with increased Facebook use, supporting a potential link between interpersonal competency and Facebook use. Important aspects of interpersonal competence, such as self-disclosure, have been associated with Facebook use as well (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Although more empirical support is needed to better understand the link between interpersonal competence and SNS use, there is sufficient research to support this potential relationship.

Purpose of the study

Raacke (2008) encouraged further research on social networking sites, lamenting a lack of methodologically rigorous research on how these sites impact social behavior. Raacke also emphasized the need for research on the populations who use sites like Facebook most, which appears to be emerging adults in college. Considering the pervasive use of Facebook, the present study investigated how the personality characteristics of users were associated with the intensity of Facebook use as well as their perceptions of interpersonal competency. Specifically, the study looked at how attachment style, FFM personality traits, and self-esteem were related to the intensity of Facebook use in an emerging adult population. In addition, the study investigated how these same personality traits and intensity of Facebook use were associated with users' perceptions of their own interpersonal competency in two domains highlighted in the literature as especially relevant to online relationships in emerging adults: initiating relationships and emotional support.

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