Exploring the Relationship Between Attachment Styles and Social Media Use

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Introduction

The evolution of technology and social media use has led to a transformation in interpersonal relationships, offering increased dependence and new challenges to these connections. Concurrently, attachment theory, which has a basis in the principles of emotional attachments between people, offers a framework for understanding how these connections form and impact a person's socioemotional functioning. The intertwining realms of attachment styles and social media use have become an important part of contemporary psychological research, and as the growth and pressures of technology use become a more normal part of our lifestyle, the psychological effects need to be further assessed (Cyr et al., 2015). Understanding the interplay between these concepts is important as it unravels the implications of attachment styles on individuals' behaviour, their emotional regulation, and relationship dynamics in the online world. As social media use becomes one of the most important and popular ways to maintain interpersonal relationships in youth's lives (Li et al., 2021), its potential effects on the development of youth's identity are important to understand (Cyr et al., 2015).

Attachment style is typically produced by two key factors – whether someone has a negative or positive view of yourself and whether you have a negative or positive view of others (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2022). With the answer to those two questions, a person's attachment style can be determined as one of four options. If someone has a positive view of self and a positive view of others, they would be classified as having a secure attachment style, having the confidence in themselves and their relationships to display intimacy and balance. Having a negative view of self and a positive view of others leads to a preoccupied attachment style, displaying low self-confidence, anxiety, and jealousy, and expressing an overindulgent need to look after others in relationships. Dismissing attachment style is characterized as having a positive view of self and a negative view of others, often having the highest self-confidence of all attachment styles, but showing very low emotional expressiveness, resulting in narcissist-like tendencies and heavy reliability on others for their own needs with nothing given in return. Lastly, people who express low in every aspect

of relationships and do not typically put forth any effort toward relationships or expect much from anyone else would be displaying a negative view of both self and others, having a fearful attachment style.

After a review of a variety of studies discussing the role of attachment styles being affected by social media use, this research paper aims to explore the intersection between the two, discussing how the formation of attachment styles can be impacted by such use. As well, a discussion is presented on the limitations of these specific studies and future research proposals.

Literature Review

Current psychological research has investigated the relationship between the use of social media and the four attachment styles which were updated by Bartholomew and Horowitz in 1991: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful, (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2022). The goal of this review is to compare the relationship between attachment styles and social media use within multiple studies, analyzing the positive and negative effects, as well as the quality of such relationships.

Although not directly related to attachment styles, a study concluded that increased use of communication technology is correlated with identity distress and anxiety (Cyr et al., 2015) which could lead to negative differences in attachment styles. The study consisted of 268 high school students and included multiple measures such as self-report questionnaires and rating scales to determine overall beliefs and feelings about themselves. Within this study, it is noted that self-report accuracy could be a limitation for the results, and the ultimate nature of the study was explored to determine if their psychological adjustment due to social media use and amount used. This study recognized that with rapid technological changes come many benefits and drawbacks, as increased communication technology can inflict greater disturbances in forming one's identity (Cyr et al., 2015). Attachment styles manifest in the context of mobile devices and digital communication, and the emphasis on developmental implications regarding attachment theory is ever-changing. Within this day and age, there is a line of whether social media usage can cross from healthy to unhealthy, and the evolutionary relationship to examine continues to be studied (Hodge & Gebler-Wolfe, 2022).

Studies which show a direct relationship between social media use and attachment style were also reviewed. A study with 2,245 adolescent participants was conducted in four Chinese

junior high schools, and the results showed that adolescents who used instant messaging more frequently presented higher attachment anxiety. In contrast, adolescents with higher attachment avoidance used instant messaging for far less time (Li et al., 2021). Participants were analyzed using group-administered questionnaires that asked each to answer questions on the amount of time spent on instant messaging per week, how often each time, and how long altogether they used instant messaging. Depending on everyone's interpersonal needs, the results showed the need for greater social media usage, and despite the increasing popularity in these high schools, individuals who do not have the desire to achieve that closeness to others and display high attachment avoidance would find instant messaging unappealing (Li et al., 2021). In addition to this study, an analysis with a sample of 297 college students in China was conducted to investigate a proposed hypothesis that smartphone addiction would relate to psychological problems, affecting attachment styles. More closely looked at in this study were dysfunctional attitudes and self-esteem being related to one another as mediators between anxious attachment styles and smartphone addiction (Yuchang et al., 2017). Different scales such as the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS) developed by Collins and Read (Yuchang et al., 2017), the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale (DAS), a self-esteem scale, and a short version of a smartphone addiction scale were used to test the hypotheses. The findings supported the hypotheses that insecure attachment styles positively predicted smartphone addiction; secure attachment styles negatively predicted dysfunctional attitudes; and insecure attachment styles positively predicted dysfunctional attitudes. In addition, dysfunctional attitudes negatively predicted self-esteem and self-esteem predicted smartphone addiction. In conclusion, this study demonstrated that social media usage hurt attachment styles.

Studies directly related to attachment styles in romantic relationships initiated online were also reviewed. Goodcase and Associates (2018) analyzed a study that surveyed 219 participants who had met a partner online at any time in their life, hoping to gain a further understanding of relationship quality for this type of initiation. The survey used measures such as a Relationship Rating Form, a ratio of in-person and online communication per week within the relationship, and an attachment anxiety and avoidance questionnaire to test their hypotheses. Conclusions found that higher levels of communication online showed to be associated with anxious attachment styles, and lower relationship quality, while avoidant attachment styles were not significantly related to the amount of online communication used (Goodcase et al., 2018). Relating to this study, Brimhall and colleagues (2017) share significant information about whether the use of social media

is a threat or comfort to relationships. Technology has become such an overwhelming, almost expected use for everyone, and relationship quality can either increase with constant communication or suffer with the increased opportunity for infidelity (Brimhall et al., 2017). Issues such as the inability to disengage or the expectedness of being able to get a hold of one's partner at any given time cause more relationship anxiety and overall distrust in one's partner, without meaning to. The need to track and monitor every move shouldn't be a must, but as technology advances it is becoming one. As technology progresses and the use of social media continually increases in individual and couple's lives, the ability to use it as a resource instead of a threat is a challenge to everyone. The cycle of miscommunication, accusations, and unavailability are directly related to anxious attachment styles, which allow social media to have the possibility of threatening relationships.

Articles already discussed analyzed the negative effects of social media use on attachment styles, but there are studies shown to prove a positive impact on relationships due to social media. Optimistic studies show an understanding of socioemotional well-being impacted by social media, but also that social development can be positively correlated with online communication. Manago and collaborators (2020) researched the ability to keep closeness within adolescents to their family and friends, with a study of 169 US adolescents who kept an online daily diary of the amount of in-person and online communications they had with family and friends. At the end of the study, the adolescents were questioned on how close they felt to their friends and family, and the results showed that having communication online in addition to in-person contact allowed for emotional closeness (Manago et al., 2020). Due to this, although online communication would imply that attachment style takes a toll, this specific study implies positive results for attachment styles due to social media use.

Discussion

The interpretation of the findings in the reviewed studies consistently revealed the influence of attachment styles relating to an individual's overall use of social media. Within the findings of these studies, attachment styles are significantly shown to shape how individuals initiate, maintain, and dissolve relationships while using technology and social media use. For instance, Brimhall and colleagues (2017) illuminate the role of technology in relationships dealing with uncertain feelings of affairs and inability to constant communication relating to anxious attachment styles.

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Similarly, Goodcase and associates (2018) highlight the association between attachment anxiety and avoidance within online-initiated relationships, showcasing the communication online and face-to-face and overall relationship quality. Closeness and positive implications of social media use regarding attachment styles were reviewed by Manago and colleagues (2020), showing variety within the relationship between attachment styles and social media use. While assessing the quality of relationships online, face-to-face and online communication both demonstrated distinct correlations with attachment styles, influencing relationships with family and friends (Manago et al., 2020). This suggests that attachment style might influence the depth and quality of various online and in-person relationships, impacting both intimate and platonic connections.

Exploring the impact of attachment styles on emotional regulation in digital interactions reveals intriguing results. While some studies suggest that individuals with secure attachment styles tend to exhibit healthy coping mechanisms and emotion regulation online (Cyr et al., 2015), others indicate that anxious or avoidant attachment styles may lead to susceptibility to stress or emotional dysregulation within social media (Yuchang et al., 2017). The division between all the findings within the various studies allows for a complex interplay between attachment styles and social media use, disclosing important findings while also leaving questions for further research.

Within the review of these studies, many valuable insights were gathered, but limitations still exist. Some studies specifically focus on specific age groups, as discussed in the study reviewed by Li et al (2021) and Yuchang et al (2017), which focused on Chinese junior high students and Chinese college students, respectively. As well with these studies, specific cultural contexts were a focal point, which could potentially limit the generalizability of results. Moreover, methodological variations across studies could introduce biases or inconsistencies in the observed studies. As well, studies focused on online-initiated relationships or social media use may suffer from self-selection bias, as participants voluntarily engaging in online activity will differ from those who have less of an interest, within the same study. Technological advancements as well are continually being made and understanding how newer social media platforms can influence online behaviours and overall attachment styles is something to keep in mind to keep up to date with newer trends, which could affect the relationship between attachment styles and social media use. Future research should aim to overcome limitations by adopting more diverse samples and standardized methodologies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Also, studies increased

in length could lead to deeper results by tracking developmental trajectories of attachment styles within social media use over a longer period. Understanding the complexities of attachment styles and social media use is necessary to continue exploration of the evolving dynamic in the online world, and how attachment styles are affected.

In conclusion, the synthesis of these studies reveals a profound impact on the relationship between attachment styles and social media use. The emphasis on online behaviours, online usage and amount, emotional experiences, and relationship dynamics allow for the review within this research paper. Understanding the implications of social media use on attachment styles can be used beyond academics, holding substantial significance for mental health practitioners, teachers, and even parents. The knowledge can guide interventions aimed at enhancing an individual's well-being, helping for healthy online behaviours, resulting in positive relationships romantic or not, and increasing positivity in attachment styles. The overall findings illustrate an intricate relationship between attachment styles and social media use, allowing for critiques and limitations to be addressed, and showcasing the need for continued research to be done.

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