



**Attachment Style and Facebook Use: Can
Facebook be used to help overcome attachment
style-related issues?**

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Abstract

Infant attachment theory was first developed by John Bowlby who proposed that attachment occurs when a certain behavioural system is activated (1969), and since its development the concept of infant attachment has been widely explored within a psychological framework. The concept of adult attachment “is an extension of Bowlby's (1969) theory of the bonds between infants and their caregivers” (Pietromonaco & Barrett 1997, p. 1409) and while Bowlby himself noted that attachment could be observed throughout the lifespan (1979), adult attachment-concerned studies only rose to prominence in the late 1980's (Hazan & Shaver 1987). While adult attachment has been studied in relation to various adult relationship variables, few studies have considered adult attachment in the technological context of the 21st century, nor have they proposed possible ways for insecurely attached individuals to form and maintain close, meaningful relationships in the 21st century. In this paper, a 2008 study examining the relationship between adult attachment styles as measured via the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised questionnaire, a self-report measure of adult attachment style, and members' engagement with, and use of, the specific social networking site Facebook, will be discussed. This paper will explore this relationship in hopes of determining whether virtual worlds, such as Facebook, can be used by those with attachment style-related issues as an alternative means of communication to aid them in forming and maintaining potentially close, meaningful relationships – a feat which they may not have been able to achieve otherwise.

Keywords: Infant Attachment, Adult Attachment, R.C. Fraley, Adult Relationships, Facebook

Infant Attachment

Attachment theory was originally developed in the 1950's by John Bowlby who proposed that "the child's tie to his mother is a product of the activity of a number of behavioural systems that have proximity to mother as a predictable outcome" (Bowlby 1969, p. 223). Since its development, infant attachment has been studied in relation to such variables as adolescent school adaptation, coping strategies, social and emotional competence, and social interaction (see Verschueren & Marcoen 1999; Lieberman, Doyle & Markiewicz 1999). As Inge Bretherton explains, "'attachment,' as conceptualised by Bowlby, was not meant to be taken as a simple synonym for the term 'social bond,' nor was it meant to apply to all aspects of child-parent relationships" (1985, p 4). She goes on to summarise the two major ideas of Bowlby's attachment theory;

"(1) attachment as grounded in a motivational-behavioural control system, that is preferentially responsive to a small number of familiar care-giving figures and (2) the construction of complementary internal working models of attachment figures and of the self through which the history of specific attachment relationships is integrated into the personality structure" (1985, p. 3).

According to Bowlby, the attachment behavioural system is operational in human infants even at birth. While Bowlby noted that the rate of a child's development could vary greatly, he argued that typical attachment behaviour develops toward the end of the child's first year (Bowlby 1969, p. 223). However from the age of three onwards, these behavioural systems become less easily activated and further changes occur during adolescence and adulthood. During the three year period in which the attachment behavioural system is easily activated, Bowlby listed six responses which could lead to attachment behaviour:

- Crying and smiling, both which tend to bring the mother closer to the child
- Following and clinging, both which bring the infant to the mother
- Sucking, which Bowlby admitted was difficult to categorise
- Calling, whereby the child hails its mother figure (1969, p. 256).

Although Bowlby's theory of attachment concentrated on the bond between an infant and their caregiver, he did believe that attachment behaviour can be observed "from the cradle to the grave" (1979, p. 129).

Adult Attachment

Bowlby's work on infant-attachment provides a framework for adult attachment; "research on adult attachment is guided by the assumption that the same motivational system that gives rise to the close emotional bond between parents and their children is responsible for the bond that develops between adults in emotionally intimate relationships" (Fraley 2004). As such, romantic relationships between adults are considered to be a result of childhood attachment development (Mikulincer & Shaver 2007) and indeed, it is thought that the relationship between infants and parental figures share some of the same characteristics as adult romantic relationships. For example, in both relationships, each party experiences a sense a security when the other is in close proximity, feels insecure when the other is not nearby and shares a mutual interest in the other (Hazan & Shaver 1987). Another important attachment bond in adulthood is that characterised by platonic friendship. Bippus and Rollin found that an individual's attachment style "affected their behaviours towards adults friends in much the same way that...they impacted romantic relationships" (2003, p. 121).

Fraley's anxiety-avoidance model of adult attachment distinguishes between two critical variables in the attachment process, attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance (2004). According to this model, individuals who score highly in the attachment-related anxiety variable tend to worry about whether their partner is available and often fear rejection, while low anxiety scoring individuals are more secure and worry far less (Fraley 2004). Individuals who score highly in attachment-related avoidance tend not to depend on others or open up to others, while low avoidant scoring individuals are more comfortable with opening up to others and depending on others (Fraley 2004). These two critical variables in the attachment process can be combined to create either a secure, preoccupied, dismissing-avoidant or fearful-avoidant attachment style (see Figure 1). Securely-attached individuals score low in both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions; they report greater relationship satisfaction and adjustment (Pietromonaco & Barrett 1997). Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style score low in avoidance but high in anxiety; they depend on others to maintain a positive self-regard and to fulfill dependency needs (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). Dismissing-avoidant individuals score low in the anxiety dimension but high in the avoidance dimension; they often report not needing close emotional relationships and desire independence (Pietromonaco & Barrett 1997). Fearful-avoidant individuals score highly in both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions; while they avoid intimacy, they are highly dependent on the acceptance and affirmation of others (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). In both adult romantic relationships and adult friendships, securely-attached individuals are found to be more desirable than highly-avoidant or highly-anxious individuals (Bippus & Rollin 2003).

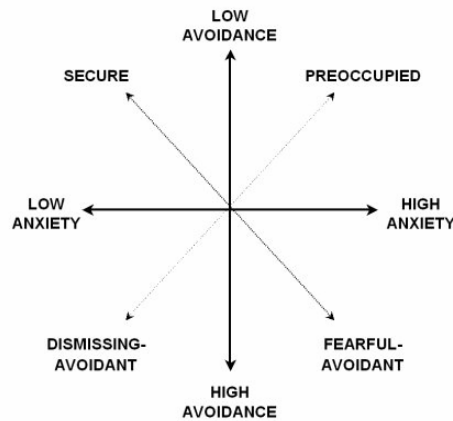


Figure 1: Two Dimensional Model of Adult Attachment (Fraley & Shaver 2000).

Adult Attachment, Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Networking

Many authors agree that four major factors distinguish computer-mediated communication (CMC) from face-to-face (FtF) communication; greater anonymity, the reduction of the importance of physical cues, greater control over the time and place of the interaction and the ease of finding similar others (Amichai-Hamburger 2007; McKenna, Green & Gleason 2002). Together, these factors “create a unique psychological environment for the user” (Amichai-Hamburger 2007, p. 188) and attract researchers to CMC.

Despite the continuing attraction of CMC, little research has been conducted examining the role of attachment style in members’ attraction to and use of CMC and social networking sites (SNSs). In 2005, Amichai-Hamburger identified adult attachment as a relevant personality theory to further understand Internet use and Internet users. He suggested that the process of attachment in adulthood could be viewed as two continua of the personality dimensions of *anxiety* and *avoidance* as proposed earlier by Fraley. Viewing the process of attachment this way allows for an understanding of the “contradiction between the very shallow relationships and the deep serious relationships” (Amichai-Hamburger 2005, p. 32) that are formed and maintained with the use of the Internet.

Previous research on the relationship between attachment style and Internet use has found attachment-related avoidance to have the strongest relationship with Internet use. Ye (2007) for example found that within casual friendships conducted over the Internet, fearful-avoidant individuals reported higher levels of interaction than dismissing-avoidant and preoccupied

individuals; she proposed that this may be due to the “characteristics of the online setting, such as lack of nonverbal cues and perceived similarity (e.g., members of the same newsgroup)” (p. 606).

The Present Study

In response to previous literature, this study has focused on the variables of secure attachment, attachment-related avoidance (comprised of dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant styles of attachment) and attachment-related anxiety (comprised of preoccupied and fearful-avoidant styles of attachment) in relation to the use of Facebook, an SNS. Facebook involves a personalised profile page hosted on the Internet which contains a list of friends and personal information such as a user’s birth date, location, religion and hobbies. Users can message, chat with, or send comments to friends, share photographs, join social groups, and perform socially-interactive tasks such as comparing music preferences with their friends. The SNS Facebook currently has over 250 million active members (Facebook.com) and due to its continuing popularity has been labelled “a mass social phenomenon in itself” (Acquisti & Gross 2006, p. 2). In Australia, Facebook has been identified as the third most popular website by Alexa, an online usage analysis service (2009), and accordingly Facebook should be of much interest to (Australian) academic researchers.

The present study is an exploratory investigation of the relationship between ‘offline’ attachment style – that is, attachment in FtF relationships – and online social networking. By exploring the relationship between secure attachment, attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety and engagement with the specific SNS Facebook, this study aims to identify what attachment style, if any, has the strongest relationship with usage of Facebook, and whether Facebook can be used as a potential means to overcome the attachment style-related issues experienced by insecurely attached individuals. It was anticipated that the secure style of attachment would be negatively related to heavy Facebook usage, and that both attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety would be positively related to heavy Facebook usage.

To explore the relationship between attachment style and use of Facebook, participants over the age of 18 were recruited via a convenience sampling procedure. Individuals were invited to participate in this research project via online recruitment notices posted on the Facebook ‘Monash Clayton’ and ‘Monash Caulfield’ pages (groups on Facebook specifically created for Monash University affiliates), *Monash Memo*, a digital weekly newsletter sent to members of the Monash University community, and the Monash University course management websites for second and third year Behavioural Studies subjects.

Participants were asked to complete two online questionnaires. To measure attachment-related avoidance and anxiety, the *Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised* (ECR-R) questionnaire, developed by Fraley, Waller and Brennan (2000), was used. The questionnaire was designed to measure attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance in the context of an emotionally intimate relationship. Scores on these two variables are combined to indicate whether the respondent reports a secure, preoccupied, dismissing-avoidant or fearful-avoidant attachment style.

The ECR-R measures adult attachment via 36 Likert-type items. Participants are instructed to answer the questions in relation to emotionally intimate relationships in general, rather than current relationships. Of the 36 items, 18 items relate to the attachment-related anxiety subscale, and 18 items relate to the attachment-related avoidance subscale. Some example questions relating to the attachment-related anxiety subscale are; 'I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love'; and 'I worry a lot about my relationships', while some example questions relating to the attachment-related avoidance subscale are; 'I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down'; and 'I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close'.

The Facebook Usage Questionnaire was specifically designed for use in the current study in order to determine an individual's level of Facebook usage (normal or heavy) and was developed from both an understanding of Facebook and a review of previous research, particularly that of Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007). The Facebook Usage Questionnaire consists of 18 questions, and includes both close-ended questions, where the participant was given fixed response alternatives, and open-ended questions, where the participant was free to devise their own answer. Questions included; 'How often do you access your Facebook account?' (with the optional answers of several times a day, daily, every 2-3 days, weekly, every 2-3 weeks, monthly, or less than monthly); and 'How many Facebook applications do you regularly use?'. Based on previous reports (see Cassidy 2006; Ellison et al. 2007), a heavy Facebook user was found to access their Facebook account several times a day or daily, spend on average 4 or more hours per week on Facebook, and comment or message individual Facebook friends several times a day or daily.

Results

Of the sample of the 251 participants who completed the survey, 191 were female and 60 were male. Participants indicated the age group into which they fell: over 50% (n=127) of the sample fell

within the 18-25 age range and a further 33% (n=85) fell within the 26-35 age range. Using the aforementioned criteria, 23 (9%) participants were identified as heavy Facebook users. As previously mentioned, high scores on the attachment-related avoidance dimension contribute to the dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles, while high scores on the attachment-related anxiety dimension contribute to the preoccupied and fearful-avoidant attachment styles. As can be seen in Table 1, the two attachment styles associated with attachment-related avoidance – dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant – were both higher in the heavy user sub-sample compared to the normal user sub-sample, while the secure and preoccupied styles of attachment were lower.

Table 1: Distribution Of Attachment Styles.

Attachment Style	All (n = 251)	Normal User (n = 228)	Heavy User (n = 23)
Secure	56.6%	57.9%	43.5%
Preoccupied	19.5%	19.7%	17.4%
Fearful-Avoidant	15.5%	14.5%	26.1%
Dismissing-Avoidant	8.4%	7.9%	13.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

What Do These Results Mean? Some Potential Interpretations and Explanations

It was anticipated that the secure style of attachment would be negatively related to Facebook usage and this was supported; the number of insecurely attached individuals was lower in the heavy Facebook user sub-sample than in the normal Facebook user sub-sample (43.5% and 57.9% respectively). In previous studies, securely attached individuals have reported holding positive views of both themselves and others (Pietromonaco & Barrett 1997), having less interpersonal problems than insecurely attached individuals (Horowitz et. al. 1993), being less likely to develop problematic Internet use (Fleming & Harrison 2007) and also reported having less self-doubt than insecurely attached individuals (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1993; Feeney & Noller 1990). Considered in this way, it may be understood that securely attached individuals experience less need to turn to SNSs in order to form and maintain close, meaningful relationships, as they are able to do so through FtF communication.

It was also expected that both attachment-related avoidance and attachment-related anxiety would be positively related to Facebook usage and this was partially supported. As can be seen in Table 1,

the number of avoidant individuals – both dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant – was higher in the heavy Facebook user sub-sample than in the normal Facebook user sub-sample; dismissing-avoidants were up 13.0% compared to 7.9%, and fearful-avoidants were up 26.1% compared to 14.5%. The number of preoccupied (anxious) individuals however was lower in the heavy Facebook user sub-sample than in the normal Facebook user sub-sample; 17.4% down from 19.7%.

These findings suggest that Facebook may appeal to individuals who score highly in both avoidant styles of attachment – dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant. Individuals who score highly in attachment-related avoidance have challenges with self-disclosure, intimacy and closeness (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). Previous studies have suggested that avoidant individuals may use the Internet more heavily than individuals with an alternate attachment style (Amichai-Hamburger 2002; Ye 2007). This may be because, for example, they seek non-obligatory contact with individuals so as to not rely on others (Amichai-Hamburger 2002). Fearful-avoidant individuals desire close relationships and the acceptance from others, and dismissing-avoidant individuals desire control and fear eventual disappointment in relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). Unlike other Internet communication tools such as chat rooms, Facebook “provides personal information about others [and] makes visible one’s connections to a wide range of individuals” (Ellison et al. 2007, p. 1162). This allows the user to establish an asynchronous, yet visible, means of interpersonal communication, fulfilling the fearful-avoidant individuals’ desire for acceptance and a close relationship, yet minimising the fear of eventual disappointment for dismissing-avoidant individuals by allowing them a high level of independence and control.

In contrast, the results found that the number of preoccupied (anxious) individuals in the heavy Facebook user sub-sample was lower than in the normal Facebook user sub-sample. Individuals with a preoccupied style of attachment rely on others to fulfill dependency needs (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). These findings suggest that Facebook may not adequately fulfill the high level of intimacy or responsiveness that preoccupied individuals seek from others. This may be due a number of factors, such as the online element of Facebook which may not fulfill the need for intimacy, or the asynchronous nature of Facebook which may not facilitate a high level of responsiveness.

This study did not uncover any significant gender differences in terms of Facebook use as the distribution of gender in the whole sample, the normal sub-sample, and the heavy sub-sample was relatively consistent. This absence of gender differences in Facebook use has been noted in previous

Internet and gender studies (Ono & Zavodny 2003; Ellison et al. 2007) and may be attributed to various reasons. Previous research has found that men peruse the Internet for entertainment and information gathering purposes, while women peruse the Internet for interpersonal communication (Shaw & Gant 2002). Facebook can potentially fulfill both entertainment and interpersonal communication motives, and even potentially fulfill information gathering motives, rendering gender differences irrelevant in terms of Facebook use. Furthermore, although gender differences have been noted in the past, computers and the Internet are now an integral and indeed inescapable part of daily life for many people (Shaw & Gant 2002) and gender differences among Internet use may no longer be applicable.

Summary – Some Final Thoughts

In summary, this study found that the number of individuals with a secure attachment style was lower in the heavy Facebook user sub-sample than compared to the normal Facebook user sub-sample, whereas the number of individuals with the two attachment styles associated with attachment-related avoidance – dismissing-avoidant and fearful-avoidant – were both higher in the heavy Facebook user sub-sample than in the normal Facebook user sub-sample. These findings suggest that there is a relationship between an individual's attachment style and their use of Facebook, and that the attachment-related divide between normal and heavy Facebook users can be understood in terms of attachment-related avoidance rather than in terms of secure versus insecure attachment.

This paper has put forward various reasons in an attempt to explain this newly-discovered relationship between an individual's attachment style and their use of Facebook, however what remains unclear is what these results mean for insecure and avoidant individuals in the broader framework of the 21st century. Previous literature has proposed that certain contexts may deactivate the attachment behavioural system (Collins & Feeney 2004; cited in Ye 2007), and more specifically that factors distinguishing CMC from FtF communication, such as those mentioned earlier in the paper, may in fact act as a 'leveller' for different attachment styles (Ye 2007). The results of the present study seem to support these claims as the differences in the attachment groups in relation to Facebook use are substantially different. Insecurely attached individuals – whether with a preoccupied, fearful-avoidant or dismissing-avoidant style of attachment – can suffer various forms of interpersonal problems and social interactions (Bartholomew & Horowitz 1991). The present author proposes that individuals may be able to use Facebook and other forms of CMC to overcome attachment style-related issues that may impede their interactions in FtF situations,

such as a fear of self-disclosure. The author also proposes that the SNS Facebook may give insecurely attached individuals a means with which to form and maintain potentially close, meaningful relationships which they may not have been able to form or maintain otherwise.

This study was a preliminary investigation into the relationship between 'offline' attachment style and engagement with Facebook and it is anticipated that the present paper will provide a specialist point of discussion for attachment theory and SNSs that can be built upon in future research. Together with the results of the present study, the continued rise and development of SNSs warrants the continual revision of previous studies and the commencement of new investigations. It is hoped that this paper has drawn attention to the importance of understanding historically well-developed psychological concepts in relation to new and emerging fields of technology in the 21st century, and that these new technologies, such as SNSs, will continue to be studied in relation to 'offline' personality and relationship frameworks.

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