Navigating Relationship Conflict in the Age of Social Media: The Impact of Attachment

Styles

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Introduction

The world continues to revolve around the constant streams of communication channels with the development of social media and other technologies. Though constant communication could be seen as a positive influence in life satisfaction, studies have shown that cognitive and communicative responses to intimate partners via social media have been linked to the correlation between an individual's attachment style and integrated conflict style (Baek et al., 2014; Morey et al., 2013). While the correlation continues to spark interest within the discipline, there is still much land to cover when evaluating the interdependence between an individual's attachment and conflict style. The focus of this paper will not only be the evaluation of the attachment theory and its resulted patterns but will expand on literature regarding communicative competency between certain attachment styles and how those individuals engage in interpersonal conflict with their romantic partners.

Attachment Theory and Styles

The Attachment Theory was originally theorized by John Bowlby, as he sought to discover more about the development of interdependence and attention-seeking behaviors between infants and their caregivers, while expanding on attachment bonding in those same groups (Littlejohn et al., 2009). Bowlby was also the same scholar to note that attachment isn't based solely on survival, but rather it seeks the creation of closeness within the creation and maintenance of relationships (D'Arienzo et al., 2019; Littlejohn et al., 2009). Thus, resulting in further research and expansion of the theory by Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver to include the growth of attachment from infancy to adulthood, and how those same adults navigate their intimate relationships with developed attachment patterns, which have been defined as attachment styles in recent research (Littlejohn et al., 2009).

In recognizable terms, Attachment Theory follows the assumption that humans develop attachment styles based on their first interpersonal interactions with their caregivers, specifically how parents react to their children's cries (Morey et al., 2013). Because these intimate relationships provide specific emotional and relational responses, similar to the way infants attach to parents, research has shown a correlation within adults as they tend to attach to partners with similar attachment styles (Bonache et al., 2017; Dijkstra et al., 2017). Following those attachment patterns from infancy, research has shown that adults may use similar strategies with their future intimate partners, as they build a response template that results from parent separation (Morey et al., 2013; Dijkstra et al., 2017). There are many variations and labels of the defined attachment styles, however, for the sake of consistency, the commonly recognized attachment style names will be utilized in this paper: Secure, Anxious, Avoidant, and Fearful.

The secure attachment style is characterized as an individual with high self-worth and low anxiety/avoidance (Littlejohn et al., 2009; Baek et al., 2014). These same individuals also develop a positive view of others, as they don't reject or fear intimacy between themselves and others (Gonzalez-Ortega et al., 2021). The secure attachment style is notably the healthiest attachment, as individual's who develop secure patterns are assumed to have had stable parental support throughout their childhood (Morey et al., 2013). Those individuals who display a secure attachment is often viewed as being socially independent and inherently develop communicative capabilities that encourage positive coping strategies to stress (Baek et al., 2014; Morey et al., 2013). Adults with a secure attachment style seek out social intimacy and are more likely to have stable partnerships, as they display greater commitment, trust, relationship satisfaction (Baek et al., 2014; Morey et al., 2013). Because the secure attachment style is recognized as the most

supportive and desired pattern, the remaining styles utilize describe dysfunctionality beginning with the anxious attachment style.

Because it is the most recognized attachment, mainly due to widespread information and discussion on social media, the anxious attachment style is defined as an individual with a high perception of others and a low perception of self (Baek et al., 2014; Morey et al., 2013). Often noted as the pre-occupied style, the anxious attachment style contrasts from secure attachment because of its fear of social intimacy and rejection from individual's that they perceive being higher in importance than themselves (Baek et al., 2014). Looking back to an individual's childhood, if they experience inconsistencies with their parental relationship, specifically parents who are unresponsive to their needs, those children develop strategies to cope with those feelings of insecurity (Morey et al., 2013). These individuals struggle in adulthood when attempting to prioritize intimacy within their relationships as they can never seem to reach the desired level of intimacy from their partners, resulting in lower relationship satisfaction and higher relational conflict (Morey et al., 2013). While they fear social rejection, an individual with an anxious attachment style with often seek out reassurance from others as their anxiety stems from their intense emotional reactiveness and influential dependency on their relationships with others (Baek et al., 2014; Morey et al., 2013).

The third defined attachment style is the avoidant attachment, often noted as the dismissive-avoidant pattern, with exhibiting individual's having a positive perception of self and a negative perception of others (Gonzalez-Ortega et al., 2021). Those adults who develop an avoidant attachment style are the same individuals that have a withdrawn relationship with their parents due to being inherently ignored as children when they exhibited any type of distress (Morey et al., 2013). In a study by Bretaña et al. (2022), those with an avoidant attachment style

were more likely to have a much lower relationship satisfaction because of their high avoidance and discomfort towards close intimacy with their partners. Because they prefer distance from their partners to feel comfort, these individuals offer less support and trust to their partners due to their negative view of others and emotional uneasiness (Morey et al., 2013; Bretaña et al., 2022). The avoidant group often dismisses any notion of intimacy which directly impacts the way that they function within a long-term relationship, considering that these individuals generally don't have any motivation to maintain a relationship of that magnitude (Bretaña et al., 2022).

The fourth, and final, attachment style is the fearful attachment. Because of many similarities, the fearful attachment can be considered a sub-category stemming from the avoidant attachment pattern. The fearful attachment assumes that individuals have a negative perception of both them and others (Gonzalez-Ortega et al., 2021). The difference between the fearful attachment and the avoidant attachment is their reasoning and motives behind rejecting social interaction. While the avoidants seemingly make the autonomous decision not to engage in any interaction with others, those with fearful attachment are afraid of social interaction and the rejection that could possibly result from the interaction (Baek et al., 2014). The fearful attachment also holds similarities with the anxious attachment style, however, those who exhibit the fearful attachment style are so afraid of rejection that even the thought of interacting with another individual causes them distress (Baek et al., 2014).

Though the attachment theory, and its resulted attachment styles, have primarily focused on interpersonal relationships and the maintenance of those face-to-face interactions, there are scholars exhibiting interest in how those relationships translate to an online format as the world progresses into the age of technology and the incorporation of social media into everyday life. It's interesting to view the correlations between an individual's technology usage, specifically on

social media, and their developed attachment style from childhood to see how those attachment characteristics impact their direct interactions within their intimate relationships.

Social Media Preferences within Attachment Styles

As social media has become increasingly more popular in the last decade, communication scholars have gained interest in how an individual's developed attachment style from childhood follows them into adulthood, their everyday technological usage, and how that impacts their intimate relationships. In recent studies, results indicate that couples are more likely to utilize technology to engage in communication with their romantic partners, as the channel of communication becomes almost unlimited (Morey et al., 2013). Through this research with the evaluation of the attachment styles, an individual's reasoning and motive behind technological and social media usage could be explained (Morey et al., 2013).

Those who possess a secure attachment style were found to utilize technological communication, and social media, to create new relationships and enhance their already existing ones (Baek et al., 2014). In terms of online communication, a secure attachment style was found to have high satisfaction from the relationship aspect, while also exhibiting a lower likelihood of becoming addicted to social media (Baek et al., 2014). Individuals with secure attachment tend to utilize a voice call versus texting or online communication, as they feel closer to their partner that way (Jin & Peña, 2010). In a study created by Jin & Peña (2010), those who consistently communicate via phone calls or text with their romantic partners have a higher chance of relationship satisfaction and lower relational uncertainty. Seemingly, those with a secure attachment style would be more likely to hold true to those healthy communication channels.

In contrast, those who exhibit a fearful attachment pattern were found to prefer online communication, just with different reasoning to those in the secure attachment category. An

individual with a fearful attachment style is more likely than most to display addictive behavior towards social media because of their excessive amount of time spent online (Baek et al., 2014). As mentioned before, the fearful attachment is essentially a branch from the avoidant category, so the more time away from social engagement, the higher satisfaction produced for these individuals. Seeing that it is a functional alternative to face-to-face communication, fearful attachments are more comfortable engaging in those intimate relationships online versus the former choice (Baek et al., 2014).

Like the fearful attachment style, individuals who display an avoidant attachment style were found to have high addictive behavior towards social media usage, however, displayed rejection towards the notion of utilizing phone calls and text messaging in terms of relational maintenance (Baek et al., 2014; Jin & Peña, 2010). An avoidant is much more likely to become addicted to mindless scrolling on social media, thus completely avoiding their relationships when being contacted as they seek to seclude themselves from others (Baek et al., 2014). However, if they are to engage in online communication, an avoidant attachment will often take advantage of email communication or text messaging rather than phone calls to avoid any possible confrontation or conflict within their relationship (Morey et al., 2013; D'Arienzo et al., 2019). Because these individuals are more likely to participate in texting channels of communication, a correlation was discovered between those with an avoidant attachment and the act of online sexual communication, or 'sexting' (Morey et al., 2013). Research indicated that an avoidant's strategies to escape communication resulted in lower relationship satisfaction and held those individual's captive in their own secluded bubble of influential social media (Baek et al., 2014).

Finally, those who exhibit anxious attachment pattern characteristics were found to display highly addictive behavior to social media, as well as to their everyday technology, like a

cellphone. Due to their ultimate desire of seeking reassurance from their partner, they often take to social media influencers and the act of social media engagement to affirm their feelings and increase their relationship satisfaction (Baek et al., 2014; D'Arienzo et al., 2019). Like the avoidant attachment pattern, an individual with an anxious attachment is much more likely to participate in the exchange of sexual text messages due to their craving of reassurance from their partner (Morey et al., 2013). However, unlike the avoidant pattern, an anxious attachment will over-utilize their social media sites because of greater feelings of jealousy and distrust in their partner, thus resulting in lower relationship satisfaction between the two intimate partners. Anxious attachments also enjoy public declarations from their partner via social media, as they feel a rush of love and worthiness (Morey et al., 2013; D'Arienzo et al., 2019).

While research cannot solidify whether attachment influences an individual's motives behind social media, it has been able to indicate that each attachment style utilizes it to their own advantages in terms of communication with a partner (Baek et al., 2014). In a study by Jin & Peña (2010), it was found that social media, and other technological use, impacted intimate relationships due to its communicative nature. Utilizing the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, the pair hypothesized that couples who exhibited high interaction with one another were more likely to see a reduction in their Relational Uncertainty, a component of Relational Turbulence Theory (Jin & Peña 2010; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Upon evaluating this research, a constant stream of communication is only positive to those attachment styles who welcome the idea of consistent availability, thus excluding the avoidant and fearful attachments. However, it is important to note that the Relational Turbulence Theory can be applied with these defined attachment styles to expand upon how these individuals navigate through transitional periods within an intimate relationship.

Relational Turbulence Theory Application

Relational Turbulence Theory was originally theorized by Deanna Solomon and Leanna Knobloch in 2001, seeking to understand the transitional period of a relationships as it moves from casual to serious. However, Jennifer Theiss and Rachel McLaren later expanded on the theory in 2011, utilizing the original framework to not only evaluate the transitional period, but to understand why this period incorporates turbulence between partners (Littlejohn et al., 2021; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). In recognizable terms, the theory seeks to visualize a transitioning relationship like a rollercoaster, resulting in the evaluation of why these ups and downs occur (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

The theory includes two dimensions: Relational Uncertainty and Partner Influence. Relational Uncertainty, as previously mentioned, is the confidence held by an individual about their relationship (Littlejohn et al., 2021; Jin & Peña, 2010). Relational Uncertainty can be simplified further into three components: self-uncertainty, partner-uncertainty, and relationship-uncertainty. Self-uncertainty is the act of questioning one's role within the relationship, such as questioning if one is ready for such relationship or the act of being in a relationship. Partner-Uncertainty essentially questions the partner, rendering doubt to the partner's fidelity and desire to be in said relationship (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Relationship-Uncertainty introduces question of actions within the relationship, resulting in unfavorable satisfaction and possible emotional reaction (Littlejohn et al., 2021; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010).

The second dimension of the theory is that of Partner Influence, indicating how a partners influence each other's lives and daily activity. However, when partner influence creates a barrier between an individual and a goal, this can end in emotional reactivity (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). For example, when an unspoken rule is created in a relationship, partners will often notice

when that rule is broken, and a conflict could bloom from the reaction of partners (Hocker et al.,

2022). Rule and boundary setting can be applied to this theory because of what the two

dimensions result in: emotional, cognitive, and communicative responses to that conflict or

change. This is where the name, Relational Turbulence, comes into play, as these sparked

responses initiate conflict between partners where they must choose to either engage in such

conflict or withdrawal (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Increased turbulence can, over time, increase

the amount of relational uncertainty, thus resulting in more conflict initiation and possibly the

end of the relationship. However, with the application of attachment theory and the attachment

styles, research has indicated a close relationship between an individual's attachment pattern and

their chosen conflict-resolution strategy as relational turbulence is experienced (Knobloch &

Theiss, 2010; Cann et al., 2008).

Chosen Conflict Styles Between the Attachments

Similar to attachment styles, a conflict style is explained as a pattern, or strategy, in

which an individual utilizes when engaging in conflict. Unlike the attachment styles, that stem

from childhood development and parental relationships, a conflict style can be developed from

environmental factors and other life experience (Hocker et al., 2022). However, research has

indicated that an individual's attachment style can also be an influential factor in conflict-

resolution strategy development (Gonzalez-Ortega et al., 2021).

When exploring the relationship between the secure attachment and the potential conflict

styles, research supports the connection between secure patterns and the integrative conflict style

due to its collaborative nature (Cann et al., 2008; Hocker et al., 2022). The integrative conflict

style is described as having high concern for both self and the other party within the conflict,

resulting in both parties exerting effort to maximize all beneficial outcomes and creating the

ideal collaboration for individuals who display a secure attachment (Cann et al., 2008; Hocker et al., 2022). Contrary to the secure attachment, an individual with a fearful or avoidant attachment would most likely participate in an avoidant conflict style. The avoidant conflict style, just as it sounds, is explained as someone who has little to no concern for self or the other party inside the conflict. Individuals who exhibit the avoidant conflict style often disengage in any sort of divergence because of their fear of rejection or blatant resistance to any sort of intimate relationship (Hocker et al., 2022; Cann et al., 2008; Bonache et al., 2017). The avoidant attachment style has also been associated with the dominant conflict style, which is described as an individual with high concern for self and low concern for other. Often, a dominant conflict style includes the individual who only seeks their own goal maximization without regard for the other party, which can result in more severe aggression and violence (Cann et al., 2008; Hocker et al., 2022). Surprisingly, the avoidant attachment is associated with the dominant style due to the engagement that they will participate in, only when conflict has escalated far enough to where they feel as though their independence and relational distance is threatened (Bonache et al., 2017). The avoidant attachment has also been associated with a withdrawal strategy as a response to interpersonal conflict, resulting in a decrease of relationship satisfaction within their intimate relationships (Bretaña et al., 2022).

Finally, the anxious attachment style is most associated with the obliging conflict style, described as a high concern for other and low concern for self, simulating the pattern for the anxious attachment (Hocker et al., 2022; Cann et al., 2008). Individuals with an anxious attachment also tend to exhibit dominant conflict style characteristics, however, because of their pleasing nature and desire for reassurance from others, obliging is most often the style of choice. The anxious attachments often participate in conflict with their intimate partner because of

negative emotional responses to turbulence, however, much of their engagement is due to the lack of attention and support from their partner (Bonache et al., 2017; Cann et al., 2008; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). Research also supports the act of withdrawing from conflict engagement because of their high regard for others, as these individuals exhibit a fear of rejection, like the fearful attachment (Bonache et al., 2017). Notably, each of the four attachment styles have similar correlation and description to the conflict style counterparts. With the evaluation of each attachment and conflict style, expanding on the different styles' social media communication preferences is clearer regarding reasoning behind usage inside their intimate relationships.

Social Media Conclusions from Conflict and Attachment Correlation

Due to a lack of research within the discipline, only the avoidant and anxious attachment styles have been connected back to conflict engagement via social media channels. However, it can be concluded that individuals with a secure attachment style utilizes social media to enhance and maintain their romantic partnerships (Morey et al., 2013; Baek et al., 2014). Secure attachments have been found to reject addictive behaviors with social media, all other attachment styles correlate with high usage of either mindless scrolling behavior or communicative desire (Baek et al., 2014). Within the avoidant attachment pattern, research supports their lack of face-to-face conflict, however, the utilization of email as a channel for conflict-resolution is favored within this style. This has created greater possibility for conflict in these individuals, while simultaneously decreasing relationship satisfaction within their intimate relationships (Morey et al., 2013; Baek et al., 2014).

Increased social media usage is present in those who exhibit anxious attachment patterns because of the inherent desire to seek reassurance from their intimate partners. The public nature

of social media reassures the individual while incorporating a recorded history of the partner's love and support, creating a positive impact to the relationship (Morey et al., 2013). These social networking sites create multiple channels of communication for an anxiously attached individual to reach their partner, satisfying that desire for reassurance. However, there are negative impacts to the anxious attachment style and social media usage as these individual's often become jealous over the secretive nature social media displays (Morey et al., 2013). Research supports the notion that this attachment style thrives off the connection that social media presents, although it is linked to some dissatisfaction within intimate relationships.

Conclusion

To conclude, an individual's attachment style can be associated with their developed conflict style all while utilizing social media to create and maintain, or reject, intimate relationships. Based off current research, social media addiction correlates with much of the insecure attachment styles, resulting in both positive and negative impacts to these individual's close relationships with partners (Baek et al., 2014). Expanding further, research supports the notion that a developed conflict style is often influenced by an individual's underlying attachment style from childhood, equaling the determination of how they both utilize social media inside their relationships and the role it plays when resolving conflict (Cann et al., 2008). If research could be further explored, it would be interesting to analyze the amount of screen time individuals engage in daily. By categorizing individuals into their respective attachment style, the study would track their daily screen time, and see if there is a correlation between that and chosen conflict styles, if any. Another research design that lends interest to this subject is that of evaluating the difference between an individual's attachment style, chosen conflict, and form of manipulation. With potential research questions, "When do these individuals activate

their attachment style, and how do they utilize it to their advantage when engaging in conflict?"

and "Are there instances of manipulation and strategy based on attachment as individuals

navigate interpersonal conflict, or are conflict styles chosen based solely from the foundational

attachment style they possess?" While current research on attachment theory and attachment

styles if apparent, there is far more room to incorporate how those style impact relational

turbulence and conflict as adults mature throughout their intimate relationships. Social media is

simply a channel of communication; however, it has become one of the most influential forms

and continues to heavily impact the way humans create and maintain relationships.

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