Adult Attachment Styles and Frequency of Self-Representation on Instagram

Esther Klingbiel

Eugene Lang College

Adult Attachment Styles and Social Media Use

With the advent of social media in recent years, the field of psychology has only begun to delve into the significance of the relationship between attachment styles and social media use. Social media's role in attachment style and broader psychopathology has not been adequately studied in the clinical psychological field.

A few studies, though, have been conducted analyzing the relationship between attachment styles and Facebook use (Hart, Nailling, Bizer, & Collins, 2014; Nitzberg & Farber, 2013; Oldmeadow, Quinn, & Kowert, 2012). However, none involve the specific study of Instagram, a mobile social networking site (SNS) that involves the posting of images to a shared platform. The purpose of this study, therefore, is an approach in beginning to fill this gap—specifically, an attempt to answer the question as to whether there is a relationship between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and frequency of self-representation on Instagram. Understanding the ways in which people engage with the non-physical, visual forms of SNSs may lead to insights about how attachment plays into identity formation, presentation, and manipulation in the digital sphere.

Nitzberg and Farber (2013) report that on SNSs (specifically, Facebook), users tend to inflate or exaggerate the way they represent themselves by enhancing their physical attractiveness (for example, carefully curating what images they post of themselves), emotional well being, and positivity. They also report that viewing other people's SNS profiles and content is linked to "increased feelings of envy and decreased life satisfaction."

In their study, the authors assessed participants' attachment styles and SNS behaviors—in regard to such behaviors, the Nitzberg and Farber specifically measured Facebook use frequency and satisfaction. They found that anxiously attached individuals reported higher feelings of intimacy with others while interacting over SNS. The authors posit that because anxious individuals feel stress when engaging in real life social interactions, they relieve and avoid this stress by increasing social interaction online.

Hart et al. (2014) found similar results when studying the relationship between attachment styles and Facebook use. The authors measured feedback sensitivity, feedback seeking, attention received, and "tendency towards privacy," all within the context of Facebook use.

The authors report that anxious attachment predicted positive feedback sensitivity, positive feedback seeking, positive general activity on Facebook, positive received attention, and negative tendency towards privacy. The authors also report converse findings for avoidant individuals. Avoidant attachments predicted negative feedback seeking, negative general activity on Facebook, negative attention received, and positive tendency towards privacy.

Oldmeadow et al. (2012) have also reported similar results to Nitzberg & Farber's and Hart et al.'s results. Along with measuring the frequency of Facebook use, the authors assessed dependence, emotional motivation, "concern over social evaluation," pride, and indifference in regard to Facebook use and presence on the site.

The authors found that anxiously attached individuals used Facebook more often than other groups, sought "Facebook comfort seeking," and were more concerned about

how others perceived them on Facebook. Avoidant attachment styles were also associated with comfort seeking and evaluation concern, but to a lesser degree than anxiously attached individuals. Furthermore, avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with "attachment, openness, and positivity," on Facebook and led the authors to conclude that there was "no relationship between the avoidant attachment style and Facebook usage."

Instagram is a mobile-based social networking site that allows users to post images and videos to a shared platform, where they can view the posts of other people they "follow" (in this circumstance, the term "following" is synonymous with subscribing). Recently, Instagram has introduced more services than just image posting. Such services include the ability to post videos, single posts containing more than one image (up to ten per single post), and direct messaging (the ability to privately send a message, image, or video from one user to one or more other users). The app has also introduced "stories," which are timed posts that disappear from the platform after a certain period of time (24 hours). Users also have the option to make their accounts public (which can be viewed by anyone, and anyone can follow them) or private (other users must request to follow such users, and only users that have been approved as followers can view a private user's posts). The posting of text is not a main component of the site—users can add descriptions to their profiles and images, as well as comment on others' images—but generally the lengths of such components are brief (less than 250 words).

Regarding the psychological constructs of this study, a brief overview of attachment styles is included here. In existing literature, adult attachment styles are

divided into four categories: Secure, Anxious-Preoccupied, Dismissive-Avoidant, and Fearful-Avoidant.

Securely attached individuals had reliable and nurturing attachments with early caregivers and generally have low social anxiety. They are simultaneously comfortable with intimacy and independence, and do not tend to avoid close relationships (Oldmeadow, et al., 2012).

Anxious-Preoccupied (also known as “anxious”) individuals tend to have low self-esteem and seek high degrees of intimacy in their personal relationships through attention-seeking and proximity behaviors. They also tend to be highly sensitive to criticism and fear rejection (Oldmeadow et al., 2012).

Dismissive-Avoidant (also known as “avoidant”) individuals, similarly to anxious individuals, feel insecure in their attachments (e.g., they are afraid of rejection, abandonment, etc.). However, conversely to anxious individuals, avoidant individuals tend to avoid intimacy and close relationships in order to preserve personal safety through autonomy and independence (Oldmeadow, et al., 2012).

Fearful-Avoidant (also known as “fearful”) individuals are similar to anxious and avoidant individuals in terms of display behaviors. While they may desire intimate relationships, they may tend to hold others at arm’s length and generally feel uncomfortable with intimacy, due to a general distrust of others and low self-esteem, or view that the self is unlovable.

Attachment styles are measured through variables such as the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (a structured interview administered by a clinician) and various self-

reporting questionnaires, including the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ-CV), the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale–Revised (ECR-R), the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ), and the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ) (Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya & Lancee, 2010).

Self-representation, the context in which attachment styles will be applied to Instagram usage, refers to posts depicting the self. Specifically, this includes any posts that fully or partially include the user's face and/or body. Furthermore, self-representation within this context applies to the "real-life" depiction of the user (i.e., it is a direct image of them and not a drawing, model, etc.).

Participants in this study took the ECR–R (2000) to measure levels of anxious and avoidant thoughts and behaviors within the context of close relationships. This questionnaire was administered via a Google Form. Participants also consented to allow the study's administrator viewing access to their personal Instagram accounts, in order to measure how many of their posts were self-representational.

Previous research predicts that anxiously attached individuals should have higher frequencies of self-representation on Facebook than avoidantly attached individuals (Hart, et al, 2014; Nitzburg & Farber, 2013; Oldmeadow et al, 2012). Therefore, this study hypothesizes that similarly to Facebook use, a correlation will be found between frequency of self-representation on Instagram and attachment styles.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study included women between the ages of 18 and 24 (N = 13, M_{age} = 21.1 years) who had personal Instagram accounts with more than 100 posts. Ethnicity and race were not included as demographic criteria. Exclusion criteria included participants without an Instagram account, with an Instagram account comprised of less than 100 posts, or who did not have personal Instagram accounts (e.g., they used Instagram for work). 17 participants originally responded to requests for inclusion in this study and four were ultimately excluded due to ineligibility. One did not have an Instagram account; one did not agree to allow viewing access to a private account; and two had less than 100 posts on their profiles.

Materials and Procedure

A Google Form was sent to participants through a link on the Internet. Part one of the form included preliminary questions to assess eligibility for participation in the study. Participants were asked to provide their email (to ensure that multiple forms were not filled out by the same person), their age, and gender. Additionally, participants were asked to respond “yes” or “no” as to whether they had a personal Instagram account.

Part two included questions regarding Instagram account information, specifically what the participant’s Instagram username was and to respond “yes” or “no” as to whether their account was set to private. If participants responded “yes” to the preceding question, they directed to part three of the form, in which they were asked to respond

"yes" or "no" to whether they were willing to grant the study's administrator access to view their private account.

Section four provided information on the administrator's information (name, school, instructor), as well as a brief explanation of the study's aims (studying attachment styles and Instagram use). Details on contact information and participant rights were also provided. Furthermore, a link to what attachment styles are was included for those curious about the topic. At the end of this section, participants were asked to respond "yes" or "no" as to whether they agreed to participate in the study. Section five asked the participant to electronically sign their name.

Part six of the form was the 36-item Experiences in Close Relationships Scale–Revised (ECR-R) self-report questionnaire (Fraley, Waller & Brennan, 2000). As previously mentioned, the ECR-R measures levels of avoidance and anxiety in intimate relationships (both romantic and non-romantic). Participants were provided with a statement and asked to agree or disagree with a 7-point Likert scale (1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 7 being "Strongly Agree"). 18 of the items measured the anxiety subscale (e.g., "I'm afraid that I'll lose my partner's love,"; "I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me."). The other 18 items measured the avoidance subscale (e.g., "I am nervous when my partner gets too close to me,"; "I tell my partner just about everything."). As per the questionnaire's authors' suggestion (Fraley, et al., 2000), the questions were randomized by the Google Forms application. All items were made mandatory (so the user would not be able to proceed unless all items had been filled out) in case a participant missed an item.

Because fearful and secure attachment styles are not measured through the ECR-R, they are not included as components of this study. Meta-analyses have found the ECR-R to be both reliable and valid (Ravitz, et al., 2010).

Participants were recruited via word of mouth, through social media (specifically, Instagram), and through Canvas, a supplemental educational networking website used by Eugene Lang College. Participants were not given full details of the study's purpose in an effort to prevent such knowledge from influencing participants to change their answers to the ECR-R or to edit their Instagram profiles. Participants were informed that the relationship between attachment styles and Instagram was being studied, but not about self-representation on Instagram or that the study's administrator would be viewing their Instagram profiles for this reason. Participants took the study on their own time and were not monitored. Furthermore, they were not compensated for their participation.

After the participants submitted their forms, results were recorded and responses to the ECR-R were coded by the administrator. Specifically, coding for both the anxious and avoidant subscales are found by averaging the scores for each subsection. Some items (14 in all) were reverse-coded (Fraley, et al., 2000).

Instagram self-representation was measured by counting how many of a user's posts included self-representation out of their total posts. Percentages were calculated from this information. Vague images, where the user may have included self-representation (but definitively, this fact was unclear), were not included. Videos, single images, and multiple-image posts were counted as one post each. The purpose for including the latter post type as one post is that the multiple image posts would receive

the same attention as single image posts. Specifically, both multiple and single image posts can only be liked "once." Multiple image posts can only be commented on as a set (i.e., a specific image in the set cannot be commented on). Depictions of the self only and the self with others were both included.

Results

As mentioned, 13 female participants between the ages of 18 and 24 participated in this study (M = 21.1, SD = 1.18). As per the ECR-R's coding standards, participants were separately scored on anxious (M = 3.68, SD = 1.42, range = 2–6.5) and avoidant (M = 3.33, SD = 1.57, range = 1.39–5.44) subscales. On average, each user had 378 images overall on each of their profiles (SD = 246.34, range = 108–963). The mean percentage of images of the self out of total images on each participant's account was 34.94% (SD = 15.32, range = 5.27%–56.98%). These data are summarized in Table 1.

Correlational analyses were conducted for the following data sets: frequency of self-representation and anxious subscale scores ($r = .478$, $p = .098$); and frequency of self-representation and avoidant subscale scores ($r = .052$, $p = .867$). Scatterplots with regression lines for these relationships were generated (Figs. 1 & 2, respectively) using SPSS.

Discussion

For multiple statistical reasons, this study's findings fail to reject the null hypothesis. That is, this study does not demonstrate that attachment styles correlate to

frequency of self-representation on Instagram. This is mostly because of the study's small sample size of only 13 participants. However, findings do beg more advanced discussion, namely, that of the correlation between anxious scores and Instagram self-representation. The correlation between these two variables is moderately positive ($r = .478$). Additionally, the correlation's significance level ($p = .098$), while not below the standard of 0.05, does approach a statistically significant relationship. A duplicate study with more participants may be useful in pursuing these promising figures.

Conversely, the correlation between avoidant scores and Instagram self-representation does not trend towards significance. Its Pearson correlation ($r = .052$), close to zero, suggests that there is no relationship between the two variables compared for correlation. This implication is furthered by a high significance level ($p = .867$), well above the accepted standards of 0.05. While there is less potential for finding significant correlation among this relationship, it may be useful do duplicate this portion as well with a larger sample size.

The statistical outcomes of this study were also affected by confounding variables that threatened the internal validity of its results. First and foremost, the study sample size, with 13 participants, was far too low. Such a sample size exaggerated reliable standard deviations and variances. For example, the total number of Instagram posts per person varied widely (range = 108–963), resulting in an extremely high standard deviation ($SD = 246.34$) and variance (60,686). Furthermore, only one rater coded the self-representation images on Instagram. This could have resulted in exaggerated or

understated numbers and calculations when conducting statistics for how many of each user's Instagram posts were self-representational.

Because this study is non-experimental, it is inherently problematic in regards to threat to internal validity and confounding variables, as non-experimental studies make no attempt to control such issues. Response rates and participation was expected to be low, and because of this the study's administrator personally knew many of the final participants in this study. This is an issue because these participants may have tailored their responses to the ECR-R with the fact in mind that someone they knew would be looking at them. For example, someone who was not known well to the administrator might have answered the ECR-R in a biased manner for worry of personal judgment, as the ECR-R does ask highly personal questions about intimate relationships. They may have answered questions more moderately in order to receive a less "extreme" score. They might also not have wanted the administrator to know how they truly feel and act in relationships, as the administrator may have had a close relationship with them. The study sample was also not particularly representative—that is, the college-educated women on Western campuses who made up the totality of this study do not constitute for all young women who use Instagram.

Finally, there is the issue of attachment style and its influence on self-representation within the context of Instagram itself. While attachment styles and specific SNS behaviors have been linked, it is difficult still to establish to what degree attachment style versus individual characteristics affect SNS use. How do we identify differing characteristics of attachment style versus individual characteristics that may be aligned

(or misaligned) *to* attachment style but not caused (in part, or in whole) *by* attachment style? The only way to clarify the relationship between attachment style and SNS use is to replicate and conduct studies with large and diverse sample groups.

In sum, for future replicated studies, this study's author recommends a larger sample size and multiple coders. Furthermore, such samples should be randomly selected and no participants should be known personally to the study's administrators and/or coders. Finally, administrators should take pains to make sure that the study's sample is representative of the population of young women using Instagram.

References

Fraley, R. C., Waller, N. G., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). An item-response theory analysis of self-report measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 350-365.

Hart, J., Nailling, E., Bizer, G. Y., & Collins, C. K. (2014). Attachment theory as a framework for explaining engagement with Facebook. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 77, 33-40. Retrieved October 8, 2017.

Nitzburg, G. C., & Farber, B. A. (2013). Putting Up Emotional (Facebook) Walls? Attachment Status and Emerging Adults' Experiences of Social Networking Sites. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69(11), 1,183-1,190. Retrieved October 8, 2017.

Oldmeadow, J. A., Quinn, S., & Kowert, R. (2012). Attachment style, social skills, and Facebook use amongst adults. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1,142-1,149. Retrieved October 8, 2017.

Ravitz, P., Maunder, R., Hunter, J., Sthankiya, B., & Lancee, W. (2010). Adult attachment measures: A 25-year review. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 69, 419-432. Retrieved October 30, 2017.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics Table of Avoidance Scores, Anxious Scores, Total Instagram Posts, Self-Representative Instagram Posts, and Age Variables*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
AnxiousScores	13	2.00	6.50	3.6877	1.42088
AvoidantScores	13	1.39	5.44	3.3331	1.57364
InstagramTotal	13	108.00	963.00	378.8462	246.34591
InstagramSelf	13	.0527	.5698	.349408	.1532502
Age	13	18	23	21.08	1.188
Valid N (listwise)	13				

Figure 1. *Scatterplot of Anxious Scores and Self-Representative Instagram Posts with Regression Line and Equation*

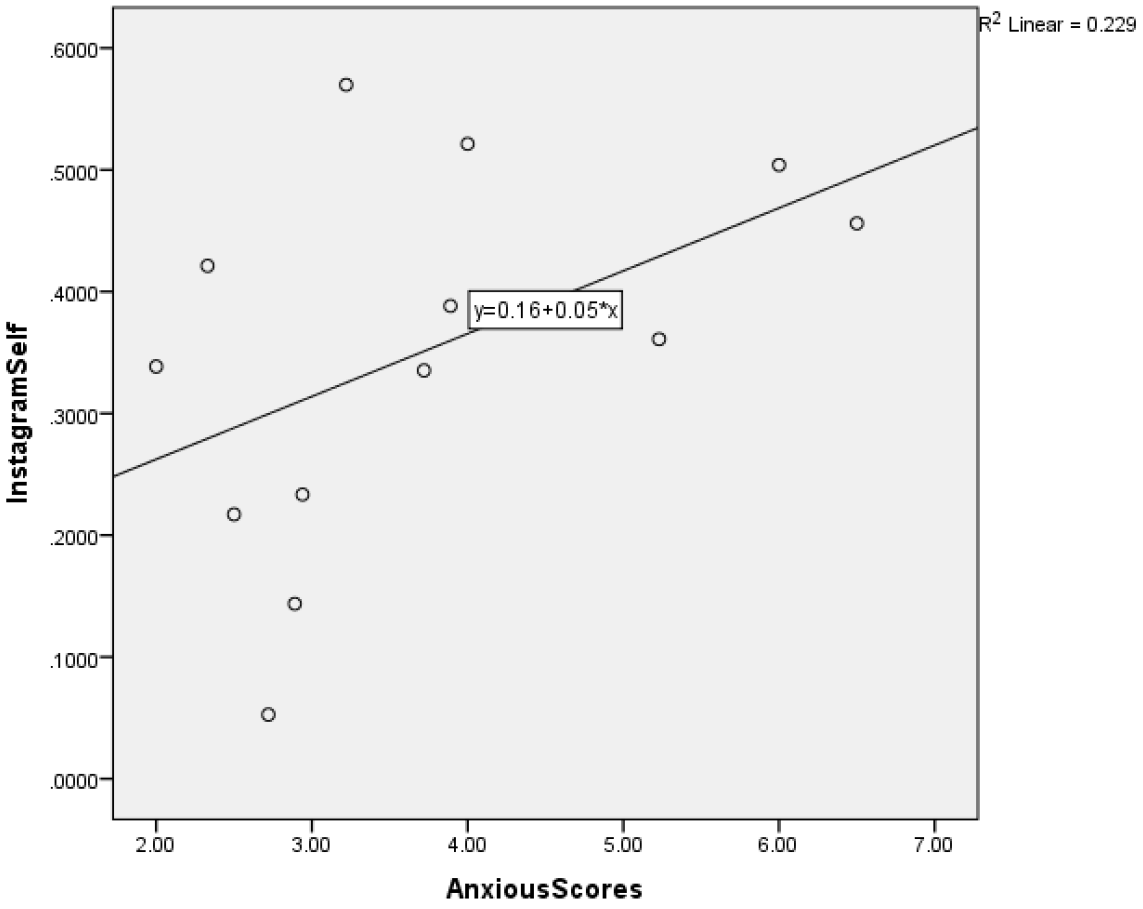

Figure 2. *Scatterplot of Avoidant Scores and Self-Representative Instagram Posts with Regression Line and Equation*