Rapid Communication

Attachment Style Differences in Online Relationship Involvement: An Examination of Interaction Characteristics and Relationship Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated attachment style differences in online relationships with regard to interaction characteristics and relationship satisfaction. The effect of relationship type was also taken into account in these investigations. The findings suggested that attachment style differences in interaction breadth and depth were present only in casual friendships. Preoccupied and dismissing individuals had a lower level of interaction breadth and depth than did secure and fearful individuals within this type of online relationship. A same pattern of attachment style differences was found in relationship satisfaction of casual online friendships.

INTRODUCTION

ATTACHMENT THEORY has often been used as a framework to study interpersonal interaction and relationships. While individuals' attachment style differences have been found to influence the extent to which people engage in a variety of behaviors in close, face-to-face relationships,[1] the role of attachment style in relationships developed via computer-mediated communication (CMC) remains an unexplored area.

Researchers have attempted to identify general attachment styles. Among different categorizations of attachment styles, Bartholomew's[2] four-category scheme (secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful) was one of the most frequently used ways to differentiate patterns of attachment. Secure individuals are low in both attachment-related anxiety and avoidance, and as a result, they are comfortable with intimacy and autonomy in relationships. Preoccupied individuals are high in anxiety and low in avoidance; they tend to show a strong desire for dependence in a relationship but are concerned about possible rejections. Dismissing individuals are low in anxiety but high in avoidance; they place high value on independence and often avoid close relationships. Fearful individuals are high in both anxiety and avoidance; they desire close relationships and intimacy, but they often avoid close relationships because of the fear of rejection.

So far, little empirical evidence has been put forth to show how attachment styles are associated with people's online relational communications. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the applicability of attachment theory to online relationship involvement. Specifically, the study explored how individuals' attachment styles may influence the breadth and depth of interaction as well as the

satisfaction with their online relationships. Given the importance of relationship type in relational communications, the study also took into account this factor in the investigation of relationships between attachment style and online relationship involvement.

METHODS

One hundred thirteen participants (51 females, 62 males) recruited from Google Newsgroups completed an online questionnaire. They ranged in age from 19 to 69 years old, with a mean age of 35.4 years. On average, these participants spent 24.8 hours on the Internet per typical week (SD = 11.7). The participants completed an online questionnaire that assessed their attachment styles, online relationship types (casual friendship, close friendship, romantic relationship), relationship length, interaction breadth and depth, and relationship satisfaction.

Attachment styles were measured with Bartholomew and Horowitz's[3] four short descriptions of attachment styles. Breadth and depth of interaction with online relational partners were measured with a scale derived from Parks and Floyd's[4] scale of levels of development in online relationship. The participants rated the degree to which they felt each statement could describe his or her communication with the identified relational partner on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Five items assessed interaction breadth (α = 0.83); six items assessed interaction depth (α = 0.80). A shortened version of Hendrick's[5] five-point Likert-type relational assessment scale was used to measure online relationship satisfaction. The alpha reliability for the relationship satisfaction was 0.79.

Statistic analysis

Separate 4×3 analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted, with attachment style and relationship type as independent variables, and breadth and depth of interaction and relationship satisfaction as dependent variables. Because relationship length varied substantially, it was entered as a covariate in all the analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

On the dimension of interaction breadth, ANCOVA produced an interaction between attachment style and relationship type, $F(6, 99)$ = 3.22, $p < 0.01$, η^2 = 0.06. Tukey contrast revealed that within casual friendships, secure and fearful individuals exhibited higher levels of interaction breadth in comparison to preoccupied and dismissing individuals. However, within close friendships and romantic relationships, the four attachment styles did not differ significantly on this dimension. On the dimension of interaction depth, ANCOVA also yielded an interaction between attachment style and relationship type, $F(6, 99)$ = 2.17, $p < 0.05$, η^2 = 0.05. The following Tukey contrast showed that the interaction pattern was the same as that of interaction breadth. Specifically, within casual friendships, secure and fearful individuals reported higher levels of interaction depth than did preoccupied and dismissing individuals, whereas within close friendships and romantic relationship, the four attachment styles were not significantly.

To test the effect of attachment style on online relationship satisfaction, ANCOVA revealed a main effect of relationship type, $F(2, 99)$ = 11.19, $p < 0.001$, η^2 = 0.15, and an interaction between attachment style and relationship type, $F(6,99)$ = 2.32, $p < 0.05$, η^2 = 0.10. Overall, satisfaction scores were significantly higher among those involved in close friendships (M = 4.10) or romantic relationships (M = 3.96), as compared to those involved in casual friendships (M = 3.38). However, the interaction with attachment style indicated that the pattern of relationship satisfaction differed across attachment style in certain types of relationships. Tukey contrast showed that such differences existed only in casual friendships: dismissing individuals were most satisfied with casual friendships, followed with fearful and secure individuals, then preoccupied individuals.

Consistent with propositions about interpersonal relationship development, the findings of the study underscored the important role of relationship type in communication patterns and relationship satisfaction in online relationships. As people's relationships develop to a higher level, the breadth and depth of interaction increases. It seems once people's online relationships have reached a level of high closeness, people feel comfortable to talk about a wide range of topics and are willing to have in-depth conversation regardless of attachment style differences. Moreover, people with different attachment styles reported similar level of satisfaction with these close relationships. One potential explanation is that within close online relationships, the characteristics of the online setting, such as lack of nonverbal cues and perceived similarity (e.g., members of the same newsgroup), can function as a lev-

eler for different attachment styles. Collins and Feeney[1] have suggested that in certain contexts, attachment systems may be deactivated. For example, dismissing individuals may learn that they can effectively derive comfort and security from relational partners if they do not openly express their attachment needs. It would be of interest to examine how characteristics of CMC along with attachment style affect people's online communication behaviors and relational outcomes.

In sum, the study provides insight regarding how relational needs impact social relationships developed in the electronic setting. The findings also contribute to the growing body of literature on online relationships in general. Future research may build on this study to further explore how attachment style may influence people's general online social behaviors.

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