Exploring similarities and differences between online and offline friendships: The role of attachment style

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Abstract

The present study merges the fields of attachment and friendships and compares these in online and offline environments. Although currently we know a great deal about the importance of friendships and attachments for healthy development, there is no research to guide our understanding of how attachment style and friendship characteristics are evidenced in online contexts. Participants completed surveys to assess attachment style, friendships (online and offline), as well as interactions with friends and friendship quality. The extent to which individuals sought out online friends did not differ as a function of attachment style. Friendship quality differed as function of attachment style, while differences among attachment styles for other friendship characteristics resulted only when context (online versus offline) was simultaneously considered.

1. Introduction

Online social interaction has become a focal point for discussion in today’s society. For example, articles concerning Facebook, MySpace or other online interaction mediums, with titles such as “MySpace can bring shy kids out of their shells” (msnb, 2008), “Yahoo to offer single user profile” (the Globe and Mail, 2008) and “Oxford University fines students with the aid of Facebook” (The Times online, 2008), are commonplace in both online and hardcopy news outlets. Given the surging interest and use of the Internet as a medium for engaging in social interactions, it is surprising how little research is available to explain how social relationships function in online and offline contexts and for whom social interactions are or are not enhanced through online interactions. This is especially true of friendships, even though friends provide one of the most important social relationships throughout development (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Richey & Richey, 1980). Friends can act as role models, supporters, advisors, reference groups, listeners, allies, critics, and companions (Buote et al., 2007; Richey & Richey, 1980; Tokuno, 1986). Friendship relationships provide a context for acceptance, sense of belonging and assistance (Buote et al., 2007; Tokuno, 1986; Weiss, 1974). Given the vast number of opportunities to form friendships in online contexts, it is important to examine whether online friendships differ from traditional offline face-to-face friendships. In addition, the study further examines whether online or offline friendships differentially benefit individuals with different social histories. Specifically, the study compares friendships on and offline for individuals with differing attachment styles.

Attachment theory has been widely studied in past literature (e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Schindler, Thomasius, Sack, Gemeinhardt, & Kuster, 2007; Tanaka et al., 2008). Developed by Bowlby (1969), attachment theory assumes that all individuals are born with behavioural control systems that aid with survival (Bowlby, 1969). Initially, these systems guide infants and children to engage in survival-based behaviours such as those that allow the child to maintain close proximity to the primary caregiver, and to seek food and warmth from their caregiver. These early interactions of the child and caregiver allow the child to develop an internal working model of the world. In turn, these internal working models guide the child’s thoughts, behaviours, and affect, and permit the infant to have a set of expectations of how others will behave and react; essentially, how a relationship functions (Weimer, Kerns, & Oldenburg, 2004). Bowlby (1969) believed that the primary caregiver acted as a “secure base” from which the child could explore their surroundings and return to if they experienced fear, illness or fatigue or if the distance between the self and the caregiver was too large. This conceptualization of a “secure base” that one turns to in time of vulnerability is valuable in making the distinction between an attachment figure, and simply a relationship, whether it be a friend, playmate or peer. While a child seeks their attachment figure in time of need, a child seeks a playmate when he is happy, content and confident that his/her caregiver is in close proximity (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, the difference between an attachment figure and a non-attachment figure is reflected in the desire for the attachment figure when undergoing a difficult time, and the need for proximity.
During adolescence and adult life, shifts in attachment figures typically occur. While the adolescent remains attached to the primary caregiver, he/she typically becomes strongly attached to persons outside the family (Bowlby, 1969). It is believed that the attachment relationship that adolescents and adults have is at least partly a reflection of their attachment (or internal working models) as infants, and that the initial parental attachment style is predictive of attachment in other non-parental relationships throughout the lifespan, such as romantic relationships and friendships (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Zimmerman, 2004). As such, the manner in which adolescents interact with this new attachment figure should mirror childhood behaviors (Bowlby, 1969). Just as young children will possess relationships that are not specifically attachment relationships, adolescents will have attachment relationships and non-attachment relationships. Attachment relationships would be somewhat parallel to early childhood attachment relationships, in that in time of need, or when undergoing a crisis or difficult time, the adolescent would seek out their attachment figure, perhaps a best or close friend. Non-attachment figures, perhaps more superficial friendships, might be sought out when one wants to have fun, is happy, and has no immediate concerns or fears.

Attachment style can be organized into four categories (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) based on two dimensions (See Fig. 1). The first dimension provides a model of the self, in which the self is viewed either positively or negatively. A positive view of self is reflected in a sense of worthiness of love and support whereas a negative view sees oneself as not meriting love and support from others. The second dimension of self presents a model of others, wherein others are perceived either positively or negatively. A positive view of others is manifested in the belief that others are trustworthy, available and accepting, while a negative view of others leads to the belief that others are unreliable and rejecting. Together, this model results in four attachment styles—one Secure style and three Insecure styles (i.e., Preoccupied, Dismissing and Fearful). An individual characterized as having a Secure attachment style has a positive view of themselves and of others, and therefore, feels worthy of others’ love and support, views others as responsive and accepting and is comfortable with intimacy and closeness. An individual having a Preoccupied attachment style has a negative view of themselves but a positive view of others, which leads to a sense of personal unworthiness with respect to love and support, but a sense that others are responsive and accepting. As a result, this individual strongly depends on others’ acceptance to feel positively about him/herself. To achieve self-acceptance, this individual would try to gain the acceptance of others and this would most probably be evidenced through seeking excessive closeness. A Fearful attachment style is distinguished by both a negative view of the self and a negative view of others. This style is similar to the preoccupied attachment style in feelings of unworthiness of love and support, however the fearful attachment style also leads to the belief that others are rejecting and untrustworthy. As a result, a fearful individual avoids relationships with the goal of protecting the self, as s/he typically feels s/he will eventually be disappointed by the relationship. The Dismissing attachment style is characterized by a positive view of the self and a negative view of others, leading this individual to dismiss the importance of relationships and try to remain independent (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994).

Some past research has been conducted on the association between attachment style and traditional face-to-face friendships. Overall, individuals with a secure attachment style seem to fare best. They report greater companionship (Saferstein, Neimeyer, & Hagens, 2005), cooperation (Schulman, Ellicker, & Sroufe, 1994), intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), emotional closeness (Zimmerman, 2004) and friendship quality (Liebermann, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999), and lower conflict (Liebermann et al., 1999) than insecurely attached individuals. In addition, secure individuals are typically socially competent (Schulman et al., 1994) and have good conflict resolution skills (Liebermann et al., 1999). Among individuals with insecure attachments, those with a preoccupied attachment style report similar levels of companionship to secure individuals (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005) have highly intimate friendships, display emotional expressivity and rely on others, which likely reflects their strong desire to validate themselves through excessively close relationships (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). This is also evident in much higher levels of self-disclosure than those with secure styles (Mikulincer & Nachson, 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005). Interestingly however, preoccupied participants report less satisfaction with their relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, 1994). Dismissing and fearful styles, on the other hand, experience very different relationships with their friends. Specifically, they experience lower levels of companionship (Saferstein et al., 2005). In addition they report challenges with self-disclosure and intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Nachson, 1991) while experiencing higher levels of friendship conflict (Saferstein et al., 2005). Further, individuals with dismissing styles demonstrate lower levels of emotional expressivity, care-giving and reliance on others than those with secure attachments (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). These findings with “face-to-face”/“offline” friendship underscore the important contribution of attachment style to friendship relationships. The current study explores whether these findings transfer to an “online” context.

Online social exchanges occur through many diverse outlets, including, blogs, chat rooms, emails, networking, gaming, personal profile sites (e.g., Facebook). Indeed, research indicates that one of the predominant uses of the Internet is for interpersonal communication (Gross, 2004; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). In addition, those who use the Internet for chatting and social exchange purposes are among those who use the Internet most heavily (Dryburgh, 2001; NetValue, 2002, as cited in Brignall & Valey, 2005). Among adolescents and young adults, many report developing both close and casual friendships online (14% and 25%, respectively; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002).

Preliminary investigations of these “new” types of friendships yield contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, consistent with displacement theory, online friendships are depicted as “weaker” relationships (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001) as evidenced through less interdependence, understanding, commitment and self-disclosure, as well as less convergence of social networks and less discussion, with exchanges being limited to a smaller variety of topics (Chan & Cheng, 2004; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Scott, Mottarella, & Lavooy, 2006). In strong contrast to these findings, other researchers endorse online friendships as an alternate venue for experiencing positive, beneficial relationships that are meaningful, close and long lasting (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Given the vast body of research that documents the impact of underlying constructs such as attachment for relationships in gen-

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**Fig. 1.** Bartholomew and Horowitz’ adult attachment model.
eral, and the growing body of work that indicates the important role of attachment style in traditional “face-to-face”/“offline” friendships, it is critical to examine whether attachment style impacts in these new online friendship contexts. The many opportunities to communicate in an asynchronous and anonymous nature while using the Internet may provide an opportunity for some individuals to differentially affect friendships as a function of attachment style. For example, less socially skilled individuals may be able to utilize asynchrony as an opportunity for reflection, planning, and as a result may be able to present themselves more effectively. Alternatively, the absence of immediate feedback (both verbally and behaviourally) may be detrimental to relationship building. Attachment style provides a framework for predicting who may or may not benefit from the unique characteristics of online exchanges. For example, Insecure individuals, who typically have less friendship experience, might benefit from the many opportunities to practice initiating friendships without the tremendous costs associated with face-to-face relationships. In addition, they can practice initiating interactions through many diverse venues (e.g., blogs, personal profiles, and games). However, it is also possible that the virtual environment could further limit successful friendship formation for individuals with insecure attachment styles. Specifically, using the Internet to interact prohibits some very important social information such as gestures, facial expressions, proximity which may be critical for both participants to interpret the importance of what is being said and the reaction to what has been said (e.g., Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Although Internet communications afford some socio-emotional communication both through the text and emoticons (Baron, 2008), these sources of information are not as robust and prevalent as it is available in face-to-face interaction. The absence of these key elements of interaction might be particularly problematic for individuals who may need more support in their relationships. Examination of the specific attachment styles will permit greater understanding of how online and offline contexts differ and for whom online versus offline contexts impact the most.

In summary, this study explored three questions. The first question examined the prevalence of online and offline friendships in the lives of late adolescents. The second question investigated how often adolescents use online venues to initiate friendships. The third question explored the role of attachment style in understanding adolescents’ evaluations of their online and offline friendships. Consistent with past research key positive and negative characteristics of friendship were examined; quality, intimacy, self-disclosure, satisfaction and conflict resolution (e.g., Akins, Bierman, & Parker, 2005; Hays, 1984; Richey & Richey, 1980;Tokuno, 1986; Weiss, 1974).

1.1. Design

The present quasi-experimental design uses attachment style as the independent variable. The dependent variables include friendship quantity, online friendship seeking, online and offline friendship quality, intimacy, self-disclosure, satisfaction and conflict resolution.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 141 participants (46 males, 88 females, 7 failed to respond) were recruited from a participant pool at a mid-sized Canadian university. The mean age of participants was 19.14 years (SD = 1.94). Participants self-reported ethnic descent was follows: 35.32% European, 12.77% Asian, 3.42% Indo, 21. 99% “other” and 6.16% of participants did not indicate ethnicity. Participants received course credit for participating. All participants were treated in accordance with APA ethical guidelines.

Participants were grouped according to attachment style based on their response to the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In total, 47 participants (33.33%) were categorized as having a secure attachment style, 29 participants (20.56%) had a dismissing attachment style, 25 (17.73%) participants had a preoccupied style, and 40 (28.37%) participants were categorized as exhibiting a fearful attachment style. The number of males and females and ages in each of the 4 attachment style groups was as follows: Secure (16 males, 26 females, 5 unidentified; Mages = 19.33 (SD = 2.52)), Dismissing (12 males, 16 females, 1 unidentified; Mages = 18.86 (SD = 1.77)), Preoccupied (10 males, 14 females, 1 unidentified; Mages = 18.84 (SD = 1.62)) and Fearful (8 males, 32 females; Mages = 19.33 (SD = 1.87)). A ONEWAY ANOVA resulted in no significant differences in age as a function of attachment style, F(3,131) = .65, p = .60.

Given the focus on technology in this study, three ONEWAY OVAs were used to test for possible differences among the four attachment styles for (1) computer comfort, (2) time spent online completing school work and (3) time spent online for entertainment purposes as a function of attachment style. Results were non-significant, largest F, F(3,134) = .74, p = .53, indicating similar levels of comfort and time spent online for all attachment styles.

2.2. Measures

Participants completed 8 measures over two sessions. In the first session, participants completed only the attachment measure. All other measures (demographic and friendship-related measures) were completed in a second session. The attachment, demographic, and friendship measures were completed in hard copy form and all other measures were completed online.

2.2.1. Attachment style

Attachment style was assessed by Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) Relationship Questionnaire measure, which is designed to gauge general attachment style by using participants’ perception of how they behave and feel in relationships. This measure consists of four paragraphs, each describing one of the four attachment styles. Participants read each paragraph and rated, on a 7-pt scale (1 = very similar to me, 7 = not at all similar to me), the extent to which the content in each paragraph reflected themselves. An example of this scale is “It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t worry about being alone or having others not accept me.” (secure attachment).

2.3. Demographics and friendship information

Participants completed a survey. Initial questions asked participants to identify their age, gender, and ethnicity. This was followed by 3 measures regarding friendships in general and online friendships in particular, and 1 measure assessing computer comfort.

2.3.1. Friendship quantity and type

Participants indicated the total number of friendships they had and, out of those friendships, how many were online friendships and how many were offline friends.
2.3.2. Friendship seeking

Online friendship seeking was assessed through two questions: In the past, how often have you tried to meet new people online (through such things as MSN, chat rooms, online games, groups, Facebook, etc.)? and Currently, how often have you tried to meet new people online (through such things as MSN, chat rooms, online games, groups, Facebook, etc.)? Participants used a 7-pt Likert-type scale for both questions with anchors being 1 (never) to 7 (always).

2.3.3. Friend nomination

Participants were asked to nominate their closest (a) online and (b) offline friend. In order to ensure consistency in the definitions of online and offline friendships, participants were given the following definitions at the outset of the questionnaire.

When we talk about an online friendship we mean one where you first met your friend online (through such things as msn, chat rooms, online games, groups, Facebook, etc.) and you use the internet to interact with your friend. When we talk about an offline friend we mean one in which you met and now interact with your friend almost all of the time on a face-to-face level.

Participants indicated the gender and age for each of these friends. Participants were asked to identify, “How emotionally close do you feel to this person?”

For the closeness questions, a Likert-type scale ranging from Not close at all (1) and Extremely Close (7) was used.

2.3.4. Computer comfort

Participants completed a 3-item computer comfort scale (Wood, Mueller, Willoughby, Specht, & Deyoung, 2005) using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1–5, with higher scores indicating less comfort. An item from this scale is “In general, how at ease do you feel about using computers”. Cronbach’s alpha was .95.

Each of the following questionnaires were completed twice; once in reference to their online friend and once in reference to their offline friend. The ordering of the questionnaire was counter-balanced across participants.

2.3.5. Friendship quality

Friendship quality was assessed by the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Friend’s Functions (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). This questionnaire is comprised of 30 items and measures the degree to which six friendship functions (stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation and emotional security) are fulfilled by a particular friend. Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on an 8-pt Likert-type scale for both questions with anchors being 1 (not at all) to 8 (fully and completely). An example from this scale is “My worst fears”. Cronbach alphas were .91 and .92 for the offline and online versions, respectively.

2.3.8. Friendship satisfaction

Friendship satisfaction was measured by the satisfaction subscale of the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent’s Affection (MFQ-RA; Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Participants completed this 7-item subscale in reference to one person. Participants identified their level of agreement with each of the 7 items using a 9-pt scale ranging from −4 (very much disagree) to +4 (very much agree) (which were then recoded as 1–9). An item from this scale is “pleased with my friendship with”. Cronbach alphas were .97 and .98 for the offline and online version.

2.3.9. Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution style was assessed by the Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI, Kurdek, 1994). This 16-item questionnaires asks participants to rate the extent to which they engage in a specific conflict resolution behaviour within a particular relationship on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The scale reflects four conflict resolution styles, which include (1) positive problem solving (characterized by compromise and negotiation; “Focusing on the problem at hand”) (2) conflict engagement (losing control and verbally attacking the other person; “Launching personal attacks”) (3) withdrawal (tuning out the other person and refusing to discuss the issue; “Remaining silent for long periods of time”) and (4) compliance (giving in and not defending oneself; “Not be willing to stick up for myself”). Reliability using Cronbach alphas was .79 for the offline and .83 for the online version.

2.4. Procedure

There were two phases to this study. The first phase involved collecting attachment style data. These data were collected in the participants’ classrooms. The Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) Relationship Questionnaire was projected via Powerpoint. Participants indicated their responses using electronic scanning forms.

Participants completed the second phase in a computer laboratory. The three sections of the computer survey were counterbalanced.

3. Results

Two sets of analyses were conducted. The first set of analyses focused on the presence of friends and online friendship seeking behaviour as a function of attachment style. The second set of analyses examined the relationship of attachment style and friendship characteristics.1

3.1. Examination of number of friends and likelihood of seeking online friends

A 2 (online versus offline friend) × 4 (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVA was computed to determine whether the number of friends differed as a function of the source of friendship and attachment style.2 Participants reported more offline friends (M = 11.29, SD = 1.70) than online friends (M = 2.9, SD = 1.70)

1 Covariates were reported for all analyses that yielded significant outcomes. In each case, the covariates were significant.

2 Test for the number of friends were significant (F(3,133) = 5.67, p < .001 and F(3,133) = 4.93, p < .003 for online and offline respectively. The variation in the number of friends identified may reflect differences in individuals’ understanding of what constitutes friendship.
friendships, \( F(1,133) = 25.82, p = <.001 \). The number of overall friendships differed as a function of attachment style, \( F(3,133) = 2.70, p = .05 \). Post hoc comparisons indicated that the Secure participants reported more friends (\( M = 9.83, SD = 1.76 \)) than the Preoccupied (\( M = 4.94, SD = 2.33 \)) and Fearful participants (\( M = 4.56, SD = 1.86 \)). The interaction was not significant, \( F(3,133) = 1.88, p = .14 \).

Two analyses were conducted to examine the likelihood of seeking out online friendships. One analysis looked at current behaviour and the other at past behaviour. The two ONeway ANOVAs (current, past) were non-significant, largest \( F(3,128) = 1.90, p = .13 \).

In summary, participants with secure attachment styles have more friends than those with fearful or preoccupied attachments and most friends that were reported were offline friendships. However, the extent to which participants sought friendships online (presently and in the past) did not differ by attachment style.

3.2. Friendship characteristics as a function of attachment style

Five friendship characteristics were examined (friendship quality, intimacy, self-disclosure, satisfaction, and conflict resolution). In each of these analyses, a 2 (friendship type) \( \times 4 \) (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVA was computed with friendship serving as the within subjects variable and attachment style as the between subjects variable. In addition, closeness of both the online and offline friendship were included as covariates, as this variable could potentially impact on other friendship related variables. Closeness of the online friendship and offline friendships were included as separate variables, in order to assess their unique contributions, as they were not significantly correlated, \( r(74) = -.058, p = .62 \).

3.2.1. Friendship quality

The 2 (friendship type) \( \times 4 \) (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVA yielded no significant main effect of friendship type, \( F(1,65) = 1.81, p = .18 \). However, the main effect for attachment style was significant, \( F(3,65) = 2.69, p = .05 \). Specifically, post hoc comparisons indicated that participants with a fearful attachment style (\( M = 5.90, SD = 1.38 \)) reported higher friendship quality ratings than those with a preoccupied attachment (\( M = 5.09, SD = 2.04 \)) (for remaining means see Table 1).

3.2.2. Intimacy

The 2 (friendship type) \( \times 4 \) (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVA assessing friendship intimacy yielded no significant main effects or interactions, largest \( F(3,66) = 1.32, p = .28 \) (for attachment style).

3.2.3. Self-disclosure

The 2 (friendship type) \( \times 4 \) (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVA examining self-disclosure yielded no significant main effect for either friendship type or attachment style, largest \( F(1,66) = .56, p = .46 \). However, a significant interaction emerged, \( F(3,66) = 2.67, p = .05 \) (See Fig. 2). To examine the interaction, four paired \( t \)-tests were computed (one test per attachment style) to determine if differences existed between online and offline friendship self-disclosure. Results indicated that for Secure, Dismissing and Preoccupied groups, there was significantly more self-disclosure with offline friends than online friends, smallest \( t(15) = 2.25, p = .02 \) (See Table 1 for means). For the Fearful group, however, there was no significant difference in the level of self-disclosure within the online and offline friendships. In addition, post hoc comparisons were computed to examine attachment style as a function of self-disclosure separately for online friendships and offline friendships. Results of the post hoc comparisons for offline friends yielded no significant comparisons. In contrast, significant post hoc comparisons for online friendships indicated that Fearful participants reported self-disclosure more so than the Secure participants.

3.2.4. Satisfaction

The 2 (friendship type) \( \times 4 \) (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVA assessing friendship satisfaction yielded no significant main effects for either friendship type or attachment style, largest \( F(1,66) = 1.16, p = .29 \). However, the interaction was significant, \( F(3,66) = 2.93, p = .04 \) (See Fig. 3). To examine whether online and offline friendship satisfaction differed within each attachment style, four paired \( t \)-tests were computed. Results indicated that Secure, Dismissing and Fearful participants reported significantly greater satisfaction with their offline than online friendships, smallest \( t(15) = 2.50, p = .02 \). Preoccupied participants’ satisfaction with their offline and online friendships did not differ significantly, \( t(10) = 1.38, p = .20 \) (see Table 1 for means).

3.2.5. Conflict resolution

To investigate the use of each of the four types of conflict resolution strategies within the friendship, 4 separate 2 (friendship type) \( \times 4 \) (attachment style) repeated measures ANOVAs were computed. All analyses resulted in non-significant main effects and interactions, largest \( F(1,66) = 2.12, p = .10 \).

4. Discussion

Youth today clearly use both online and offline outlets as a source for friendships. Interestingly, overall, more friendships continue to be forged and maintained in offline contexts. This overall finding may be a function of developmental level such that these youths would have spent more of their time in close contact with others and would, at this point in development, have had fewer opportunities to forge online friends. However, it appears to be the case that attachment style might yield fundamental differences in what online and offline friendships can offer.

Although extant literature regarding social interaction and attachment style would suggest that attachment style would play a critical role in an individual’s assessment of their friendships (e.g., Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005), the present study suggested that attachment style alone provides a fairly limited impact on friendship assessment. What is clear, however, is that when attachment style does play a critical role in friendship assessment, it is when the context of the friendship is examined. Specifically, in a number of cases, attachment style impacts friendship differently when individuals relate to online or offline contexts.

With respect to friendship quality, the only two groups to differ significantly were the participants with a fearful and the preoccupied attachment style—both groups who typically hold a negative view of themselves in terms of worthiness for close relationships. Perhaps the more interesting finding is the lower quality of friendships reported by participants with a preoccupied style. Recalling that all groups nominated a friend, this group was the only one to be identified as experiencing lower quality relative to any other group. Given that Fearful participants typically have low levels of companionship, self-disclosure and intimacy (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005), which likely results in less experience with relationships, and friendships in particular, it is possible that by asking participants to choose a friend as a referent, the participants with a fearful style are overestimating the quality of that friendship.

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4 Levene’s Tests of Equality variance were conducted for each measure with no significant findings for the measures regarding friendship characteristics (i.e., quality intimacy, self-disclosure, satisfaction and conflict resolution).
Thus, with fewer examples to compare the nominated friendship to, and having overcome the challenges in trusting others with the nominated friend, the friendship may seem higher in quality than it would be rated by others. Notably, visual inspection of the means suggests that the high friendship quality reported by participants with a fearful attachment style may be a reflection of higher perceived quality for online than offline contexts.

Secure, Dismissing and Preoccupied participants discriminated between offline and online friendships and engaged in more self-disclosure with their offline friends. Fearful participants self-disclosed to a similar extent with both friendships, which resulted...
in more self-disclosure with online friends than was engaged in by those with other attachment styles. These findings suggest that while individuals with a secure, dismissing and preoccupied attachment style exhibit more caution, and limit the information they reveal to online friends, individuals with a fearful attachment are less vigilant and are apt to disclose more personal information. While this might be perceived to be problematic, it is also possible that an online friendship is beneficial and advantageous for individuals with a fearful attachment. Again, given the negative view of others held by those with a fearful attachment style, asynchronous opportunities available through the Internet may allow these individuals the opportunity to reflect on their partner’s comments, and to plan and reconsider their statements and the statements of others. Therefore, this type of communication might allow them to feel more secure in their interactions, resulting in greater self-disclosure, and possibly facilitating friendship development. Given that past findings seem to be contradictory in terms of which style discloses more, with some studies finding that secure individuals disclose more information (e.g., Grabbill & Kerns, 2000; Pistle, 1993) and others indicating that insecure participants self-disclose more (Mikulincer & Nachshon 1991; Saferstein et al., 2005), these results are consistent with a portion of past findings.

Notably, while all other attachment styles discriminated between offline and online friendships in their reports of satisfaction, and reported greater satisfaction with offline friends, the Preoccupied style did not make this distinction. Individuals with a Preoccupied style typically report lower levels of satisfaction with most types of face-to-face relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, 1994), as they feel they are not benefitting from the relationships and/or not receiving back what they put into the relationships in return. Lower satisfaction ratings may also be reflective of an inaccurate perception of the relationship, although in our findings, participants with a preoccupied attachment did report lower friendship quality, which would be consistent with lower satisfaction ratings. Therefore, given that those with a Preoccupied style typically feel lower levels of satisfaction with most face-to-face relationships, an online friendship would not be expected to be reported as highly satisfactory, which is consistent with minimal past research indicating that participants with a preoccupied style were less satisfied with their online friendships (Jiali, 2007).

Past research indicates that securely attached individuals typically reported greater friendship intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991) than those with an insecure attachment. Similarly, individuals with a secure attachment style have been found to have good conflict resolution skills relative to those with an insecure attachment (Liebemann et al., 1999) setting up the expectation that differences might occur. In both cases our outcomes did not support our expectations. Perhaps this is a function of the categorization of individuals. In the previous work, categories of attachment were defined as secure versus insecure. Our more fine grained classification system might remove small trends. Alternatively, evaluation of friendships might be skewed or inflated within particular attachment styles (i.e., Fearful and Preoccupied (Mikulincer, Orbach, & Lavnieli, 1998). Given that little research has directly compared the four attachment styles, with some contrasting the larger grouping of secure versus insecure attachments, it is important that we investigate the more subtle differences within each of the attachment styles.

On the whole, our findings suggest that there are differences between online and offline friendships and that these differences are experienced differently as a function of attachment style. Friendships were equally high in quality, intimacy and self-disclosure (evidenced by the non-significant main effects of friendship type), providing convergent evidence that online friendships present a positive and beneficial alternative to offline friendships. Past literature would suggest that offline friendships result in higher levels of self-disclosure, understanding, commitment (Chan & Cheng, 2004; Scott et al., 2006), cooperation (Schulman et al., 1994) and intimacy (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), but this is not uniform for all individuals, only for some.

In this study, attachment style predicted friendship characteristics when the friendship context was taken into account. In particular, individuals with fearful and preoccupied attachment styles experienced friendships differently, and more negatively, than their peers for contexts where they meet face-to-face with their friends. These findings are concerning but consistent with previous literature suggesting that these groups may require additional practice, and aid in friendship development. One thing our findings suggest is that online sources may provide a starting point to navigate friendships. Initiating an online friendship might seem less risky and easier to initiate, as there less to less cost associated with this type of friendship. Furthermore, the potential for asynchronous and anonymous Internet interactions allows the opportunity for self-presentation strategies and reflection and thought before engaging in online conversation. Similarly, newer developments in Internet communication (i.e., using emoticons, informal communications, typed emotional statements, plays on language; Baron, 2008; Danet & Herring, 2003; Nishimaru, 2003) may provide alternative ways for less socially skilled individuals to express themselves. The findings of our exploratory study set out the challenges for future research. Specifically, if we are to understand how online contexts can be a potential source for facilitating difficult social relationships especially for individuals who traditionally experience challenges in relationship building, we need to determine which online features in particular are most supportive, how long it takes for any benefits to be realized and whether any benefits would transfer to offline contexts.

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