



Too close for comfort: Attachment insecurity and electronic intrusion in college students' dating relationships



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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important context for dating relationships among young adults. This study sought to explore how the ubiquitous and public nature of social media may interact with college students' individual characteristics to contribute to intrusiveness and invasion of privacy in dating relationships. A survey of 307 college students asked participants about their adult romantic attachment style and engagement in "electronic intrusion" (EI). EI included looking at a dating partner's private electronic information without permission, monitoring a partner's whereabouts using social media, and monitoring who a partner talks to or is friends with on social media. There were no gender differences in frequency of perpetrating EI. Results showed that level of attachment anxiety was positively associated with EI for women and men, and level of avoidance was negatively associated with EI for women. Results suggest that attachment style influences intrusive electronic dating behaviors, and social media may increase risk for anxiously attached college students to engage in EI for anxiety relief.

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1. Introduction

The pervasive daily use of the Internet and cell phones has made social media an important relational context for youth and young adults (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). Social media use among college students in particular is widespread, as a recent study of 437 college students found that 88% of women and 83.4% of men text messaged daily, 73.2% of women and 61.6% of men visited "personal profile sites" every day, and 30.1% of women and 37.2% of males engaged in daily instant messaging (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011). A diary study of 92 college students found that students were using Facebook for about 30 minutes a day, mostly posting content to a wide audience (e.g., updating their Facebook "status"), but more often observing content rather than creating it (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

Whereas intimacy in close relationships was previously developed primarily through face-to-face communication, social media are now a significant space for relationship initiation, maintenance, and negotiation. This study explores the intersection of college students' developmental context and social media use by examining how the psychological factors that college students might bring

to a relationship influence their electronic dating behaviors. Specifically, are levels of romantic relationship attachment anxiety or avoidance associated with likelihood to use social media to intrude into a dating partner's privacy and monitor their behaviors?

1.1. Social media and dating relationships

Social media play an important role in college students' dating interactions and communication. Young people use social media, especially social networking sites, to express romantic feelings for their partner, communicate with partners, and announce things to the public about their relationship (Pascoe, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Social media communication among dating partners differs from face-to-face communication because it moves previously private dating interactions into public spaces, gives dating partners constant access to one another, provides the ability to monitor their partner's activities, and spread information instantly to entire social networks (Draucker & Martsof, 2010; Melander, 2010).

Social media have had both positive and negative influences on dating relationships, depending on how and with whom one is communicating. Research has shown that the use of cell phones and texting was positively associated with relationship satisfaction and intimacy (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman,

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2013), and that texting helps adolescents feel close to their social networks and romantic partners (Pettigrew, 2009). Instant messaging was also found to be negatively associated with loneliness (van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008). However, a study of 308 college students found that Facebook uniquely contributed to jealousy in romantic relationships (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009) and mobile phones were found to be a particular source of conflict for some young couples as they try to navigate being “perpetually connected” by their phones and managing communication rules and boundaries (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011).

1.2. The role of gender in social media use

Although both young women and men are charged with navigating digital boundaries in dating relationships, there is preliminary evidence that women and men experience the digital social world differently (e.g., Muscanell, Guadagno, Rice, & Murphy, 2013; Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013). Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) found that motivations for using social media differ by sex; women tend to use these technologies to maintain social relationships, whereas men often use social media to build new relationships and for career purposes. Studies suggest that women are using social media more frequently than men (e.g., Kimbrough et al., 2013).

Research also indicates that women may experience more jealousy and distress from relationship issues on social media. In an experimental study with 266 college students, women reported more jealousy than men when hypothetically imagining viewing pictures of their partner with another person on social media (Muscanell et al., 2013). Another study found that although men spent more time than women looking at their partner's Facebook profiles than women, women reported higher levels of Facebook use and Facebook jealousy (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013). This gendered experience may be relevant to understanding how individual characteristics influence digital communication in relationships.

1.3. Electronic intrusion in dating relationships

The ease and pervasiveness of sharing and searching for personal information via social media, coupled with the growing social expectation of immediate and constant communication, contribute to a blurring of digital boundaries between dating partners that may put college students at risk for involvement in several types of problematic digital dating behaviors (Bennett et al., 2011; Melander, 2010; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, in press; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). These behaviors, which have been called “digital dating abuse” and “electronic victimization,” can include monitoring someone's activities and whereabouts, controlling who they talk to and are friends with, name-calling, threats and hostility, spreading embarrassing and sexual photos with others, and pressuring for sexual behavior (Bennett et al., 2011; Reed et al., in press). Our previous study found that among a sample of 365 college students, 68.8% reported at least one digital dating abuse victimization behavior in the past year, and 62.6% reported one or more perpetration behavior in the past year (Reed et al., in press). For a comprehensive review of the emerging literature on the role of social media in dating violence among adolescents and young adults, see Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, and Price (2014).

The most common form of these behaviors are what we term “electronic intrusion” (EI), or the use of social media to intrude into the privacy of a dating partner and monitor their whereabouts and activities (Bennett et al., 2011; Reed et al., in press). One third of college students have reported being stalked through the

Internet (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002) and 73.5% of a college student sample experienced “electronic intrusiveness” in the past year from a dating partner (Bennett et al., 2011). In a survey study of 306 college students, Reed et al. (in press) found that EI was common: 37.2% of participants monitored a partner's whereabouts and activities, 36.7% monitored who a dating partner talk to and is friends with, and 42.8% looked at a dating partner's private digital information using social media.

While frequent messages and social media monitoring may be welcomed and “normative” behavior for some dating partners, a mismatch of desires for electronic boundaries or monitoring may make one or both partners feel uncomfortable or controlled. Such boundary violations may be part of a constellation of electronic dating behaviors that exert power and control over a dating partner. For some young adults, these intrusive behaviors may be driven by what Muise et al. (2009) discussed as a “feedback loop” of Facebook jealousy that occurs among college students. In this loop, spending time on Facebook increases anxiety about a dating relationship which then leads to more time on Facebook searching for additional information. In this study, we sought to extend these findings to multiple social media platforms, and to investigate whether the likelihood of experiencing this loop and engaging in EI behaviors varies by psychological factors.

The experience of EI may also be influenced by gender. One study found that men reported more electronic intrusiveness from their dating partners in the past year than women (Bennett et al., 2011). As previously discussed, thinking about relationship issues or infidelity on social media has been found to evoke greater jealousy and emotional distress from women than men (Muscanell et al., 2013). If women are experiencing more emotional distress from digital interactions with dating partners, monitoring and “checking up” on a partner could be a means of reassurance or response to this distress. Additionally, Bennett et al. (2011) found that men reported electronic intrusiveness to be the least distressing type of electronic victimization in dating relationships. Therefore, women report perpetrating more electronic intrusion than men, but also find victimization of these behaviors more distressing than men. The current study will address how romantic attachment style might affect the likelihood for women and men to engage in EI in their dating relationships.

1.4. Romantic attachment style and dating relationships

Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding the development of relational patterns across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969). Based on the qualities of the caregiver-infant relationship, distinct attachment classifications emerge that shape the infant's expectations of close relationships (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Infants categorized as securely attached are thought to have experienced sensitive and responsive caregiving, and learn to expect that their caregivers will comfort them in times of distress. In contrast, insecurely attached infants are raised by inconsistent or unavailable caregivers, and discover that they are unable to rely on their caregivers for comfort (Johnson et al., 2010). These infants develop dysfunctional regulation schemas in an attempt to reduce their anxiety, resulting in anxious or avoidant attachments (Izard & Kobak, 1991).

These varying experiences with primary caregivers during infancy lead to the creation of internal working models, which become the way in which an individual cognitively interprets intimacy throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1979, 1980). The internal working model provides a bridge from the relational patterns experienced in infancy to comparable expectations and behaviors present in adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In adulthood, individuals with insecure attachment patterns re-enact their experience of feeling unloved and undervalued with their

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