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## So why have you added me? Adolescent girls' technology-mediated attachments and relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Technology plays an almost ubiquitous role in contemporary British society. Despite this, we do not have a well-theorised understanding of the ways adolescent girls use digital devices in the context of their developing secure relationships with their families and friends. This study aims to address this gap in understanding. Fifteen young women based in the Midlands and from across the socio-economic spectrum participated between 2012 and 2013. Participants completed three research tools exploring technology-mediated attachment and relationships, and participated in a face-to-face interview. The findings suggest that it is possible for girls to develop attachments with others through, and with, technology; technology use brings people together and mediates relationships in a range of ways encapsulated by attachment functions. The study highlights the ongoing importance of parental and peer relationships by suggesting that technology can act as a means by which the positive and negative attributes of existing relationships can be amplified.

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## 1. Introduction

Technology is deeply embedded in the lives of most adolescent girls in contemporary British society (EU Kids Online, 2014). Whether as a result of increased internet access, user-generated content and the popularity of social networking sites (SNS), or ease of access to information and entertainment, the trend has been examined in a number of ways. Adams and colleagues have focused on the technology-mediated educational needs of adolescents (2013). Goswami (2008) has focused on the relationship between child development and technological experience. Amichai-Hamburger (2002) has focused on social networking and personality, and his work has been extended by Zoppos (2010), Oldmeadow, Quinn & Kowert (2013) into exploring loneliness, introversion/extroversion and adult attachment online. These latter groups have shone a light on the characteristics of technology-enabled communication and human interactions.

These studies all improve our understanding of our relationships with technology and with one another. These are not trivial; the apparent ubiquity of technology and resultant implications have been the source of moral panic within the media, in homes, schools and public policy. The study reported here aims to bring a

framework to that debate in the context of technology use and relationships made, lost, re-made and evolved by adolescent young women.

Building on a pilot study (Levine & Edwards, 2014), it reflects on these relationships through the lens of attachment theory. Attachment theory offers a meaningful way to reflect on these relationships because we see that our technology-mediated lives are not 'worlds apart' from adult-oriented lives. Rather, while technology does offer distinctive constraints and promoters, our technology-mediated relationships draw on well-understood, familiar themes of relationship models that can be applied across online and offline worlds. These provide research, practice, families and young women with both language and space to reflect on these relationships in rational ways.

The study reported in this paper therefore aims to respond to the question 'What can we understand about technology-mediated relationships in light of attachment theory?' Within this sub-questions focus on technology-mediation of family relationships and friendships, and two potentially key mediating factors of age and socio-economic circumstance. Carried out as one strand of an ESRC-funded PhD project, the study is novel in two ways:

- the frameworks of attachment theory, the sociology of adolescence and the study of digital media have not previously been brought together

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- new tools have been developed for exploring a range of socio-cognitive characteristics in the context of adolescent technology use, and established tools have been adapted for use in this setting.

The study focuses on adolescent girls (rather than adolescents of both sexes) for two reasons. Firstly, the endocrinological (Sisk & Zehr, 2005) and neuroscientific (Blakemore, 2012) evidence is clear that boys and girls experience puberty in distinctive and different ways. These differences manifest in psychological and behavioural contexts (e.g. Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Keijsers, Branje, Frijns, Finkenauer, & Meeus, 2010). Secondly, methodological challenges make robust comparison of technology use across genders in adolescence difficult, for example in the gaming literature (Hayes, 2013).

## 2. Attachment and relationships

Attachment theory can provide a framework in which to analyse young people's online and offline interactions and relationships with the parents and friends close to them (Levine & Edwards, 2014).

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth pioneered attachment research during the last century, providing the conceptual and methodological foundation upon which contemporary theorists link relationships and emotional development (Bowlby, 1973; Goldberg, 2000). Ainsworth's research into attachment theory focused on young children, and led to the identification of the systematic patterns of behaviour (Ainsworth, 1969) of 'secure', 'avoidant' and 'resistant/ambivalent', and subsequently, 'disorganized'. In research with older children and young people, these patterns are also called 'balanced', 'limiting', 'preoccupied' and 'disorganized' respectively (Goldberg, 2000).

Bowlby argued that healthy relationships with a small number of trusted individuals are key to an individual's mental health (Bowlby, 1973). While initial research focused on mother-child relationships as the 'secure base', attachment researchers have since broadened into investigating other relationships, particularly in exploring attachment with older children. Some relationships can be described as 'attachment bonds' (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Attachment bonds occur when an individual has a relationship with another who is seen to be a source of security. These are not always the same as 'affectional bonds' although there may be overlaps between them within the attachment context. An attachment bond includes all of the facets of an affectional bond, but also exists in relationships where an individual looks for safety and calm. Attachment behaviours do not always imply an attachment bond; causal relationships are difficult to demonstrate (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Attachment behaviours are 'situational', and attachment bonds are 'consistent over time' (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008, p.13.), regardless of the situation or circumstance.

Attachment theory also provides a framework in which to identify and analyse the ways in which relationships are represented in other life contexts (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). Bowlby called this representation our 'inner working models' (IWMs) of relationships (1973). IWMs can be thought of as the representational frameworks in which we can conceptualize our interactions with others, based on our previous interactions. Their key function is to 'anticipate', 'interpret' and 'guide' interactions with others (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008, p.103), whether parental or otherwise.

### 2.1. Attachment and adolescence

In adolescence, the attachment focus shifts away from

categorizing or dichotomizing attachment organization types and relationships, and towards the functions of attachment (Allen, 2008) such as trust/respect, unhappiness on separation, proximity-seeking and exploration from the secure base (Ainsworth, 1989).

Allen characterizes a number of adolescent attachment 'developmental transformations'. The changing relationship with the parent features heavily in these, as the young person transitions from a concern with the proximity of the attachment figure, to availability (Booth-Laforce et al., 2006), to growing independence and developing attachments outside the parent/carer relationship. Although we see an increase in peer attachment throughout the adolescent years, parental relationships continue to be important.

The importance of peer relationships for adolescents cannot be underestimated (although 2014 work by Herres and Kobak amongst others has found that attachments with parents continue to be important throughout adolescence) and are associated with a number of positive and negative societal outcomes (Boykin McElhaney, Immele, Smith, & Allen, 2006). Boykin McElhaney et al. suggest that teenagers' attachment types - in particular, types of insecurity - are linked to the ability to externalize, and whether or not the young person is engaged in delinquent activity. There is a small amount of research exploring technology and attachment (for example Amichai-Hamburger, 2002 on intergroup interactions online; Lee, 2013 on attachment style on social networking sites; Otway et al., 2014 on texting and security) this rarely focuses on adolescence. This study posits that technology could have a role to play in facilitating the kind of relationship identification and development that characterizes Allen's functions described above.

This freedom to explore outside parental relationships in more than logistical ways resonates particularly for young adolescents beginning to increase their levels of risk-taking in their online interactions (Livingstone, 2008), and is also correlated with attachment (Morsünbül, 2009; Richards, McGee, Williams, Welch, & Hancox, 2010). Peer attachment, while also correlated with good psychological health, is associated with more active participation in high risk behaviours (Carter et al., 2007).

## 3. The sample and method

The study is rooted in an interpretive paradigm that draws on qualitative social psychology and the sociologies of adolescence and technology. A purposive sampling technique was used, specifying the following criteria:

- female
- willing to speak freely with the researcher
- Midlands-based
- aged between 8 and 18, but predominantly clustering around the 9–11 and 16–18 age ranges
- from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, ideally Groups B, G, H, L, M, P and Q (Acorn classification, CACI, 2014)
- high volume users of technology, meaning they used digital technological for more than one hour a day at the youngest age range, and more than three at the oldest age range.

Two sibling groups were included in the sample to enable comparison between and within families. Twenty families were approached to participate via social and professional networks. Ten families were from urban environments, and ten from rural or semi-urban environments. Of these, fifteen families agreed to participate, with one family lost to attrition early in the process. Table 1 provides more detail concerning the sample.

A distinctive, but unanticipated characteristic of the sample is that most participants were living in a home with both parents.

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