



# Of “Likes” and “Pins”: The Effects of Consumers’ Attachment to Social Media

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## Abstract

Marketing researchers and practitioners are showing substantial interest in social media communication, trying to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with this new cultural and social phenomenon. In this research, the authors examine social media as a new attachment phenomenon, positing likely predictive links to marketing-related social media behaviors. Researchers have demonstrated useful applicability of psychological attachment theory to a variety of other marketing contexts, including special possessions, places, brands, and services. Attachment to such varied focal targets has been shown to influence behaviors of interest to marketers. However, research to date has yet to develop a conceptualization or operationalization of attachment in the social media context. The authors seek to contribute to the literature in two primary ways: first, we provide a foundational definition of attachment to social media, and conduct four initial studies to develop a measure that meets desired reliability and validity standards. Secondly, in a fifth study, we use this validated measure to test its empirical usefulness in predicting social media behaviors in an applied retail setting. Taken together, the results are particularly valuable in demonstrating that attachment to social media is a distinct, measurable phenomenon that helps to explain various activities on social media platforms, including C2C advocacy and C2B supportive communication behaviors. Results reveal practical guidance for marketing managers wrestling with developing effective social media marketing strategies.

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## Introduction

Social media has become an important new cultural and social phenomenon, changing the way millions of people and businesses connect and communicate. Academic researchers and practitioners in marketing are showing substantial interest in this new form of communication, trying to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with social media. According to Jim Davis, Sr., Vice President and CMO of SAS, “just a few years ago, we were talking about the *information revolution* — today, we are witnessing a *social media revolution*. For business, it’s a double-edged sword. On one

hand, one influencer can drive thousands of potential customers (or more) to a website or store. On the other hand, that same influencer can spread his or her dissatisfaction and erode your brand equity and profitability” (Gillan 2010). Social media is thus radically changing the communication landscape. The average American now spends an average of 3.2 hours a day, or 22.4 hours a week, on social networking sites. This is not limited to young users. Those 35–49 spend an average of 21 hours per week, and those 50–64 spend an average of 17 hours a week on social media (Ipsos 2013). Even the first lady of the United States has used social media to engage in “hashtag activism” (e.g., #BringBackOurGirls).

Social media has also become a major focus in corporate marketing strategy. According to the 2014 Social Media Industry Report (Stelzner 2014), 97% of companies are using some form of social media to market their business. However, only about a third of them feel like they are doing so efficiently,

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indicating a disconnect between what marketing managers believe they should be doing and knowing exactly what to do to leverage social media. This poses a serious problem since effective marketing strategy depends upon concentrating resources optimally against well-specified activities to increase sales and create sustainable competitive advantage (Aaker 2008). Without a clear course of action to incorporate social media into marketing strategy, most C-suite officers will be left wanting regarding the link between social media marketing efforts and return on marketing investment.

Academic research also has begun investigating various social media phenomena including personality traits of those who use social media (Ehrenberg et al. 2008), how use of social media impacts the individual (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006), as well as a host of brand-related (Gensler et al. 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014; Labrecque 2014; Naylor, Lamberton, and West 2012) and organization related issues (Blazevic et al. 2014; Rapp et al. 2013; Wang, Yu, and Wei 2012).

The motivation of our research adds to this growing literature and stems from an interest in the core ingredient of social media, the individual actor (Peters et al. 2013). Therefore, in our research, we undertake a new direction in marketing-related social media research, seeking a strong theoretical understanding of psychological connections consumers may be forming with social media and how this connection subsequently impacts various consumer behaviors. Are some people forming especially strong bonds with social media itself? If so, does that stronger affinity manifest in social media behaviors that are important to marketers? Prior research has shown that people develop attachments to various “targets” of attachment, including places (e.g., Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees 2014), people (e.g., Bowlby 1979), and brands (e.g., Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Social media now powerfully enables connection and interaction with these attachment foci (Wilcox and Stephen 2013). It seems plausible that individuals may develop an attachment to the conduit itself, since social media facilitates their interaction with other attachment target(s). As has been historically demonstrated with other attachment research (e.g., Hazan and Zeifman 1999), attachment manifests itself in various behavioral outcomes or consequences. Behavioral manifestation of social media attachment could involve elevated activity in social media dialogues, postings, viewings, sharings, etc., many of which could support important marketing outcomes.

The current research makes three key contributions in both attachment theory and social media research. First, we extend attachment theory’s role in marketing to the domain of social media by demonstrating that individuals exhibit variation in their attachment to social media. Second, we provide an empirically validated measure that captures quantitative variation in attachment to social media. Third, and most importantly, we empirically demonstrate that ASM has distinct behavioral implications. Attachment to social media more accurately predicts consumer behaviors, advocacy, and supportive communication back to the organization above attitude toward social media and time spent on social media. Beyond their theoretical significance, the results have significant managerial implications,

offering that attachment to social media is predictive of consumer’s social media behaviors. As far as we are aware, this is the first article to examine attachment to social media, this set of behavioral outcomes in the social media context, and it is the first to demonstrate these effects in relation to attitude toward social media and time spent on social media.

## Theoretical Background

### Key Concepts

Before presenting our conceptualizations and hypotheses, we define two key components of our research. First, in order to define attachment to social media (ASM) we leverage the existing definitions from prior multi-disciplinary work on attachment (Bowlby 1979; Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees 2014; Park et al. 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). The common core among these definitions is the strength of the bond between the person and the attachment object. Therefore, we define attachment to social media (ASM) simply as *the strength of a bond between a person and social media*. Secondly, social media in this paper is defined as an interactive platform that allows social actors to create and share in multi-way, immediate, and contingent communications (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Peters et al. 2013). The focus is on social media as a holistic phenomenon, rather than on one specific social media platform or another (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). Other research, such as Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014), has related to the brand in the context of social media. Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014 scale is specific to a “brand” of social media, whereas, our scale is a psychological individual-level difference factor with an unbranded medium.

Recent research has also taken a holistic approach (e.g., Rapp et al. 2013). Justification for this stance ties to the external reality that social media is continuously evolving — new platforms arise and old platforms become out of vogue. Therefore for our purposes we wish to investigate attachment to social media rather than attachment to a specific social media platform. Our approach could be adapted in future research if researchers seek to study attachment to a specific platform of interest (e.g., Pinterest). With definitions of ASM and social media in hand, we now present the theoretical logic underlying our investigation.

### Attachment Theory

Attachment theory has been particularly useful in psychology and marketing, and we posit that it also offers an excellent framework to investigate peoples’ growing psychological connections with social media. Thus in this paper, we use attachment theory to test consumers’ attraction to social media and examine behavioral consequences of that attachment such as being an advocate of a brand or company via social media and interacting with brands and companies on social media. Explication of this ASM construct contributes theoretically by extending attachment theory into the domain of social media. Originally, attachment theory described strong “bonds” between mothers and infants attachment that met fundamental

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