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Followers of the Façade; The Rising Addiction of Social Media

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Social Media and Social Physiological Effects

Research in progress for COMM 1307: Introduction to Mass Communication

Faculty Mentor: Jenny Warren

The following paper was composed by a student in an Introduction to Mass Communication course at Collin College in response to an assignment that asked students to objectively analyze scholarly research regarding the effects of mass media. Initially, students were instructed to review scholarly research relating to mass media and its possible effects. Then, after gaining new insight and knowledge, students wrote a draft of their paper and had it peer-reviewed by another student. Using this analysis, students wrote follow-up drafts in hopes that, with each draft, they would reach a sounder understanding of what the research says about the topic and then, finally, be able to apply that knowledge and literature to modern-day themes.

To that end, this paper summarizes various Mass Communication research studies and then begins to set the groundwork for future analysis regarding childhood attachments and their possible correlation to mental health issues and social media addiction.

Followers of the Façade: The Rising Addiction of Social Media

Kona Momoh

This research will discuss how attachment styles are formed between child and caretaker, particularly whether a child felt emotionally secure and validated by their parents' presence. This attachment may be an indicator of a social media user's likelihood to seek external validation from social media use. An estimated 3.6 billion people spend their day checking social media, whether it is through capturing the perfect photo for Instagram, keeping up with the latest tweets, or posting a thoughtful Facebook status to conclude the night (Clement, 2020). Frequent posting and liking on social platforms nowadays may seem conventional; however, this frequency can allude to psychological factors that go beyond users' captions. These factors will be discussed throughout the paper, including the low self-esteem that may stem from lack of validation in childhood. This connection will also be analyzed to determine whether a correlation may exist between it and an individual's vulnerability to social media addiction. This research will also explore age (specifically adolescents to middle-aged adults) and the difference in reasons for social media usage across each of these demographics. Gender will also be observed, particularly the social pressures placed on women to present themselves in a certain way on social platforms. Analyzing gender helps to determine how these pressures may lead women to be more susceptible to social media addiction and the psychological issues that come from it. Lastly, this paper

will explore the psychological effects that can result when social media use does not elicit the positive feedback users expect.

Attachment theory, created by psychologist John Bowlby, theorizes that “children, over time, internalize experiences with caretakers in such a way that early attachment relations come to form a prototype for later relationships outside the family” (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 226). Psychologist Mary Ainsworth expanded on Bowlby’s theory through her creation of attachment styles; these were classified based on how infants responded to the absence of their caretakers and were broken down into three types: “secure, anxious-resistant, and avoidant” (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 226). The majority of infants who were classified as “secure, became somewhat subdued or distressed in their mother’s absence” but expressed “warm, relieved greetings and were quickly soothed” upon her return (Cooper et al., 1998, pp. 1380-1381). Infants classified as anxious-resistant “protested and cried when their mothers left” and throughout her absence. When the mothers returned, the infants “sought to be held” and seemed to express feelings of “anger and distress” while the mothers attempted to comfort them (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 1381). The last group of infants, classified as avoidant, were unphased by their mothers’ absence and continued to remain unphased when they returned, as the infants made no attempt to “seek” any sort of comfort from their mothers and “appeared to be prematurely self-reliant” (Cooper et al., 1998, p. 1381). Ainsworth’s study claims that attachment styles relate to an infant’s “expectations about whether the caregiver is emotionally available and responsive” or whether the infant himself is “worthy of love and care” (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991, p.

321). Bowlby's and Ainsworth's theories on attachment affirm just how early the need for reassurance and validation begins to present itself.

Drawing from the findings of Bowlby and Ainsworth, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) created an attachment model that depicts how the internalized experiences between infants and caretakers present themselves in adulthood. They claim that the self-image is "dichotomized as positive or negative" in regard to whether or not one is "worthy of love and support" and whether or not one views others as "trustworthy and available vs. unreliable and rejecting" (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227).

Individuals who classify themselves as secure possess a positive "sense of worthiness" about the self and have a positive expectation that other people are generally "accepting and responsive." Those who identify with being "preoccupied," similar to anxious-resistant, feel a negative sense of self-worth but have an overall positive outlook on others. Individuals with these characteristics often "strive for self-acceptance by gaining the acceptance of valued others." Adults who experience a negative sense of self-worth along with having the negative belief that others are rejecting and cannot be trusted are classified as "dismissive avoidant." Dismissive avoidant adults will often isolate themselves from others in an effort to protect themselves from the possibility of being rejected. The last classification of the Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) model is referred to as "fearful avoidant." People who are fearful avoidant have a positive sense of self-worth but have a negative outlook on others. These individuals are often fearful of being disappointed and as a result avoid "close relationships" while "maintaining a sense of independence and invulnerability" (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227).

Past research explains that individuals with attachment issues often struggle with self-reassurance and validation. Gil-Or et al. (2015) examined possible psychological factors influencing social media addictions. During this study, the behavior of participants was analyzed on social media and compared to their actual lives through a series of questionnaires. The results of the study revealed a positive correlation between false personalities portrayed online and low levels of self-esteem and authenticity that stemmed from attachment styles of anxiousness and avoidance (Gil-Or et al., 2015, p. 1). Additionally, what also has been found is that in order to feel worthy and validated these individuals may seek reassurance and validation from external factors, social media possibly being one of them. Bowlby and Ainsworth discuss the importance of healthy attachment between the relationship of children and their caretaker as it is the foundation for how they will view and navigate future relationships in their life (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 226). If an individual does not receive an adequate amount of validation from caretakers, they may possibly seek validation from individuals on social media who provide them that attention. These users may then consistently run to those platforms any time they feel inadequate, forming a dependence to the validation.

Validation through social media can be attained through the attention received from likes and comments, which may be a prime motive for why individuals gravitate towards these platforms. The average person who uses a “false Facebook-self,” a term coined by Dr. Cecile Andreassen to classify individuals who use false personas on Facebook, was shown to have higher levels of avoidant and attachment styles and

lower levels of esteem and authenticity (Gil-Or et al., 2015, p. 2). The same study also found that women in particular were shown to have higher anxious attachment levels and lower self-esteem than men. A possible reason for this is that women especially experience a greater social pressure when it comes to self-appearance (Fox & Vendemia, 2016, p. 593). This pressure may carry itself onto social platforms where women reportedly post and edit their photos more frequently than men (Fox and Vendemia, 2016, p. 593). Overall Gil-Or et al. (2015) concluded that high levels of these attachment styles (anxiousness and avoidance) are positively correlated to the shortcomings in one's personality that may later overcompensate itself online (p. 2). Dr. Cecilie Andreassen's (2017) "Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale" (BFAS) supports a similar claim. The BFAS concludes that individuals with social insecurities are more likely to be dependent on social media (Edwards, 2017, p. 29). As discussed in the adult attachment model from Bartholomew and Horowitz, early experiences with rejection play a major role in how individuals view their self-worth. If an individual felt rejected by their caretakers, they may adopt the notion that the reason for this rejection was due to them being their authentic selves, which was not enough. "Preoccupied," or anxious-resistant individuals, as previously discussed, generally have a positive outlook on others but a negative outlook on themselves, causing them to "strive for self-acceptance" through external validation from "valued others" (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227). These same individuals may therefore begin to counter these feelings of inadequacy by overcompensating, i.e. presenting an inauthentic version of themselves on social platforms in order to feel accepted or validated.

The freedom individuals are given on social media allows users to have the option to showcase their reality or, instead, present a glamorized, inauthentic version of their lives. This is exhibited through the emphasis that users place on self-censorship. Sites such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook can become a form of escapism for those displeased with their lives. Social platforms can provide users the ability to adopt various personas, create elaborated myths regarding their achievements and skills, and a life that, unbeknownst to followers, ceases to exist after logging out. Author Zizi Papacharissi (2012) expands on this claim, by explicating the heightening of “self-awareness and self-monitoring” that occurs on social platforms (p. 6). According to Papacharissi (2012), self-monitoring and self-censorship are “strategies for negotiating the self across multiple media networked audiences” (p. 6). The habit of editing and filtering is a way of conveying “a compelling narrative about the self” in order to maintain a “socially coherent environment” for an audience that may be “collapsed, imagined or actual” (Papacharissi, 2012, p.6). This concept of self-monitoring reinforces the idea that the seeking of external validation may possibly be a prime motive for social media use. This appears to be especially true for adolescents.

Peer approval can be daunting and, oftentimes, have a significant impact on adolescents. According to Harter’s 2012 study, as teens begin their quest towards “developing cohesive self-identities, adolescents typically engage in greater levels of social comparison and interpersonal feedback-seeking” (as cited in Nesi & Prinstein, 2015, p. 1427). As a result, adolescents may fall victim to the façade of social media simply because of how willing they might be to filter and self-censor their identities in

order to appease others. Fullwood et al.'s (2016) study concluded a negative correlation between self-presentation and self-concept clarity. Self-presentation as described by Foxwood and Vendemia is the desired persona individuals take on in order to receive attention from a particular audience (p. 593). Self-concept, on the other hand, is the "collection of beliefs that one possesses about oneself" based on past, present and future "selves" (Fullwood et al., 2016, p. 1). Ultimately the research found that adolescents who had high levels of self-concept clarity were less likely to have the desire to present an inauthentic representation of themselves. Adolescents who had lower levels of self-concept clarity were more likely to use social media as a way to "try out different self-presentations," in an "attempt to resolve identity crises" (Fullwood et al., p. 2).

The need to establish an appealing self-representation on social media platforms is not specific to adolescents. Middle aged adults and college students are also shown to be concerned with their online self-representation. A 2013 study by Elliot Panek, Yioryos Nardis, and Sara Konrath in *Computers in Human Behavior* studied this reality. They concluded that young adult college students who posted more frequently on Twitter "scored higher in certain types of narcissism" while middle-aged adult narcissists updated their status more frequently on Facebook (as cited in Swanbrow, 2013, para. 3). The authors explain the concept behind this positive correlation quite simply: "It's about curating your own image, how you are seen, and also checking on how others respond to this image" (as cited in Swanbrow, 2013, para. 5). Further, "Middle-aged adults usually have already formed their social selves, and they use social media to

gain approval from those who are already in their social circles” (as cited in Swanbrow, 2013, para. 5). College students, on the other hand, use social media sites like Twitter as a “megaphone” where they can “over evaluate the importance of their own opinions” (as cited in Swanbrow, 2013, para. 6). This research concludes that “narcissistic college students and their adult counterparts use social media in different ways to boost their egos and control others’ perceptions of them” (as cited in Swanbrow, 2013, para. 10).

The thrill of validation received from social media can be a natural high, one that unfortunately not all users get to experience. When online self-representation fails to bring fulfillment, feelings of inadequacy may begin to surface. As a result of this, social media may result in psychological issues. The article, “Laughing and Crying” by Marcus Gilroy-Ware (2018) claims that frequently “posting updates, liking other people’s posts and clicking on links posted by other users” is negatively correlated to well-being (para. 4). Another study presented in the article found a positive correlation between “the greater the number of strangers you follow on picture-sharing network Instagram, relative to friends you know, the more likely Instagram use is to be associated with symptoms of depression” (Gilroy-Ware, 2018, para. 6). Foxwood and Vendemia found that Facebook consumption can “trigger” and even create a “greater body dissatisfaction” in one’s self. This was found to be particularly true for women, who have more of a tendency to “socially compare” themselves than do their male counterparts (p. 594). Similarly, a Royal Society for Public Health study found that “Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram all led to increased feelings of depression, anxiety, poor body image, and loneliness” (Ehmke, para. 2). These studies support the idea that a positive

correlation exists between declining mental health and the inadequacy that could occur when the expectations of self-representation on social media are not met.

It is essential to note that an addiction to social media is, of course, not the only possible cause of mental illness, as there are other factors which can potentially cause depression, anxiety, and narcissism. Traumatic episodes like bullying and abuse or stress-related factors, such as pursuit of higher education, poverty, and poor physical health are all possible contributors to a decline in mental health. In some cases, however, social media can have a positive impact on individuals suffering with mental illness. A study done by Naslund et al. (2016) showed that, “people with serious mental illness report benefits from interacting with peers online from greater social connectedness, feelings of group belonging and by sharing personal stories and strategies for coping with day-to-day challenges of living with a mental illness” (p. 113). These findings indicate that social media can have a positive impact on mental health, but it is important to take into account that, when the outlook of the self is already negative, social media can amplify these mental illnesses—particularly, if the objective of an individual being on social media is not to develop authentic connections but to present a false reality or seek external validation.

The addiction of social media may be due to a multitude of factors, some of which can be determinants that stem from early childhood attachments, poor self-esteem, gender, and age. Others possible effects can be mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and narcissism stemming from the addiction itself. In order to avoid a dependence, social media users may have to establish a healthy self-esteem and

boundary between their reality and filtered social platforms. Learning to detach from the need to have external validation and instead embrace the authenticity of the self may greatly reduce the possibility of succumbing to the façade of social media. Further research, however, is still needed to determine what factors may make an individual more vulnerable to a social media addiction. Additionally, future studies should further analyze the negative effects addictions to social platforms can have on mental health.

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