

ATTACHMENT NEEDS AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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Attachment is a significant human need throughout life. Recent developments in communication technologies indicate that social networking sites (SNS) play a significant role in forming relationships. In addition to forming real-life relationships, students also form new relationships and maintain already existing relationships through SNS. In other words, in line with uses and gratifications theory, new media are used to gratify students' needs. In this study conducted in 2011, we compared real-life friendships with friendships formed through SNS, in fulfilling the attachment needs of students at the English Preparatory School at the Eastern Mediterranean University. We found statistically significant differences between attachments formed in real life and those formed through SNS. Therefore, we determined that SNS play a significant role in satisfying the need for attachment among young people who are at the outset of their tertiary education.

Keywords: attachment needs, social networking sites, communication, university students, uses and gratifications theory.

Social networking sites (SNS) have become a sine qua non of our lives. Aside from meeting the need for communication, SNS have begun to satisfy other needs including attachment. Heavy use of SNS leads people to satisfy the need for attachment to which Maslow (1968) refers as a *sense of belonging*. Human needs are best classified by Maslow in his well-known hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1).

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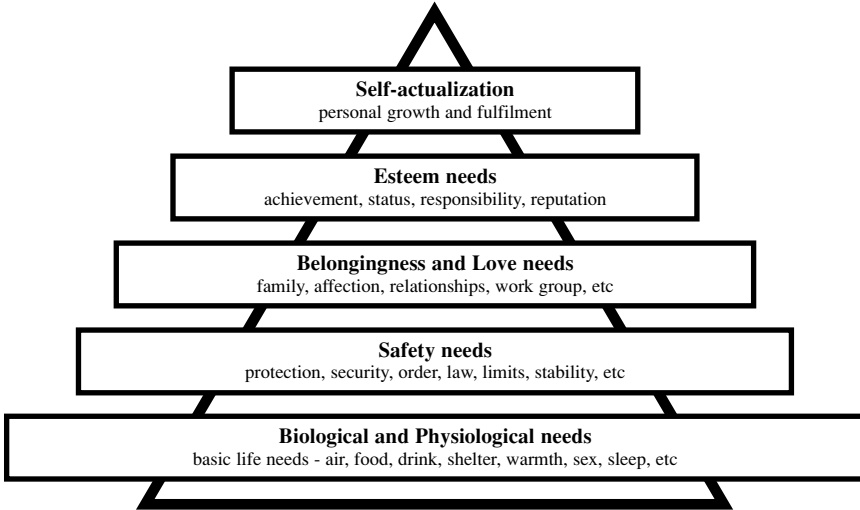


Figure 1. *Maslow's hierarchy of needs.*

In the uses and gratification theory, first proposed in the 1940s (Herzog, 1944) and then revisited by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974 and by Rosengren, Palmgreen, and Werner in 1985 (see Papacharissi, 2008), it is pointed out that media is consumed in order to satisfy the psychological and social needs of the individual. Uses and gratification theory is based on the functionalist paradigm of social sciences. In a work written in 2006, Agyekwena (see Özad, 2012) draws a parallel between uses and gratification theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As noted by Özad, there is a considerable body of research on the use of SNS for the purpose of gratifying university students' need.

What is attachment? According to Maslow (1968), in order to realize self-actualization, when basic physical and safety needs are fulfilled, one needs to satisfy the need for belonging – in other words, one's attachment needs. Attachment has been defined in a variety of ways, some of which include: “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194), “an affectional tie that one person or animal forms between himself and another specific one – a tie that binds them together in space and endures over time” (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974, p. 31), and “[a] two-way process that evolves over time. It is sometimes confused with bonding, often portrayed as a somewhat mystical process, that mothers experience shortly after a baby is born. Although some women experience such moments, many more have no such recollection” (Atwool (n.d.), p. 2).

Since the beginning of humanity, people have satisfied their attachment needs by bonding with those in their close circles, such as relatives and people that

they personally know. However, with the spread of technology, particularly the Internet and SNS, people are beginning to form relationships with individuals they have never met and maintain relationships with loved ones even from a distance. Individuals must experience sufficient levels of attachment to reach the highest step on Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs.

What are SNS? According to Serrat (2009) "[S]ocial networks are social communities of the web, connected via electronic mail, websites and weblogs, and networking applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Lotus Quickr, or LinkedIn" (p. 1). At the outset of the new millennium, SNS have become indispensable in our lives. SNS allow relationships to be formed not only within our close environment but also with people who are physically at a distance or even with people we have never met in the traditional sense but have met through the use of SNS. Among the SNS, undoubtedly Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are the most widely used (see, Uygarer, 2011). SNS are particularly popular among young people. For most young people, starting higher education means leaving home and living abroad or independently. Therefore, they will form new relationships and new bonds of attachment. Recently, in addition to traditional relationships, young people have been forming these relationships/attachments through SNS.

In the literature, there is a dearth of research articles related to attachment formed via SNS (Uygarer, 2011). Hence, in the present study we reviewed the literature on SNS and attachment separately. When communicating with others or anticipating communication, feelings of fear or anxiety have been considered one of the major obstacles in the educational process (Gümü & Geçer, 2008).

Bretherton (1992) stated that attachment theory started via the observations of Bowlby (1969), which were focused on infants and children and aimed at understanding the relationship between childhood and children's later personality development. Çelik (2004) asserted that "the attachment behaviors of the human infant (e.g., proximity seeking, smiling, clinging) are reciprocated by adult attachment behaviors (touching, holding, soothing) and these responses strengthen the attachment behavior of the infant toward that particular adult" (p. 2). Çelik further mentioned that "since everybody needs to establish close relationships in their personal lives, how they attach to others and form interpersonal relationships become very crucial" (p. 1).

According to Wood (2007), four attachment styles exist for children: secure, fearful, dismissive, and anxious/ambivalent. With respect to attachment theory, it has been observed that in the literature both attachment and attachment styles have always been discussed with respect to babies and children whereas adults have been overlooked. With respect to adult attachment, Hamilton (2000) maintains that "it extends our understanding of attachment by exploring continuity beyond childhood in adolescents who have been reared in both conventional and noncon-

ventional family context” (p. 690). Despite the common belief that attachments formed in childhood influence all human life, attachments formed in adulthood are also significant. Hazan and Shaver (1987) point out that there are gender differences in adult attachment. Since males and females cannot maintain their needs in the same way, they behave differently and it has been noted that these differences also depend on cultural values. In urban areas, the behavior of girls and boys differs (Saymaz, 2003) and, therefore, their needs are not maintained in the same ways.

Ledbetter et al. (2011) found in their study that “the interaction effect between self-disclosure and social connection directly predict[ed] Facebook communication and indirectly predict[ed] relational closeness” (p. 27). Boyd (2008) shares the view that almost all friends have reasons to enhance their friendship ties. Attachment is also significant in adulthood as everyone needs to be loved and to feel a sense of belonging to someone or something. These desires do not diminish and continue to motivate individuals to reach for success in the areas of career and in life.

Eldeleklioglu (2008) found that loneliness decreases with increased social skills and social support from friends while, unfortunately, social support taken from family is not considered sufficient. In order to develop social skills, a social education program that leads teenagers to achieve suitable skills should be provided, whereby they would be helped to establish healthier and more effective relationships with their families and friends in order to decrease loneliness. In addition, these will help the teenagers benefit more fully from social support sources.

In this study our aim was to explore real life friendships in comparison to friendships formed through SNS with regards to fulfilling the attachment needs of students attending the English Preparatory School at Eastern Mediterranean University.

Method

A quantitative research methodology was chosen for the present study. It was designed as a case study of English Preparatory School students at the Eastern Mediterranean University during the 2011 academic year. Of the 600 total students enrolled in the course, 100 ($n = 77$ female, 23 male) were selected using random sampling to participate in the study. Out of the 100 students, 17 participants were aged between 16 and 18 years, 55 between 19 and 21 years, and 28 between 22 and 24 years. There were 22 participants were from North Cyprus, 56 from Turkey, and 22 from other countries including Iran, Nigeria, Jordan, and Azerbaijan.

An in-house questionnaire was developed by the researchers. In addition to three demographic questions used to determine gender, age, and nationality, 64 items were prepared for inclusion in the questionnaire, and rated using 5-point Likert scales. The reliability of the instrument was assessed. To ascertain the critical value of agreements for propositions, the score range was divided according to the scale division of Balçı (2004): 1.00–1.79 = *strongly disagree*; 1.80–2.59 = *disagree*; 2.60–3.39 = *undecided*; 3.40–4.19 = *agree*; 4.20–5.00 = *strongly agree*. With respect to Cronbach's alpha value, George and Mallery (2001) suggest that $\alpha > .7$ is acceptable and $\alpha > .8$ is good. Taking this into consideration, the Cronbach's alpha value of the measuring instrument (.75) is between acceptable and good.

Data collected were analyzed using SPSS version 11.5. In order to test whether or not there were any statistically significant differences between genders, an independent samples *t* test was run. The presence or absence of statistically significant differences among the participants according to age group and nationality was assessed using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA).

Results

Our results with regard to the attitudes of the participants towards satisfying their attachment needs through attachments formed in real life and through SNS are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Attitudes Toward Attachment of the Participants in Real Life

Item	Rating	<i>M</i>
I have a close relationship with friends of my own sex.	Agree	3.48
I share my private life with friends of my own sex easily.	Undecided	3.22
I have a relationship with the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.34
I share things with friends of the opposite sex other than my private life.	Undecided	3.38
I cannot have a comfortable relationship with the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	2.98
I share very few things with the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	2.66
I get along with friends of my own sex.	Agree	3.42
I am not afraid of being in a position of being emotionally vulnerable with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.31
I can express myself easily towards friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.15
I get along with friends of the opposite sex but not very well.	Undecided	3.16
I am a little bit afraid of being in an emotionally silly position with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.11
I can express myself but not very easily towards friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.29
I do not get along with the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	3.10
I am very much afraid of being in an emotionally silly position towards the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	3.08
I do not express myself easily towards the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	2.92
I do not apply different rules towards friends of my own sex.	Undecided	2.98

Table 1 continued

Item	Rating	<i>M</i>
I have very flexible borderlines towards friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.17
I apply some different rules towards friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.19
I have some flexible boundaries in friendships with my own sex.	Undecided	2.97
I apply different rules towards the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	2.86
I do not have flexible boundaries with the girl/boy I like.	Undecided	3.00
I share everything about my same sex with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.30
I share everything about the opposite sex with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.06
I can have a close relationship with friends of my own sex in a group.	Undecided	3.19
I share some things about my sex with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.13
I share something about my opposite sex issue with opposite sex friends.	Undecided	3.21
I have a relationship (but not very close) with friends of the opposite sex in group.	Undecided	3.02
I do not (cannot) share anything about my sex issue with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	2.80
I do not share anything about the opposite sex with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	2.65
I cannot have a close relationship with the girl/boy whom I like in a group.	Strongly disagree	1.34
I feel attached to friends of my own sex.	Undecided	2.77
I feel attached to friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	2.65
I feel attached to the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	2.98

As shown in Table 1, the participants are mostly undecided about attachment in childhood, as related to real life; they show agreement with two statements: “I have a close relationship with friends of my own sex” and “I get along with friends of my own sex”; and the only statement they strongly disagree with is “I cannot have a close relationship with the girl/boy I like in a group”.

Table 2. Means and Attitudes Toward Attachment of the Participants on SNS

I feel attached to the people I communicate with.	Undecided	3.23
I have a close relationship with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	2.46
I share my private life easily with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.04
I have a close relationship with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.12
I share my private life with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.12
I have a close relationship with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	2.48
I share my private life with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.04
I get along with friends of the same sex.	Undecided	3.38
I am never afraid of being in an emotionally vulnerable position with friends of my sex.	Undecided	2.76
I am able to express myself easily with friends of the same sex.	Undecided	3.25
I get along with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.08
I am never afraid of being in an emotionally vulnerable position with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	2.40
I can express myself easily with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.13
I can get along with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.33

Table 2 continued

I am never afraid of being in an emotionally vulnerable position towards the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.24
I am able to express myself easily towards the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.26
I do not apply different rules towards friends of the same sex.	Undecided	3.10
I have very flexible boundaries with friends of the same sex.	Undecided	3.17
I do not apply different rules to friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.25
I have very flexible boundaries with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	2.96
I do not apply different rules to the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	2.97
I have flexible boundaries with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.14
I share my private life about my own sex with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.15
I share my private life about the opposite sex with friends of my own sex.	Undecided	3.27
I have a close relationship with friends of the same sex.	Agree	3.52
I share my private life about my own sex with friends of the opposite sex.	Undecided	3.36
I share my special experience about the opposite sex with opposite sex friends.	Undecided	3.19
I have a close relationship with friends of the opposite sex when I am in a group.	Agree	4.01
I share my private life about my own sex with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.13
I share my private life about the opposite sex with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.01
I have a close relationship with the girl/boy whom I like.	Undecided	3.24

In Table 2 results are presented of the means and corresponding attitudes of participants to attachment formed on SNS. Participants are undecided about 28 out of 30 of them. They only showed agreement with the statements “I have a close relationship with friends of the same sex” and “I have a close relationship with friends of the opposite sex when I am in a group”.

Table 3. Means and Attitudes of Attachment of the Participants in Real Life and on SNS

I have a close relationship with friends of my own sex.	Agree	3.48
I get along with friends of my own sex.	Agree	3.42
I cannot have a close relationship with the girl/boy whom I like in a group	Strongly disagree	1.34
I have a close relationship with friends of the same sex (SNS)	Agree	3.52
I have a close relationship with friends of the opposite sex when I am in a group (SNS)	Agree	4.01

In Table 3 the propositions are set out with which participants agreed or disagreed.

Table 4. ANOVA Results for Age Intervals

	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between groups	55402,504	2	27701,252	3,676	.029
Within groups	730871,2	97	7534,755		
Total	786273,7	99			

A one-way ANOVA was run in order to check the relationship of some of the demographic variables in relation to attachment formed in real life. The ANOVA revealed that there is a statistically significant difference in the attachment formed in real life ($p = .3$) and on SNS ($p = .4$) between different age groups, as well as in the attachment formed on SNS.

Table 5. *Independent Samples t Test Results According to Gender*

Gender	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Female	23	3.78	1.00	98	2.82	.01
Male	77	3.06	1.09	39.11	2.96	.01

An independent samples *t* test was conducted in order to analyze attachment formed through SNS in terms of gender. There was a statistically significant difference in levels of attachment according to gender [$t(df = 98) = 2.82, p < .001$]. Results indicate that female students satisfy their attachment needs by communicating on SNS more than male students do. Our results also reveal that the use of SNS is extremely popular among the tertiary students in our sample. There was a statistically significant difference in satisfying the attachment needs of the students through the use of SNS according to both age and gender.

In addition to age and gender, nationality was also computed as an independent variable. However, when a one-way ANOVA was run, there was no statistically significant difference found in relation to nationality.

Discussion

Communicating with others is a vital human need and is particularly significant in forming bonds of attachment. It starts at birth, with connections formed within the family, and later extends to school and other social circles in which a person becomes involved. Commencing with higher education means becoming part of a new environment where new relationships will be formed. This period is considered significant since students enter a new social milieu – university – and some students leave home for the first time and, thus, have to reconsider their attachment needs. As soon as the basic physical human needs (food, sex, and shelter) are satisfied, the need for belonging must be satisfied in order to open the way for the needs higher on Maslow's (1968) hierarchy such as self-esteem and self-actualization. SNS offer an alternative for meeting the need of attachment, whereby SNS are used in order to gratify the need for belonging. Consequently, in the present study we set out to compare communication in real life with communication through SNS of the English Preparatory School students studying at Eastern Mediterranean University, in order to compare the attitudes

of the students in forming attachment by these means. The results reveal that in general the participants are undecided about the statements that point to satisfying their attachment needs in their real lives and in the relationships formed on SNS. *t* test results indicate that female students are better than are males in establishing friendships and, thus, attachment on SNS. According to one-way ANOVA results, there is a statistically significant difference in the means of length of attachment formed on SNS between different age groups. In this study, we explored the importance of attachment needs and considered the role of new technological developments (such as SNS) in order to highlight the role of technology in the lives of humans. According to our results, people make use of SNS in order to fulfill one basic human need; that of belonging. This enables them to reach the objectives higher on Maslow's hierarchy of needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization.

In conclusion, our findings in this study indicate that the English Preparatory School students make extensive use the SNS in order to satisfy their need for attachment. In relation to age and gender, we found statistically significant differences between the attachments formed in real life and those formed through SNS. Therefore, we determined that the use of SNS plays a significant role in satisfying the need for attachment among young people who are at the outset of their higher education.

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