

Emotion Regulation and Social Media Motives as Mediators of Attachment and Problematic Social Media Use

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INTRODUCTION

- According to the Compensatory Internet Use Theory (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014), individuals may turn to social media use to meet certain psychological or emotional needs. Individuals may also use social media to cope with social challenges, which puts them at further risk for problematic social media use.
- Research has identified a link between insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, to a variety of dysfunctional social media behaviors, such as problematic use (e.g., Demircioğlu & Göncü-Köse, 2022; Gori et al., 2023), addiction (e.g., Costanzo et al., 2021), and stalking (Santos et al., 2021).
- One factor associated with insecure attachment that may explain this link is emotion regulation. Wei et al. (2005) found that anxious attachment was consistently associated with emotional reactivity and sometimes emotional cutoff, whereas avoidant attachment was consistently associated with emotional cutoff.
- Different attachment styles have been associated with different social media use motives. Stoven & Herzberg (2021) found anxious attachment significantly predicted social media use for social goals (e.g., to belong, to be liked, for social comparison), self-goals (e.g., to receive attention or affection), and emotional goals (e.g., seek support for negative feelings, to receive comfort).
- Our study examined the role of insecure attachment on social media addiction and stalking behaviors, with emotional regulation strategies and motives for social media use as mediators.

Table 1: Correlations for Anxious and Avoidant Attachment Styles

Variables	Attachment	
	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment
Emotional Regulation		
• Emotional Reactivity	.585***	.093
• Emotional Cutoff	.482***	.667***
Social Media Motives		
• Escape	.432***	.103
• Fear Of Missing Out	.290**	.072
• Boost Self	.246**	.002
• Praise	.126	-.026
• Maintain Existing Relationships	.046	-.099
• Meet New People and Socializing	.082	-.198*
Problematic Social Media Use		
• Addiction	.315***	-.069
• Stalking	.519***	.116

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

METHODS

Participants

- 113 undergraduates from SUNY Geneseo who completed an online survey

Measures

- Demographics** – Age & Gender Identity
 - Age: 17-32 ($M=18.75$, $SD=1.52$)
 - Gender Identity:
 - Cis man: 19; Cis woman: 87; Androgyne: 1; Gender fluid: 1; Gender queer: 1; Prefer not to respond: 3
- Attachment** - Experiences in Close Relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)
 - Anxious: 17-item scale ($\alpha=.91$)
 - Avoidant: 18-item scale ($\alpha=.89$)
- Emotion Regulation** - Differentiation of Self-Inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998)
 - Emotional reactivity: 11-items ($\alpha=.84$)
 - Emotional cutoff: 11 out of the 12-items ($\alpha=.84$)
- Motives for Social Media Use**
 - Escape: 4-items ($\alpha=.76$)
 - Fear of Missing Out: 3-items ($\alpha=.69$)
 - Boost self: 3-items ($\alpha=.76$)
 - Praise: 6-items ($\alpha=.86$)
 - Maintain Relationship*: 4-items ($\alpha=.84$)
 - New Relationship*: 4-items ($\alpha=.78$)
 Note: * (Horzum, 2016)
- Social Media Addiction** (Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale: Andreassen et al., 2012)
 - 6-item scale ($\alpha=.80$)
- Stalking** (Modified version of Cyberstalking Scale: Santos et al., 2021)
 - 9-item scale ($\alpha=.89$)

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Correlations between Attachment, Emotional Regulation Motives, & Problematic Social Media Use

- Table 1: Pearson correlations revealed that anxious attachment significantly predicted both social media addiction and stalking behaviors, greater emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff, as well as three social media motives (fear of missing out, escape, and boost self).
- Avoidant attachment did not significantly predict either social media addiction or stalking behavior. Although those with avoidant attachment reported increased emotional cutoff, they reported a decreased tendency to use social media in order to socialize or meet new people.

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- Analyses examining both types of emotion regulation strategies (reactivity & cutoff) and the three types of motives (fear of missing out, escape, and boost self) as potential mediators of anxious attachment and problematic social media use indicated that only emotional reactivity, escape motives, and boost self-motives were significant potential mediators. We then conducted several OLS regressions and bootstrapping analyses with emotional reactivity entered as the first mediator and then either escape or boost self motives entered as the second mediator between anxious attachment and problematic social media use.
- Figure 1: Emotional reactivity and both escape and boost self motives fully mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and social media addiction. More specifically, those with higher anxious attachment were significantly more likely to report higher emotional reactivity, which significantly predicted an increased inclination to use social media in order to escape or boost their self-esteem. Each social media motive then significantly predicted increases in social media addiction.
- Figure 2: Emotional reactivity and both escape and boost self motives partially mediated the relationship between anxious attachment and social media stalking. More specifically, those with higher anxious attachment were significantly more likely to report higher emotional reactivity, which significantly predicted an increased inclination to use social media in order to escape or boost their self-esteem. Each social media motive then significantly predicted increases in social media stalking.

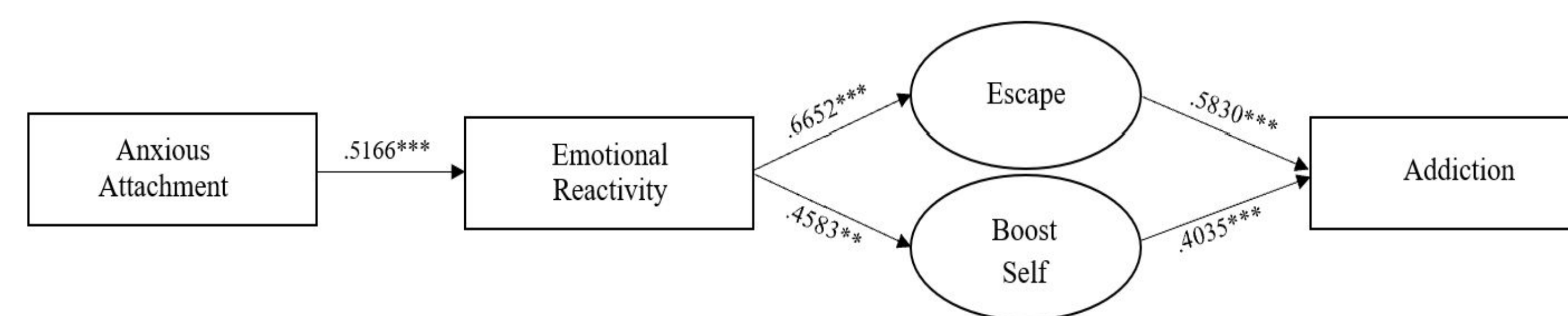


Figure 1: The mediating role of emotional reactivity and social media motives (escape, boost self) in the relationship between anxious attachment and addiction

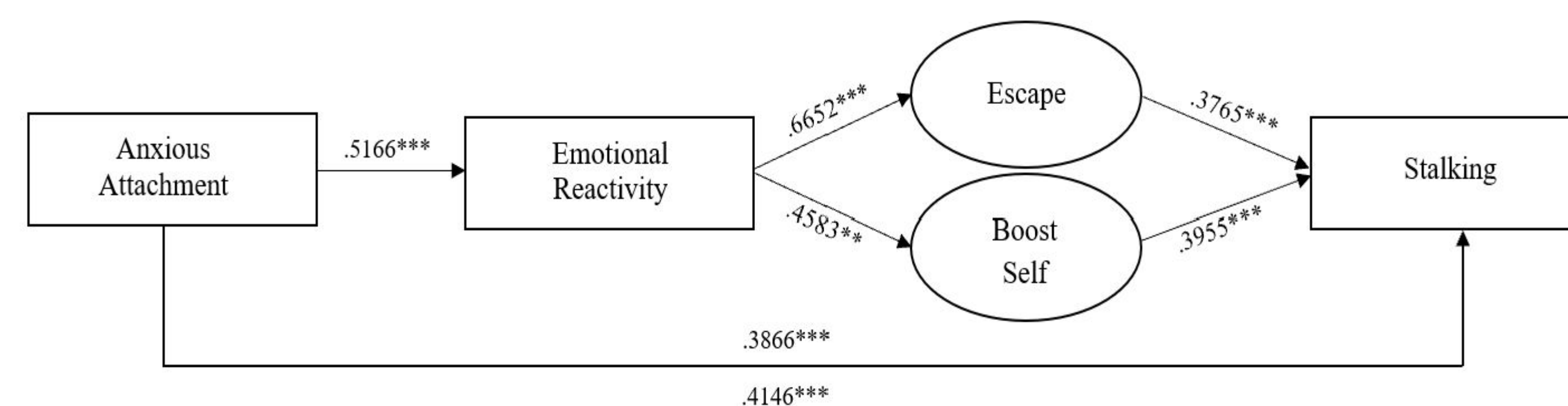


Figure 2: The mediating role of emotional reactivity and social media motives (escape, boost self) in the relationship between anxious attachment and stalking

Note: Regression coefficients above the arrow represent the direct effect when escape is entered in the model; regression coefficient below the arrow represent direct effect when boost self is entered in the model

Overall Conclusions and Implications

- Individuals with higher anxious attachment may be at greater risk for both social media addiction and stalking because of their need to regulate the high emotional reactivity they tend to experience. Two potential ways of dealing with their high emotional reactivity may be to use social media to escape their feelings or to affirm insecurities about themselves. This may put them at increased risk for both types of problematic social media use.
- Any tendency for anxiously attached individuals to experience emotional cutoff and to have concerns about being left out or missing out do not seem to explain their increased tendency for problematic social media use.
- Individuals with increased avoidant attachment were more inclined toward emotional cutoff and did not seem to be inclined to use social media for any of the motives we examined in our study. Given that emotional cutoff did not significantly predict problematic social media use, it is not surprising that avoidant attachment did not predict problematic social media.