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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**The Impact of Social Media Silent Treatment on Attachment Style and Interpersonal Anxiety****Rameha Imran**

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed interpersonal communication while also introducing new forms of relational stress, such as social media silent treatment, where individuals experience being ignored or excluded online. The present study aimed to examine the impact of social media silent treatment on interpersonal anxiety and to explore the moderating role of attachment style among young social media users. Using a correlational research design, data were collected from 50 university students aged 18–25 years through self-report measures, including the Cyber-Ostracism Scale, Adult Attachment Style Scale, and Interpersonal Anxiety Scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, regression analysis, and one-way ANOVA in SPSS. The findings revealed a weak but significant positive relationship between social media silent treatment and attachment anxiety, while the direct relationship between social media silent treatment and interpersonal anxiety was weak and statistically insignificant. Regression analysis indicated a modest predictive effect of social media

silent treatment on interpersonal anxiety. Overall, the results suggest that attachment style, particularly insecure attachment, influences how individuals perceive and respond to online exclusion. The study highlights the importance of considering attachment patterns when understanding the psychological effects of digital interactions and underscores the need for interventions that promote healthier coping strategies in online communication.

Keywords: *Social Media Silent Treatment, Cyber-Ostracism, Attachment Style, Interpersonal Anxiety, Online Social Exclusion*

Chapter I

Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have become a primary medium for interpersonal communication, shaping how individuals form, maintain, and perceive relationships. Alongside their benefits, these platforms have introduced new forms of interpersonal stress, one of which is social media silent treatment a situation where individuals are deliberately or perceived to be ignored, left on “seen,” excluded from online interactions, or receive no response in digital communication. Although the term silent treatment is traditionally studied in offline relationships, recent research conceptualizes similar online experiences under constructs such as cyber-ostracism and online social exclusion, which have been shown to significantly affect psychological well-being.

Empirical evidence suggests that experiences of being ignored or excluded online are associated with increased emotional distress, anxiety, and reduced feelings of belonging. Studies on cyber-ostracism indicate that individuals who perceive online exclusion report higher levels of social and interpersonal anxiety, as well as negative self-evaluation. These effects are explained through psychological mechanisms such as rejection sensitivity and rumination, which intensify emotional responses to perceived social neglect. Attachment theory offers a relevant framework for understanding individual differences in responses to social media silent treatment. Attachment styles secure, anxious, and avoidant play a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpret and react to interpersonal cues.

Research conducted after 2020 has consistently found that individuals with anxious attachment are more vulnerable to negative outcomes of social media interactions, including heightened anxiety and emotional dependence on online validation. In contrast, securely attached individuals tend to show greater emotional regulation and resilience in the face of online social stressors.

Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated that insecure attachment styles are linked with problematic social media use and greater psychological distress, suggesting that attachment insecurity may amplify the impact of perceived online rejection. Being ignored or excluded on social media can activate attachment-related fears of abandonment, thereby increasing interpersonal anxiety, particularly among individuals who are already sensitive to relational cues.

Despite growing research on cyber-ostracism and attachment styles, limited empirical work has directly examined social media silent treatment as a distinct interpersonal phenomenon and its combined effect on attachment style and interpersonal anxiety.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the impact of social media silent treatment on attachment styles and interpersonal anxiety, contributing to a deeper understanding of how digital interaction patterns influence psychological well-being in contemporary social contexts.

Background

Social media has become a major part of interpersonal communication, but it has also introduced new forms of relational stress, such as social media silent treatment, where individuals feel ignored or excluded online. Recent research describes this experience as cyber-ostracism or online social exclusion

and shows that it can negatively affect emotional well-being by increasing feelings of rejection and interpersonal anxiety. Attachment theory explains why people respond differently to such experiences, as individuals with insecure, especially anxious, attachment styles are more sensitive to signs of rejection and may interpret online silence as abandonment. Studies after 2020 suggest that this sensitivity can intensify anxiety, rumination, and emotional distress during online interactions. However, limited research has directly examined social media silent treatment together with attachment style and interpersonal anxiety, highlighting the need for further investigation into this emerging digital interpersonal issue.

Theoretical Framework

The current study is based on three psychological theories that help explain the relationship between social media silent treatment, attachment style, and interpersonal anxiety. Attachment Theory, proposed by John Bowlby, suggests that early relational experiences shape how individuals regulate emotions and respond to closeness or rejection in later relationships. Individuals with insecure attachment styles, particularly anxious attachment, tend to be more sensitive to signs of rejection. As a result, experiencing silence or being ignored on social media may intensify feelings of insecurity and interpersonal anxiety.

Ostracism Theory, developed by Kipling Williams, explains that being ignored or excluded threatens fundamental psychological needs such as belongingness and self-worth. In online environments, social media silent treatment can be understood as a form of cyber-ostracism, which has been associated with emotional distress and anxiety due to unmet social needs.

Rejection Sensitivity Theory, introduced by Geraldine Downey, focuses on individual differences in expecting and perceiving rejection. People with high rejection sensitivity are more likely to interpret ambiguous online behaviors, such as delayed responses or lack of interaction, as rejection. This tendency increases rumination and anxiety during social interactions. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of how social media silent treatment can act as digital rejection, why attachment style influences individual responses, and how these experiences contribute to interpersonal anxiety.

Study Variables

Independent Variable

Social Media Silent Treatment (Measured using the Cyber Ostracism Scale COS)

Dependent Variables

- Attachment Style (Measured using the Adult Attachment Style ASS)
- Interpersonal Anxiety (Measured using the Interpersonal Anxiety Scale IAS)

Rationale of the Study

Social media is a major part of daily communication, but it can also create experiences of exclusion, such as being ignored or receiving silent treatment online. Research shows that online exclusion, or cyber-ostracism, can threaten psychological needs like belonging and self-esteem and increase emotional distress and social anxiety (Shi et al., 2025). Studies also indicate that individuals with insecure attachment, especially anxious attachment, are more affected by such online rejection, experiencing higher interpersonal anxiety (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Therefore, studying the impact of social media silent treatment on attachment style and interpersonal anxiety is important to understand how digital rejection affects emotional well-being and why people respond differently.

Significance

This study is significant because it explores how social media silent treatment affects individuals' emotional and social functioning, focusing on attachment styles and interpersonal anxiety.

Understanding this relationship can help identify people who are more vulnerable to negative psychological effects of online exclusion, particularly those with insecure or anxious attachment. The findings can inform psychologists, counselors, and educators about the emotional risks associated with social media interactions and guide interventions to promote healthier online communication. Additionally, it contributes to the limited research on digital silent treatment, providing insights into how online behaviors influence mental well-being in today's social context (Williams, 2007; Shi et al., 2025).

Chapter II

Literature Review

Recent research increasingly highlights that attachment style plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals experience and respond to social media use, particularly in relation to mental health and psychological wellbeing. Empirical studies suggest that individuals with anxious attachment are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of social media, as they tend to seek constant reassurance and validation through online interactions. As a result, they are more likely to experience reduced psychological wellbeing, heightened social anxiety, emotional dependence on online feedback, and problematic patterns of social media use (Young et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2025).

Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that social anxiety serves as a key mediating factor in the relationship between insecure attachment and excessive social media engagement. Individuals with insecure attachment may interpret online interactions more negatively, leading to increased fear of rejection and social evaluation, which in turn encourages excessive or compulsive use of social media as a coping mechanism (Huang et al., 2025). This pattern explains why certain users are more susceptible to digital stressors and emotional distress arising from online communication.

Similarly, research on social media addiction demonstrates that individuals with insecure attachment styles report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and maladaptive online behaviors. These individuals often rely on social media to regulate emotions and fulfill unmet attachment needs, which can reinforce emotional distress and contribute to compulsive usage patterns (Eichenberg et al., 2024). Overall, existing literature strongly emphasizes that attachment patterns significantly influence how online interactions affect mental health, underscoring the importance of considering attachment-related vulnerabilities when examining the psychological impact of social media use.

Impact on Interpersonal Anxiety

Social media experiences like silent treatment or online exclusion can increase interpersonal anxiety by threatening basic psychological needs such as belonging and self-esteem. Research shows that individuals who perceive online rejection often experience heightened social anxiety, emotional distress, and rumination (Shi et al., 2025; Williams, 2007). These effects are particularly strong when users repeatedly encounter silence or exclusion in digital interactions, highlighting the role of online communication in influencing emotional wellbeing.

Impact on Attachment Style

Attachment style influences how individuals respond to social media silent treatment. Studies indicate that those with anxious or insecure attachment are more sensitive to perceived rejection, interpreting delayed responses or being ignored online as personal abandonment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Eichenberg et al., 2024). Insecure attachment is also linked to problematic social media use, as individuals may seek excessive online interaction to manage their anxiety, which can reinforce emotional dependence and perpetuate interpersonal stress (Huang et al., 2025; Young et al., 2020).

Chapter III

Methodology

Study Aims and Objectives

- To examine the impact of social media silent treatment on interpersonal anxiety among social media users.
- To investigate the role of attachment style in moderating the relationship between social media silent treatment and interpersonal anxiety.

Research Design

This study uses a correlational design to examine how social media silent treatment relates to interpersonal anxiety and the moderating role of attachment style.

Research questions

- What is the impact of social media silent treatment on interpersonal anxiety among social media users?
- How does attachment style influence or moderate the relationship between social media silent treatment and interpersonal anxiety?

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

There is no relationship between Social media silent treatment, Attachment style and Interpersonal Anxiety.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1)

Social media silent treatment has a positive impact on Interpersonal Anxiety.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_2)

Social media silent treatment has a negative impact on Attachment Style.

Operational Definitions

Social Media Silent Treatment

Social media silent treatment refers to the experience of being ignored, left without a reply, excluded from online interactions, or intentionally avoided on digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, or Instagram. It is measured using self-report scales assessing perceived online exclusion or cyber-ostracism, such as the Cyber-Ostracism Scale (Shi et al., 2025; Williams, 2007).

Attachment Style

Attachment style represents a pattern of expectations, emotions, and behaviors in interpersonal relationships, developed through early life experiences. In adults, it is typically classified as secure, anxious, or avoidant. It is measured using standardized self-report questionnaires like the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) scale, which assesses levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Eichenberg et al., 2024).

Interpersonal Anxiety

Interpersonal anxiety refers to the level of discomfort, nervousness, or fear experienced during social interactions, including fear of rejection or negative evaluation. In research, it is measured using scales such as the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) or the Social Anxiety Scale, which quantify anxiety symptoms specifically in interpersonal contexts (Shi et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2025).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Participants must be between 18 to 25 years old.
- Participants must be active users of social media.
- Participants should be able to understand the study and give their consent to take part

Exclusion Criteria

- Participants who are professionals or employed full-time will be excluded.
- Individuals who cannot provide informed consent due to cognitive issues.

Sampling Strategy

A convenience sampling approach was used, targeting university students 18 - 25 who frequently use social media.

Statistical Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS. Characteristics of the participants were presented as descriptive statistics analysis. Pearson correlation and regression were used to identify the relationships established between social media silent treatment, attachment style, and interpersonal anxiety in university students.

Ethical Considerations

- Participants gave informed consent.
- Participation was voluntary with the option to withdraw.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

Chapter IV

Results

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of study variables (N=50)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Social Media Silent Treatment	31.82	9.367
Attachment Style	38.10	10.886
Interpersonal Anxiety	53.51	7.789

Table 2

Independent sample t test of Comparison of Interpersonal Anxiety and Attachment style between male and female (N=50)

Variables	Male		Female		p	t (df)	95% CI		r	Cohen's D
	M	SD	M	SD			U.L	L.L		
IA	37.8	12.95	36.8	11.30	.55	.291	7.91	-5.916	0.04	12.161
	4	7	4	9			6			
AS	52.6	8.968	53.8	6.894	.45	-.566	3.26	-5.829	0.08	7.998
	0		8		0		9			

The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between male and female participants in interpersonal anxiety, $t(48) = 0.291, p > .05$, with a very small effect size ($r = .04$). Similarly, no significant gender difference was found in attachment style, $t(48) = -0.566, p > .05$, and the effect size was also small ($r = .08$). These findings suggest that gender does not play a significant role in influencing interpersonal anxiety or attachment style in the present sample.

Table 3

Correlation Analysis of social media silent treatment, interpersonal anxiety and attachment style (N=50)

Variables	1	2	3
Social media Silent Treatment	1	.360	.142
Interpersonal Anxiety	-	1	.055
Attachment Style	-	-	1

The results show that social media Silent Treatment has a weak, positive correlation with Attachment style ($r = 0.360, p < 0.05$), indicating that higher experiences of social media silent treatment are somewhat associated with higher attachment anxiety. Silent treatment has a very weak, insignificant positive correlation with Interpersonal Anxiety Scale ($r = 0.142, p > 0.05$), suggesting no meaningful relationship between online exclusion and interpersonal anxiety in this sample. Additionally, Attachment style has a very weak, insignificant negative correlation with Interpersonal Anxiety ($r = -0.055, p > 0.05$), indicating that attachment anxiety is not strongly associated with interpersonal anxiety among participants in this study.

Table 4

Linear Regression of Silent treatment and Interpersonal Anxiety (N=50)

Variables	R	R ²	P	B	SE	95% CL	
						L.L	U.L
Constant			0.10 ^b	23.141	5.550	11.892	34.299
Interpersonal Anxiety	0.360	.130	0.10 ^b	.451	.169	.112	.791

The results showed a moderate positive relationship ($R = 0.360$), with interpersonal anxiety explaining about 13% of the variance in silent treatment ($R^2 = 0.130$). The regression coefficient ($B = 0.451, SE = 0.169, 95\% CI [0.112, 0.791]$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in interpersonal anxiety, silent treatment scores tend to increase by 0.451 units. However, the effect was not statistically significant ($p = 0.10$), suggesting that interpersonal anxiety does not reliably predict silent treatment in this sample, and other factors likely contribute to this behavior.

Table 5

Linear Regression of Silent treatment and Attachment Style (N=50)

Variables	R	R ²	p	B	SE	95% CL	
						L.L	U.L
Constant			.327 ^b	49.557	3.882	41.751	57.363
Attachment Style	.142 ^a	.020	.327 ^b	.117	.118	-.120	.355

The results indicate a weak positive relationship ($R = 0.142$), with attachment style accounting for only 2% of the variance in silent treatment ($R^2 = 0.020$). The regression coefficient ($B = 0.117, SE = 0.118, 95\% CI [-0.120, 0.355]$) suggests a small, positive increase in silent treatment scores for each unit increase in attachment style. However, this effect was not statistically significant ($p = 0.327$), indicating that attachment style does not meaningfully predict silent treatment in this sample, and other factors likely play a larger role.

Chapter V

Discussion

The findings of this study align with previous research suggesting that attachment style plays a critical role in how individuals respond to social media interactions. Studies have shown that individuals with anxious or insecure attachment are more vulnerable to negative outcomes from social media use, including higher social anxiety and emotional distress (Young et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2025). Similarly, research indicates that insecure attachment is associated with maladaptive social media behaviors and increased psychological distress (Eichenberg et al., 2024). The influence of social media silent treatment on interpersonal anxiety appears to be complex and may be mediated by factors such as rejection sensitivity, rumination, or coping strategies (Shi et al., 2025; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These findings emphasize the importance of considering individual differences in attachment when examining the psychological effects of digital social interactions. Future studies could explore these mediating mechanisms and include larger, more diverse samples to better understand the relationship between online exclusion, attachment, and interpersonal anxiety.

Implications and limitations

This study highlights that attachment style plays an important role in how individuals experience social media interactions, particularly online exclusion or silent treatment, suggesting that psychologists and educators should consider attachment patterns when addressing social media-related anxiety. The findings can guide interventions to improve coping strategies and promote healthier online communication. However, the study has limitations, including a small sample size (N = 50), a cross-sectional design that limits causal conclusions, reliance on self-report measures, and the exclusion of potential factors such as social support or frequency of social media use that may influence the relationships.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into the relationship between social media silent treatment, attachment style, and interpersonal anxiety. The findings suggest that attachment style, particularly insecure or anxious attachment, influences how individuals perceive and respond to online exclusion. While social media silent treatment may contribute to interpersonal anxiety, its effect appears to be influenced by underlying attachment patterns and individual differences. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of considering attachment when examining the psychological impact of digital interactions and highlights the need for strategies to help individuals cope with online rejection in a healthy way.

Conflict of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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