



The role of interpersonal attachment styles in shaping consumer preferences for products shown in relational advertisements



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ABSTRACT

The present research adopts an attachment theory perspective to advance new insights into the effectiveness of advertising strategies that depict interpersonal relationships. Although pictures, and specifically pictures of relationships (e.g., friends), make up an increasingly large portion of advertisements, scant research has examined how depictions of relationships impact consumer evaluations of advertised products. The present research demonstrates that the effectiveness of ads which depict interpersonal relationships, including romantic partnerships and friendships, is associated with consumers' interpersonal attachment styles. Specifically, individuals with highly anxious attachment styles are unlikely to purchase products shown in relational ads; whereas, individuals with less anxious and more secure attachment styles are more likely to purchase these products. Importantly, perceptions of fit (i.e., the extent to which an advertised product is perceived as a good fit with oneself) mediate the relationship between interpersonal attachment style and consumers' likelihood of purchasing products shown in advertisements that portray relationships.

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1. Introduction

As the business world becomes increasingly competitive, researchers and practitioners are challenged with a need to better understand how individual characteristics and social contexts jointly impact consumer responses to advertisements. Research has shown that consumers' evaluations of advertised products can be influenced by stimuli in ads, including, for example, visual imagery (Jiang, Adaval, Steinhart, & Wyer, 2014; Unnava & Burnkrant, 1991), normative cues, and product claims (David, 2016; Freling & Dacin, 2010). One related area that has received less attention is the impact that relational stimuli in ads (e.g., the portrayal of an interpersonal relationship) have on individuals' evaluations of advertised products. Despite the high frequency at which campaigns depict togetherness (e.g., show pictures of friends, family, etc. in ads; Cavanaugh, 2014), scant research has investigated the impact of visual depictions of relationships in ads. Advertisements can depict relational or non-relational contexts, and consumers may differentially evaluate products that are shown in ads which portray a relationship versus ads that do not (Cavanaugh, 2014; Vrtička, Sander, & Vuilleumier, 2012). The present research uses attachment theory (Ainsworth, Salter, Blehar, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1980), and adult

attachment theory primarily, to explain why ads that portray relationships may be differentially effective among various types of consumers.

Toward this end, the current research proposes that attachment styles are associated with consumers' likelihood of purchasing products shown in relational versus non-relational ads. Relational ads refer to those that portray an interpersonal relationship such as friends, family, or romantic couples, and non-relational ads are those that portray an individual by him/herself. Similar to the notion of "it fits like a glove," (Allen, 2002), it is proposed that the framework underlying the differential effectiveness of relational ads among individuals with various attachment styles is related to feelings of fit, and can best be explained by experiential choices infused by social and historical forces.

The research presented herein makes several important contributions. First, the current research highlights the importance of interpersonal attachment styles in the prediction of consumer behavior. Research using attachment theory in consumer contexts is emerging (Swaminathan, Stille, & Ahluwalia, 2009). Research has shown, for example, that attachment styles assist in explaining consumer's likelihood of retaliation after terminating a relationship with a brand (Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson, 2012). The present research contributes to this emerging literature by demonstrating an additional area of consumer behavior in which attachment theory is particularly insightful, i.e., the domain of advertisements, particularly those which depict an interpersonal relationship.

The current research also advances new insights into the effectiveness of certain visual stimuli in advertisements. Research has shown

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that visual imagery depicted in ads can influence consumers' liking and perceived attractiveness of advertised products (Jiang et al., 2014), but it heretofore remains unclear how the depiction of relationships, specifically, impact consumer evaluations of advertised products. The present research focuses on the common practice of depicting relationships, or "happy togetherness," in marketing communications (Cavanaugh, 2014), and reveals how the effectiveness of such strategies is directly associated with individuals' attachment styles. In the next section, a review of attachment theory is provided, followed by the development of our conceptual model and two studies which empirically test the hypothesized predictions. A detailed discussion of the theoretical contributions, as well as important practical implications of the research is provided later in the paper.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Attachment theory and interpersonal attachment styles

Focusing upon the dispositions and propensities undertaken by individuals in their development of relationships, attachment theory proposes that individuals' unique interpersonal experiences with their caregivers during childhood shape their perceptions and expectations of relationships throughout life (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1980). Individuals with different attachment styles are likely to construe the same relational-relevant situations or interpersonal encounters in different ways, as they are predisposed to interpret such events in ways that are consistent with their existing expectations and beliefs (Collins, 1996).

Early literature on attachment theory suggests three attachment styles that individuals can hold: anxious, secure, or avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). First, anxious attachment styles are held by individuals who, based on being cared for in an inconsistent manner, have a strong need for closeness and are preoccupied with attachment, while also worrying about relationships (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). Second, secure attachment styles are held by individuals who, based on being cared for in a responsive and reliable manner, expect that others will be available and supportive when needed (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Third, avoidant attachment styles are held by individuals who, based on having unresponsive caregivers, have developed a sense of independence, whereby they prefer emotional distance from others and are disinterested in interpersonal-related situations (Bowlby, 1980).

Although the three-category approach (i.e., secure, anxious, avoidant) of attachment styles served as the initial conceptualization of individual attachment styles (Bowlby, 1980; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), a two-dimensional conceptualization (consisting of anxiety and avoidance dimensions) has become more well-accepted in the literature (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Thomson et al., 2012), as individual differences in attachment representations are more consistent with a dimensional (vs. categorical) conceptualization (See Fraley, Hudson, Heffernan, & Segal, 2015 for a review). The present research follows this dimensional approach, and similar to extant research (e.g., Cho & White, 2013 and Swaminathan et al., 2009, studies 2 and 3), it focuses upon a single dimension of attachment style. Specifically, attachment anxiety, which concerns the extent to which individuals consider and are worried about how their behaviors may result in rejection by others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) is particularly relevant to the current research, as anxiously attached individuals view relationships as a central part of their lives (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Thus, the present research focuses specifically on the anxiety dimension of attachment style, as it is directly associated with interpersonal influence.

Of note, it is especially important from a practical perspective to understand how attachment anxiety, in particular, is associated with individuals' behaviors as consumers. Specifically, although secure attachment styles (i.e., those low in anxiety and avoidance) have

traditionally been the most prevalent style in society (Bowlby, 1980; Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997), attachment theory scholars suggest that drastic societal changes, such as more mothers in the workplace and higher divorce rates are contributing to greater levels of attachment anxiety (Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, & Holland, 2013; Mickelson et al., 1997; Salo, Jokela, Lehtimäki, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2011). Importantly, these societal trends are associated with attachment anxiety but do not appear to impact the levels of attachment avoidance (Belsky, Houts, & Fearon, 2010; Fraley et al., 2013; Mickelson et al., 1997). Thus, it is particularly important to understand how varying levels of attachment anxiety impact individuals' behaviors as consumers.

In the next section, predictions are developed regarding how attachment anxiety may impact individuals' evaluations of products shown in ads that portray an interpersonal relationship. Focusing specifically on attachment anxiety (and thus holding attachment avoidance constant), individuals who are lower in attachment anxiety are more securely attached. Thus, in the remainder of the paper, we refer to individuals who are greater (lower) in attachment anxiety as anxiously (securely) attached individuals.

2.2. Anxious and secure attachment styles and relational advertising stimuli

Interpersonal attachment styles, or the way in which individuals perceive others and perceive themselves in reference to others (Bowlby, 1980), affect consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to attachment-relevant events (Simpson & Rholes, 2010). Indeed, extant research has shown that individuals who have attachment styles that are high in anxiety and characterized by interpersonal insecurity may use a brand's personality (i.e., exciting) to fulfill a signaling role and project their ideal self-concept to others (Swaminathan et al., 2009). Similarly, interpersonal attachment styles may influence consumer responses to specific stimuli shown in advertisements. Specifically, and as discussed below, anxious and less anxious, more securely attached individuals likely differ in their responses to products shown in ads that portray an interpersonal relationship. Indeed, highly anxious attachment styles are manifested by hyperactive concerns with relationships, including strong desires for closeness, but intense fears of abandonment or rejection by others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Less anxious, more secure attachment styles, however, are characterized by greater interdependence, that is, comfort with getting close to others and expectations that others will accept of them (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003).

Attachment styles affect individuals' interpretations of and expectations regarding interpersonal situations they encounter (Collins, 1996; Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991), and individuals often make experiential choices that are imbued by social and historical forces (Allen, 2002). Similarly, the social situation and interpersonal context shown in an advertisement may impact an individual's feelings of how the advertised product may fit with oneself. Indeed, extant literature on visual imagery has shown that ads are more effective when they exhibit stimuli which viewers can easily and positively relate to (Debevec & Romeo, 1992). Importantly, it is likely that, among anxious and securely attached individuals, ads which depict relationships (versus those that do not) have varying effects on consumer evaluations, including experiential-based feelings about fit of the advertised product with oneself.

As documented in the consumer research literature, individuals sometimes make decisions based on feelings of fit or rightness. Specifically, the "fits-like-a-glove" framework theorizes individuals' decisions as being more experiential and less rational or constructive (Allen, 2002, 515). These so-called experiential choices are imbued by social and historical forces; that is, they are made based on feelings that arise when a person imagines a choice in light of previous experiences. Similarly, and as discussed above, attachment theory explains that individuals' expectations of relationships and perceptions of oneself in relationships are a function of their attachment styles, which are developed

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