



# Romantic gift giving as chore or pleasure: The effects of attachment orientations on gift giving perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

In two studies we introduce Attachment theory as a fresh consumer research perspective on the study of gift giving perceptions among individuals in romantic relationships. We explore the intricacies of romantic gift giving as affected by the interplay between long-lasting individual dispositional variables and relationship-specific variables. In Study 1 we show that when provided with descriptions of unknown persons' attachment orientations and their emotional needs in romantic relationships, participants can accurately predict those persons' gift giving perceptions. In Study 2 we directly assess the links between dispositional attachment orientations and gift giving perceptions as well as the underlying processes through self-reports of participants currently in romantic relationships. We find that self-esteem and relationship satisfaction influence the link between attachment orientations and gift giving perceptions. We also provide implications for future research and practitioners.

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## 1. Introduction

Why is it that some people always seem to stress when it comes to buying gifts for significant others, whereas others seem to enjoy the whole experience? Why do some people see gifting a romantic partner as an obligation while others see it as a fun, noble expression of love or commitment? Is the stress or joy associated with the gift giving experience influenced by how satisfied individuals are in their current romantic relationships? Or is it dependent on individuals' working models that were formed in childhood? In the research reported here we explore the factors that underlie the way people approach gift giving (as either a pleasure or chore) by assessing the influence of attachment orientations vis-à-vis self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, and relationship commitment. Our research is informed by Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988) as attachment psychologists show that individuals develop expectations about what is likely to happen in relationships and these expectations influence their behaviors.

We choose to frame our context of analysis on romantic relationships as Belk and Coon (1991) suggest that dating, mating, and courtship involve intense personal interactions, which exert powerful effects on gift giving. Our research focuses on the perceptions of the givers as influenced by their attachment orientations because attachment theorists (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988; Feeney and Noller,

1990) have shown that individuals' attachment orientations are stable and exert strong influence on their behaviors in interpersonal relationships.

In the following sections, we report the results of two studies that test the effects of attachment orientations on people's perceptions of romantic gift giving. In Study 1, we investigate the link between attachment orientations and gift giving perceptions using a vignette technique. In Study 2, we examine this link through self-reported measures of attachment and also explore the underlying processes. Finally, we provide a discussion of our results and suggest implications for researchers and practitioners. Our studies make important contributions to the gift giving literature in several ways. We show that attachment orientations influence people's perceptions of gift giving in both self-reports and manipulated scenarios. We also show that the intricacies of gift giving perceptions are due in part to long-lasting and stable factors such as individuals' attachment orientations as well as situational context factors such as relationship satisfaction. Our research is among a few studies in consumer behavior (Thomson et al., 2005; Swaminathan et al., 2009) that investigate interpersonal behaviors from an attachment perspective. We begin with a discussion of the romantic gift giving and attachment literatures.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The romantic gift giving literature

A gift is defined as a good or service voluntarily provided to another person or group through some sort of ritual presentation (Belk, 1979). Sherry (1983) suggests that gift giving is one of the processes that

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integrate a society. Regarding romantic gift giving, Belk and Coon (1991, 1993) propose that gifts are used as a mechanism to start a relationship and to both initiate and reciprocate gift giving. Gifts can help the givers reinforce highly valued unstable relationships (Caplow, 1982), or ingratiate themselves with the recipient (Belk, 1988; Ruth et al., 2004). In general, studies (Beatty et al., 1991; Belk, 1988; Belk and Coon, 1991; Goodwin et al., 1990; Schiffman and Cohn, 2009; Wolfenbarger, 1990) show that gifts carry symbolic meanings through which givers communicate their feelings and commitment to recipients.

However, gifts are not always given and perceived as a voluntary act. Belk (1976, p. 155) suggests “the obligation to give may be based on moral or religious imperatives, the need to recognize and maintain a status hierarchy, the need to establish or maintain peaceful relations, or simply the expectation of reciprocal giving.” Cheal (1987, 1988) finds that under certain circumstances, people give gifts as an obligation to conform to relationship rules. This view is shared by Goodwin et al. (1990) who find that in socially defined gifting occasions, the giver's motives can be predominantly voluntary, predominantly obligatory, or a combination of both. In the context of social ties in the Chinese culture, Joy (2001) finds that while there is no obligation to give close friends gifts on ritual occasions, givers often express a sense of obligation when gifting good friends and Hi-Bye friends, mainly due to the givers' perception of reciprocity and indebtedness to the receivers. More recently, Marcoux (2009) finds that feelings of obligation from a gift economy can incite people to turn to the market as an escape. Schiffman and Cohn (2009) investigate the dynamics of gift giving behaviors among long-term committed romantic dyads and find that couples follow two rulebooks. The Symbolic Communication Rulebook defines gifts as a form of idealized symbolic communication while the Economic Exchange Rulebook suggests gifts are instrumental, rational, and pragmatic intended to commoditize objects. Feelings of obligation are not uncommon among givers following the Economic Exchange Rulebook.

These findings suggest that besides situational factors that are specific to the romantic relationship such as the quality of the relationship and the recipient, there are other factors that underlie feelings of obligation, and these factors might be dispositionally internal to the giver. For example, if a person is highly avoidant and generally distrustful of his or her relationship partner(s), that person may regard all gift exchanges as obligatory and not enjoy gifting, whether or not the person is satisfied with the relationship. It is likely that romantic gift giving is influenced by the interplay between situational, relationship-specific variables (e.g., relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction) and stable, predispositional variables such as self-esteem and attachment orientations. However, the extant literature has largely neglected these long-lasting and stable variables. We attempt to address this gap from an attachment perspective.

## 2.2. Attachment theory

Attachment theory explains people's propensity to form affective bonds with others and to regulate inner distress, including anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Research on adult attachment is guided by the assumption that the same motivational system that gives rise to close emotional bonds between children and their parents is responsible for the bonds that develop among adults in emotionally intimate relationships. According to the theory, early experiences between a child and the primary caregiver lay the foundation for functioning in subsequent relationships. These early experiences create inner representations (working models) of the attachment system of the self (as worthy of love or not) and others (as trustworthy or not). These working models shape later patterns of habitual response to significant others and to distressing situations. Attachment theory shares some similarities regarding insecure attachment with Horney's tripartite interpersonal

theory (Horney, 1945). However, while Horney's theory has been mainly applied to personality disorder research, Attachment theory has become a major organizational framework for interpersonal behaviors in close relationships (Davidovitz et al., 2007). Its relevancy to our research is indisputable, as we investigate romantic gift giving perceptions.

Early work on infant attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978) identified three types of attachment orientation: secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent attachment. Research suggests that a person's attachment orientation has strong effects on various relationship behaviors. Simpson (1990) illustrates that compared to anxious and avoidant attachments, a secure attachment is associated with greater relationship interdependence, commitment, trust, and satisfaction. Anxious and avoidant attachments are associated with less frequent positive emotions and more frequent negative emotions. Diamond et al. (2008) find that separation-related changes in affect, behavior, and physiology are more pronounced among highly anxious individuals as such individuals are more sensitive to the loss of partner availability.

In this research, we propose that attachment orientations exert a strong influence on romantic gift giving perceptions. Gifting is an important aspect of romantic relationships and how people view themselves in relation to romantic partners should affect their gift giving perceptions.

## 3. Study 1

In order to test the effects of individuals' attachment orientations on gift giving perceptions, in Study 1 we used a vignette technique, which presented participants with descriptions of unknown persons who displayed typical attachment orientations. Participants were asked to assess how the unknown persons in the descriptions would perceive romantic gift giving. The vignette technique has been widely used not only in the attachment but also consumer behavior literature (e.g., Luo, 2005). When participants evaluate unknown persons, the results should not be affected by participants overrating their own input in order to present themselves positively (Grau and Doll, 2003).

### 3.1. Secure attachment and gift giving

Attachment theory specifies secure attachment as low on both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions. Researchers (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998; Grau and Doll, 2003; Hazan and Shaver, 1987) have found that securely attached individuals are happy and maintain a very positive self model. They are very confident and trusting in their relationships and have no fear of intimacy with romantic partners. They make considerable investment and have constructive strategies in dealing with conflicts (Pistole, 1989). In line with these findings, we predict that secure people will enjoy gifting their romantic partners and not perceive it as an obligation. To secure individuals, a gift may be the perfect way to show their love.

### 3.2. Anxious attachment and gift giving

Goodwin et al. (1990) suggest that the unpleasant prospect of strained relations due to a partner's failure to honor the gifting custom leads to strong feelings of obligation. Close and Zinkhan (2009) find that people in the early stages of a relationship feel obliged about buying Valentine's gifts. Feelings of obligation may come from the fact that consumers in a new relationship buy to solidify or invest in the relationship. Regarding our research, an important characteristic of anxious individuals is their fear of being abandoned or neglected by attachment figures. They tend to blame their partners for being unsupportive and not fulfilling their emotional needs (Grau and Doll, 2003). They focus their attention on their partners and constantly

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