Gift-Giving Behaviors: Views From an Attachment Perspective

Hieu P. Nguyen, University of Texas at Arlington
James M. Munch, University of Texas at Arlington

This research provides a fresh perspective on the study of gift-giving behaviors among individuals in romantic relationships. Interpersonal attachment theory provides a firm foundation on which we based our hypotheses. Specifically, we explore individuals’ gift giving behaviors based on their dispositional attachment orientations and show that an individual’s attachment orientation exerts differential effects on their gift giving behaviors. We found that anxiously attached individuals view gift giving as an obligation rather than altruism and tend to experience more anxiety while searching for gifts. They prefer gifts that are prestigious, functional, and fun. In return, they expect romantic partners to express gratitude. On the other hand, avoidant individuals do not manifest these behaviors, and they don’t volunteer to give gifts.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12819/volumes/v34/NA-34

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A large body of research has investigated different aspects of the gift-giving experience including social, personal, and economic exchanges (Belk and Coon 1991; Mattson 1982), social roles and relationships (Joy 2001; Ottes et al. 1993; Ruth et al.1999), symbolism (Belk and Coon 1993; Wolfinbarger 1990), anxiety (Wooten 2000) and the personal value of gifts (Larsen and Watson 2001; Ruffle 1999). Researchers have attempted to propose taxonomies of gift-giving motives, including Sherry’s (1983) altruistic versus agnostic motives, the Goodwin et al.’s (1990) voluntary versus obligatory motives, and Wolfinbarger’s (1990) groupings of motives (altruism, compliance with social norms, and self-interest). However, very few studies have attempted to explore the role of personal attachment in shaping gift giving behaviors among couples.

In an attempt to find the answer to this question, we based our research on findings from the interpersonal relationship literature, particularly Attachment Theory.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973) explains the propensity of people to form lasting affectional bonds with other people and to regulate inner distress, including anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment. According to the theory, early experiences between a child and his or her primary caregiver lay the foundation for functioning in subsequent relationships. Early work (Ainsworth et al. 1978) identified three types of attachment: secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent attachment. Bowlby (1973) found that securely attached people have a strong, secure base and believe that significant others are available in stressful circumstances. They tend to develop mental models of themselves as friendly, good-natured, and likeable whereas significant others are well intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy (Simpson 1990).

Mikulincer and Orbach (1995) found that anxious individuals tend to maintain distance from attachment figures, deny their insecurity and related negative affects. Meanwhile, Simpson (1990) found that anxious individuals tend to develop models of themselves as being misunderstood, unconfident, and underappreciated. In their eyes, significant others are typically unreliable, either unwilling or unable to commit themselves to a permanent relationship.

More recent work on attachment style has suggested that the attachment system could be more precisely conceptualized and measured dimensionally rather than categorically along two fundamental dimensions: attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance. People who score high on the anxiety dimension tend to worry whether their attachment figures would be available, responsive, and attentive. People who score low on this dimension are more secure with respect to the perceived responsiveness of their partners. People who score high on the avoidance dimension tend to retract from attachment figures and prefer not to rely on others. People who score low on this dimension are more comfortable being intimate with others and are more secure relying on and having others rely on them.

Based on these findings, ten hypotheses were developed and tested in this paper. We were interested in the effects of attachment style on people’s gift giving motives (voluntary vs. obligatory), gift selection effort, gift giving anxiety, types of gifts chosen, and expectation of gratitude. A questionnaire was developed and handed out to 134 undergraduate students, resulting in a usable sample size of 127 responses after data cleaning. Attachment style was measured with the ECR scale (Brennan et al. 1998) while dependent variables were measured with established scales. All scales showed significant reliability.

Multiple regression analysis was used as the analytical tool. Results indicated that nine out of ten hypotheses were supported. As predicted, anxiety attachment is positively related to obligatory rather than voluntary gift giving while avoidance attachment is negatively related to voluntary gift giving. Avoidance attachment was negatively related to gift selection efforts and surprisingly, anxiety attachment was not positively related to gift selection efforts as we had predicted. We also found that anxiety attachment was positively related to choice of gifts that are prestigious, functional, and fun, while it was not the case for avoidance attachment. We also found that anxiety attachment was positively related to gift giving anxiety while avoidant individuals seemed immune from it.

Finally, results indicated that as expected, anxiety attachment was positively related to expectations of gratitude while avoidance attachment was not.

This study provides empirical support for the influence of individuals’ attachment style on their gift giving behaviors in romantic relationships. The main contribution of this paper is that it provides a fresh perspective on the study of people’s gift giving experiences. The personal attachment approach that we propose here is particularly relevant to the inquiry of gift giving behaviors in romantic relationships because it explores gift giving behaviors based on how people see themselves (actual role) versus others (their romantic partners) and consequently use gifts to strengthen that role and also express their aspiration to get closer to their ideal role in the relationship. This research direction is in line with Belk’s (1979) contention that the giver’s ideal self-concept is more strongly related to gift choice than either the giver’s actual self-concept or the perceptions of the gift by the recipient in both gift selection and symbolic encoding of gift by giver.

This study also provides valuable insights to marketers in their efforts to understand the “hot buttons” that cause consumers to choose certain products as gifts. Marketers could integrate findings from this study into their advertising messages for gifts that would appeal to different attachment patterns. For instance, knowing that anxious individuals experience a high level of anxiety when searching for gifts, marketers or gift consultants could present gift choices that not only take the burden off their shoulders but also communicate the message that they (the gift givers) are committed to the relationship and will therefore be rewarded with much gratitude and appreciation from their partners.

Future research should explore the effects of attachment style from the gift recipient’s perspectives and answer these questions: what value do they appreciate the most (economic, functional, social, or expressive)? What gift attributes do they prefer? Do they feel comfortable letting their partners know of their feelings about the gift (for example, if a woman receives a gift that she does not like)? These questions, when answered, will provide valuable insights to marketers in designing marketing strategies and persuasive communications that speak to the heart of both the givers and recipients of the gifts.
REFERENCE