The Influence of Attachment Anxiety on Attitudes For Ads Related to Interpersonal Goals

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The Influence of Attachment Anxiety on Attitudes for Ads Related to Interpersonal Goals

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have theorized that people with different attachment styles think, feel, and behave differently in a variety of domains. The present research investigated how attachment anxiety influences how consumers process different types of ads, in particular ads that focus on interpersonal versus self goals. Results from a study showed that consumers with higher chronic attachment anxiety had more favorable attitudes towards couple-focused versus self-focused ads. This research provides initial empirical evidence as to the effects of attachment style on persuasion outcomes.

Throughout their lives, people desire to grow closer to and gain approval from their relationship partners, including friends, family members, and romantic partners. Indeed, relationship partners can be strong elicitors of influential motivations that shape our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003; Gillath et al. 2006). Recent studies have shown that just thinking about one’s significant others can automatically and unconsciously activate goals associated with significant others. For example, when college students are asked to think about their mother, they show higher achievement motivation and better performance on an achievement test (e.g., Shah 2003). Individuals who are motivated in certain respects (e.g., due to high self-monitoring or a need to belong) try to achieve goals that their significant others set for them, even if these goals do not match their own self goals (Morrison, Wheeler, and Smeesters 2007).

Given the importance of relationship partners in daily life, it is not surprising that advertising messages often emphasize how the use of certain products can advance consumers’ interpersonal goals. Thus, it is important for researchers to understand how different groups of consumers are influenced by ads that highlight interpersonal goals to different degrees. So far, little research has examined how consumers process and in turn are influenced by persuasive appeals that highlight interpersonal goals versus other goals, in particular self goals.

The present research examined how attachment style influences consumers’ responses to ads related to the advancement of interpersonal goals versus personal goals. Past studies have not attempted to link attachment style to persuasion. Our study provides initial empirical evidence as to the effects of attachment style on ad attitudes.

ATTACHMENT THEORY AND RESEARCH

During the first few years of life, infants become emotionally attached to their primary caregiver, the caregiver with whom they interact with the most often. Originally, attachment theory was developed to explain the nature of the infant-caregiver relationship. Later, attachment researchers, notably Bowlby (e.g., 1980, 1982), argued that the core function of the attachment system continues through life. This is the basic assumption of the “internal working model” (Bowlby 1969). Internal working models of attachment are thought to be cognitive-affective motivational schemas. Whereas traditional approaches to schemas have tended to focus on semantic knowledge, internal working models of attachment emphasize the representation of motivational elements, such as needs or goals (Shaver, Collins, and Clark 1996).

Internal working models play an important role in shaping how individuals interpret their interpersonal relationships and the social world in which they reside. Main, Kaplan, and Cassidy (1985) proposed that an internal working model during childhood is composed of specific experiences of one’s self and others. Over time, these specific experiences become more generalized beliefs and expectations about the warmth and responsiveness of others, worthiness of the self, and the level of security in the world. Thus, internal working models are expected to become solidified through repeated experience and increasingly generalized. Although the presentation of self and others changes and evolves over people’s lifetimes as they form new relationships with others, research suggests that internal working models remain strongly influential (Collins and Read 1994). Once developed, people’s histories of interpersonal experiences and their unique sets of memories, beliefs, and expectations shape how they think and feel about relationships with others and how they behave in relationships. Moreover, these internal working models of attachment function are largely automatic (Bowlby 1979; Collins and Allard 2001). Below, we review research on adult attachment style, which is believed to be rooted in chronic differences in internal working models of the self and others developed in infancy. We then review how these systematic differences would be expected to influence how certain types of ads, those that emphasize interpersonal goals versus self goals, are processed.

Attachment Style and Pursuit of Interpersonal Goals

Attachment style refers to an individual’s habitual pattern of relational perceptions, emotions, and behaviors in interpersonal relationships (Collins and Read 1990). Researchers have theorized that there are three prototypical attachment styles that develop based on infants’ reactions to separation and reunion with a primary caregiver: 1) secure; 2) anxious; and 3) avoidant (Ainsworth, Salter, Blehar, and Wall 1978). Here, we focus on relationships between attachment style and interpersonal goals. People with different attachment styles differ in the extent to which they are motivated to seek closeness, avoid rejection, and maintain autonomy.

Adults with a secure attachment style tend to be more comfortable with closeness, intimacy, and interdependence in their interpersonal relationships. They are generally willing to rely on others when necessary and are confident that they are worthy of the love of others. They tend to have a favorable self view, and this makes securely-attached adults less dependent on receiving other people’s validation or support (Collins and Read 1994). Securely-attached people have a more balanced preference for both autonomy versus closeness. Getting close to others does not threaten securely-attached people’s sense of autonomy. And, maintaining autonomy does not provoke worries about being abandoned or rejected by others.

On the contrary, insecurely-attached people (both avoidantly-attached and anxiously-attached) are less able to balance closeness and autonomy desires. Because individuals with an avoidant attachment style have a largely negative view of human nature, they tend to distrust trust other people, maintain emotional distance from them, and show less interest in forming close relationships (Bowlby 1982; Shaver and Hazan 1988). Although individuals with an avoidant attachment style have negative views about others, they generally have a favorable self view. Avoidant people tend to believe that independence and self-reliance are more important than the support or positive views of other people. They desire distance from others and self-control.
Whereas avoidantly-attached people prefer not to depend on others, anxiously-attached people are highly dependent on others' reactions and behaviors. Anxiously-attached people are relatively insecure about their partner's feelings and doubt their partner's love (Hazan and Shaver 1987). They habitually worry about being rejected or abandoned. This anxiety produces a strong desire for closeness, proximity seeking, and dependence on others. Anxiously-attached people tend to pursue interpersonal goals accorded with their strong needs for closeness which causes them to behave in a dependent manner. They tend to think that they are unlovable unless they are able to meet others' expectations (Collins and Read 1990; Mikulincer 1998). Anxiously-attached people are motivated to meet certain standards of worth in order to get approval from others and satisfy others. Indeed, their level of personal happiness and well-being is directly related to the amount of approval they receive from others and to the amount of satisfaction they produce in others (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991; Davis, Shaver, and Vernon 2004). For these two groups, attentional focus is not on others. For example, because the motivation of the avoidantly-attached is to minimize attachment concerns, they tend to direct attention away from information that makes others' needs salient (Fraley, Davis, and Shaver 1998).

There has not been much empirical work that has directly assessed the information processing goals of individuals with different attachment styles. However, a few studies provide some evidence. Mikulincer (1997) provided indirect evidence that attachment-related goals influence information processing. In his study, participants were asked to evaluate a product and select how much time they had left for a second task. Half of the participants were told that the second task was related to a social interaction. The rest of the participants were told that it was not related to a social interaction. The study showed that participants with an anxious attachment style chose to spend less time during the first task when the second task was social versus non-social. In contrast, participants with an avoidant attachment style preferred to spend more time during the first session when the second task was social versus non-social. Participants with a secure attachment style did not show any difference in terms of the amount of time selected during the first section, regardless of whether the second task was social or non-social. These results indicate that participants allocated their attention in ways that served their chronically-active goals due to attachment style.

### Attachment Style and Persuasion

As discussed above, past research has demonstrated ways in which attachment style affects how people think, feel, and behave in situations such as romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver 1994) and friendships (Trinke and Bartholomew 1997). Some research has attempted to incorporate attachment theory into the consumer domain. A recent study showed that consumers with different attachment styles are respond differently to types of brand personalities. Specifically, whereas consumers who are both anxiously- and avoidantly-attached prefer exciting brands, consumers who are anxiously-attached but not avoidantly-attached prefer sincere brands (Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia 2009). Thomson and Johnson (2001) showed that knowledge of different attachment styles can be used to predict satisfaction in consumer-brand relationships. They found that consumers with either higher or lower scores on both avoidance and anxiety measures reported greater satisfaction in consumer-brand relationships. Consumers who were higher on one dimension but not the other were likely to report lower satisfaction in consumer-brand relationships. According to Nguyen and Munch (2006), consumers with different attachment styles exhibit different gift-giving behaviors. Anxiously-attached consumers view giving a gift to their romantic partners as an obligation. After giving gifts to their romantic partners, they expect to receive appreciation in return. Alternatively, consumers with high avoidance attachment who give gifts to their romantic partners do not expect gratitude. Another study demonstrated that avoidantly-attached consumers are generally less attached to possessions after a loss than are securely-attached consumers (Ferraro, Escalas, and Bettman 2006).

### Overview

As of yet, there have been no studies directly examining the association between attachment style and persuasion. The premise of the present research is that understanding structures and functions of internal working models can provide insight into this issue. In our study, we investigated whether different types of ad appeals, those that focus on the fulfillment of interpersonal goals versus self goals, produce different persuasion effects among anxiously-attached consumers. In the present research, we view an interpersonal ad as an ad that emphasizes how a product can increase social interaction with and the satisfaction of a romantic partner through the use of the advertised product. We view a self-ad as an ad that emphasizes the satisfaction the individual consumer can gain through use of the advertised product outside of any interpersonal context. In view of the above, we predicted that consumers with high (vs. low) attachment anxiety would have relatively more favorable attitudes towards an ad highlighting the emotional value a romantic couple (vs. an individual) would receive from buying and using the advertised product.

### Study

In order to create ads that emphasized the fulfillment of interpersonal goals versus personal goals, we conducted a pretest ($n=102$; 56% female; $M_{age}=21$). Participants viewed an ad that depicted either a single individual (self-focused ad condition) or a couple (couple-focused ad condition) enjoying and benefiting emotionally from a product. The product we selected was a digital camera because consumers can enjoy taking pictures for their own pleasure and/or for the pleasure of others. We used a fictitious brand name for the digital camera so participants could not rely on potentially preexisting brand attitudes. Each of the two ads we created had 11-12 lines of ad copy. The ads differed in that the couple-focused ad showed a romantic couple benefiting from the use of the product whereas the self-focused ad showed an individual benefiting from the use of the product. Each ad included 3-4 clip-art pictures that showed either a happy couple or a happy individual.

All participants read:

"Picture your life with a Pentax digital camera. Pentex digital cameras offer superb image quality with vibrant colors, detail..."
and performance. Equipped with the latest technology, Pentex digital cameras have all the features you want, and their intuitive design makes using these features easy."

Participants in the self-focused ad condition then read the following ad copy:

"Taking a photograph is more than just documenting your experience. It’s a way to capture and hold onto the feelings you felt during those singular moments in your life. These photos will reflect those moments that make up the store of your life. Pentex Digital Cameras will make you happy."

The copy for the couple-focused ad stated:

"Taking a photograph is more than just documenting your experience. It’s a way to capture and hold onto the feelings you shared during those special moments spent with your special someone. These photos will reflect the joy and love that make up the story of your life. Pentex Digital Cameras will make your special someone happy."

After reading the ad, all participants reported the degree to which the ad made them focus on people with whom they have an interpersonal relationship (1=Not much at all, 7=Very much). As expected, we found that participants in couple-focused ad condition focused more on their interpersonal relationships compared to participants in self-focused ad condition (M\text{couple}=4.42 vs. M\text{self}=3.20; t(101)=3.22, p<.01).

**Method**

The study was a 2 (ad type: self-focused vs. couple-focused) X 3 (attachment style: secure vs. anxious vs. avoidant) design. These factors were not fully crossed as was possible that participants could score high or low along more than one attachment style (see below).

Three hundred and two college-age students (58% female; Mage=21) at a West Coast University were paid $5 to participate in an advertising study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the ad conditions. After reading the ad, they rated their attitude toward it (Aad). Participants then completed demographic questions. After several filler items (from unrelated studies), participants completed the Collins and Read (1990)’s adult attachment scale measure. This 18-item scale includes three subscales based on Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) three category measure of adult attachment style: (a) comfort with closeness (attachment security), (b) comfort depending on others (attachment avoidance), and (c) anxiety in relationships (attachment anxiety). Example items include: “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others” (attachment avoidance); “I often worry my partner will not want to stay with me” (attachment anxiety); and “I find it relatively easy to get close to others” (attachment security). Each item was rated on a seven-point Likert scale, from “not at all like me” (1) to “very much like me” (7).

Past studies have used either a categorical measure of the three types of adult attachment style or a two-dimension continuous measure of attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Neither of these measures fully captures adult attachment. That is, individuals cannot be cleanly divided into one category of attachment style. Individuals can score high or low on more than one attachment style measure. The two dimensional measure focuses only on attachment avoidance and anxiety ignores attachment security; low attachment avoidance and anxiety are presumed to be high in attachment security. However, some individuals score highly on both attachment anxiety and attachment security, thereby qualifying for both attachment dimensions. In our research, we used three different continuous attachment measures (secure, anxious, and avoidant) and analyzed each separately. Thus, we do examine potential interactions among different attachment styles, although one might find them. As we discuss below, this may be viewed as a limitation of the present research.

**Results**

We tested our predictions using three separate ANOVAs. The three attachment styles were analyzed separately. The continuous measure for each attachment style was used in all analyses.

Participants completed 3 items that measured their ad attitudes (bad-good, dislike-like, and unfavorable-favorable, 1-7 scale). We averaged these items (α=.92). ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between the anxious attachment measure and ad condition (F(1, 298)=6.95, p<.01). Follow-up analysis showed that there was no effect of anxious attachment style in the self-focused ad condition (F(1, 147)=1.86, p = .17) whereas there was a significant positive effect of anxious attachment style in the couple-focused ad condition (F(1, 151)=5.62, p<.02). A median split (Med.=3.44) illustrates that anxiously-attached participants had more favorable ad attitudes in the couple-focused ad condition compared to participants not anxiously attached (M\text{High}=4.97 vs. M\text{Low}=4.40). There were no significant interaction effects on ad attitudes among securely-attached participants (F(1, 298)=.10, p=.75) or avoidantly-attached (F(1, 298)=.30, p=.58).

**Discussion**

These results show that consumers with different attachment styles respond differently to the two ad types. As predicted, anxiously-attached participants had more favorable attitudes toward the couple-focused ad. These results are consistent with the view that anxiously-attached people are more dependent on others and that the couple-focused ad is preferred because it shows how product purchase can fulfill their (chronic) goal of positive interpersonal interaction.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

**Summary**

Consumer researchers have not paid much attention to the role of attachment style in persuasion. This research investigated the influence of consumers’ attachment styles on ad attitudes. Our study sheds light on the link between attachment style and persuasion outcome. Due to positive and warm interactions with their primary caregivers, people with a secure attachment style seek to balance autonomy and interdependence goals. Due to inconsistent care-giving from their primary caregivers, people with an anxious attachment style doubt their own lovability and depend on others for approval (Mikulincer 1998). Results from our study showed that anxiously-attached versus securely-attached consumers had more favorable attitudes towards a couple-focused ad versus a self-focused ad.

Taken together, this research provides the first empirical evidence that attachment styles are related to responses to ads having to do with interpersonal goals. However, this research should be viewed only as an initial step in the exploration of the complex association between consumers’ attachment style and persuasion process.

**Limitations and Follow-up Study**

There are several limitations to this research that need to be examined in future research. One limitation of the study was that it used fictional ads and did not have a no-people control condition.
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(i.e., an ad that shows a picture of an individual or a couple with the product). While this enabled us to control for potential pre-existing brand attitudes, our results might not generalize. We ran a follow-up study (n=100; 64% female; M_age=20) which used real ads and had a no-people control ad condition. The study was a 3 (appeal type: self-focused vs. couple-focused vs. control) X 3 (attachment style: secure vs. anxious vs. avoidant) within subject design. Participants read three ads (randomly ordered). They then completed the attachment measures.

Participants in the self-focused ad condition read:

“Some of the greatest fights don’t involve an opponent. Everlast. Greatness is within.” The ad shows a single person punching a sandbag. In the couple-focused ad condition, participants read:

“Reveal your natural tone and reveal the real you. New NIVEA natural tone moisturizer with even tone complex helps fight the discoloration caused by aging, dryness and too much sun. So you have beautifully even-toned skin in all over. And the confidence to get as close as you want. NIVEA. Touch and be touched.”

The ad shows a couple (two individuals looking at each other. In the control condition, participants read:

“Do you really have to spend “60,000 to get a $60,000 car? Building an exceptional $60,000 luxury sedan is an amazing accomplishment. Designing it to cost less than $40,000, however, is nothing short of a miracle. Which brings us to the remarkable new 2009 Genesis. With rear-wheel drive and a 4.6 L, 375-horsepower V8, it’s more powerful than the far pricier BMW 550i, yet as spacious as a 760Li or Mercedes-Benz S-Class.”

The ad shows only the product (a car) without a person or couple. A manipulation check confirmed that participants viewed the couple-focused ad as more couple-focused compared to the self-focused ad (M_couple=3.79 vs. M_self=2.26; t(182)=5.60, p<.001). ANOVA found a significant interaction effect on ad attitudes between ad condition and attachment anxiety (F(2, 276)=3.33, p<.05). There was no significant effect of attachment anxiety in the self-focused ad and control ad conditions but there was a significant effect in the couple-focused ad condition (F(1, 80)=13.90, p<.001). A median split along the attachment anxiety measure (Med.=3.63) showed that anxiously-attached participants (vs. not) had more favorable attitudes towards the couple-focused ad (M_high=4.82 vs. M_low=3.92). As in the main study, there was no significant effect of ad type on the ad attitudes of avoidantly-attached or securely-attached participants. Thus, the results of the follow-up study are consistent with the results of the main study. They confirm that attachment anxiety influences responses to ads related to interpersonal versus self goals. Attachment anxiety did not influence attitudes towards the self-focused or control ads. These results notwithstanding, a clear limitation of the follow-up study is that it does not control for product type across ad conditions.

Another limitation of the main study is that it did not examine interactions among different attachment styles. The three attachment styles were studied separately. Yet, there may be interactions among attachment styles. A further limitation of the present research is that it relies on chronic attachment style to effect variation in attachment style strength. Research has demonstrated that attachment (in)security can be induced by priming techniques (e.g., Swaminathan et al. 2009). Given that, in many cases, marketers may not know their customers’ attachment styles, it would be extremely useful to confirm our results in a future study that primes attachment style.

Conclusion

Attachment researchers have long theorized that people with different attachment styles think, feel, and behave differently in a variety of domains. Despite the potential importance of attachment style to consumer behavior, attachment style has not been extensively studied by consumer researchers. This research provides initial evidence that consumers with different attachment styles respond differently to ads related to self versus interpersonal goals. Indeed, we believe that attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding a wide variety of persuasion issues. Our results have implications for marketers who may find it very useful and productive to target different kinds of ads to segments of consumers with different attachment styles.

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