The Push and Pull of Attachment Styles on Romantic Consumption

Martin Mende, Florida State University, USA
Maura Scott, Florida State University, USA
Aaron Garvey, University of Kentucky, USA
Lisa Bolton, Pennsylvania State University, USA

How and why people engage in romantic consumption is not fully understood. Two studies examine the impact of attachment styles on romantic consumption (e.g., romantic movies, weddings) and find that attachment anxiety stimulates romantic consumption and attachment avoidance functions as a barrier. These effects are driven by emotional intimacy motives.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The modern experience of romantic love is interlocked with the consumption of commodities and leisure goods (Illouz 1997). Consumers engage in romantic consumption routinely (e.g., romantic movies) and for exceptional events (e.g., weddings). Accordingly, romantic consumption is of crucial economic importance. For example, weddings are a $50+ billion business per year (IBISWorld). Surprisingly, given its ubiquitous nature, romantic consumption has received scant attention in consumer research.

We examine how and why consumers engage in romantic consumption. We posit that consumers’ attachment styles explain systematic differences in their romantic consumption. Individuals function in relationships differently through their attachment styles, defined as the systematic pattern of relational expectations, needs, emotions, and behaviors that results from the internalization of a particular history of attachment experiences (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver 2007). Attachment styles are conceptualized through two dimensions: Attachment anxiety is the extent to which a person worries and ruminates about being abandoned; attachment avoidance is the extent to which a person possesses an excessive need for self-reliance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver 1998). Because people can experience varying levels of each of these dimensions, the literature distinguishes four attachment styles (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver 1998).

We propose that attachment anxiety and avoidance trigger systematic patterns of romantic consumption. Given that attachment anxiety and avoidance are linked to engagement in or flight from romantic love, we argue that romance-themed offerings will trigger the attachment system. Specifically, a hyperactivated (deactivated) attachment system related to the anxious (avoidant) attachment style should result in distinct responses to romantic offerings:

Hypothesis 1: Consumer preference for, and consumption of, offerings that evoke romantic love (a) increase with an increasing level of attachment anxiety, but (b) decrease with an increasing level of attachment avoidance.

As the two dimensions interact, we propose that the positive effect of attachment anxiety in the context of romantic consumption counteracts the negative effect of avoidance:

Hypothesis 2: Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance interact to influence romantic consumption, such that the negative effect of attachment avoidance declines with an increasing level of attachment anxiety.

People have a fundamental motivation to form interpersonal bonds, to fulfill their need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Fulfilling this need has been shown to mediate the effect of attachment styles on psychological well-being. We explore whether romantic consumption helps fulfill the motive to achieve emotional intimacy.

Hypothesis 3: The effects triggered by attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and their interplay in response to offerings that evoke romantic love will be mediated by a motive for emotional intimacy.

We test these hypotheses in two studies. The first study is a survey of married women who report on their actual wedding spending. Results indicate that, at low levels of anxiety, avoidant consumers spend far less than secure consumers. At high levels of anxiety, avoidance has no effect: anxious and fearful consumers do not differ in their spending, which also does not differ from the spending of secure consumers. These results support H1-H2: attachment avoidance reduces romantic consumption (in the form of wedding spending)—but less so as attachment anxiety increases. That is, attachment avoidance pushes consumers away from romantic consumption, but attachment anxiety pulls them back.

In the second study, participants watch a preview to a romantic movie and indicate their intentions to watch the rest of the romantic movie (or a non-romantic movie alternative). At low levels of anxiety, intentions to watch the romantic movie decline as avoidance increases; at high levels of anxiety, avoidance has no effect (anxious and fearful consumers do not differ in their intentions, nor from secure consumers). These results support H1-H2: Avoidance deters romantic consumption whereas anxiety pulls consumers back toward romantic consumption (and outweighs the effect of avoidance). Moreover, mediation analyses support H3: Attachment effects on romantic consumption arise from differences in the desire for emotional intimacy by attachment style.

Together, this research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we contribute to consumer attachment research (e.g., Thomson & Johnson 2006; Thomson, Whelan, & Johnson 2012) by demonstrating the influence of the interplay between attachment anxiety and avoidance on romantic consumption. Second, we expand the examination of romantic consumption beyond gift-giving (Belk & Coon 1993; Huang & Yu 2000) as romantic consumption frequently is not gift-giving (e.g., watching a romantic movie). Third, our work helps inform the psychological process driving romantic consumption: Desire for emotional intimacy—an arguably ironic motive inasmuch as the consumption of products that evoke romantic themes (e.g., watching a romantic movie alone) may not necessarily create close connections with others.

REFERENCES


