Growing With Love: Priming Attachment Security Enhances Exploratory Consumer Behaviors

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Four studies demonstrated that unobtrusively activating attachment security facilitated exploratory consumer behavior in adults. Participants primed with attachment security sought variety in food choices (Study 1) and preferred financially risky options (Study 2 & 3). The effect was driven by optimism towards the environment and feelings of security (Study 4).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Love is one among very few topics that have fascinated people across all times and cultures. Marketers often use reminders of love to decorate their stores, to package products, and to organize promotion campaigns. We know very little, however, about how cueing loving relationships might affect consumer behavior. In this paper we explore the impact of a specific consequence of love primes, namely feelings of attachment security, on exploratory consumer behavior.

Attachment is the innate tendency to form strong emotional bonds with particular individuals and to seek proximity to these individuals when distressed (Feeney and Van Vleet 2010). Attachment security is developed early in life, through initial interactions with significant others who are available and supportive in times of need (Bowly 1973). It guarantees that offspring will maintain proximity to caring attachment figures in times of need, and thus enhances chances of survival, reproduction, and parenting (Bowly 1982). Feelings of attachment security become internalized in a working model of attachment, and generalize to other important relationships that come into existence later in life (Bowly 1973).

Attachment and exploration are believed to be tightly intertwined (Bowly 1988), but empirical evidence has been lacking (Shaver and Mikulincer 2010). Exploration is the urge to go out in the world to work, play, discover, and create (Feeney and Van Vleet 2010). It has been argued that being securely attached gives individuals the confidence and courage to explore the environment, accept challenges, and take risks (Bowly 1988; Feeney and Van Vleet 2010). As risk taking and variety seeking are two prominent manifestations of exploratory tendencies in consumer behavior (Raju 1980; Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1992), the present paper aims to explore whetherpriming consumers with attachment security enhances financial risk taking and variety seeking.

In Study 1, we demonstrated that attachment security enhanced variety seeking. 43 participants (Mage=18.42, SDage=.59; 22 males) were randomly assigned to one of two story writing conditions, and were instructed to imagine and describe an interaction with “someone who takes good care of you and who is there for you whenever necessary” (attachment security condition) or “a mere acquaintance” (control condition). Then they chose four scoops of ice-cream out of five flavors. Choosing more flavors indicates more variety seeking. Attachment security indeed increased variety seeking (F(1,38)=4.75, p<.05).

In Study 2, we replicated the effect of attachment security on another exploratory consumer behavior, namely risk taking. Participants (N=54; Mage=21.76, SDage=2.03; 17 males) were randomly assigned to one of two story writing conditions, and were instructed to imagine and briefly describe a walk with someone they felt attached to (attachment security condition) or alone (control condition). Afterwards, all participants completed two sets of seven monetary risk preference questions, one small-stake and one large-stake set (Hsee and Weber 1999). For example, they indicated their preference between “receiving €30 for sure” and “flipping a coin; receiving €100 if Heads or €0 if Tails”. The risk preference index for each participant ranged from 1 (extremely risk-aversive) to 8 (extremely risk-taking). We found a significant interaction between attachment security priming and stake size on financial risk taking (F(1,51)=6.24, p=.02).

In Study 3, we replicated the effect of attachment security on financial risk taking for small financial gains, but not for large gains or losses. Participants (N=115; Mage=21.38, SDage=2.33; 49 males) were randomly assigned to one of three picture evaluation conditions. They evaluated ten pictures of mothers holding babies (attachment security condition), babies (baby condition), or landscapes (control condition). Afterwards, they provided certainty equivalents for various uncertain gambles (50% chance of gaining [losing] €4 [€2000] or 50% chance of gaining [losing] €0) (Abdellaoui, Bleichrodt et al. 2008). In the gain domain, the interaction between stake size and attachment security was replicated (F(2,56)=2.92, p=.06). When the risk was small, participants primed with attachment security stated larger certainty equivalents than those in the baby priming (p=.03) and control condition (p=.05), meaning they were more risk taking. However, when the risk became larger, the effect disappeared (p>.48)(See Figure 2). We found no significant effects in the loss domain.

Specifically, when stakes were small, risk taking was higher in the attachment security (MRP=4.04, SDRP=.28) compared to the control condition (MRP=3.26, SDRP=.29; see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Study 2

![Figure 1: Study 2](image1)

Figure 2: Study 3

![Figure 2: Study 3](image2)
It has been shown that decision-makers prefer options with 100% of winning $W$ over uncertain options with P% of winning a higher prize $J$ and (1-P)% of winning $0$, even if these two options have the same expected utility ($U=W=P*J$) (Tversky and Kahneman 1992). Both feelings of security (captured by the size of $W$) and optimism (captured by the probability to win) may drive risk-taking behavior. In Study 4, we employed two decision tasks to explore the underlying mechanism. Participants ($N=44$; $Mage=21.82$, $SDage=5.69$; 22 males) were randomly assigned to either the same attachment security or control treatments as in Study 2. Then they engaged in two decision tasks (p-game & w-game) in a random order (Demaree, DeDonno, Burns, and Everhart 2008). In the p-game, the wager was fixed, and the probability to win was changeable to participants (0-100%). The lower probability to win was accompanied by a higher prize. In the w-game, the probability was fixed, and participants could decide on the wager (0-50€). A higher wager was accompanied by a higher prize. Both small and large risks were included. We found a significant interaction between stake size and attachment security in both w-game ($F(1, 42)=3.59, p=.065$) and p-game ($F(1, 42)=5.09, p=.03$) (See Figure 3). When stakes were of a moderate size, attachment security enhanced risk taking in both p-game ($p=.001$) and w-game ($p=.06$). However, we found no effect when stakes were extremely small.

In conclusion, we demonstrate that attachment security enhances exploratory consumer behaviors in the form of variety seeking and risk taking for financial gains at acceptable levels of risk. Preliminary evidence suggests that both optimism towards the environment and feelings of security drive this effect.

REFERENCES


