

Gift giver's attachment style and the experience of emotions

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use and value of attachment theory to illuminate dyadic gift-giving behaviour in close relationships. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), explains the tendency of humans to create strong emotional bonds with significant others and it is one of the most used theoretical frameworks influencing research in close relationships (Fraley et al., 2011). This perspective provides solid theoretical foundations to link close relationships and gift-giving behaviour. Individuals with particular attachment styles are predisposed to think, feel and behave differently in their relationships (Collins, 1996). Drawing on this theory, a model is presented to elucidate whether gift givers with some attachment styles are more prone than others to experience particular emotions when giving or to perceive gift-receiver's responses differently. Using gift-giving diaries written by fourteen gift-givers, this paper discusses the most frequently mentioned positive emotions both that the gift-giver's experience when giving a gift and that they perceive the receiver as experiencing. It also discusses the underlying reasons for these emotions for gift-givers with different attachment styles. Practitioners might benefit from considering attachment orientations to better understand their consumers and the gift-giving process (Nguyen&Munch, 2011). This paper sets a basis for debate and lays the foundations for future empirical research.

1. Introduction

Extant research has emphasized the importance of emotions in gift-exchange and how they affect relationships (e.g. Ruth et al., 1999; 2004). However, the emotional component of interactions between gift-giver and receiver, already considered for the receiver (Ruth et al., 1999; 2004), has been neglected for the giver. Given that much gift-exchange behaviour takes place within important interpersonal relationships (Ruth, 1996), we employ Bowlby's (1969) seminal theory of attachment, which considers close relationships, to address this neglect of givers' emotions in gift-giving research. This study is important for a number of reasons. First, a deeper understanding of the determinants of variation in gift-giving behaviour will enable marketers to apply appropriate marketing strategies to the market for gifts (Beatty et al., 1996), being the UK giftware market expected to grow up to £5bn in 2015 (Hughes, 2011). Second, knowledge of how relationships operate as antecedents of gift-giving motivations has important implications for practitioners (Lutz, 1979). Retailers can act as "friends" and bridge the relationship between gift-givers and receivers, for example using wish-lists (Bradford & Sherry, 2013:169). The nature of the relationship, defined by emotional closeness, may determine the nature of the gift (Parsons, 2002), being emotional closeness not necessarily linked with kinship structures (Roster, 2006). Advertising can be more effective if it appeals the right benefits sought for a relationship (Parsons, 2002). Despite this, the emphasis on the emotional component in marketing exchanges and relationships has been neglected (Bagozzi et al., 1999).

In this paper, we focus on dyadic gifts that "indicate the nature of the relationships between two people who know each other and are in an anchored relationship" (Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012:75). The attachment style of the gift-giver is integrated with the cognitive and emotional responses of the gift receiver, to explain gift-giving behaviour through a conceptual model based on Collins (1996). In this model, givers with different attachment styles are predisposed to interpret gift-giving in ways consistent with their existing expectations and beliefs. This paper aims to explain the emotions of gift-givers with different attachment styles, how these givers perceive the emotions of gift-receivers, and how this perception shapes givers' emotions. This provides a novel approach to the study of gift-giving behaviour from a psychological perspective. This article begins with a review of gift-giving literature, introduces attachment theory (AT) and integrates these two bodies of literature. The following sections introduce the research methodology, discuss the findings of fourteen gift-giving diaries, and note implications for practitioners.

2. Literature review

Gift-giving

Gift giving is a subject suitable for multidisciplinary investigation (Minowa et al., 2011) and has been widely studied in many disciplines such as economics (e.g. Mitrut & Nordblom, 2010; Ruffle, 1999), anthropology (e.g. Sherry, 1983; Mauss, 1954), sociology (e.g. Adloff, 2006; Caplow, 1984; 1982), psychology (e.g. Griskevicious & Kenrick, 2013; Kimel et al., 2012;) and marketing (e.g. Segev et al., 2012; Nguyen & Munch, 2011). The role of relationships has been central in much of gift-giving research (e.g. Bradford & Sherry, 2013; Ruth et al., 2004). Relationships define and influence individuals' behaviour, as individuals are especially sensitive to those with whom they have close relationships (Ward & Broniarzk, 2011). Gifts, as tangible expressions of relationships (Segev et al., 2012), facilitate the expression of sentiments (Belk, 1979), and make giving a good indicator of emotional involvement with family members and friends (Komter & Vollebergh, 1997). Ruth et al., (1999) reviewed the extant literature and identified ten emotions relevant to gift-exchange: love, happiness, gratitude, pride, fear, anger, sadness, guilt, uneasiness and embarrassment.

The feelings communicated through gift-giving and those aroused in gift-giver and receiver, are an important part of the gift-giving experience (Ruth, 1996). This is because although people normally experience emotions privately, these emotions are a reflection of interpersonal responses (Bagozzi et al., 1999) between giver and receiver. However, with some exceptions (Ruth et al., 1999), the role of emotions in interpersonal relationships (Bagozzi et al., 1999) and the cognitive appraisals of consumption emotions (Ruth, 2002) have been neglected. In this paper we argue that emotions related to relationships between the giver and the receiver and the perceived response of the receiver, lead gift-givers to modify their emotional response to the gift-giving experience. AT helps to integrate emotional and cognitive responses into a conceptual model for close relationships.

Attachment theory

AT has become one of the leading frameworks to study close relationships (Fraley et al., 2011). AT describes a form of behaviour that results in a person attempting to be close to another individual as a manifestation of humans' search for protection (Bowlby, 1977). According to this perspective, humans develop a particular attachment style determined by the relationship between mother and infant in the first years of life (Bowlby, 1988). Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) proposed and tested a model for adult attachment assuming positive and negative evaluations of two types of internal working models, the model of the self and the model of others (Figure 1). Four attachment styles emerged for close relationships: *secure*, *preoccupied*, *fearful-avoidant* and *dismissive-avoidant* attachment.

Figure 1: Model of adult attachment

		MODEL OF SELF (Dependence)	
		Positive (low)	Negative (high)
MODEL OF OTHER (Avoidance)	Positive (low)	SECURE Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	PREOCCUPIED Preoccupied with relationship
	Negative (high)	DISMISSING Dismissing of intimacy and counter-dependent	FEARFUL Fearful of intimacy and socially avoidant

Source: Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991:227)

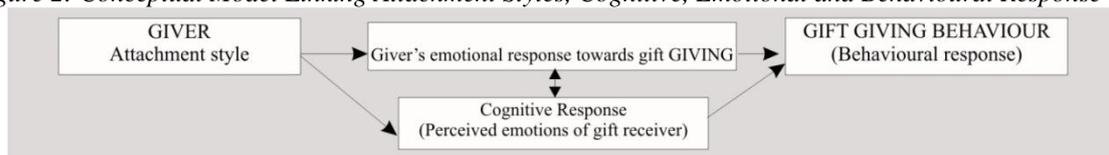
First, *secure* attached individuals are responsive, accepting (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and more predisposed to feel positive emotions than the other groups (Tidwell et al., 1996). Second, *preoccupied* subjects are comfortable being close to others but fear being abandoned (Collins & Read, 1990); they search for social acceptance to achieve self-acceptance (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and respond to events with strong negative emotion (Collins, 1996). Third, *fearful-avoidant* individuals tend to reject people to protect themselves against rejection because they negatively evaluate themselves and others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Finally, *dismissive-avoidant* people avoid close relationships to maintain a sense of independence and invulnerability and are able to suppress their attachment system to defend themselves (Fraley & Shaver, 1997). The last two groups (*fearful* and *dismissive*), actively deny feelings of distress, and are more likely to feel unemotional in response to events (Collins, 1996). These four attachment styles involve the generation of emotions because “attachment theory is fundamentally about emotional experiences and their regulation” (Tidwell et al., 1996: 731). Individuals can develop emotional attachments to different objects, such brands or gifts; or to a person, attachment reflecting an emotional bond and involving a variety of emotions (Thomson et al., 2005). The present research deals with giver’s attachment to other people to study consumer-to-consumer relationships. The application of AT to marketing is relatively novel (Thomson et al., 2012; Nguyen & Munch, 2011). AT has been used recently in the brand literature to examine consumer’s attachment to brands (e.g. Malär et al., 2011; Grissaffe & Nguyen, 2011) and in gift-giving research to link giver’s attachment styles and giver’s gift-giving perceptions (Nguyen & Munch, 2011). In the

next section, we explain how gift-giving can benefit from AT to study givers' emotions in gift-giving research.

Attachment style as determinant of gift-giving responses in close relationships

Adult attachment research has become a strong influence on the study of relationships (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2010) and it is fundamentally concerned with emotional experiences (Tidwell et al., 1996). The control of emotions is important in the study of gift exchange (Ruth, 1996). Differences in attachment style play an important role by shaping other person's cognitive, emotional and behavioural response patterns (Collins, 1996), which contributes to explaining why different people can experience different emotional responses to the same event (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Basic emotions (e.g. joy) can affect individuals' own actions and interactive partner's responses (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). The study of complex behavioural applications, such as gift-giving, may benefit from considering the way that a person relates to another, as close relationships arouse emotions and are affected by the way partners react emotionally to relational events (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). As a consequence of the attachment style of the giver, the giver's actual emotions, their perception of the receiver's emotional response and the interaction between them, may all influence gift-giving behaviour (figure 2). This conceptual model, developed from Collins (1996), suggests that the cognitive and emotional responses of the gift giver are expected to have reciprocal effects on the receiver and might contribute to determining the gift-giving behavioural strategy.

Figure 2: Conceptual Model Linking Attachment Styles, Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioural Response



Source: Adapted from Collins, (1996:81)

3. Aims and Methodology

This study aims to explain the emotions of gift givers with different attachment styles, how these givers perceive the emotions of gift receivers, and how this perception shapes givers' emotions. This study follows a sequential mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research, analysis and interpretative approaches for the "broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Johnson, 2007:123). It consists of two parts, an exploratory stage that builds on the proposed conceptual framework described previously, and a confirmatory stage to verify the adaptation of Collins' (1996) model to the gift-giving. This paper only addresses the exploratory stage. Twenty-four gift-givers were recruited through a local online newspaper to take part in this study. First, participants completed an initial background questionnaire, assessing participant's attachment style according to Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) and demographics (See Appendix A for further details). Consistently with Otnes et al. (1993), over 85% of participants were female. Then, fourteen of the original respondents agreed to participate in the next stage which involved keeping a gift-giving diary for a four-week period focusing on their emotions as gift-givers and their perceptions of the receivers' emotions. At a later stage, participants will take part in a short follow-up interview to clarify issues arising from the diaries. The data were analysed using content analysis (Kassarjian, 1977) followed by interpretive analysis (Holbrook & O'Shaughnessy, 1988), as used by Ruth et al., (1999). In addition to Ruth's et al (2004) classification of emotions four new emotions were identified as excitement, surprise, disappointment and anxiety, as a result of a pilot stage involving ten interviews. The interpretive analysis was a close, critical examination of the text, describing each gift-giving experience (Ruth et al., 1999). The main focus was on the emotions experienced by the giver

or perceived by the giver to be experienced by the receiver. Each emotion was analysed to identify what made it different among different attachment style groups.

4. Findings and discussion

Consistently with Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991), most individuals reported a mix of attachment styles resulting in the following classification: five *secure* (33% diary entries), five *secure/dismissive* (45%), two *secure/fearful* (8.5%), one *fearful/dismissive* (3.8%) and one *preoccupied* informant (8.5%). Researchers received 105 gift giving reports from fourteen different gift-givers. As this study was conducted over the Christmas season, 90% of gifts were Christmas gifts. Emotions were coded in terms of positive, negative and multiple/mixed emotions (Ruth et al., 1999) for the emotions experienced by gift givers and the perceived emotions of gift receivers. We identified, neutral emotions perceived by givers about receivers, and new themes emerged to explain why givers experienced each emotion. This paper concentrates on positive emotions, but a summary of negative, multiple and neutral emotions, has been included in Appendices B (Table B1) and C (Table C1).

Giver's emotions

Individuals in the insecure categories reported the greatest frequency of giver's positive emotions. That is, *secure/fearful* (88%), *secure/dismissive* (81%) *dismissive/fearful* (75%) and *preoccupied* (55%). By contrast, only 40% of *secure* givers reported positive emotions. This may seem surprising since *secure*-attached individuals are more inclined than other groups to feel more positive emotions and fewer negative ones than the insecure groups (Tidwell et al., 1996), but may be explained by the fact that they are also more open about expressing their emotions without suppressing any elements (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). From all attachment categories, most givers reported feeling "happy", "loving" and "excited". First, six different themes were identified within the happy subtheme (Appendix C, table C2) reflecting different reasons for happiness between *secure* and *secure/dismissive* participants. These two groups reported broadly similar frequencies of happiness (69% and 83% respectively). *Secure* participants felt happy mainly for giving a gift (9 out of 20): "I was happy to be giving the gift... I really enjoy giving gifts so I am always happy to be giving them." (Anne, *secure*). By contrast, *secure/dismissive* individuals reported happiness because of their satisfaction with the gift they had selected (10 out of 23). This is consistent with the desire of these individuals to be self-sufficient (Collins, 1996) and their sense of competence and superiority (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007): "As always, I'm happy that the gifts I've chosen are what they would like..." (John, *secure/dismissive*). Considering the low number of events for *secure/fearful*, *preoccupied* and *dismissive/fearful* individuals, the new themes do not shed much light on the interpretation of these emotions for these groups.

Second, feeling loving was the next emotion that was mentioned most, but very few participants described why they felt loving. The explanations of those who did were analysed according to the codes in Appendix C (Table C3). The most striking feature was that, as with happiness, *secure/dismissive* individuals felt loving when giving a gift they were happy with. Third, excitement was reported by 43% of *secure* givers and 56% of *secure/fearful* individuals. However, only 12% of *secure/dismissive* individuals reported being excited, which reflects avoidant individuals tendency to be unemotional (Collins, 1996), to experience less enjoyment of social interaction (Tidwell et al., 1996), and specifically *dismissive* people, to believe they are their main source of support (Freeman & Brown, 2001).

Perceived gift receiver's emotions

Individuals' emotional responses to an event are, in part, due to peoples' interpretation of the event (Collins, 1996). A fundamental principle of gift-giving for most exchanges is the

arousal of positive emotions in the gift-recipient (Clarke, 2013). In our sample, 90% of givers perceived gift-receivers to experience positive emotions (Appendix C, Table C1). The most common of these across all the attachment styles were happiness, gratefulness, love and surprise. When givers explained why they thought receivers felt in a particular way, different themes emerged indicating differences for *secure* and *secure/dismissive* individuals. First, the most frequently perceived emotion was happiness, reported by 69% of the *secure* group, 73% of the *secure/dismissive* and 88% of the *secure/fearful*. While *secure* individuals thought gift receivers were happy to receive an unexpected gift (3 out of 6), *secure/dismissive* givers (6 out of 8) believed that receivers were happy to be given a gift they liked (Appendix C, table C2): “*She was happy because she got what she wanted...*” (Rose, *secure/dismissive*). Second, gratefulness was the second most frequently mentioned emotion (Appendix C, table C3). While *secure* individuals thought that receivers felt grateful equally for receiving a gift and for the effort expended in selecting a gift, for the *secure/dismissive* receiving a gift was the main reason why gift receivers were grateful (8 out of 16). The third reason was feeling loved but participants generally did not offer an explanation (Appendix C, Table C4). Finally, *preoccupied* individuals perceived the lowest levels of positive emotions, reporting small percentages of receivers being happy (22%), grateful (22%) loved (22%), surprised (22%) and excited (0%). Anxious (*preoccupied*) individuals tend to overemphasize their sense of vulnerability and hyper-activate negative emotions (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). They tend to blame themselves for perceived rejections (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) which might explain why they are less prone to perceive positive emotions in gift-receivers.

Interaction between gift giver and receiver

According to the conceptual model (Figure 2), givers’ actual emotions and their perceptions of the receiver’s emotional responses influence each other. However, for some attachment styles no respondents reported how the receiver’s emotions affected them. *Secure* attached individuals, reported experiencing new emotions in 18 out of 35 gift-giving events after seeing receiver’s response: “I think that I felt happy and excited and loving because her reaction was of genuine shock and surprise followed by “you didn't have to!” which made me even more happy that I'd given her it...” (Agnes, *Secure*). By contrast, only 2 out of 48 events reported by *secure/dismissive* givers included their emotions after giving the gift. *Dismissive* individuals keep their image of invulnerability by inhibiting emotions (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007), which supports this finding. *Secure/fearful* participants indicated how they felt about the experience only in 2 out of 9 gift giving cases. This is consistent with the tendency of *avoidant* individuals to feel unemotional in response to events (Collins, 1996).

5. Conclusion

The approach described here makes it possible to explore the emotional, cognitive and behavioural effects of the attachment of gift givers in order to explain gift-giving emotions. These findings can help practitioners in framing advertising appeals and enhancing positive emotions associated with gift-giving. Retailers, who can bridge the relationship between giver and receiver (Bradford & Sherry, 2013) can use more effective advertising, if it appeals the correct benefits sought for a relationship (Parson, 2002). Marketers might emphasize the role of givers showing love, happiness and excitement and portraying happiness, gratefulness and love in receivers because these are the emotions gift givers’ expect and can identify with. Additionally, marketers can develop a deeper understanding of their customers and the gift-giving process through attachment orientations (Nguyen & Munch, 2011). We identify different reasons for gift-givers to experience the same emotions, and also different motives to perceive the same emotions experienced by the receiver, depending on attachment styles. This sets the agenda for further research on attachment styles as a criterion for segmentation.

6. References

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APPENDIX A: Demographics

Table A1: participant demographics

	PARTICIPANT ID	AGE	INCOME	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS	GENDER
SECURE	Anne	18-24	Less than £200 a week	3	Female
	Eve	35-44	Between £200-£299 a week	3	Female
	Agnes	18-24	Less than £200 a week	3	Female
	Stephanie	35-44	Between £600-£699 a week	1	Female
	Ruth	25-34	Less than £200 a week	3	Female
SECURE/ DISMISSIVE	John	35-44	Between £500-£599 a week	1	Male
	Leslie	35-44	Between £400-£499 a week	2	Female
	Emma	18-24	Less than £200 a week	4	Female
	Mary	45-54	Between £1000-£1499 a week	3	Female
	Rose	18-24	Between £200-£299 a week	2	Female
SECURE/ FEARFUL	Susan	18-24	Less than £200 a week	7	Female
	Martha	35-44	Between £300-£399 a week	4	Female
PREOCCUPIED	Peter	45-54	Less than £200 a week	1,5	Male
DISMISSIVE/ FEARFUL (avoidant)	Kim	18-24	Less than £200 a week	5	Female

APPENDIX B: Gift-givers' emotions

Table B1: Gift givers' emotions (positive, negative, multiple and neutral)

		Participant Attachment style					Total
		Secure	Secure/dismissive	Secure/fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissive/fearful	
Positive emotions	Count	14	39	8	5	3	69
	% within Attachment style	40.0%	81.3%	88.9%	55.6%	75.0%	65.7%
Negative emotions	Count	4	2	0	2	0	8
	% within Attachment style	11.4%	4.2%	.0%	22.2%	.0%	7.6%
Multiple emotions	Count	17	7	1	1	1	27
	% within Attachment style	48.6%	14.6%	11.1%	11.1%	25.0%	25.7%
Neutral	Count	0	0	0	1	0	1
	% within Attachment style	.0%	.0%	.0%	11.1%	.0%	1.0%
Total	Count	35	48	9	9	4	105
	% within Attachment style	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table B2: Gift givers' emotions "happy"

		SECURE	SECURE/ DISMISSIVE	SECURE/ FEARFUL	PREOCCUPIED	DISIMISSIVE/ FEARFUL
HAPPY	Giving a gift	9	5	1	0	0
	Giving the gift giver was happy with	3	10	1	0	1
	Seeing receiver opening gifts	2	0	0	0	0
	Seeing receiver's reaction	3	2	0	1	1
	Pleasing receiver	3	1	0	1	0
	Selecting a gift	0	5	0	0	0
TOTAL		20	23	2	2	2

Table B3: Gift givers' emotions "loving"

		SECURE	SECURE/ DISMISSIVE	SECURE/ FEARFUL	PREOCCUPIED	DISIMISSIVE/ FEARFUL
LOVING	Showing love	1	1	0	1	0
	Buying a gift	1	0	0	0	0
	Giving a gift the giver is happy with	1	3	0	0	0
	Seeing receiver's reaction	1	2	0	0	0
TOTAL		4	6	0	0	0

APPENDIX C: Perceived gift-receiver's emotions

Table C1: Perceived gift-receiver's emotions (positive, negative, multiple and neutral)

		Participant Attachment style					Total
		Secure	Secure/dismissive	Secure/fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissive/fearful	
Positive emotions	Count	29	45	8	8	4	94
	% within Attachment style	82,9%	93,8%	88,9%	88,9%	100,0%	89,5%
Negative emotions	Count	1	1	0	0	0	2
	% within Attachment style	2,9%	2,1%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,9%
Multiple emotions	Count	4	0	1	1	0	6
	% within Attachment style	11,4%	0,0%	11,1%	11,1%	0,0%	5,7%
Neutral	Count	1	2	0	0	0	3
	% within Attachment style	2,9%	4,2%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	2,9%
Total	Count	35	48	9	9	4	105
	% within Attachment style	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Table C2: Perceived gift-receiver's emotions "happy"

		SECURE	SECURE/DISMISSIVE	SECURE/FEARFUL	PREOCCUPIED	DISIMISSIVE/FEARFUL
HAPPY	For receiving a gift	2	1	1	0	0
	For receiving an unexpected gift	3	1	0	0	0
	For receiving a gift the receiver likes	1	6	0	1	0
	For receiving a gift from the giver	0	0	0	1	0
TOTAL		6	8	1	2	0

Table C3: Perceived gift-receiver's emotions "grateful"

		SECURE	SECURE/DISMISSIVE	SECURE/FEARFUL	PREOCCUPIED	DISIMISSIVE/FEARFUL
GRATEFUL	For receiving a gift	2	8	0	0	0
	For the effort of selecting the gift	2	5	0	0	0
	For receiving a gift the receiver likes	0	3	0	0	0
TOTAL		4	16	0	0	0

Table C4: Perceived gift-receiver's emotions "loving"

		SECURE	SECURE/DISMISSIVE	SECURE/FEARFUL	PREOCCUPIED	DISIMISSIVE/FEARFUL
LOVING	For the thought	0	2	0	1	0
	For receiving a gift	1	2	0	0	0
	For receiving a gift the receiver likes	0	2	0	0	0
TOTAL		1	6	0	1	0