Secure and sustainable but not as prominent among the ambivalent: Attachment style and green consumption

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Abstract

Human activity in recent decades has degraded the environment and contributed to numerous public health hazards. Thus, the United Nations recently made an urgent call to develop sustainable consumption practices. Although existing literature has acknowledged attachment style as a potential predictor of certain consumption responses, its influence on pro-environmental consumption has not yet been examined. We tested this possibility in a large-sampled study ($N = 1,397$) and found securely attached individuals to report the highest scores on the GREEN consumption scale measuring consumers' propensity to buy and use goods and services sustainably. Although we did not find that people with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style differed significantly from those with an avoidant attachment style, we observed a trend in this direction, with the former demonstrating directionally less favorable values toward pro-environmental consumption. Our findings provide preliminary evidence for the notion that attachment styles may meaningfully predict pro-environmental consumption. Given that modern psychometric tools can predict Big Five personality traits from digital behavioral footprints, these tools may also predict a person's attachment style and thus facilitate more effective, tailor-made pro-environmental communication campaigns aimed at mitigating climate change.

Keywords: green consumption, pro-environmental consumption, attachment style, secure, avoidant, anxious, ambivalent

1 Introduction

Whereas economic progress has improved living standards in many countries over the last decades, human activity has simultaneously degraded the environment and contributed to numerous public health hazards. Over 90% of the people worldwide breathe air exceeding the limits set by the World Health Organization, with ambient air pollution leading to over 4 million annually (WHO, 2018). As a response, the United Nations set 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with Goal 12 focusing on sustainable consumption (United Nations, 2017). Although the literature has delineated numerous situational antecedents of sustainable consumption, individual differences also play a prominent role in shaping sustainable consumption responses (White et al., 2019). This brief report investigates whether attachment style can be one individual differences factor related to consumers' propensity to consume goods and services sustainably

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) postulates that infants learn how the world functions from their relationships with primary caregivers. Children seek closeness with their caregivers whenever experiencing stressful situations. If their closeness cravings are regularly met, they tend to develop a secure attachment style, seeking interaction with caregivers. Alternatively, they develop an avoidant attachment style, where they do not seek interactions with caregivers, or an anxious/ambivalent attachment style, characterized by an interest in interactions, but still a resistance to engage in these interactions (Ainsworth et al., 2015). Childhood attachment style is moderately stable from infancy to adulthood, with the prevalence of each attachment style among adults being similar to that of young children (Fraley, 2002; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Notably, a person's childhood attachment style is related to his parenting orientation, which facilitates specific attachment style formation among babies, implying a cross-generational legacy of attachment patterns (Szepeswöl et al., 2015).

The anxious/ambivalent attachment style has received less interest in literature than the remaining two attachment patterns (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Children who develop this attachment style appear uninterested in contact with peers, as they

make fewer social attempts and are less responsive to other children’s social offers than their counterparts who develop secure or avoidant attachment styles (Pastor, 1981). Anxious/ambivalent children also seem to adopt strategies that signal their immaturity or weaknesses—often through affective displays—to increase the care they receive, indicating that they resist close contacts but perform actions that bring attention to themselves (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

Marketing literature has recently recognized the role of attachment theory in shaping consumer behavior (David et al., 2020). For instance, studies link attachment style to various types of consumption (Pepping et al., 2015), advertising responses (David & Bearden, 2017), and brand perceptions (Swaminathan et al., 2009). However, although personality traits partially predict pro-environmental attitudes (Desrochers et al., 2019; Hirsh & Dolderman, 2007), no studies have tested whether consumers’ attachment styles predict the propensity to consume goods and services in a pro-environmental manner. Building on the notion that pro-environmental consumption has emerged as a social norm (Goldberg et al., 2019; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Palomo-Vélez et al., 2021), and that an anxious/ambivalent attachment style is linked to certain violations of social norm (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994; Pastor, 1981), we predict that individuals with this attachment style should be less interested in pro-environmental consumption compared to those with secure or avoidant attachment styles. We test this key prediction in a large-sampled study.

2 Method

A total of 1400 participants were originally recruited through the online panel Pro-lific; however, due to missing data, our final sample consisted of 1397 participants (835 female, 560 male, two did not disclose their sex; median age = 39 years). Participants replied to a set of established, well-validated consumption scales, several of whom were included for the purpose of a different project. Of particular importance for the current investigation, they filled out the 6-item GREEN scale (Haws et al., 2014), which measures individuals’ pro-environmental values and attitudes linked to their consumption on items such as “My purchase habits are affected by my concern

for our environment.” Responses were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to form a composite GREEN index ($\alpha = .95$). Participants also indicated their age, sex, and relationship status (“Are you in a relationship?”) using a binary response format (Yes/No). These latter items served as control variables to increase the internal validity of the study. To capture attachment style, we used the single-item measure from Hazan and Shaver (1987) due to its concrete nature and simplicity. Single-item measures are valid if they, as in the current case, represent clear and unambiguous constructs (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007). Participants read a brief description of the key characteristics associated with each attachment style and were asked to choose the one that best described who they are as individuals in romantic relationships. Consistent with previous studies on the distribution of different attachment styles (e.g., Cassidy & Berlin, 1994), our sample consisted of relatively few participants with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style ($n = 108$; 7.73%), when compared to the number of participants with a secure ($n = 564$; 40.37%) or an avoidant ($n = 725$; 51.90%) attachment style.

3 Results

To test whether attachment style was related to pro-environmental values, we conducted a single-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) with attachment style (secure, avoidant, ambivalent) as the between-subjects factor and participants’ ratings on the GREEN scale as the dependent variable. This analysis revealed a significant omnibus effect of attachment style, $F(2, 1394) = 10.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Follow-up post-hoc tests (Tukey) revealed that participants with a secure attachment style ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.32$) reported the highest scores on the GREEN scale; significantly (both $ps < .001$) higher than participants with an avoidant ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.29$; $\eta_p^2 = .01$) or anxious attachment style ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.60$; $\eta_p^2 = .02$). However, contrary to our prediction, participants with an anxious attachment style did not differ significantly from their counterparts with an avoidant attachment style ($p = .177$). Including participants’ age, sex, and relationship status as covariates did not change the nature or significance of the attachment style results and none of these

variables were significantly associated with participants’ ratings on the GREEN scale (age: $F(1, 1387) = 2.19, p = .139$; sex: $F(1, 1387) = 1.55, p = .213$; relationship status: $F(1, 1387) = .02, p = .883$). Figure 1 shows the distributional properties of the results.

Figure 1: GREEN consumption scores for each attachment style. Horizontal lines indicate medians; notches around these lines show 95% confidence intervals around medians. Grey points represent means. White box plots show interquartile ranges. The shaded areas in the violin plots depict response densities.

4 Discussion

Although attachment style has recently been discussed as a potential predictor of consumption responses (Blackwell et al., 2017; David & Bearden, 2017; Pepping et al., 2015), the literature has largely neglected this individual difference in the context of pro-environmental consumption. We fill this gap and find individuals who perceive themselves as securely attached to score the highest on the GREEN scale that captures the propensity to consume goods and services sustainably (Haws et al., 2014). Contrary to our predictions, people with the two insecure attachment styles (i.e., anxious/ambivalent and avoidant) did not differ significantly in the green consumption values, although those with an anxious/avoidant attachment style had the lowest mean in terms of “going green.” Taken together, these results provide

preliminary evidence for the importance of attachment style theory when studying sustainable consumption (Bowlby, [1969/1982](#)).

Acting sustainably as a consumer has emerged as a social norm, and sustainable consumption can reward people with heightened social status and communicate desired qualities on the mating market (Farrelly & Bhogal, [2021](#); Griskevicius et al., [2010](#); Palomo-Vélez et al., [2021](#); Van de Grint et al., [2021](#)). Securely attached individuals should seek contact with others (Ainsworth et al., [2015](#)); thus, they are likely to comply with social norms more than those who have one of the two insecure attachment styles. Our findings corroborate this notion.

Recent research on mass persuasion shows that tailored messages that account for personality traits inferred from digital footprints may result in a 50% increase in sales when compared to unpersonalized messages (Matz et al., [2017](#)). Various individual differences, such as personality traits or sexual orientation, can be relatively accurately predicted from social media activities such as Facebook Likes (Kosinski et al., [2013](#)). Thus, individuals' attachment styles can likely be identified using such modern tools, suggesting that tailoring messages for predicted attachment styles may increase the persuasive appeal of marketing messages and communication campaigns. Future research should test this possibility.

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