



## Be Mine: Attachment avoidance predicts perceptions of relationship functioning on Valentine's Day



William J. Chopik<sup>\*,1</sup>, Britney M. Wardecker, Robin S. Edelman

Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Many cultures designate specific holidays to celebrate love and affection, such as Valentine's Day in Western culture. Intuition would suggest that holidays like Valentine's Day would enhance perceptions of romantic relationships for most people. However, few empirical studies have examined how relationship evaluations vary when assessed on such holidays. We found that reminders of relationships on Valentine's Day enhanced perceptions of relationship functioning. However, we found that individuals' attachment orientation moderated these responses: when relationships were made accessible on Valentine's Day (versus a control day), higher levels of satisfaction and investment were reported only by individuals lower in attachment avoidance. Together, the current findings suggest Valentine's Day enhances relationships; however, this enhancement is especially likely when individuals are thinking of their partner and have a disposition towards depending on romantic partners.

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### 1. Introduction

Many cultures designate specific holidays to celebrate love and affection. In Korea, for instance, Pepero Day is celebrated in November among young couples who exchange pepero (a cookie stick dipped in chocolate syrup) and other romantic gifts. In Israel, the holiday of Tu B'Av is a popular day for Jewish weddings and even has ties in the Talmud, in which the holiday signaled the start of the harvest season. In Japan, White Day is celebrated with the exchange of white chocolate and marshmallows among both friends and couples. In Western cultures, the celebration of Valentine's Day typically involves reminders of the beauty and possibilities of romantic relationships—candlelit dinners, roses, boxes of chocolate, love notes, and gifts that signify love and affection. Valentine's Day might therefore remind couples of their initial love and affection, perhaps enhancing their perceptions of their relationship.

In fact, relationship-enhancing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have been shown to enhance perceptions of relationship functioning. For example, individuals who routinely express admiration and affection for a partner and remind themselves (and their

partners) what they appreciate about the relationship report happier, more satisfying relationships (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Reminders of existing, high-quality relationship partners are also tied to feelings of gratitude, an emotion hypothesized to enhance feelings of closeness between individuals (Algoe, 2012). Perhaps Valentine's Day serves as an annual reminder to individuals to pay particular attention to the positive aspects of their relationships.

Some empirical evidence supports the intuition that Valentine's Day influences positive perceptions of partners and relationships. Couples often list commemorative events (e.g., anniversaries, holidays) among the many forces that keep them together and happy in their relationships (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Further, Gonzalez and Koestner (2006) found that participants spontaneously mentioned themes of love, commitment, praise, and fidelity when writing Valentine's Day announcements. However, there is also evidence that Valentine's Day might harm relationship evaluations. Morse and Neuberg (2004) found that already-weak romantic relationships were nearly five times more likely to break up during the two weeks around Valentine's Day than other weeks during the calendar year. Taken together, Valentine's Day might enhance perceptions of relationship quality for some individuals and diminish perceptions of relationship quality for others. What other factors might account for individual differences in people's response to Valentine's Day?

We propose that an individual's orientation towards close relationships (i.e., attachment orientation) could explain how perceptions of relationship functioning are influenced by Valentine's Day. An individual's attachment orientation is conceptualized as

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States. Tel.: +1 (734) 763 5146; fax: +1 (734) 647 9440.

E-mail address: [chopik@umich.edu](mailto:chopik@umich.edu) (W.J. Chopik).

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their position on two conceptually distinct dimensions: avoidance and anxiety (Fraley & Waller, 1998). The avoidance dimension is characterized by chronic attempts to inhibit attachment-system activation in an effort to minimize expressions of distress (Edelstein & Shaver, 2004). For instance, individuals with higher avoidance scores generally dislike intimacy and are less likely to provide emotional support for romantic partners (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Attachment-related anxiety reflects “hyperactivation” of the attachment system and preoccupation with the availability of relationship partners (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002). For instance, individuals with higher anxiety scores exhibit excessive reassurance-seeking and hypervigilance to signs of rejection and abandonment (Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005).

In the current study, we predict that individuals will be more likely to provide positive evaluations of their current relationships after being reminded of relationships on Valentine’s Day compared to individuals not reminded of relationships on Valentine’s Day and individuals providing evaluations on a control day, as this brings to mind the positive aspects of their relationships. However, we expect that individuals high in avoidance and/or anxiety will be less likely to respond with positive evaluations of their current relationship compared to individuals low in avoidance and/or anxiety. When reminded of Valentine’s Day, avoidant individuals may be more likely to report negative evaluations of their relationship functioning because they are thinking about their partner’s shortcomings; anxious individuals may be more likely to worry about their partner’s availability and conjure up relationship problems that may not exist. Further, individuals high in anxiety may have unrealistic expectations of how affectionately their partner should behave on Valentine’s Day and view their partner’s efforts as insufficient. The current study examines how perceptions of relationship quality vary as a function of Valentine’s Day, a (presumably) relationship-enhancing event that many couples celebrate every year, and how these perceptions vary as a function of attachment style.

We sought to isolate the effects of accessibility of Valentine’s Day by comparing participants’ responses to a control day nearly 2 months later. The accessibility of relationships was manipulated unobtrusively through webpage advertisements (Chopik & Edelstein, 2014) and participants then completed a measure of relationship functioning. Thus, separate groups of participants on Valentine’s Day and on a control day were randomly assigned to either a high- or low-accessibility condition via webpage advertisements. We predicted a two-way interaction, between survey date and accessibility condition, such that higher accessibility of relationships on Valentine’s Day would increase perceptions of relationship functioning. We also predicted a three-way interaction between survey date, accessibility condition, and an individual’s attachment orientation. Specifically, we predicted that individuals high in avoidance and/or anxiety, given their discomfort with intimacy and insecurities about their relationships (Brennan et al., 1998; Shaver et al., 2005), would respond to reminders of relationships with lower perceptions of relationship functioning compared to individuals low in avoidance and/or anxiety.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 144 partnered respondents (76.9% female,  $M = 36.37$ ,  $SD = 12.63$ ) recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Single participants ( $N = 66$ ) were redirected to a series of questions about subjective well-being and depression and are not considered here. Participation was limited to those in the United States, and

participants were compensated \$.15, which is similar to other short studies implemented on MTurk. Participants were 85.3% Caucasian, 7.7% Asian, 3.5% Black or African American, 2.8% Hispanic/Latino/a, and <1% multiracial or other ethnicities. Relationship length ranged from four months to 50 years ( $M = 10.94$  years,  $SD = 11.76$ ).

### 2.2. Procedure and materials

Participants responded to a request to participate in a study on personality and well-being. The survey was left available for 2 days only, Valentine’s Day 2011 ( $n = 75$ ) and a control day (April 20, 2011;  $n = 69$ ). Participants were naïve to the fact that the survey was only available for these two days (6:00 AM through midnight). The survey made no mention of the date, so participants were not reminded of Valentine’s Day prior to exposure to the manipulation. They were first directed to an informed consent page, which provided the cover story that the University of Michigan was sponsoring the webpage. The banner advertisements at the top and bottom of the first page read, “UM Events & Services 2011” and had a University of Michigan logo. These banner advertisements were included to reduce suspicion about the nature of the study by introducing advertisements early on in the study (on the consent page).

Participants first completed the Experiences in Close Relationships-Short (ECR-S) inventory (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007), a 12-item questionnaire designed to measure attachment anxiety and avoidance. The ECR-S avoidance subscale ( $\alpha = .86$ ) reflects an individual’s discomfort with closeness. The ECR-S anxiety subscale ( $\alpha = .78$ ) reflects an individual’s concern about abandonment. Sample items include “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner” (avoidance), and “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them” (anxiety). Participants rated the extent to which they agree with each statement, using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Anxiety and avoidance were moderately correlated ( $r = .19$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which is consistent with previous research using the ECR-S (Wei et al., 2007). The banner advertisements on the ECR-S page were identical to those featured on the consent page. The generic banner advertisements (depicting UM Events & Services 2011) were presented at the top and bottom of the page containing the ECR-S so that participants’ responses would not be affected by the relationship accessibility manipulation presented next.

On the next page, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The high-accessibility condition was designed to make relationships salient and featured banner ads that read, “Show Your Love for Your Partner Today!!!” with a picture of a couple kissing from *Gone with the Wind*; the low-accessibility condition featured banner ads that read, “Join Us for UM’s Cherry Picking Outing on Aug. 5th!!!” with a picture of cherries. To reduce suspicion, if participants clicked on any of the banner advertisements, they were linked to a website that included a calendar and list of university-approved events (Valentine’s Day did not appear on this list of events; See Appendix A for illustrations of these banner ads.). These advertisements were used to manipulate accessibility of relationships on both Valentine’s Day and the control day. These banner advertisements were at the top and bottom of the webpage on which participants filled out measures of relationship functioning. The placement of ads on this page ensured that participants were thinking about relationships before they responded to questions about their relationships. Thus, the manipulation of relationship accessibility and survey responses occurred simultaneously.

To assess *relationship functioning*, participants completed the 37-item Investment Model Scale (IMS; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Ten items measured relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha = .96$ ; e.g.,

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