

# **Who are the best gift-givers? Not who you'd think, says marketing research**

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Meredith David, Ph.D., assistant professor of marketing in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. Credit: Baylor Marketing & Communications

Have you ever bought a gift for a friend, simply because it's a gift that you would like yourself?

If so, that was likely a time that you projected your own attitudes onto your friend, assuming your friend shared your preferences. Such activity is called "social projection" and is the focus of new marketing research from Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business.

The study, "I Love the Product, but Will You? The Role of Interpersonal Attachment Styles in Social Projection," is authored by Meredith David, Ph.D., assistant professor of marketing, and published in *Psychology & Marketing*. Research results are based on the surveys of 1,272 people across five studies.

The research reveals that people who are "secure" in interpersonal settings are the ones most likely to engage in social projection (making choices on behalf of others based on their own preferences). Conversely, those who are "anxious" in such settings are less likely to assume that others share their own preferences and less likely to make choices for others based on their personal attitudes.

"You'd think that secure people with lots of friends and healthy [personal relationships](#) would have a better idea of what someone would like as a gift, but that's not the case," David said. "This research shows that [individuals](#) who are anxious in interpersonal situations and who have fewer close, personal relationships are better at predicting what a person

may like."

Securely attached individuals, David explained, are people who expect others will be available and supportive when needed. Anxiously attached individuals have less positive expectations about interpersonal-related situations and constantly worry about relationships.

"The findings of this study are counterintuitive and contrary to much of the literature, which says secure attachments are most desirable and attachment anxiety is only associated with negative behaviors and outcomes," David said. "My research suggests that secure attachments may not always be the best or most optimal."

## **Making choices for others**

Secure individuals, David said, tend to be older, in a committed relationship and earn a higher-income. Anxious individuals tend to be younger, single and earn a lower income.

A securely attached person is more apt to choose a gift based on his/her own preferences. An anxious person is more apt to consider what the recipient may like, and will make a choice based less on his/her own personal preferences.

"A key takeaway is that secure people (people who have healthy relationships and feel comfortable in interpersonal settings, etc.) should be mindful of their propensity to assume others like what they like," David said. "Gifts should be thoughtful, and securely attached folks need to take caution when selecting and buying gifts. Importantly, these individuals should strive to put their own preferences aside when considering what others may like."

## **Research implications for marketers**

David said her research can impact many areas of the market, including gift-giving and marketing to [gift](#) buyers, as well as human resources and hiring.

One example given in the study is that of a company that lists on its website a group of products that have been deemed "good gifts" for purchase. Based on the results of this research, the company could see a greater return if its target market consists mainly of securely attached individuals.

"Specifically, the findings show that less-anxious, more securely attached individuals are more likely to project their attitudes onto others," David said. "Thus, it is likely that, while shopping online, [securely attached] individuals are more likely to assume that others would also like products from that store."

Thus, a potential sale.

## **Research implications for those who make hiring decisions**

David said human resources professionals and hiring managers may benefit by considering the attachment styles of job candidates and using the research to guide their evaluations as to which candidates may perform better in certain roles.

"For example, it is not uncommon that marketers and salespeople must predict preferences of the customers, at least as they relate to new products, pricing promotions etc. Sales and product development positions may be better suited for anxiously attached individuals;

whereas financial, technical or market research positions may be a better fit for secure individuals," David said.

**More information:** Meredith E. David. I love the product but will you? The role of interpersonal attachment styles in social projection, *Psychology & Marketing* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/mar.21080](https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21080)

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