



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



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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

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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, $M_{age} = 36.37$, $SD = 12.63$) 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.,

“I feel satisfied with our relationship”), seven items measured commitment ($\alpha = .91$; e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”), ten items measured investment ($\alpha = .92$; e.g., “Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal in my relationship with my partner.”), and ten items measured interest in alternatives ($\alpha = .95$; e.g., “The people other than my partner with whom I might become involved are very appealing”). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each statement, using a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 9 (*agree completely*). These measures appeared on pages that had the same banner advertisements as the manipulation.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Zero-order correlations, presented in Table 1, indicated that individuals in the high-accessibility condition reported greater relationship satisfaction compared to individuals in the low-accessibility condition. Participants who completed the survey on Valentine’s Day reported greater relationship satisfaction, investment, and commitment than individuals who completed the survey on the control day. Avoidant individuals were less satisfied and invested in their relationships and reported greater interest in relationship alternatives. Anxious individuals were also less satisfied, invested, and committed.

The subscales of the IMS were significantly intercorrelated, r 's $> .28$, p 's $< .001$ (consistent with Rusbult et al., 1998), so we conducted a MANOVA predicting satisfaction, investment, commitment, and interest in alternatives from accessibility condition and date of survey completion and the interaction between these two variables. As predicted, there was a marginally significant accessibility \times date interaction predicting relationship functioning, $F(3,137) = 2.55$, $p = .08$. Follow-up analyses revealed that the interaction was primarily driven by relationship satisfaction, $F(1,139) = 3.38$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .07$. As shown in Fig. 1, relationship satisfaction was highest among participants for which relationships were accessible on Valentine’s Day ($M = 7.56$, $SD = 1.40$) compared to participants in the other conditions ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 1.98$), $p = .002$, $d = .63$. The effects of accessibility and date approached significance for investment, $F(1,139) = 2.49$, $p = .06$, and commitment, $F(1,139) = 2.54$, $p = .06$. The means for investment and commitment were in a similar direction to those found for relationship satisfaction, but post hoc analyses revealed that the conditions did not significantly differ from each other. Accessibility and date did not significantly predict interest in alternatives $F(1,139) = .75$,

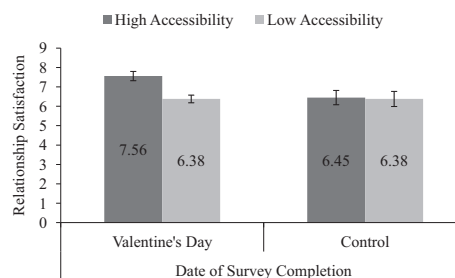


Fig. 1. The effects of accessibility and date of survey completion on relationship satisfaction. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

$p = .53$. In sum, the interaction between accessibility and date was significant for relationship satisfaction but not relationship investment, commitment, or interest in alternatives. In the next section, we examine whether an individual’s attachment orientation moderates the effects of accessibility and date on relationship functioning.

3.2. Multivariate analyses

To determine whether attachment orientations, date of survey completion, accessibility of relationships, and their interactions were associated with perceptions of relationship functioning, we conducted separate regression analyses predicting each facet of relationship functioning from these terms and their two- and three-way interactions. Anxiety and avoidance were mean-centered prior to computing interaction terms. Given the wide range in relationship duration of the participants, relationship length was included as a covariate in all analyses. Relationship length was only significantly associated with interest in relationship alternatives (see below). To reduce the number of interaction terms in our analyses, we excluded terms that involved the product of anxiety and avoidance (none of these interactions were statistically significant when included in the model, all p 's $> .35$).

3.2.1. Relationship satisfaction

For relationship satisfaction, the main effects of avoidance, $\beta = -.23$, $p = .01$, accessibility, $\beta = .16$, $p = .05$, and date, $\beta = .14$, $p = .10$, were consistent with and in the same direction as those reported above. The accessibility \times date interaction was also significant, $\beta = .18$, $p = .03$, replicating the pattern described above; this effect was qualified by an avoidance \times accessibility \times date interaction, $\beta = -.18$, $p = .04$. To decompose this significant three-way interaction, we conducted separate regression analyses for each

Table 1
Correlations Among Primary Study Variables (Study 2).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Attachment avoidance							
2. Attachment anxiety	.19*						
3. Satisfaction	-.26**	-.15*					
4. Investment	-.30**	-.16*	.63**				
5. Commitment	-.14	-.15*	.79**	.59**			
6. Interest in alternatives	.35**	.06	-.28**	-.34**	-.24**		
7. Accessibility	.02	-.09	.16*	.12	.05	-.09	
8. Date of survey completion	.08	.00	.14*	.19*	.22**	-.04	.00
M	2.78	3.65	6.69	6.43	6.22	3.62	–
SD	1.20	1.19	1.92	1.65	1.11	1.64	–

Note: Ns range from 141 to 144; Date of survey ($-1 =$ Control Day, $1 =$ Valentine’s Day), accessibility of relationships ($-1 =$ low accessibility, $1 =$ high accessibility).

* $p < .10$.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p < .01$.

date of data collection, with avoidance, anxiety, accessibility, and their two-way interactions as independent variables. Results from these analyses revealed that the interaction between avoidance and accessibility condition was significant on Valentine's Day, $\beta = -.22, p = .04$, but not on the control day, $\beta = .13, p = .31$. As shown in Fig. 2, relationship satisfaction was highest among individuals low in avoidance when relationships were made accessible on Valentine's Day. Among individuals low in avoidance, the slope of accessibility was positive, $\beta = .66, p < .001$. Among individuals high in avoidance, the slope of accessibility was not significant, $\beta = .19, p = .28$. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

3.2.2. Relationship investment

For investment, the main effects of avoidance, $\beta = -.30, p = .001$, and day of completion, $\beta = .17, p = .04$, were consistent with and in the same direction as the findings reported above. In addition, the avoidance \times accessibility \times date interaction was significant, $\beta = -.24, p = .006$. As described for relationship satisfaction, we conducted separate regression analyses for each date of data collection, with avoidance, anxiety, accessibility, and their two-way interactions as independent variables. Results from these analyses revealed that the interaction between avoidance and accessibility condition was significant on Valentine's Day, $\beta = -.39, p < .001$, but not on the control day, $\beta = .14, p = .34$. As depicted in Fig. 3, relationship investment was highest among individuals low in avoidance when relationships were made accessible on Valentine's Day. Among individuals low in avoidance, the slope of accessibility was positive, $\beta = .66, p < .001$. Among individuals high in avoidance, the slope of accessibility was not significant, $\beta = -.09, p = .62$.

3.2.3. Relationship commitment and interest in alternatives

For commitment, only day of completion emerged as a marginally significant main effect ($\beta = .15, p = .09$), consistent with the zero-order correlations.

For alternatives, the main effect of avoidance, $\beta = .36, p < .001$, was consistent and in the same direction as the findings reported earlier. The only other significant main effect was that of relationship length, such that individuals in longer relationships reported lower interest in alternatives, $\beta = -.21, p = .01$.

Because the subscales of relationship satisfaction, investment, and commitment were highly intercorrelated, r 's $> .59, p$'s $< .001$, we created a composite variable of relationship functioning from these three variables ($\alpha = .85$) to test if the results could be more parsimoniously explained. As with relationship satisfaction and investment, there was a significant avoidance \times accessibility \times date interaction, $\beta = -.22, p = .009$, mirroring the patterns in Figs. 2 and 3. However, the main effect of condition and the

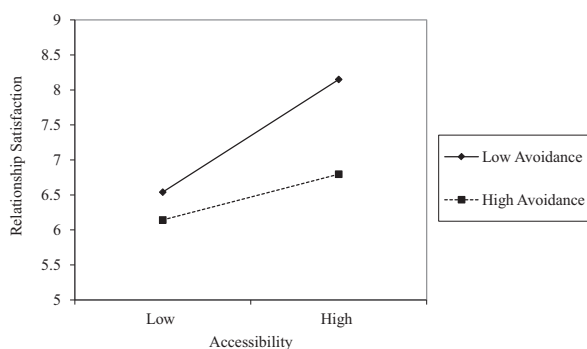


Fig. 2. The effects of avoidance and accessibility of relationships on relationship satisfaction on Valentine's Day. Regression lines are plotted separately for the low- and high-accessibility condition conditions, at 1 standard deviation above and below the means of avoidance.

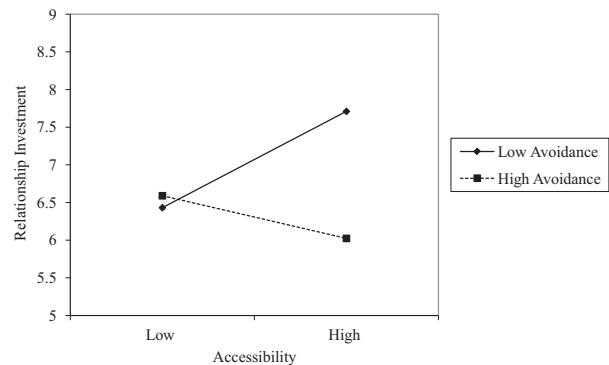


Fig. 3. The effects of avoidance and relationship accessibility on relationship investment on Valentine's Day. Regression lines are plotted separately for the low- and high-accessibility conditions, at 1 standard deviation above and below the means of avoidance.

date \times condition interaction were no longer significant as they were when examining relationship satisfaction in isolation. Combining relationship satisfaction, investment, and commitment into one composite of relationship functioning is not typically done using the IMS. Indeed, the subscales were originally conceptualized as unique predictors of relationship commitment and stability (Rusbult et al., 1998). Correlations among the subscales of the IMS also vary widely across samples, type and length of relationships, and social settings (Le & Agnew, 2003). The main effect of accessibility and its interaction with date were significant only for relationship satisfaction. Global evaluations of broad domains (e.g., life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction) are often more sensitive to the accessibility effects related to these judgments whereas other, more specific evaluations (e.g., interest in alternatives) are not (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006). Thus, analyzing the subscales of the IMS both separately and in a composite can provide useful information.

4. Discussion

The current study found that Valentine's Day increased perceptions of relationship satisfaction and investment, but only when relationships were accessible and only among individuals low in attachment avoidance. Individuals high in avoidance reported lower satisfaction and investment compared to individuals low in attachment avoidance, especially when relationships were made salient on Valentine's Day. Taken together, the current findings demonstrate that recurring events dedicated to love and affection (e.g., Valentine's Day) enhance evaluations of relationships; however, this enhancement is especially likely when individuals are thinking of their partner and have a disposition towards depending on romantic partners.

Although previous studies indicate that couples use annual commemorative celebrations, such as anniversaries and birthdays, to maintain and even repair relationships (Dindia & Baxter, 1987), few studies have examined how recurring relationship events contribute to perceptions of romantic relationship functioning. Findings from the current study suggest that reminders of relationships on Valentine's Day (e.g., heart-shaped chocolates, cards) might enhance how individuals evaluate their romantic relationships. We did not find support for other hypotheses that suggest relationship functioning worsens around Valentine's Day—an explanation provided for the increased dissolution that occurs during this time period (Morse & Neuberg, 2004). Instead, we found that Valentine's Day, on average, increased perceptions of relationship functioning rather than diminished them. However, individuals high in avoidance did not experience this “boost” in

relationship satisfaction and investment, leaving open the possibility that Valentine's Day might hurt some relationships.

The current study also extends the findings of laboratory research by suggesting that the effects of relationship accessibility can be moderated by other characteristics of the immediate social environment. Laboratory studies demonstrate that increasing the mental accessibility of relationships improves a wide range of intra- and interpersonal outcomes (Gillath, Selcuk, & Shaver, 2008). We observed many of the same accessibility effects for Valentine's Day, a recurring real-world event, providing support for the idea that our feelings depend on the things to which we direct our attention (e.g., Kahneman et al., 2006). Thinking about partners on a day that traditionally celebrates the joyous nature of relationships might remind individuals of why they enjoy spending time with their partners. Attending to the positive attributes of relationships and partners, in turn, might increase global adoration and evaluation, thus enhancing relationship functioning (Neff & Karney, 2005).

Perhaps the most substantial contribution of the current study is related to individual differences in these responses, providing further insight into the many psychological processes that underlie recurring relationship events. We found that avoidant individuals did not report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and investment when reminded of relationships on Valentine's Day. When compelled by relationship events to think about their intimate partners, avoidant individuals likely fixate on the negative characteristics and flaws of their current relationship partners (Collins, 1996). Perhaps avoidant individuals withdraw even more when their partners initiate positive interactions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005), which may be more likely on Valentine's Day. There is also evidence that individuals high in avoidance try to limit their attention to relationship-relevant information and do not benefit from exposure to such information (Edelstein, 2006; Edelstein, Kean, & Chopik, 2012). Further, the suppression of relationship-relevant information is strongest among partnered avoidant individuals (Edelstein & Gillath, 2008), who are the focus of the current study. Thus, avoidant individuals in a relationship may be less affected by relationship reminders compared to individuals low in avoidance.

Contrary to our predictions, attachment anxiety did not moderate the effects of accessibility on perceptions of relationship functioning. For some anxious individuals, Valentine's Day might provide an opportunity to satisfy the desire to become closer with their partner and enhance relationship functioning (Shaver et al., 2005). For other anxious individuals, Valentine's Day might highlight the undesirable qualities and faults of their partners, or lead them to interpret ambiguous behavior as indicative of relationship problems that may not actually exist (Collins, 1996; Kruger et al., 2013). Thus, whereas some aspects of anxiety might predict increases in perceptions of relationship functioning, others would predict the opposite, and this discrepancy may explain the null results from the current study.

Very few studies provide real-world tests of the function of commemorative relationship celebrations. The current study capitalizes on a naturally recurring event that ostensibly enhances relationships. Although our study provided a unique way to assess the effects of recurring relationship events on perceptions of romantic relationships, our methodology is not without limitations. For instance, we used a between-subjects design and were not able to assess relationship functioning before Valentine's Day, how persistent these effects are, or the long-term implications for relationship outcomes. There is some evidence that effects of repeated priming of attachment security can persist as long as 1 week (Carnelley & Rowe, 2007; Gillath et al., 2008); perhaps positive interactions with partners on Valentine's Day continue to influence relationship functioning beyond merely that 1 day. These temporary "bumps" may not necessarily save an already struggling

relationship (Morse and Neuberg, 2004); however, occasional reminders might keep some couples together and happier for a longer period of time.

In addition, there may be other unaccounted for reasons why individuals would respond to reminders of relationships on Valentine's Day with higher satisfaction. Perhaps people feel pressure to follow the social norms and scripts of Valentine's Day and, with the expectation to be in a happy, satisfying relationship, shift their perceptions of their relationship to reflect how they believe they *should* feel about their relationship. Unfortunately, we did not measure the degree to which individuals felt pressured to adhere to societal expectations that might affect perceptions of relationship functioning. The current investigation was also limited to the experience of Valentine's Day among US respondents. Future research can further examine how factors at the individual, dyadic, and broader cultural level contribute to relationship functioning in the context of recurring relationship events.

Despite these limitations, our study has many practical implications. Relationship reminders, particularly on occasions that celebrate relationships (e.g., Valentine's Day), enhance perceptions of the quality of a romantic relationship for most partnered individuals. People may feel more positive about their relationship if they deliberately attend to relationship milestones or recurring events, such as anniversaries (Algoe, 2012). Couples should be encouraged to reflect on their relationship and celebrate each other on these special days. However, such reflection would likely not increase perceptions of relationship functioning for avoidant individuals. Future research should examine how other relationship reminders (e.g., wedding rings, pictures of loved ones) influence perceptions of relationship functioning and how this varies by attachment style.

Claudia Ghandi once said, "If I had a single flower for every time I think about you, I could walk forever in my garden." For better or for worse, recurring relationship events provide opportunities for people to think about their relationships. Based on the findings from the current study, we would like to amend Ghandi's original statement by noting that evaluations of relationships are the result of a complex interaction between accessibility, the immediate social context, and an individual's approach towards close relationships.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.01.035>.

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