The Price of Love: the Gifting Behaviors of Insecure Lovers

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We demonstrate that in a romantic dyad relationship, an insecure lover is more likely to engage in more frequent gift giving to his or her beloved one, is more likely to select hedonic or discretionary items as gift choice, and is willing to pay more for a desired gift item.

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likely that when consumers are faced with competing information they will be more likely to want to try the product again to move away from their state of dissonance.

Using an experimental methodology we tested whether a positive or negative informational social influence would either enhance or decrease the perceptions of sweet (or bitter) tasting drink. A total of 105 undergraduate students from a large Mid-Atlantic private university participated in the study in exchange for bonus course credit. Participants were divided into one of six cells for our 2 (sweet tasting vs. bitter tasting) x 3 (positive vs. negative information social influence vs. no informational influence) between subjects design.

An unsweetened guava juice concentrate was mixed according to the directions and the flavor was either enhanced using a sweetener (sweet) or made to taste worse using lemon juice (bitter). A pre-test found that the sweeter drink was rated as more pleasant than the bitter drink (MSweet = 4.22 vs. MBitter = 2.94, F(1, 40) = 11.22, p < .01). Participants in the study were randomly divided into one of the six cells and told that they would be sampling a new type of drink. The drink was given to participants in a clear plastic cup with no markings. Before sampling the juice, the participants’ attention was directed to a whiteboard that contained previous students’ flavor ratings of the drink displayed in a stem and leaf style tick mark chart similar to the manipulation used by Cohen and Golden (1972). The tick marks were skewed to the top of the whiteboard under the positive informational influence condition and then inverted under the negative informational social influence condition.

Each participant was given approximately four ounces of the juice mixture and asked to fill out a questionnaire. Two seven point measures; Pleasant (anchored by Unpleasant to Pleasant) and Willingness to Try Again (anchored by Never to Very Likely) were used as the main dependent variables of interest. Once the study was over, participants were debriefed as to the true nature of the experiment and asked not to discuss the study with anyone.

Results were analyzed using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Participants who received the sweet tasting juice were not impacted by the informational social influence effects; however, those that received the bitter tasting juice were significantly impacted by the social influence manipulation. Those who tasted the bitter juice and viewed the ratings given by others felt the pleasantness of the drink was significantly higher than those who were making their judgments without any social influence effects (MInformation_POS = 4.10 vs. MNo_Information = 2.94, F(1, 37) = 12.25, p < .01). This finding indicates that the positive informational influence effect can increase the evaluation of a poor product. Furthermore, the in-congruency between the positive informational influence and the bitter tasting drink caused consumers to want to try the drink again (MInformation_POS = 4.10 vs. MNo_Information = 2.61, F(1, 37, p < .001) which indicates that not only can informational social influence impact subjective consumer evaluations but it may also impact repeat behaviors.

Our study explores the interplay between informational social influence and evaluations of products. Our results suggest that an unpleasant product can be given a more favorable evaluation if consumers are made aware that other consumers had previously evaluated the product favorably. We also provide an avenue for further investigation by identifying the impact that conflicting signals can have on future intentions. In summary, we question the familiar adage, if everybody did it would it you?

REFERENCES


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Love is in the giver, not the gift. (William Sloan Coffin)

In the romantic dyad relationship, to love and to be loved may not always strike the perfect balance. If a person is more in love with or more devoted to his or her lover, he or she may feel insecure in the relationship. Purchasing and giving gifts to one’s romantic partner is one of the most important and common ways to show one’s love and nurture the intimate relationship. The average American spent about $100 on Valentine’s Day in recent years, which was equivalent to almost one third of their entire Christmas shopping spending (Paul 2009). While the early research generally regard gift giving as an economic exchange process based on reciprocity motivation (e.g., Mauss 1925; Sherry 1983), Belk and Coon (1993) turned to the romantic love model within the agapic love paradigm to explain lovers’ gifting behaviors, and found it to be a necessary addition to the economic exchange model. Nevertheless, they still viewed gift giving as an instrumental act designed to accomplish a goal such as gaining the recipient’s love (Belk and Coon 1993). Particularly in an unbalanced romantic dyad, the motivation of an insecure lover trying to gain more “love” and secure feelings, may be manifested by the way he or she gives gifts for his or her beloved one.

In Sherry (1983)’s influential study of consumer gift giving in anthropological perspective, gift-giving is viewed as a continuous cycle of reciprocities. One important factor that is associated with satisfaction in a relationship is the reward level of the resources exchanged in the relationship (cf. Sprecher 1998). Notably, gift giving is a way of reinforcing relationships that are highly valued but insecure such as the kinship ties weakened by distance (Caplow 1982). In the romantic relationship, gifts are used to enhance self-attractiveness and self-esteem...
(Mick and DeMoss 1990) or express feelings of love towards one’s significant other (Cheal 1987). Research on dating gift giving shows that such gifts can also serve as a diagnostic cue for people to assess the intensity of a partner’s love (Belk and Cook 1991). These instrumentalities of gift-giving naturally lead us to ask when and how people may develop different gifting strategies. Initial evidence has shown that gift giving patterns do evolve along different stages of a romantic relationship, e.g. often starting from the “gift-showering” at the early stage to “becoming unnecessary” at the mature stage (Joy 2001).

Existing literature has primarily focused on the desired recipients’ influence as the origin of gift givers’ gifting behaviors. For example, Otnes et al. (1993) integrated the study of recipient influences within the research on gift-selection behavior and explored how givers themselves actually view recipients and then examine how these perceptions influence actual gift-selection practices. Similarly, Ruth et al. (1999) investigated how the recipient’s perceptions of the existing relationship, the gift, and his or her emotional reactions converge to affect relationship realignment. In this research, we propose a different perspective to consider givers’ motivation of gaining feelings of security as the origin of their gifting behaviors. More specifically, we propose that the need to feel secure in the relationship will influence (1) how often an insecure lover gives gifts to his or her lover, (2) what kind of gifts he or she is inclined to purchase, and (3) how much is his or her willingness to pay for the chosen gift.

We first conducted an exploratory study to probe the gifting behaviors of lovers. Semi-structured interviews with 18 subjects who were in romantic relationship uncovered the following gifting patterns: (1) people tended to spend more time and effort in gift giving during courtship; what’s more, they tended to focus on more hedonic items as their gift choice; (2) once the relationship settled down, people tended to reduce gift-giving to only occasion based (e.g. birthday) and holiday based gifting, and they tended to choose more functional or utilitarian items as gifts; (3) gifting was one of the most common means to please one’s romantic partner; (4) when people felt less secure in the relationship, they thought of purchasing a gift more often, and they indeed did so. These findings support that in general, the power structure of a romantic relationship influences people’s gifting behaviors.

We also conducted an experiment to investigate whether level of felt security in a romantic relationship has impact on people’s choice of gift items. We randomly primed subjects (N=125) using scrambled sentence task with either feeling secure or feeling insecure in a relationship. Subsequently, the subjects primed as feeling insecure were more likely to select hedonic or discretionary items from the given list of gift choices compared to the subjects primed as secure (budget was controlled for; 85.6% vs. 57%, p<.01). Additionally, we plan to conduct a second experiment to test the difference in the willingness-to-pay for a desired gift item when subjects are subliminally primed with either feeling secure or insecure.

Meanwhile, a 3-month event-contingent diary study (N=38) is under way (confidentiality was assured through study’s administrative procedure). Each time a subject gives a gift to his or her romantic partner, (s)he is instructed to record the experience following an agenda of topics specified in the journal kit as well as filling out a set of scale items adapted from the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS, Hendrick 1988), the commitment scale (Lund 1985) and Braiker and Kelley (1979)’s love scale. This longitudinal study aims to gather further evidence of how level of felt security influences a lover’s gifting behaviors along the evolving relationship.

We aim to contribute to the literature by demonstrating that in a romantic dyad relationship, an insecure lover is more likely to engage in more frequent gift giving to his or her beloved one, is more likely to select hedonic or discretionary items as gift choice, and is willing to pay more for a desired gift item. We also identify managerial and public policy implications that stem from these findings.

REFERENCES