Give Me Your Self: Gifts Are Liked More When They Match the Giver’s Characteristics

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We explore how recipients’ appreciation for a gift depends on the match between the gift and giver. Four studies demonstrate that recipients appreciate gifts more when they figuratively match the giver, i.e., that contain references to the giver’s core characteristics, because they perceive such gifts as more congruent with the giver’s identity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We often wonder what gifts we should buy to make our friends and relatives happy. Past research has documented many factors that affect recipients’ satisfaction with the gifts they receive. Whereas most of this literature focused on the fit between the gift and the recipient (Gino and Flynn 2011; Ward and Broniaczyk 2011) and on the relationship between the giver and recipient (Belk 1976; Ruth, Ottes, and Brunel 1999), our work explores how the fit between the giver and the gift affects recipients’ appreciation for gifts. We propose that recipients like a gift more when it matches the giver, i.e., when it contains references to the core characteristics of the giver, because recipients perceive such gifts as congruent with the giver’s identity. This proposition builds on people’s inherent preference for identity congruence when they consider other people’s expressions, and on the role of gifts as expression of the giver’s identity.

People not only tend to act in ways that are congruent with their own identity (Oyserman 2007; 2009), they also tend to appreciate, as observers, consistency in other people’s actions (Cialdini, Trost, and Newsom 1995; Fiske and Taylor 1991). Given that research in gift giving has highlighted the role of gifts as a tool that allows givers to express their identities (Belk, 1976), we reasoned that gift recipients evaluate gifts in relationship to the givers. In particular we hypothesize gifted recipients appreciate gifts that match the giver because they perceive such gifts as congruent with the giver’s identity. We found support for the attractiveness of giver-matched gifts across four different studies. Confirming our theoretical account, in each of our studies we found that the perceived congruence of the gift with the giver’s identity mediates the effect of matching on our dependent variable. All studies used giver-matched gifts that were aesthetically (as opposed to functionally) related to the giver, ruling out the explanation that recipients are appreciative of giver-matched gifts because they infer higher quality of the gift from the giver’s presumed expertise.

In Study 1, participants read a scenario in which they received a mug of “Cupid and Psyche,” a painting which is part of the Louvre’s collection in Paris. In a between-participants design, the giver was described as either as passionate about France (match condition) or as passionate about England (no match condition). Participants appreciated the gift more when it figuratively matched the giver than when it did not.

In Study 2, we decoupled the gift from the act of giving, and demonstrate that the preferences for giver-matched gifts do not depend on recipients’ inferences about the giver’s motivations to give a giver-matched gift (or not). Participants imagined that their friend Robin moved overseas and left some possessions behind for friends to pick. Participants had to indicate which object they preferred to pick between an urban print (“NY—Towers and Spotlights” by Jerry Driendl) or a landscape print (“Sunbeams through the trees” by Ross Hoddinott). In a between-participants design, participants were told that Robin was passionate about photographing urban sites (urban condition) versus landscapes (landscape condition). We also included a control condition in which no mention was made of photography. Results indicated that participants in the landscape condition preferred the landscape print more than participants in the urban condition, with the control condition falling in between.

Study 3 rules out the alternative explanation that recipients appreciate giver-matched gifts more because these gifts are reminders of people they like. Participants imagined receiving a gift (a mouse pad displaying ancient images of a South-African tribe). In a 3×2 between-participants design, we manipulated how participants liked the giver (close friend, acquaintance, disliked person) and whether the gift matched the giver (of South African origin and passionate about African music) or not (of Scottish origin and passionate about Scottish music). Results revealed two significant main effects and a lack of interaction between liking for the giver and match. In particular, liking for the giver positively affected gift appreciation; most importantly, participants appreciated giver-matched gifts more than not matched gifts irrespective of how they liked the person who was given the gift.

Study 4 showed that a giver-matched gift is appreciated more than a giver-non-matched gift only if the match concerns a core characteristic of the giver. Participants read a scenario similar to Study 3, and we manipulated whether the key characteristic of the gift (images of a South-African Tribe) matched a core characteristic of the giver (Robin’s country of origin), an incidental descriptor of the giver (a country where they once held a tournament of Robin’s favorite sport), or nothing (no mention of the country in Robin’s description). Whereas gifts that matched a core characteristic of the giver were more appreciated than gifts that did not match anything, gifts that matched a non-core characteristic of the giver did not.

Early research on gift giving highlighted the role of gifts as a tool that allows givers to express their identities (Belk 1976; Schwartz 1967). Our research explored the consequences of doing so for recipients’ appreciation. We showed that givers can increase recipients’ appreciation by choosing gifts that match their own identity and are in turn perceived as more congruent. Previous research has documented several instances in which people overly focus on themselves when attempting to predict others’ reactions (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, and Gilovich 2004). Egocentric biases might underlie several tendencies among gift givers that ultimately translate into suboptimal recipient happiness such as privileging gift attributes like exclusivity (Teigen, Olsen, and Solas 2005) and stigmatizing regifting practices (Adams, Flynn, and Norton 2012). While we do not claim that participants should neglect including recipients’ likes and tastes in the gifts they give, our research suggests that some egocentrism might in fact be beneficial. Future research should investigate how givers should balance the goals of matching the gift with their own and recipients’ characteristics.

REFERENCES


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