Gifting an Identity: the Effect of Gifts on Receiver Identity
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We demonstrate that the gifts we receive have a strong influence in shaping how we view our own identity. Specifically, when a gift is received, recipients use the gift to infer how others view them. These reflected appraisals then influence the identity of the receiver.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Existing work on gift-giving has tended to focus on how and why givers’ choose the gifts that they do. One of the central findings of this research is that givers frequently choose gifts for their symbolic meaning (Belk 1976; McCracken 1986). Gifts can be chosen to communicate a valued relationship (Sherry 1983), shared identities and interests (Larsen and Watson 2001), and even how the giver would like the receiver to perceive them (Larsen and Watson 2001). Little research, however, has examined the impact of such gifts on receivers, despite several calls for more research on this topic (Joy 2001; Larsen and Watson 2001; Minowa and Gould 1999).

The current work suggests that receivers often see gifts as indicative of how the giver views them. Receiving a certain team’s hockey jersey, for example, suggests that the giver perceives the receiver as a fan. Or receiving a coffee cup suggests the giver must view the receiver as a coffee drinker. And because gifts have the potential to convey such information (i.e., reflected appraisals; Tice and Wallace 2011), they should also be capable of affecting individuals’ self-appraisals (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979). In short, the current work investigates the idea that gifts can alter aspects of individuals’ identity because of what they convey about how others view them.

GIFTS AS REFLECTED APPRAISALS
Schwartz (1967) first suggested that gifts might act as “generators of identity,” where at a young age parents use gifts to push gender identities (e.g., dolls for girls, guns for boys). Such gifts could potentially affect identity via selective exposure, but they could also affect identity by communicating information about how the giver perceives the receiver to be. This latter suggestion is consistent with the looking glass view of self, where individuals come to learn about themselves through the eyes of others (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979). According to this perspective, beliefs about how others view us (i.e., reflected appraisals) can directly influence how we see ourselves (i.e., self-appraisals).

Gifts should be capable of providing a very clear picture – from the receivers’ perspective – about what the giver thinks of them. Even gifts that receivers dislike should presumably convey information about what the giver thought the receiver might like. As such, receivers might often see gifts as diagnostic of how the giver views them. This is not to say that this view is necessarily accurate. The giver may have chosen the gift for reasons that have nothing to do with what they thought the receiver would like. Our suggestion is simply that gifts are often likely to be seen as indicative of what a giver thinks the receiver would like, and therefore, that they provide information about how the giver views the receiver.

Given the possibility that gifts might be interpreted this way (i.e., as information about how one is seen by other people), we suggest that they provide a strong context in which to study the effect of reflected-appraisals on self-appraisals. Extant work has largely investigated this relationship in naturalistic settings, and therefore relied on correlational data, or else has examined contexts in which actual appraisals are highly ambiguous (e.g., Kenny and DePaulo 1993; Tice and Wallace 2003). Gift receipt is one context where we believe we might find evidence of the impact of reflected appraisals on self-appraisals. This would contribute to the gift-giving literature by investigating the impact of gifts on receivers’ reflected appraisals and, in turn, on identity formation, but would also contribute to the literature on reflected appraisals by providing an experimental demonstration of the role of reflected appraisals on self-appraisals.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES
To test these ideas we conducted a series of studies examining how receiving gifts can influence both self-identity and beliefs about how the giver perceives the receiver (i.e., reflected appraisals). Across four experiments and a field study we find support for our predictions.

Experiment 1 demonstrated that receiving a team jersey (Experiment 1a) or a city branded mug (Experiment 1b) as a gift vs. receiving the same item as a randomly drawn prize increased gift-congruent identity and reflected appraisals. In other words, people who received these items as gifts vs. as a prize identified more strongly with the sports team (Experiment 1a) or city (Experiment 1b). This effect is mediated by the receiver’s belief that the giver views the receiver as possessing the identity signaled by the gift (i.e., reflected appraisals).

Experiment 2 and 3 replicates the effect and demonstrates moderation of process by manipulating whether the gift is diagnostic for how the giver sees the receiver or not. Specifically, Experiment 2 found that the effect of receiving an identity-signaling gift on identity was larger when the gift was personal and not given to anyone else (diagnostic) compared to when the same gift was given to multiple people (non-diagnostic). Similar results were found in Experiment 3 where the effect of receiving an identity-signaling gift on identity is larger when given by a close (diagnostic) vs. distant (non-diagnostic) other. Evidence is provided that this moderated effect is mediated by the receiver’s belief that the giver views the receiver as possessing the identity signaled by the gift.

Lastly, in Experiment 4 we examined this effect outside the laboratory in a natural experiment. Specifically, during the new naming of a business school in the Fall of 2015, students on campus were given t-shirts with the new name and logo by the school’s administration. Survey results later found that receiving the t-shirt (vs. not) resulted in higher self-identity perceptions aligning with the new school name.

CONCLUSION
Overall, by showing that gifts can drive recipients’ identity, we highlight an important consequence of gifts from the receiver’s perspective. Across five studies we provide evidence that receivers use gifts to inform them of how the giver views them. We demonstrate that these reflected appraisals can then influence how the receiver perceives themselves, influencing their own identity perceptions.

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