Gifts of Consolation: Gifts As Substitutes For Emotional Support

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Most gift research looks at celebratory gifts, but consumers also give gifts when others experience negative life events, e.g., a loved one’s death. We propose that these “gifts of consolation” are a form of social support, and in six studies show when and why consumers substitute gifts for emotional support.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024266/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Most research on gifts has examined celebratory gifts, or gifts that are given in response to others’ positive events, such as birthdays or holidays. However, consumers also give gifts in response to others’ negative life events, such as a loved one’s death or a break-up. In this research, we introduce the term “gifts of consolation” to refer to gifts given in response to negative events and examine when and why consumers give them.

We propose that gifts of consolation are a form of social support and thus that giving a gift can be a substitute for providing someone with emotional support. People have the existing psychological ability to substitute a product for a psychological construct (Chen, Peng, Wan, and Levy 2017), and we argue that giving gifts and providing emotional support both satisfy a person’s obligation to provide social support to close others (Clark 1987). Therefore, if givers are unable to provide emotional support, they should be more likely to give a gift and vice versa.

Studies 1a and 1b test the basic effect, examining whether givers spend more on gifts when they have not provided emotional support. Participants (n = 208; n = 209) were asked to imagine that their friend’s mother died and that they were able or unable to provide them with emotional support. Then in study 1a, participants chose between giving their friend one of three arrangements of sympathy flowers (small—$40, medium—$60, and large—$80) or not sending flowers, and in study 1b they chose how much they wanted to donate to a memorial fund for their friend’s mother. Participants who provided less emotional support condition spent more on gifts, than did those who provided more support (p = .006; p = .029), suggesting that givers use gifts to compensate for not providing emotional support.

Prior research (Clark 1987) has found that people feel less obligated to provide social support to people they are distant from, so in study 2 we examine whether the givers’ closeness to the support recipient moderates the effect. Participants (n = 414) first read that a friend’s (close condition) or coworker’s (distant condition) mother had died, and they attended (did not attend) the funeral. Then they were asked how much they would donate to a memorial fund. There was an interaction between the level of emotional support provided and closeness (p = .06). Participants in the close condition donated significantly less money ($54) when they attended the funeral than when they did not (p < .0001), but the effect was marginal in the coworker condition (p = .21; p = .1). When feelings of obligation are low, givers do not compensate for a lack of emotional support with a gift.

Study 3 tests whether givers substitute gifts for emotional support in celebratory situations or whether this effect is unique to gifts of consolation. Participants (n = 415) read about a friend’s positive event (another friend was throwing them a birthday party) or negative event (their mother died), and that they did or did not attend the birthday party (funeral). Then they indicated how much they would spend on a gift for their friend. There was a significant interaction between gift giving occasion and level of emotional support provided (p < .0001) such that participants said they would spend more on a gift when they did not attend their friend’s mother’s funeral than when they did (p < .0001), but whether or not they had attended their friend’s birthday party did not influence how much they chose to spend on a gift (p = .36), showing that givers substitute more for negative than positive events.

Study 4 examines whether the substitution effect works in reverse: If a giver gives a gift, are they then less likely to provide the recipient with emotional support? Participants (n = 203) first read that a friend’s (coworker’s) mother had died and that they decided to send flowers and a sympathy note or just a note. Then they were asked to write the note they would send. These notes were coded for how emotionally supportive they were. Participants who gave flowers wrote significantly less supportive notes than did those who did not give flowers (p < .0001). This effect was moderated by a marginal interaction (p = .09) such that giving a gift led to less supportive notes in the friend condition (p < .0001) but only marginally less supportive ones in the coworker condition (p = .07). This shows that givers compensate for not giving a gift by providing more emotional support.

Study 5 looks at when givers prefer to give gifts rather than provide emotional support. We propose that when a giver wants to support someone who they think will be difficult to support (e.g., someone who is negative or has low self-esteem; Forest, Kille, Wood, and Holmes 2014), they will give a gift to fulfill their obligation to provide support while avoiding an unpleasant interaction. We test this idea in a lab study. Participants (n = 48) were told that they would provide another participant with social support and were shown the profile of the person they would support. The profile was actually not from another participant but manipulated so that the person was easy to support by varying how pessimistic and low in self-esteem they were. Then participants were asked if they wanted to spend five minutes talking to the person (i.e., provide emotional support) or pay $1 to give the person a cookie and avoid the conversation (i.e., give a gift). Participants were significantly more likely to provide support by giving a gift when the support recipient sounded hard to support (54%) than easy to support (25%, p = .039), showing that gifts of consolation are an appealing way to support difficult people.

In conclusion, we show that givers give gifts of consolation and treat them as substitutes for emotional support. Our findings suggest that thinking about gifts as a form of social support may be a fruitful direction for future research.

REFERENCES

