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Social Comparison in Decisions For Others: Considering Multiple Gift Recipients Leads to Unique But Less-Liked Gifts

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This research examines how the social context in which a gift is selected influences gift choices. When givers select gifts for multiple recipients, they focus on what differentiates recipients instead of what each would like best. This leads givers to choose unique gifts over gifts that would be better liked.

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We further suggest that this inconsistency between givers and receivers would only happen between acquaintances but not strangers. For gifts given by strangers, receivers do not need to make sense of receiving an undesirable gift, so they would not consider giver's thoughts even when a gift is bad. Consistent with our predictions, a third study that involved real gift exchange returned results similar to the first two recall studies among acquaintances, but not among strangers.

The fourth experiment found that although thought counts very little in most cases, investing thoughts into a gift made givers feel more socially connected with receivers, which may help maintain and develop the relationship between givers and receivers.

This research has important implications in how to manage gift-exchanges. When choosing gifts, most people want their thoughts to be appreciated. However, our research shows that people receive extra credit for their thoughts only when they had chosen gifts disliked by receivers. Since a desirable gift is highly appreciated regardless of whether givers invest thoughts or not, maybe the most important thing for gift givers is to choose the right gift rather than investing enough thought. It is the thought that counts, this research suggests, but only when giving loved ones bad gifts.

Social Comparison in Decisions for Others: Considering Multiple Gift Recipients Leads to Personalized but Less-Liked Gifts

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gift giving is a challenge, and sometimes, this challenge is compounded by having to choose gifts for multiple recipients. Having multiple recipients in mind not only means that more gifts are needed, but it may change what givers focus on when making gift selections. We hypothesize that, when people select gifts for multiple recipients, they focus on what differentiates the recipients instead of on what each would like best, leading givers to select unique gifts over gifts that would be better liked.

There are at least two reasons why such an effect might arise. First, givers may actually perceive recipients differently when they are presented together versus separately (e.g., Hsee 1996). Alternatively, givers may want to personalize gifts in order to convey an understanding of recipients' unique identities (e.g., Belk 1996; Schwartz 1967), and this personalization motive may be highlighted in the multiple-recipient context. Although it may be important to differentiate gifts when recipients are likely to compare gifts, if recipients are unlikely to do so, then it makes less sense for givers to pass up gifts that would be better liked in favor of unique gifts.

Studies 1-3 explore whether givers who are purchasing items for multiple recipients favor unique gifts over better liked gifts. In each study, givers selected a gift for one recipient or two unacquainted recipients from a list of options in which one gift would clearly be better liked by both recipients. For example, in one study, participants selected a birthday card for one or two recipients: the target recipient and another recipient who was shown laughing (suggesting that he had a better sense of humor). Although most givers in the one-recipient condition (70%) gave the target recipient the card that was rated funniest in a pre-test, in the two-recipient condition, only a minority gave him this card (26%), $\chi^2(1) = 9.03, p = .003$. This happened despite the fact that givers who gave one of the other cards predicted that the target recipient would enjoy that card less than did givers who gave the funny card, $t(45) = 2.38, p = .02, d = .68$.

Study 4 examined a perceptual account for the current effects. Givers either chose a gift for one friend, chose a gift for two friends,

or considered both friends but only choose a gift for one. One of the available gifts was clearly the most appropriate gift. Some givers gave an item and others predicted which item the recipient(s) would choose. A contrast analysis indicated that givers were less likely to give the target recipient the better gift when they selected gifts for both her and another recipient (42%) than when they considered the target recipient alone (86%) or considered both recipients but selected a gift for the target recipient only (82%), $z = 3.88, p < .001$. Givers predicted that the target recipient would choose the better gift for herself regardless of condition, $\chi^2(2, N = 168) = .42$. Thus, merely considering two people together does not alter perceptions of recipients' tastes and does not drive the tendency to differentiate gifts.

Studies 5 and 6 examined whether givers differentiate gifts to convey their understanding of recipients' identities. In Study 5, participants chose between the movies *Up!* and *Star Trek* for a recipient who had a main interest in animation and a secondary interest in science fiction. Participants chose which movie would convey a better understanding of the recipient. Half of each sample considered this choice in isolation, and the other half considered this choice in the context of having already chosen to give *Up!* to another friend. Fewer thought that *Up!* conveyed a better understanding of the target when they were also giving *Up!* to another recipient (52%) than when they were getting it only for the target recipient (97%), $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 17.39, p < .001$.

In study 6, givers imagined selecting gifts for two close friends, for whom they would put considerable thought into their gift choices, or for two casual acquaintances. Both recipients preferred animated movies, but the target recipient had a secondary interest in science fiction. That target recipient was less likely to receive the better gift (the animated movie) in the close-friends condition (31%) than in the casual-acquaintances condition (47%), $\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 3.97, p < .05$, indicating that givers were less likely to diversify their gift choices for casual acquaintances. Thus, the more motivated givers are to put thought into their selections, the more likely they are pass up better liked gifts for unique gifts.

Finally, study 7 explored whether focusing givers' attention on recipient liking, by asking them to first predict which items recipients would choose for themselves, might encourage givers to select gifts that maximize recipient liking. Indeed, givers who first predicted which items recipients would choose for themselves were more willing to give two recipients the same gift than those in the control condition, who were more likely to diversify their gift selections. (Seventy-six percent gave the target recipient the better gift in the predict-liking condition and 54% did so in the control condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 3.93, p < .05$.)

In sum, the social context in which a gift is selected influences gift choices. When people select gifts for multiple recipients, they focus on what differentiates recipients rather than what each recipient would like best. This leads givers to pass up gifts that they believe would be better liked for unique gifts. This tendency is rooted in the motivation to convey an understanding of recipients' unique identities and is ameliorated by encouraging givers to consider which items recipients would choose for themselves.

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