

Research Report

Sentimental value and gift giving: Givers' fears of getting it wrong prevents them from getting it right

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Abstract

Sentimental value is the value derived from an emotionally-laden item's associations with significant others, or special events or times in one's life. The present research demonstrates that when faced with the choice between sentimentally valuable gifts and gifts with superficial attributes that match the preferences of the recipient, givers give the latter much more often than recipients would prefer to receive such gifts. This asymmetry appears to be driven by givers feeling relatively certain that preference-matching gifts will be well-liked by recipients, but relatively uncertain that the same is true for sentimentally valuable gifts. Three studies demonstrate this gift-giving mismatch and validate the proposed mechanism across a variety of gift-giving occasions and giver-receiver relationship types. The contribution of these findings to the gift-giving literature, as well as directions for future research, are discussed.

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An ideal gift can take many shapes. Gifts related to the preferences and tastes of individuals tend to be well received (Gino & Flynn, 2011), as are gifts that serve as reminders of special events and relationships (Belk, 1988, 1991). This latter type of gift, one we term a sentimentally valuable gift, is particularly interesting because of its ability to provide a recipient with happiness for years after the gift exchange (Yang & Galak, 2015). Yet, as we will show, givers do not give these gifts as often as recipients would like. That is, we will demonstrate that when faced with the decision of whether to give a gift with superficial attributes that match the preferences of the recipient or a gift that is likely to act as a reminder of the giver-receiver relationship, givers give the former more often than recipients would prefer. The question of why such a mismatch occurs is central to the intent of this paper. Indeed, we propose this arises because givers feel relatively certain that preference-matching gifts will be well-liked by recipients, but

relatively uncertain the same is true for sentimentally valuable gifts, and, as a result, shy away from the latter.

Theoretical background

The utility a recipient extracts from a gift comes in many different forms, however, in the present research we focus on two. First, a gift may provide a recipient utility in the form of preference-matching utility. Preference-matching utility is the utility a person derives from an object when its superficial components match their idiosyncratic tastes. For any given object, the extent to which these attributes, such as its brand, form factor, appearance, and the like, match an individual's tastes, determines its net preference-matching utility to that individual. For example, a Justin Bieber poster given to a "Belieber," a gift card to GameStop given to a video game enthusiast, and a Tom Brady jersey given to a Patriots fan, all have substantial preference-matching utility as the superficial attributes of the gifts match the respective recipients' idiosyncratic tastes. We emphasize the superficial aspect of preference-matching utility to differentiate

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it from another form of utility a recipient may extract from a gift, sentimental value.

Unlike preference-matching utility, which stems from an item's superficial features matching one's tastes, sentimental value stems from an item's intangible link to a cherished aspect of one's life. Specifically, sentimental value is the value derived from an emotionally-laden object's associations with significant others, or special events or times in one's life (Belk, 1988, 1991; Fletcher, 2009; Yang & Galak, 2015).¹ This value is acquired immediately, though in some cases it may increase with time (Yang & Galak, 2015). It is important to note that not *all* objects that relate to other people, past events, or another time, are sentimentally valuable. As the definition suggests, it is critical that *at least* one of these elements is "significant" or "special", and that the object is emotionally-laden. Further, the associations must be with *positive* aspects of one's life (i.e., not associations with a now-disliked person, or an unpleasant event or time; Yang & Galak, 2015). As an example of a sentimentally valuable object, consider a picture of someone along with their best friends at high school graduation, that was given to them at their graduation party. This picture immediately carries strong associations with significant others (best friends), and a special event (graduation), and thus will likely be quite sentimentally valuable to the recipient. As another example, a scrapbook given by a loving husband to his wife on their 10-year wedding anniversary is likely to be immediately sentimentally valuable as the scrapbook not only leads the wife to think of a significant other (husband), but also a special event and time in her life (their wedding and subsequent marriage). In both of these cases, the sentimental value stems from the memory markers the objects provide.

Though it seems possible that some gifts are both high in sentimental value and preference-matching utility, these two forms of utility are generally negatively correlated (Yang & Galak, 2015), and thus givers may often have to decide whether to give a gift high in sentimental value and low in preference-matching utility, or vice-versa. To examine if this is indeed the case, we conducted a pilot study in which seventy-one Amazon Mechanical Turk workers (56% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.63$) were presented with six tradeoffs from the gift-giving literature, along with the sentimental value vs. preference-matching utility tradeoff, and indicated how often they had to make each tradeoff when gift-giving (0 = Never, 100 = Every time I decide on a gift).² As is shown in Table 1, the average rating for the sentimental value vs. preference-matching utility tradeoff was 45.86, which was one of the highest ratings given to any of the tradeoffs. In other words, the frequency of this tradeoff in everyday gift-giving is quite high, and even more common than many of the tradeoffs documented in the gift-giving literature (see Table 1).

Having confirmed the sentimental value vs. preference-matching utility tradeoff is quite common in everyday gift-giving, the present work asks whether givers and recipients are aligned

Table 1
Frequency of gift giving tradeoffs.

Tradeoff	Frequency
Desirable vs. feasible (Baskin et al., 2014)	50.00 (3.60) _a
Hedonic vs. utilitarian (Williams & Rosenzweig, 2016)	46.35 (3.68) _{ab}
Preference-matching vs. sentimentally valuable	45.86 (3.46) _{ab}
Material vs. experiential (Chan & Mogilner, 2016; Goodman & Lim, 2015)	42.17 (3.72) _{bc}
Unrequested vs. requested (Gino & Flynn, 2011; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016)	41.87 (3.79) _{abcd}
Immediate vs. delayed (Yang & Urminsky, 2015)	33.70 (3.38) _{cd}
Complete vs. partial (Kupor, Flynn, & Norton, 2016)	32.12 (3.96) _d

Note - 0 = I never have to make this tradeoff; 100 = I have to make this tradeoff every time I decide on a gift. Values in parenthesis represent standard errors. Values that do not share a letter in their subscripts are significantly different from one another at the 0.05 level of significance. A definition and example were provided for each tradeoff. The gift types listed on the left (e.g., Desirable) are the types that previous work suggest givers favor relative to recipients, and the gift types listed on the right (e.g., Feasible) are the types that previous work suggest recipients favor relative to givers.

with one another when it comes to this tradeoff. Said otherwise, do givers give sentimentally valuable gifts as often as recipients would prefer? To that end, in our studies, givers and recipients choose between two gifts: one that is sentimentally valuable and one whose superficial components match the preferences of the recipient. For recipients, the decision of which gift is preferred is straightforward. Recipients simply evaluate the utility they know they will extract from each gift, and then choose whichever gift provides them with more utility. Given that recipients are merely expressing a preference for the self, and uncertainty regarding the utility they will extract from each gift is minimal, this should be a fairly easy task, as they just have to choose the gift they know they will like more. In some cases, this will be the preference-matching gift, while in others it will be the sentimentally valuable gift. On the other hand, consider the giver's perspective. Givers will also try to assess the utility the recipient will extract from each gift, however, since they are choosing for someone else, there is uncertainty regarding these predictions. Thus, givers have to consider how much utility the recipient will derive from each gift in terms of distributions of possible utilities (rather than a single, definite utility stream like recipients consider). Under these circumstances, givers will likely feel relatively certain that a preference-matching gift (which, by definition, possesses superficial attributes the recipient is known to like), will be well-liked by the recipient. At the same time, however, givers will likely feel relatively *uncertain* that a sentimentally valuable gift (which, does not possess these attributes), will be well-liked by the recipient. That is, even if a giver believes the sentimentally valuable gift is superior, there is some uncertainty as to whether the receiver will like it. Therefore, the giver may instead opt for the preference-matching gift because of its perceived certainty to be well-liked as compared to the sentimentally valuable gift.

In sum, we predict that givers do not give sentimentally valuable gifts as often as recipients would prefer, and that this

¹ Note that this definition of sentimental value differs from that used in economics, which treats sentimental value as all the non-material financial value of a gift (e.g., List & Shogren, 1998).

² In all studies, sample size was determined prior to the start of data collection and all variables are reported. All research materials and data can be obtained here: (masked for review, but available if requested).

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