

Research Report

Give me your self: Gifts are liked more when they match the giver's characteristics

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Abstract

Research on gift giving has devoted considerable attention to understanding whether and how givers succeed in choosing gifts that match recipients' tastes. On the contrary, this article focuses on how recipients' appreciation for a gift depends on the match between the gift and the giver. Four studies demonstrate that recipients are particularly appreciative when they receive gifts that figuratively match the giver, i.e., that contain references to the giver's characteristics, because they perceive such gifts as more congruent with the giver's identity. This effect is not conditional on inferences recipients might make about the giver's motivations or on whether recipients have a good relationship with the giver, but relies on the match concerning core rather than peripheral characteristics of the giver. Importantly for our understanding of identity-based motivation, these findings demonstrate in a gift-giving context that identity-congruence not only drives consumer behavior, but is also appreciated in other people.

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On occasions such as celebrations and anniversaries, we often find ourselves wondering what gifts we could buy to make our friends and relatives happy. Past research has identified many characteristics that affect recipients' satisfaction with the gifts they receive. Typically, gift-giving researchers have investigated how gift appreciation depends on the fit between the gift and the recipient's tastes and desires (Gino & Flynn, 2011; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011) and on the relationship between the giver and the recipient (Belk, 1976; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999). In contrast, the current paper focuses on how the relationship *between the giver and the gift* affects recipients' appreciation for the gifts they receive. We propose that recipients like a gift differently depending on whether or not it *matches* the giver, i.e., on whether or not the gift contains references to the core

characteristics of the giver. Four studies show that gifts that merely contain aesthetic references to the giver's core characteristics (e.g., the giver's passions) are appreciated more by recipients, because they are perceived as more congruent with the giver's identity. These findings have theoretical and practical implications for identity-based motivation and gift giving, and suggest new research questions about how identity-congruence affects consumer behavior.

Theoretical background

We propose that recipients particularly appreciate gifts that match the giver, i.e., that contain references to the giver's characteristics, because recipients perceive such gifts as congruent with the giver's identity. Theoretically, 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 expressions of the giver's identity.

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Identity has been demonstrated to be a strong predictor of people's behavior. Both the personal and the social characteristics of people's identity (e.g., traits, group memberships) can determine people's goals and actions (Oyserman, 2009). Recently, the identity-based motivation model articulated why and how people are motivated to act in ways that are congruent with their identity (for reviews see Oyserman, 2007, 2009). Making choices that are consistent with one's identity "feels right," both when the identity is chronically salient and when it is temporarily cued. In the marketplace, individuals express their identity by preferring products that convey who they are and the communities they belong to (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005). Practically, consumers seek identity-congruence when making choices that are both central in their life (e.g., when they consider career opportunities; Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009) and trivial (e.g., detergents; Forehand & Deshpande, 2001).

Especially because people expect identities to be stable over time, they not only use their own identities to guide their behaviors and decisions; they also evaluate other people's behaviors and purchase decisions in relation to the actors' identities (Belk, Mayer, & Bahn, 1982; Berger & Heath, 2007; Calder & Burnkrant, 1977). In particular, people seem to appreciate consistency not only in their own attitudes and behaviors, but also in the attitudes and behavior of other people (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010). Being inconsistent is perceived as a sign of being inauthentic and not true to one's self, traits that people consider to be inherently negative (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). In terms of identity-based motivation, this stream of research suggests that consumers may value identity-congruent expressions both when they pertain to their own actions and when they pertain to others' actions.

Gifts are no exception to this identity-based motivation framework. Research on gift giving has long highlighted the role of gifts as a tool that allows givers to express their identities, and that self-presentation might be one of the most prominent symbolic functions of gift giving (Schwartz, 1967; Wolfenbarger, 1990). In fact, the giver's self concept may often be more predictive of the characteristics of a gift than the giver's concept of the receiver (Belk, 1979). In this work, we explore whether appreciating congruence in the expressions of other people's identities translates into increased appreciation among gift recipients for gifts that figuratively match the giver, i.e., that contain references to core characteristics of the giver. Note that the fact that "the giver matters" in how recipients evaluate a gift is not new to the gift giving literature; however, whereas previous research has focused on the relationship *between the giver and the recipient* (Belk, 1976; Ruth et al., 1999), we hypothesize that gift appreciation is also affected by the relationship *between the giver and the gift*.

Consider the examples of Olivia and Jack, who are passionate about Italian culture and horses respectively. We hypothesize that Olivia's and Jack's friends will particularly appreciate gifts that contain references to Italy and horses (e.g., a mug or a mouse pad with Italy- and horses-related pictures), because such gifts are perceived as more congruent with Olivia and Jack. Of course, not any reference to the giver will be perceived as congruent with the giver's identity. In particular, a non-core descriptor of the giver that is matched by the gift should not result in a gift that is perceived as particularly congruent with the giver, and therefore should not result in increased appreciation. Using the examples above, if Italy and horses were only incidentally related to Olivia and Jack rather than being core descriptors of their identities (e.g., if Italy was the country of origin of a liked artist or a horse was portrayed on the cover of a liked book), Italy- and horses-related gifts should not result in increased appreciation.

Table 1
Means (and standard deviations) per condition for all studies.

Study 1	Match	No match				
Gift appreciation	5.83 (1.10)	5.27 (0.97)				
Identity congruence	5.74 (1.04)	4.47 (1.52)				
Study 2	Urban	Landscape	Control			
Preference for landscape print	5.02 (2.91)	6.14 (2.79)	5.76 (2.87)			
Landscape print relative congruence	−1.72 (2.11)	1.27 (1.78)	0.03 (1.15)			
Study 3	Good friend		Acquaintance		Disliked person	
	Match	No match	Match	No match	Match	No match
Gift appreciation	5.26 (1.55)	4.53 (1.54)	4.79 (1.16)	4.19 (1.36)	4.11 (1.29)	3.00 (1.44)
Identity congruence	5.66 (1.19)	4.10 (1.54)	5.28 (1.20)	4.08 (1.57)	5.20 (1.14)	3.47 (2.14)
Study 4	Core match	Non-core match	No match			
Gift appreciation	5.64 (1.08)	5.13 (1.34)	5.03 (1.45)			
Identity congruence	6.16 (0.97)	5.45 (1.38)	5.11 (1.14)			

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