

Can't find the perfect gift?

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Why is it so hard to choose the perfect gift? One reason is that we know less than we think we do about each others' likes and dislikes, and it's worse for things we like ourselves, says a University of Michigan business professor.

"Making estimates about others' preferences can be difficult," said Andrew Gershoff, associate professor of marketing at Michigan's Ross School of Business. "But our own preferences can make things worse. The more we personally like an item (to buy as a gift), the worse we do."

A forthcoming study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* by Gershoff and colleagues Anirban Mukhopadhyay of the Ross School and Ashesh Mukherjee of McGill University builds upon prior research that people often overestimate the extent to which their own attitudes and opinions are shared by others—a phenomenon known as the false consensus effect.

The researchers found that the degree of false consensus depends on whether the gift-buyer likes or dislikes an item. This is because people find it harder to think of reasons to dislike something they like than to think of reasons to like something they dislike.

According to the study, when people like something, they tend to like most aspects of it, so negative reasons don't come to mind easily. But when a person does not like an item, the overall dislike may be caused by just one bad attribute, or even a set of normally liked attributes that just do not go well together, so positive aspects come to mind more

easily.

"This difference leads us to make more exaggerated predictions that people like the same things we do, compared to predictions that people will dislike the same things that we dislike," Gershoff said.

In other words, when we like something, we have a difficult time understanding why someone else wouldn't like it, too. But when we dislike something, we are able to recognize that others may like the item, even if we don't.

Gershoff and colleagues conducted three separate studies using college students as subjects. They surveyed the students on their likes and dislikes of posters, movies and ice cream sundaes of various flavors and toppings.

They found, overall, that false consensus is weaker for individuals' dislikes as compared to their likes, and that this difference is driven by greater preponderance of positive attributes of disliked items than negative characteristics of liked items.

The researchers say their findings not only have implications for consumers, but also for managerial decision-makers, who must often make judgments about the tastes of their target consumers in designing advertising or developing products.

"Our research indicates that decision-makers in such situations need to be highly sensitive to the danger of overprojecting their own likes, more so than their own dislikes, onto target consumers," said Mukhopadhyay, assistant professor of marketing at the Ross School. "It also suggests that decision-makers can combat this bias in their judgments by making a conscious effort to think of countervailing attributes for the product or advertisement in question."

In the end, the researchers say that while it is important for businesses and consumerism to thrive for the sake of a strong economy, other factors come into play when individuals make purchasing decisions.

"There are many reasons to give a gift apart from whether or not the person is going to like it," Gershoff said. "There are other values that people have and those values include building closer ties and closer friendships.

"So sometimes the receiving of a gift or the taking of a recommendation from a friend may strengthen that relationship even if the gift isn't perfect. It may make that tie closer and perhaps what's even more valuable than getting a VCR or a table saw is knowing that people around you care about you."

Source: University of Michigan

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