

Why must we compensate after buying gifts that threaten our identities?

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If a vegetarian has to buy a steakhouse gift certificate for a friend, her discomfort will lead her to buy something else that reaffirms her identity, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"When gift givers choose a gift that matches the identity of the recipient but is contrary to their own identity, they experience discomfort," write authors Morgan K. Ward (Southern Methodist University) and Susan M. Broniarczyk (University of Texas). This discomfort leads [consumers](#) to choose other products that express their identities.

The authors investigated the consequences for gift-givers when the gifts threaten one of two central identities: school affiliation or political identity. In their studies, the researchers told participants to imagine they were choosing a gift for a recipient who had created a gift registry. In one experiment, gift givers from the University of Texas at Austin (the "Longhorns") chose gifts for a close friend that attended either their own school or the rival school (Texas A&M, home of the "Aggies").

The gifts on the registry were emblazoned with the schools' emblems. "While making a gift choice, the givers of the rival Texas A&M gift were more likely to exhibit physical signs of discomfort such as chewing on their lips, averting their eyes, fidgeting, and crossing their arms," the authors write. At the checkout, Longhorns fans distanced themselves physically from their Aggies purchases.

After they purchased the gifts, Longhorn-identified participants were

then offered either an expensive silver pen or a cheap plastic pen with the Longhorn logo on it. Longhorn fans who gave the University of Texas gift were confident in their identities and much more likely to choose the more attractive silver pen for themselves. In contrast, Longhorn fans who purchased the rival Texas A&M [gift](#) were more likely to choose the cheap plastic Longhorn pen in order to reestablish their identities.

The authors also found that Democrats asked to choose gifts at odds with their political identities were more likely to choose a subscription to the New York Times, whereas Republicans who chose items emblazoned with donkeys chose the more conservative Wall Street Journal.

More information: Morgan K. Ward and Susan M. Broniarczyk. "It's Not Me, It's You: How Gift Giving Creates Giver Identity Threat as a Function of Social Closeness." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

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