

Lovely wrapping make us happier about the gift

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With holiday gift-giving season ramping up, let's consider the art of giftwrapping: Is the effort behind those precise folds, elaborate bows and tiny ornaments really worth it? Yes – research says it is.

A now-classic study by SMU marketing professor Daniel Howard holds that giving a gift that has been lovingly wrapped does influence the recipient to value it more. When it comes to questions of wrapped vs. unwrapped, and even elegantly wrapped vs. brown paper and no bow – the "tricked-out package" wins the day.

Why do we care about wrapping paper? Howard says the question is a bit complicated, but it appears that giftwrapping is a visual signal that creates an almost Pavlovian response. "Gift wrapping, through repeated pairing with joyous events in people's lives, has utility in cuing a happy mood which, in turn, positively biases attitudes," Howard noted.

In one of Howard's experiments, 45 university students were asked to evaluate four products in exchange for a free gift. And though the students thought they were evaluating the product, they actually were evaluating the gift—a sheepskin bicycle seat cover.

In one experiment, half of the subjects received their bicycle cover in the manufacturer's plastic bag, while the other half received it wrapped in blue-and-white paper with a matching ribbon and bow. The subjects were then asked to rate their gift on three nine-point scales, ranging from undesirable to desirable, from bad to good and from foolish to wise. The test subjects who received the gift-wrapped bicycle seat cover gave it a higher overall approval rating (7.14) than those who received it unwrapped (6.06).

In a second experiment, 82 different university students received their bicycle seat cover gift either wrapped or unwrapped. But this time, some students were led to believe that the gift was meant for them while others thought that it was meant for someone else. The recipients who thought the gift was for them were happier with it when it was wrapped. However, those who thought the gift was for someone else didn't care at all whether the gift was wrapped.

Another experiment tested whether the perceived "quality" of the wrapping paper itself affected the subjects' attitudes towards the gift. To do this, another 60 [university students](#) were asked to compare an assortment of packaging options – wrapped, unwrapped or "nontraditionally wrapped" gifts (wrapped in brown packaging paper

with neither ribbons nor bows). The results? The nicely wrapped gift was the favorite, while the unwrapped gift was the least favorite. Even the non-traditionally wrapped [gift](#) (in plain brown [paper](#)) was preferred over the one that was not wrapped at all.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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