

Holiday shopping for friends? Why looking for unique gifts might not be the best plan

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Finding the perfect gift for that special someone is never easy and the challenge gets even harder during the holiday season. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers shopping for more than one person tend to pass on "guaranteed hits" in lieu of getting something unique for each person on their list.

"Having multiple recipients in mind not only means that more gifts are needed, but it may change what [shoppers](#) focus on when making gift selections," write authors Mary Steffel (University of Cincinnati) and Robyn A. LeBoeuf (University of Florida). "Our research indicates that shoppers selecting gifts for more than one person at a time may focus on getting different gifts for each recipient rather than on simply getting what each would like best."

This behavior is what the researchers term "overindividuation," or the tendency for shoppers to select a variety of gifts even when they know the recipients won't be comparing gifts. Ironically, this means that the more shoppers try to be thoughtful, the more likely they are to pass up gifts that would be better liked in favor of individuated gifts.

Consider someone giving a magazine subscription to two friends, both of whom are avid sports fans. Instead of getting both friends a sports magazine, the giver might select a technology magazine for the first friend and a travel magazine for the second, even though both friends might have preferred a sports magazine and even though the giver might have given a sports magazine to either friend if he or she were the only

recipient.

In six experiments, the researchers asked shoppers to choose gifts for one or more person. In all of the studies, one gift item was pre-tested to be more appealing than the other available gift items. When shopping for one recipient, shoppers tended to choose the most appealing gift. However, when shopping for multiple recipients, shoppers tended to pass up the more appealing gift in favor of getting different gifts for each person.

"To help consumers from losing sight of what gifts people would most appreciate, we encourage gift givers to think about the type of [gifts](#) the recipient would most likely pick for themselves," the authors conclude.

More information: Mary Steffel and Robyn A. LeBoeuf.

"Overindividuation in Gift Giving: Shopping for Multiple Recipients Leads Givers to Choose Unique but Less Preferred Gifts." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2014.

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