

The psychology of gift-giving and receiving

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Gift exchanges can reveal how people think about others, what they value and enjoy, and how they build and maintain relationships. Researchers are exploring various aspects of gift-giving and receiving, such as how givers choose gifts, how gifts are used by recipients, and how gifts impact the relationship between givers and receivers.

The symposia "The Psychology of Gift Giving and Receiving" will take place during the Society for Personality and Social Psychology Annual Convention in Long Beach, California.

Challenges of "picky" recipients

According to a recent [poll](#), people are becoming increasingly selective about the items they want. Researchers Andong Cheng, Meg Meloy, and Evan Polman surveyed 7,466 Black Friday shoppers in 2013. They found that of the shoppers surveyed, 39% of the items they purchased were for individuals they considered "picky." While most of us may shop for a picky person in our lives, we know very little about how people cope with the challenge of shopping for a picky person.

Cheng and her colleagues confirmed that shoppers are less motivated, and likely to employ effort-reducing strategies when choosing gifts for people they believe to be picky. Gift givers are more likely to give [gift cards](#), or forgo a gift altogether for a picky recipient.

According to their research, there is an upside to being picky: shoppers are more likely to purchase an item the picky recipient specifically

requests. Less picky people have a higher chance of receiving items they don't want, whereas picky recipients more often get what they want.

Recipients' perception of gift cards

Picking out a gift can be extremely difficult, especially if you consider the 39% purchasing for picky individuals, and often cash feels impersonal. Chelsea Helion and Thomas Gilovich are studying how individuals perceive and spend gift cards. Gift cards, it seems, hit a sweet spot—they have the flexibility of cash, but are given and meant to be spent as gifts.

Lead researcher Chelsea Helion explains that "While gift cards technically could be used to buy mundane things like textbooks or paper towels, we find that this feels like a misuse of the card. When paying with a gift card, people forgo buying everyday items in favor of buying indulgent items."

Helion and her colleagues' research has found that when individuals receive a gift card, they are more likely to purchase hedonic items (luxury items that are meant to bring pleasure) versus using credit cards or cash for purchases. When individuals are given a gift card instead of cash, they feel a justification to buy something that's out-of-the-ordinary.

According to Helion, recipients use gift cards to "treat' themselves to items they might not normally buy. "We find that this is because individuals experience less guilt when paying with a gift card, compared to [credit cards](#) or cash," Helion says."

Personalizing gifts: good or bad?

Gift-givers tend to choose gifts that are personalized to the recipient, but are less versatile than what the recipient would like to receive, according to new research by Mary Steffel, Elanor Williams and Robyn LeBoeuf.

This mismatch arises because givers tend to focus on recipients' stable traits rather than recipients' multiple, varying wants and needs. "Givers tend to focus on what recipients are like rather than what they would like. This can lead them to gravitate toward gifts that are personalized but not very versatile," lead researcher Mary Steffel shares.

The tendency for givers to choose overly specific gifts may contribute to gift nonuse. "Recipients take longer to redeem gift cards that can only be used at a particular retailer or that come with a suggestion for how they should be used than gift cards that can be used anywhere. Givers fail to anticipate this and favor specific over general gift cards," Steffel said.

To give a gift that is more likely to match a recipient's preferences, the researchers recommend that givers focus more on what the recipient would like, rather than focusing on their unique traits.

Material gifts versus experiences

Consumers frequently struggle with what kinds of gifts to give, leading to an overwhelming number of top 10 gift lists and online guides that aim to improve your relationship with the receiver. Researchers Cindy Chan and Cassie Mogilner offer simple guidance in their presentation. "To make your friend, spouse, or family member feel closer to you, give an experience," Chan says.

Experiments examining actual and hypothetical gift exchanges in real-life relationships reveal that experiential gifts produce greater improvements in relationship strength than material gifts, regardless of whether the gift is consumed together.

According to Chan and Mogilner's research, the relationship improvements that recipients derive from experiential gifts stem from the emotion that is evoked when the gifts are consumed, not when the gifts are received. Giving experiential [gifts](#) is thus identified as a highly effective form of prosocial spending, and can have a greater impact on improving the relationship between the giver and receiver.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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