

For Better or Worse: The Effect on Gifting in Relationships

Haley A. Owens

GiftAFeeling

November 8, 2021

Have you ever given a gift and felt unsure about how the recipient would react? This may have been a passing thought, but the effect of gifting on relationships is more significant than you may think. Not only has the act of gift-giving existed for ages as a form of communication, but it also affects our personal relationships. If a gift that is given is poorly received, the relationship might experience some negative strain. In this block, you will learn exactly how gift-giving affects our relationships on a psychological level, as well as be given the tools to use the act of gift-giving to your advantage and strengthen the relationships in your life!

The history of gift giving and relationships

The act of gift-giving has been around longer than any of us. All over the world, the act of gift-giving and exchanges has mediated political conflicts, defined special occasions and most significantly, defined modern social practices that we all partake in, whether consciously or unconsciously, in our everyday lives. Gift-giving is so instrumental in our society that over one hundred billion dollars are spent on gifts every year in the United States (Ruth et al., 1999). While many definitions exist to describe the term gift-giving, its association is with something given without receiving payment in return and is often associated with the expectation of reciprocation or a change in the relationship with the recipient (Davies et al., 2010). In fact, [early research](#) in fields like anthropology and psychology suggests that social relationships and boundaries are formed and maintained through the continuation of the exchange cycle of giving and receiving. Not only is gift-giving essential in maintaining social ties, but it also serves the meaning of symbolic communication in social relationships.

Speaking of symbolic communication, the exchange ritual that gift giving represents is common to all cultures and periods of history, which indicates that gift-giving has always, in one way or another, affected relationships with others. In this blog we will further explore how gift

giving can negatively and positively affect our relationships, and how you can maximize the gifts you give, so that you can positively maintain and grow your own relationships!

The two natures of relationships that affect gift giving

To understand more about gift giving and relationships, it is important to know why people give the gifts they do. Psychological research on gift giving indicates four different functions of a gift (Rai et al., 2017).

1. A symbolic communication between the giver and recipient
2. A social exchange which aids in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships
3. An economic exchange which serves as obligatory reciprocal exchanges
4. A socializer which helps parents teach children about the customs of society

Gifts further act as catalysts and problem-solvers for romantic relationships, as well as to gain attention of the recipient. Gifts further serve as a gesture of relational intimacy between gift givers and receivers. The time, money and energy individuals put into securing a gift acts as social signals, further expressing that gifts are incredibly important in relationships. [Further research](#) indicates that two different beliefs exist when it comes to the nature of relationships. Those two beliefs, **destiny beliefs and growth beliefs**, act as views of how individuals approach relationships, and in turn reveals how gift-giving can be used to your advantage.

Destiny beliefs

People who experience destiny beliefs often focus on the initial stage of a relationships and based on the initial compatibility of a relationship, assume they have found their perfect match. On the other hand, if there is not an immediate compatibility, those with destiny beliefs will assume the relationship was simply not meant to be. To simplify, these individuals believe that relationships are either destined to be together or not, leaving minimal room for any social

ties in between. This also leads them to immediately distancing themselves from the relationship when any negative relational events occurs (Rai et al., 2017). When gifting with someone who holds destiny beliefs, it is important to understand that these consumers are more sensitive about the required effort that goes into giving a gift. If the gift is poorly received, it may be an indicator to someone with a destiny belief that things may not work out.

Growth beliefs

People with growth beliefs characterize their relationships by growth, often assume that successful relationships are carefully cultivated and developed over time. Dissimilar to destiny beliefs, individuals who have growth beliefs define successful relationships as working through obstacles with their partner and as a consequence, grow closer. They carry less of an importance on initial compatibility and instead prioritize understanding their partner and developing a closer relationship. When negative relational obstacles occur those with growth beliefs adopt strategies that help them solve problems and conflicts, and in turn grow from their experiences. When gifting with someone who holds growth beliefs, it is important to put personal consideration and personalization into a gift, to emphasize the understanding and relational depth experienced with said individual.

The importance of gift giving in relationships

As previously mentioned, gift giving has become a customary part of peoples lives, where gifts have a central place in society by creating and maintaining social bonds. In fact, [research](#) in marketing have identified multiple factors that influence gift-giving behavior, such as attachment orientations, relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment. While it is evident that gift giving is influenced by numerous factors, there are two very significant dimensions that are involved in making gift choices; **desirability and feasibility**. Desirability “is

the value of the end of an action whereas feasibility is the ease of achieving the desired outcome” (Rai et al., 2017, p. 699).

The model of gift-giving behavior

To better understand the actual process of gift exchange and how it effects relationships, A model (Sherry, 1983) exists that divides the gifting activities into three stages:

1. Gestation - The gift search and purchase
2. Prestation - The actual exchange
3. Reformulation - Gift disposition and realignment of the giver/recipient relationship

Gestation

This stage represents all behaviours that come before the actual gift exchange. This involves where the concept of the gift becomes reality, as well as the feelings that go into choosing the gift. When purchasing a gift, individuals may have an unconscious ulterior motive that they wish to achieve. For example, by giving your romantic partner a gift, you wish to increase your romantic bond as the outcome. By doing so, we place symbolic meaning on the gifts we choose to give.

Prestation

During this stage, the actual gift exchange occurs. This stage outlines all aspects of the moment of exchange, including the immediacy of the recipient’s response, the recipient’s intent of response, as well as the mode of presentation of the gift. When it comes to the initial response of the gift recipient, the recipient may fake their reaction in an effort to save the feelings of the recipient.

This stage also indicates the interactional complexities of simultaneous gift giving, as it involves gift comparisons and the individual replication of each-others behaviour. There is also a chance the gift may not be as accepted with as much delight as expected.

Reformulation

The reformulation stage involves what will be done with the gift after the immediate exchange, which could involve displaying it, storing it, selling it, returning it etc. This stage also contains how the social bond will be affected. Furthermore, if the exchange was singular, a role reversal will occur where the recipient becomes the giver and vice versa.

This model provides us with a comprehensible breakdown of the social aspect of the gift-exchange interaction, and acts as a guide to understand how complex the social aspects of gift-giving can be. This information may feel daunting, and the idea of choosing a gift may now feel overwhelming and stressful. Fortunately, gifts do exist that can guarantee a positive reaction from recipients, regardless of if they have destiny or growth beliefs. Personalized gifts provide a fool-proof way of giving a gift that will be well received and cherished.

Personalized Gifts - The perfect gift

Personalized gifts provide the security of a perfect gift without spending a fortune on something you are unsure the recipient will appreciate. By being recipient-centric, the gift is personalised to a specific person which increases a sense of consideration and appreciation. They are also flexible to occasions, so there is never not a good time to give a personalized gift. Whether the gift is fun and creative or sentimental and memorable, giving something personalized can constantly be of use and value to the recipient, reducing the likely of the gift being returned or discarded. The personalized aspect of the gift further allows the social tie of the

relationships to be acknowledged will act as a positive gesture that continues to maintain the relationship. Whether the recipient has a destiny belief or a growth belief, personalized gifts act as the [perfect gift](#) for any occasion and a guaranteed success of positively affecting a relationship - just through a simple gift.

While the act of gift giving seems like a menial and repetitive process, there are very complex psychological and sociological aspects to the entire process of gift exchanges. Not only do giving gifts affect our relationships and behaviours in so many ways, but they also have the power to make or break our relationships, whether they are platonic, familial or romantic. While this information may seem daunting or too in depth, this small act of exchange contains a plethora of decisions that can affect us either positively or negatively. By understanding this process, we are able to proactively use this gift exchange in our favour and begin to grow our relationships by giving the gift that never fails. Afterall, perfect is personalized.

References

- Antón, C., Camarero, C., & Gil, F. (2013). The culture of gift giving: What do consumers expect from commercial and personal contexts?. *Journal Of Consumer Behaviour*, *13*(1), 31-41. doi: 10.1002/cb.1452
- Davies, G., Whelan, S., Foley, A., & Walsh, M. (2010). Gifts and Gifting. *International Journal Of Management Reviews*, *12*(4), 413-434. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00271.x
- Komter, A., & Vollebergh, W. (1997). Gift Giving and the Emotional Significance of Family and Friends. *Journal Of Marriage And The Family*, *59*(3), 747. doi: 10.2307/353958
- Luo, B., Fang, W., Shen, J., & Cong, X. (2019). Gift–image congruence and gift appreciation in romantic relationships: The roles of intimacy and relationship dependence. *Journal Of Business Research*, *103*, 142-152. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.06.018
- Nguyen, H., & Munch, J. (2011). Romantic gift giving as chore or pleasure: The effects of attachment orientations on gift giving perceptions. *Journal Of Business Research*, *64*(2), 113-118. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2010.02.006
- Rai, D., Lin, C., Hong, J., & Kulick, G. (2017). The influence of relationship beliefs on gift giving. *Management & Marketing*, *12*(4), 697-709. doi: 10.1515/mmcks-2017-0040
- Ruth, J., Otnes, C., & Brunel, F. (1999). Gift Receipt and the Reformulation of Interpersonal Relationships. *Journal Of Consumer Research*, *25*(4), 385-402. doi: 10.1086/209546
- Sherry, Jr., J. (1983). Gift Giving in Anthropological Perspective. *Journal Of Consumer Research*, *10*(2), 157. doi: 10.1086/208956