

**The Gift-Stress: Exploring the Dark Side of Gift-Giving**

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### **Abstract**

Under the umbrella of gift-giving stress, giver-recipient inconsistencies are well-known. Typically, when appraising the quality of a gift, givers focus on the moment of exchange whereas recipients focus on its usefulness during their ownership. Due to this, givers experience gift-giving stress because they implement a slightly self-centered perspective which is the reaction the gift will stimulate. Greater importance is given to the “wow” factor the givers are seeking rather than what recipients requested and long-term satisfaction. They picture the recipient screaming with glee because it is rewarding to the gift-giver which in turn elicits gift-receiving anxiety for the recipient to act in this manner and not fall short. Conversely, it is worthwhile to consider the consequent interpersonal behaviors not just during the exchange but also after the exchange occurs. Since givers believe that the more thought and money they invest in a gift, the greater the receivers’ appreciation of it, consequently believing their gifts are better than they actually are. The downside to this view is moral licensing wherein givers feel like they are going above and beyond when giving the gift indirectly leading them to believe that they have warranted the right to later behave in any manner as deemed fit. Another perspective accounts for cognitive dissonance givers face when picking gifts that contradict their attitudes. Overall, exploring these different views can increase the knowledge in gift-giving literature about the causes and consequences of unsuitable gift selections.

*Keywords:* dark side, gift-giving stress, gift-receiving anxiety, moral licensing, cognitive dissonance

### **Dissecting standpoints between the giver and recipient**

Surprisingly, a major finding in the domain of social psychology is that even though it is assumed that gifts are given with the best of intentions, people often misjudge other people's choices (Galak et al., 2016). Gift-givers overrate the moment of gift-giving and undervalue the consequences that follow after. There can be adverse consequences in presenting unfitting gifts as it can increase the gap in the relationship between the giver and recipient (Dunn, Huntsinger et al., 2008). Taking this into account, it would be relevant to ponder a unifying explanation as to why such blunders take place. One explanation may be that when appraising the quality of the gift, the givers put greater emphasis on the moment of exchange and want to make sure the recipient would go through a series of emotions such as feeling delighted, surprised, and overjoyed. This causes the givers to experience anxiety presenting the gift because of the idealistic "wow" factor that they expect should emerge from the recipient's reaction. Whereas the recipients undergo gift-receiving anxiety because they focus on calculating how valuable the gift will be throughout their subsequent ownership. These clashes of perspectives are based on what each member prioritizes; givers prioritize properties of the gift that triggers positive emotions during the initial stage of presenting the gift to the recipient and recipients prioritize properties of the gift that make its ownership fulfilling (Galak et al., 2016).

### **The negative embodiment of gift exchange**

Most research includes a common train of thought: gift-giving promotes the strengthening of relationships between individuals. However, there is a dark side to it. The giver experiences two constituents underlying gift-giving: egocentrism (Zhang & Epley, 2012) and warm glow (Andreoni, 1990; Anik et al., 2009). Egocentrism is putting a greater emphasis on their thoughts and feeling and disregarding the recipients' standpoint. The phrase warm glow

explains the feeling of personal joy experienced by the giver when presenting the gift, which makes them feel good about themselves when carrying out a good deed for someone else. This refers to “helper’s high” (Luks, 1988). To sum it up, this situation seems to provide hedonic benefits to both participants; the recipient feels acknowledged or appreciated and the giver feeds off this rewarding sensation.

### **Moral licensing and gift exchange**

Recent research gives some food for thought to this positive side with a colliding stance. The negative side arises via the concept of moral licensing, which indicates that for people to maintain their positive moral self-regard, they are driven to balance their positive and negative behavior as if they cancel each other out (Jordan et al., 2011). For example, when doing something out of the goodness of the heart such as helping someone or donating to charity, people assume they possess the leeway to license self-centered, immoral behavior, or selfish behavior (Giebelhausen et al., 2020; Khan & Dhar, 2006; Kouchaki & Jami, 2018). In fact, Kouchaki (2011) found that people do not even need to preserve righteous behavior to provide themselves with a license, but they invent one according to their convenience. Hence, people’s moral standing is malleable per behaviors perceived as moral or immoral.

When applied to gift-giving, the blend of egocentrism and warm glow gives rise to moral licensing. Individuals tend to overestimate the belief in their goodness and moral behavior leading them to believe their gifts are better than they are (Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992). Although, research has found that only half of the gifts presented by the giver are what the recipients actually desire (Pollmann & van Beest, 2013). Adding a warm glow to the mix, the principal moral feeling of positivity gravitates them toward moral licensing (Khan & Dhar, 2006). This makes them feel entitled to consequently act in any manner on any occasion.

Previous studies have acknowledged that gift-giving fosters a source of anxiety and insecurity (Wooten, 2000) as it creates a feeling of indebtedness (Joy, 2001). Polman & Lu (2021) researched the aftermath of gift exchange in feelings, behaviors, and relationships. Specifically, they studied the inverse relationship between the gift-giver and the recipient – how gift-giving can dent the relationship between the giver and recipient by navigating the giver’s moral compass of the course. It was discovered that gift exchange between romantic partners changes the perception of the non-giver in terms of what comprises infidelity. They concluded that givers engage in self-serving behavior in their relationship with the recipient, which can lead to undesirable outcomes for people’s romantic and platonic relationships.

### **The Gift Dissonance**

Recent research has explored that because of anxiety presenting, givers intentionally avoid buying gifts that are inconsistent with their attitudes despite knowing it is what the recipient longs for the most (Givi & Mu, 2022). This roots back to undergoing psychological discomfort in doing so, completely disregarding the consequence for the recipient receiving an ill-favored gift. Givi & Mu (2022) explore a new perspective of cognitive discomfort that transpires from feeling uneasy and bothered when consumers experience contradiction. In order to combat anxiety presenting, the self’s desires are given greater prominence and contemplation rather than the consumers’ decision. There are many reasons this occurs. Givers want to stand out and pick out something unique therefore may avoid giving them something similar to their possessions (Givi & Galak, 2020). Taking this into account, to avoid feeling resentful, they pick something different from their possessions (Givi & Galak, 2019).

There are several inferences. One of them is that consumers are practically wasting their money on a gift they know that the recipient does not even yearn for. This indicates that the giver

should abstain from pondering over the feelings of psychological discomfort and prioritize what the recipient wishes for. Clearly, the giver-recipient relationship can be undesirably impacted which can account for the subsequent regrettable social implications (Givi & Mu, 2022).

In terms of the marketing lens, recipients are highly likely to return the less preferred gifts, which affects the businesses as they need to be resold at less than market value (DiChristopher, 2015). The results obtained in the study by Givi & Mu (2022), demonstrate that selling a product as a gift even though consumers consider it attitude-inconsistent, may trigger a contemplation simply because it is advertised as a gift. Without this kind of advertising, they may not even have given it a second thought. Along the same lines, marketers need to consider their goals and ideologies, how profitable the attitude-inconsistent products are, and how big their market is.

Therefore, while gift-giving behavior does seem to facilitate stronger relationships, it cannot be taken at face value. There are some side-effects to it as discussed above. It is important to be self-aware of one's behavior and actions.

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