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Socially Connecting and Socially Distancing Consumer Choices

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Socially Connecting and Socially Distancing Consumer Choices

Abstract

Can people use consumption to manage their social relationships? Across three essays, this dissertation explores why and how people make consumer choices that socially connect or distance themselves from others. Essay 1 examines how motives to signal social identity and uniqueness can lead people to make choices that both connect and distance them from other members of their social group. People are often conflicted between wanting to fit in and be different. This research demonstrates how consumers simultaneously satisfy competing motives for group identification and individual uniqueness along different dimensions of choice, thus allowing them to be similar and different at the same time. Essay 2 studies how consumers' gift choices can change how socially connected their recipients feel to them. This research examines actual and hypothetical gift exchanges in real-life relationships and reveals that experiential gifts (events recipients live through) make recipients feel more connected to their gift giver than material gifts (objects for the recipient to keep), regardless of whether the gift is consumed together. Experiential gifts have this connecting effect because of the greater emotion they evoke when consumed. Essay 3 investigates how the emotion that motivates gift giving can affect how connected or disconnected gift givers and recipients feel to each other. This research shows that the same situation of social inequity can elicit feelings of gratitude or guilt, and explores the downstream social consequences of gifts that say "thanks" versus "sorry." Gifts can help restore relationships, but with differential effects for gift givers and recipients. Gift givers report greater improvements in social connection when giving out of guilt, whereas recipients report greater improvements when receiving a gift given out of gratitude. By studying relationships between people, this dissertation provides a richer understanding of the role of consumption in people's social lives and offers guidance to help people foster closer relationships with others.

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SOCIALLY CONNECTING AND SOCIALLY DISTANCING CONSUMER CHOICES

Cindy Chan

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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

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Cindy Chan

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ABSTRACT

SOCIALLY CONNECTING AND SOCIALLY DISTANCING

CONSUMER CHOICES

Cindy Chan

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Leaf Van Boven

Can people use consumption to manage their social relationships? Across three essays, this dissertation explores why and how people make consumer choices that socially connect or distance themselves from others.

Essay 1 examines how motives to signal social identity and uniqueness can lead people to make choices that both connect and distance them from other members of their social group. People are often conflicted between wanting to fit in and be different. This research demonstrates how consumers simultaneously satisfy competing motives for group identification and individual uniqueness along different dimensions of choice, thus allowing them to be similar and different at the same time.

Essay 2 studies how consumers' gift choices can change how socially connected their recipients feel to them. This research examines actual and hypothetical gift exchanges in real-life relationships and reveals that experiential gifts (events recipients live through) make recipients feel more connected to their gift giver than material gifts (objects for the recipient to keep), regardless of whether the gift is consumed together.

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Essay 3 investigates how the emotion that motivates gift giving can affect how connected or disconnected gift givers and recipients feel to each other. This research shows that the same situation of social inequity can elicit feelings of gratitude or guilt, and explores the downstream social consequences of gifts that say "thanks" versus "sorry." Gifts can help restore relationships, but with differential effects for gift givers and recipients. Gift givers report greater improvements in social connection when giving out of guilt, whereas recipients report greater improvements when receiving a gift given out of gratitude.

By studying relationships between people, this dissertation provides a richer understanding of the role of consumption in people's social lives and offers guidance to help people foster closer relationships with others.

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How do consumers reconcile conflicting motives for social group identification and individual uniqueness? Four studies demonstrate that consumers simultaneously pursue assimilation and differentiation goals on different dimensions of a single choice: they assimilate to their group on one dimension (by conforming on identity-signaling attributes such as brand) while differentiating on another dimension (distinguishing themselves on uniqueness attributes such as color). Desires to communicate social identity lead consumers to conform on choice dimensions that are strongly associated with their group, particularly in identity-relevant consumer categories such as clothing. Higher needs for uniqueness lead consumers to differentiate within groups by choosing less popular options among those that are associated with their group. By examining both between- and within-group levels of comparison and using multidimensional decisions, this research provides insight into how multiple identity motives jointly influence consumer choice.

INTRODUCTION

People often behave similarly to those around them—they adopt the music their friends listen to and buy the latest clothing trends to help them fit in. Indeed, conformity is one of the oldest topics in psychology and consumer research (Asch 1955; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Sherif 1936) and choosing the same thing as other in-group members facilitates the communication of desired social identities (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2005). At the same time, people also want to be different. They purchase shirts with distinctive logos to set them apart from the masses or wear designer suits when they want to stand out for an important interview (Snyder and Fromkin 1980; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). How do these conflicting motives for similarity and difference combine to drive consumer choice?

Social influences on assimilation and differentiation are well-documented, but they have mostly been examined in separate research streams (Hornsey and Jetten 2004). Further, research has artificially forced these motives into opposition. By studying contexts in which people are only given the option to select what someone else picked (assimilation) or something different (differentiation), prior work suggests that consumers must trade-off between these two motives and that only one motive can prevail in any single choice (Mason, Conrey, and Smith 2007). Therefore, although it is well established that people often assimilate to or differentiate from the behavior of others, less is known about whether and how consumers reconcile these competing tendencies.

We propose that consumers can satisfy desires for assimilation and differentiation within a single choice context by satisfying different motives on different choice

dimensions. They may select a product that allows them to communicate desired social identities (e.g., a brand preferred by an in-group), while also differentiating within the group (e.g., a less popular product from that brand). By studying both individual and group levels of comparison and using a multidimensional dependent measure, we demonstrate that people do not simply assimilate or differentiate, but often do both simultaneously.

ASSIMILATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

People often assimilate to the behaviors of others (Asch 1955; Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975; Sherif 1936). Conformity may be due to informational or normative influence (Deutsch and Gerard 1955) and being similar to others supports the human need for validation (Brewer 1991; Snyder and Fromkin 1980). People also tend to behave similarly to aspiration groups (Englis and Solomon 1995) and make choices that are consistent with positive reference groups to construct or express desired identities (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005). For example, if Harley Davidson motorcycles are associated with tough guys, then people who want to seem tough may buy that brand. Or if electric cars are a signal of environmentally conscious people, then people who want to seem green may purchase a Toyota Prius.

Conversely, there are also countervailing pressures for differentiation (Maslach 1974; Snyder and Fromkin 1980; Vignoles, Chryssochoou, and Breakwell 2000). People want to be at least somewhat unique (see Lynn and Snyder 2002 for a review) and being

too similar to others can generate a negative emotional reaction (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). People with higher needs for uniqueness prefer products that are more scarce or differentiated (Lynn and Harris 1997; Tian et al. 2001). And situational factors can activate people's desires to make different choices or distinguish themselves from those around them (Ariely and Levav 2000; Fishbach, Ratner, and Zhang 2011; Maimaran and Wheeler 2008). Differentiation may also be driven by the symbolic meaning of consumption; consumers often diverge from the behavior of out-group members to avoid communicating undesired identities (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008; Berger and Rand 2008; White and Dahl 2006, 2007).

But while some research has recognized motives for assimilation, and other research has recognized motives for differentiation, these motives have mostly been examined in separate research streams (Hornsey and Jetten 2004). Therefore, little empirical work has actually examined how people integrate these motives. Further, prior work has taken a one-dimensional view of similarity or differentiation using either binary choice (e.g., people must select the same product as another person or a different one) or a continuum of low to high similarity (Mason et al. 2007). For example, people are often forced to either conform and do the same thing as others, or differentiate and do something different. Because these studies require that people trade-off between the two motives, they do not allow for the possibility that both can be satisfied simultaneously through a single choice.

The little work that has attempted to reconcile these two motives has focused on how these competing motives can be achieved through group-level behavior. Optimal distinctiveness theory argues that people satisfy these opposing needs through contrasting

social identities, so that "the need for deindividuation is satisfied within in-groups, while the need for distinctiveness is met through intergroup comparisons," (Brewer 1991, 477). When distinctiveness is threatened, people may describe themselves as more similar to other in-group members, for example, because it heightens differences from out-group members (Pickett, Bonner, and Coleman 2002). Along similar lines, although not explicitly focused on drives for similarity and differentiation, research on divergence and the meaning of consumption has also examined how group-level comparisons can satisfy different identity motives (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008; Berger and Rand 2008; White and Dahl 2006, 2007). By converging with the choices of similar others (e.g., a jock dressing like the jocks) and diverging from the choices of dissimilar others (e.g., jocks dressing differently than the punks), consumption gains symbolic meaning as a marker of group membership. Thus according to prior work, people satisfy assimilation motives within groups and differentiation motives between them.

By focusing on assimilation within groups and differentiation between them, existing perspectives often overlook the fact that differentiation also occurs within groups. Bikers may tend to wear leather, but one biker may wear a leather jacket, whereas another may wear a leather vest. Similarly, Goths may tend to wear black, but one Goth may wear a black t-shirt, whereas another may wear a black trench coat. This suggests that intergroup comparisons alone may not be sufficient in satisfying needs for distinctiveness.

Further, because prior research has studied these motives independently, it has difficulty explaining much of actual consumer behavior. Work on uniqueness, for example, suggests that people want to be at least slightly different, but says little about

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how that difference is enacted when faced with multiple differentiating options (Maslach 1974; Snyder and Fromkin 1980; Vignoles, Chryssochoou, and Breakwell 2000). Imagine that black Chevy cars are popular among someone's friends. If this person wanted to be unique, there are many ways he could do it. He could select the same brand but a different color (red Chevy), a different brand but the same color (black Honda), or a different brand and color altogether. Any of these choices could provide differentiation, and thus uniqueness theories alone provide little guidance on what this person would choose. Yet casual observation suggests that people do not choose among such options randomly. Groups of friends can often be seen wearing different options from the same brands, for example.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

This article develops an integrative perspective explaining how similarity and difference combine to drive consumer choice. Real choice involves multiple product dimensions (e.g., brand and color) and we propose that these different attributes enable consumers to simultaneously satisfy desires to both assimilate and feel unique. In particular, we suggest that consumers resolve competing identity motives at different levels of a single choice—they conform to their in-group on one dimension of choice while differentiating on another.

Importantly, which particular product attributes foster assimilation versus differentiation should depend on their relevance to identity-signaling, that is, how strongly they communicate group membership. Brands often signal group identities

(Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; White and Dahl 2007). Polo and Abercrombie, for example, tend to be associated with preppy college fraternities, whereas Vans and Quiksilver tend to be associated with skateboarders. Consequently, if wearing a certain brand (e.g., Polo) is a good signal of a particular social group, then someone who wants to communicate that identity while also feeling unique may buy a shirt from that brand but select a particularly unique color (e.g., orange).

While identity-signaling motives lead people to choose in ways that are similar to or different from groups, we suggest that uniqueness motives will lead them to choose varying degrees of differentiation from members of their in-group. Consumers can thus make choices that simultaneously allow them to conform to desired reference groups on an attribute of choice that signals identity (e.g. brand), while differentiating from in-group members on a uniqueness attribute (e.g., color) to satisfy needs for uniqueness.

In situations where other choice dimensions are stronger signals of social identity, however, the effects may differ. Take fashion, where a new color is en vogue every season and multiple brands carry a variation of this trend. If purple is the color of the season, fashionistas may converge to wear that color, but those with higher needs for uniqueness may differentiate themselves on attributes that have less identity-signaling value in that context (e.g., the cut of clothing or potentially even the brand). Thus the exact product attributes on which consumers assimilate versus differentiate from the in-group will depend on the particular context, but will also be driven by which attributes are more or less signaling-relevant. In choosing this way, consumers are able to simultaneously signal their social identity and satisfy desires for uniqueness through a single consumer purchase.

H1:   Affiliation motives will drive preferences on choice dimensions associated

with desired social identities. People will conform on identity-signaling

attributes and choose items that strongly signal membership to an in-

group.

H2:   Uniqueness motives will drive preferences at the within-group level.

Higher needs for uniqueness or situations that activate uniqueness motives

will lead people to differentiate themselves on uniqueness attributes and

choose less popular items among in-group options.

Four studies test these hypotheses. They demonstrate that people tend to choose

options preferred by in-group members on dimensions that are linked to their social

identities (studies 1 to 4), and that this is driven by desires for other people to associate

them with those groups (studies 2 and 3). Desires for uniqueness, in contrast, influence

choices at the within-group level; higher needs for uniqueness (studies 1, 2, and 4) or

situations that activate drives for uniqueness (study 3) lead people to make differentiating

choices among group-associated options. By studying both group and individual levels of

comparison and using a multidimensional dependent measure, we show how people do

not simply assimilate or differentiate, but simultaneously do both on different dimensions

of choice.

STUDY 1: EVERYDAY CLOTHING CHOICES

Do consumers' real everyday choices allow them to simultaneously communicate both their social identities and their uniqueness relative to others in their group? Study 1 provides a preliminary test of our hypotheses by examining clothing choices in a field setting. We took pictures of what people from two groups wore on a usual day and then showed them to observers to address two key questions. First, we examine whether observers can use people's clothing choices to accurately guess to which social group they belong. Second, we examine whether these same choices simultaneously express individual uniqueness, such that observers view people with higher needs for uniqueness as more differentiated in their in-group.

Method

This study consisted of two parts: a field data collection and an online survey. Fifty-four students participated in the field portion in exchange for $5; thirty-five of these participants from the field portion returned to participate in the online study along with twenty-eight new participants, for a total of sixty-three students who participated in the online study in exchange for $10.

Field Data Collection. The study was conducted at a private northeastern university where most juniors and seniors belong to one of ten mixed-sex eating clubs. In addition to providing a venue where students eat their meals, each club's house also functions as a social gathering place for its 100-200 members. The eating clubs are

geographically close (located on the same street), but often carry distinct social identities (e.g., athletic, liberal, southern, etc.).

Male and female members of three eating clubs were recruited to participate in this study. At two of the clubs (referred to as Clubs A and B to preserve anonymity), students were asked to participate as they approached the club for dinner, and a photo was taken of each participant who agreed to participate (Club A: 9 males, 17 females; Club B: 11 males, 17 females). Participants were dressed in casual, everyday attire with no visible eating club names or logos, and there were many similarities in the clothing choices of the two groups. For example, almost all the males wore shorts, and about half the women in each club did as well. Importantly, however, there were also some differences: many Club A members dressed in athletic or preppy attire whereas Club B members favored a more hipster or alternative style.

Students from the third club (Club C) were recruited as a control group for the online study.

Online Survey. Three days later, an online survey was sent to participants from all three clubs (63 responded: 35 of the original participants from Clubs A and B and 28 new participants from control Club C). First, these 63 participants (hereafter referred to as "observers") were shown the photos and asked to indicate whether each photographed person belonged to Club A or B (actual club names were used in the survey). To minimize the possibility that observers would correctly identify photographed people because they recognized people they knew, each photo was retouched to blur out both the person's face and the background (i.e., only their clothes were shown, figure 1).

FIGURE 1

STUDY 1: SAMPLE PHOTOS OF CLOTHING WORN BY MEMBERS OF

CLUBS A AND B

Club A
(athletic and preppy style)
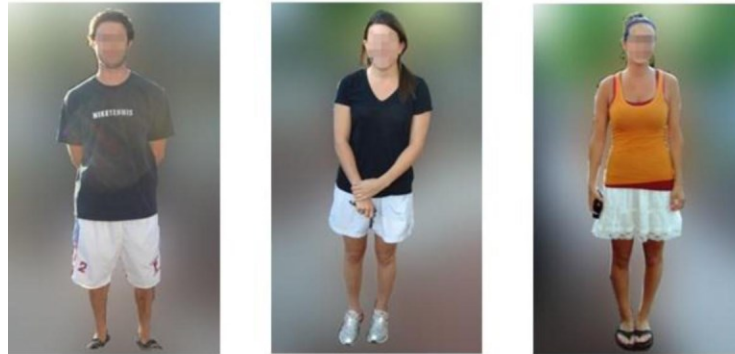
Club B
(alternative and hipster style)
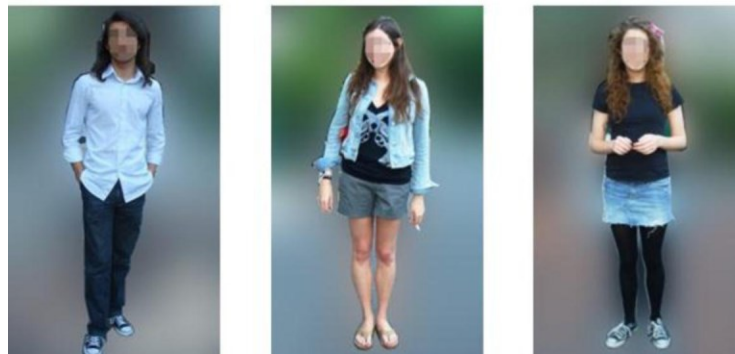
Second, observers were shown the same photos—this time grouped by club—and asked to rate how unique each photographed person's style was compared to other people in his/her club (1 = not at all unique; 7 = very unique). A mean uniqueness rating was calculated for each photo (excluding an individual's rating of his/her own photo) to be used in later analyses.

Finally, the 35 returning members of Clubs A and B completed the Consumer Need for Uniqueness scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$; Tian et al. 2001). This provided a trait measure of each individual's motive to achieve differentiation through consumer goods. Need for uniqueness scores did not differ between Clubs A and B ($t(33) = 1.32, p > .19$).

Results

Given our interest in how consumers simultaneously satisfy different motives, we analyzed how well people's clothing choices communicated both group affiliation and individual uniqueness.

First, results indicated that people's clothing choices successfully communicated their social identities. Each observer's responses were scored to determine what percentage of photographed people they accurately categorized into the correct club (we assumed that observers from Clubs A and B accurately categorized their own photo and omitted this in the analysis). The average score was 85%, showing that observers were very good at categorizing people to their correct social groups ($t(62) = 30.99, p < .001$ vs. chance). While one might worry that this accuracy could be driven by members recognizing fellow club members (despite having their faces blurred), this was not the case. Even people who did not belong to either focal club (control Club C) showed great accuracy (average accuracy score of 80%, $t(27) = 20.32, p < .001$ vs. chance).

Second, clothing choices also successfully communicated desires for uniqueness. Even though they only had access to a single clothing choice example for each

photographed person, observers rated individuals with higher needs for uniqueness as having more unique styles relative to others in their in-group ($r(33) = 0.35, p < .04$).

A final test of whether these motives can be achieved simultaneously comes from examining the relationship between need for uniqueness and the accuracy of social categorization. One might argue that satisfying one motive comes at the cost of the other. While people with higher needs for uniqueness might dress in ways that communicates their desire for differentiation, for example, doing so might make them be more likely to be miscategorized into the wrong social group. But this was not the case. There was no significant relationship between accuracy of social categorization and need for uniqueness scores ($r(33) = -0.01, p > .96$) or accuracy of social categorization and uniqueness ratings by observers ($r(33) = -.15, p > .37$). Thus, more unique individuals were just as likely to be recognized as members of their respective clubs as less unique individuals. This provides further evidence that satisfying one motive need not come at the expense of the other, and that real everyday choices can simultaneously communicate identity at both levels.

Discussion

By using real everyday choices in a naturalistic setting, study 1 provides preliminary evidence that consumers choose in ways that can simultaneously communicate both social identity and uniqueness. Everyday clothing choices not only effectively signaled social identities, allowing observers to accurately categorize people into their respective social groups, but also simultaneously conveyed individual desires

for uniqueness, allowing choosers to communicate their desires for differentiation. Further, the fact that achieving one motive did not come at the cost of the other supports the notion that these motives can act in concert.

The results of study 1 provide initial support for our theory and the following studies use more controlled paradigms to shed light on the motives behind such choices and rule out alternative explanations.

STUDY 2: THE ROLE OF IDENTITY-SIGNALING

Study 2 examines how various identity motives influence different levels of consumer choice. By experimentally manipulating the social group associated with different options (i.e., in-group or out-group), we simultaneously test how social identity motives and individual desires for distinction combine to drive choices.

Many aspects of consumer choice can communicate identity, but past research demonstrates a particularly strong association between social identities and brands (Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; White and Dahl 2007). For example, research has shown that consumers form stronger connections with brands that are used by members of an in-group. Building on this association, study 2 uses brands as markers of social meaning and examines whether consumer choice on this dimension (e.g., choosing a Chevy over a BMW) is driven by desires to signal particular social identities. In particular, people should be more likely to choose a brand when it is strongly linked to an in-group (a group to which they belong) as opposed to an out-group (a group to which they do not belong).

We also conduct two ancillary tests to provide further support for our conceptualization. First, we examine whether the tendency to choose group-associated brands is driven by how much people want to be associated with that group—the more people want to be associated with a particular group identity, the more likely they should be to select a group-associated brand. Second, we examine whether these effects are moderated by the identity-relevance of the choice domain. Certain product domains are more commonly used in the communication of identity (e.g., cars and clothes as opposed to dish soap and bike lights, Berger and Heath 2007), and if these effects are really about communicating social identity, then they should be stronger in identity-relevant domains.

Our theory also suggests that choice should simultaneously satisfy desires for differentiation. Products are distinguished not only by different brands (e.g., Chevy or BMW), but also by different options within those brands (e.g., a black or red Chevy, or a BMW 3-series or 5-series). Consequently, choosing a less popular style or color from the brand preferred by in-group members should allow participants to construct and communicate desired social identities while also allowing those with higher needs for uniqueness to differentiate themselves.

Method

One-hundred thirty-two students participated in this study on a computer as part of a larger set of experiments in exchange for financial payment.

Depending on condition, participants were first asked to identify either an in-group or out-group using instructions adapted from prior work (Escalas and Bettman

2005). Participants in the in-group [out-group] condition read: "We would like you to write in the name of a small, tightly knit social group that you [do not] belong to and [do not] feel a part of. You should feel you are [not] this type of person and that you [do not] fit in with these people. This group should be quite specific (so much smaller than say your high school class or all engineering students)." Participants identified groups such as athletic teams, student councils, and fraternities. We also measured desires for association by asking participants, "How much would you want other people to associate you with this group?" (1 = not at all; 7 = a great deal).

Next, participants made choices in ten familiar consumer categories (e.g., cars, sunglasses, and toothpaste). In each category, participants were asked which of four self-generated options they preferred. Two of the products (A1 and A2) were from one brand (Brand A) and two (B3 and B4) were from another brand (Brand B). Participants were asked to imagine that they had a general idea about the preferences of people in the group they had specified, and that out of 100 group members, 60 preferred Product A1, 17 preferred A2, 17 preferred B3, and 6 preferred B4. We provided one example (i.e., 60 group members might prefer a silver BMW, 17 might prefer a black BMW, 17 might prefer a silver Mercedes, and 6 might prefer a black Mercedes) and asked them to think of brands and products relevant to the group they listed when making their choices. Importantly, the preferences were deliberately distributed so that Brand A was more strongly linked to the in-group than Brand B (77% of the in-group preferred Brand A). Moreover, they were also distributed so that there was an option to choose a popular product (A1 or B3) or a differentiating product (A2 or B4) from each brand.

Finally, participants completed the Consumer Need for Uniqueness scale (Cronbach's α = .93; Tian et al. 2001). There was no effect of the manipulation on need for uniqueness scores ($t(130) = 0.21, p > .83$).

Results

Similar to study 1, we analyzed our data at different levels (in this case, brand and product choice) to test the effects of both identity-signaling and uniqueness motives on choice.

Identity-Signaling Choice: Influence of Reference Group. First, we examined choice at the group-signaling level. A mixed effects binary logistic regression (with a random effect to control for repeated measures) revealed that people were more likely to choose the reference group-associated brand (Brand A) when the reference group was an in-group as opposed to out-group ($\beta = 1.18, S.E. = 0.19, t(1318) = 6.10, p < .001$). Whereas people in the out-group condition chose an option from the group-associated brand 47% of the time, this jumped to 72% in the in-group condition.

Further, when individual participants' need for uniqueness scores and the need for uniqueness and reference group interaction were included in the model, the effect of reference group on choice remained significant ($p < .005$), whereas the effects of need for uniqueness and its interaction were not significant (both ps $> .16$)

Identity-Signaling Choice: Mediation by Desires to be Associated with Reference Group. To provide further evidence that this difference between conditions is driven by desires to signal group identity, we examined whether the effect was mediated by

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participants' desires to have other people associate them with the group they listed. Participants in the in-group condition reported stronger desires to be associated with the reference group listed than those in the out-group condition (M_{in} = 5.34 vs. M_{out} = 1.81; β = 1.76, *S.E.* = 0.11, $t(131)$ = 15.73, $p < .001$). Further, when both reference group condition and desires to be associated with the group were included in the earlier model predicting brand choice, the effect of association ratings was significant (β = 0.15, *S.E.* = 0.07, $t(1317)$ = 2.03, $p < .05$), and the effect of reference group condition was reduced (β = 0.64, *S.E.* = 0.32, $t(1317)$ = 1.98, $p < .05$). A significant mediation effect was confirmed by generating a confidence interval of the indirect effect, which did not include zero (95% *CI* = 0.02 to 0.51 using the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation; Bauer, Preacher, and Gil 2006; Selig and Preacher 2008). This underscores the notion that choices at the brand level were driven by people's desires to communicate their social identity to others. Further, when included in each step of the mediation, need for uniqueness and the need for uniqueness by reference group interaction were not significant (all ps > .19), and the overall mediation pattern was unchanged (95% *CI* = 0.02 to 0.51).

Identity-Signaling Choice: Moderation by Identity-Relevance of Consumer Category. Finally, to further test that identity-signaling motives were driving choice at the brand level, we examined whether choice was moderated by the identity-relevance of the consumer category. A separate set of participants (N = 138) rated how effectively each of the ten consumer categories signaled identity (1 = not at all; 5 = a great deal). Mean ratings were calculated to form a continuous identity-relevance measure for each consumer category. Cars and apparel were seen as more identity-relevant, while

electronics and household goods were seen as less identity-relevant. We next constructed a mixed effects binary logistic regression to predict choice of the group-associated Brand A. The independent variables in this model were reference group, category identity-relevance (as a continuous measure), reference group by identity-relevance interaction (to test our hypothesized moderation), and a random effect to control for repeated measures.

A main effect of category identity-relevance (β = -0.84, *S.E.* = 0.13, t(1316) = -6.59, *p* < .001) was qualified by the predicted reference group type by identity-relevance interaction (β = 0.41, *S.E.* = 0.20, t(1316) = 2.04, *p* < .05). To illustrate this interaction, we dichotomized the continuous identity-relevance variable using a median split and conducted separate mixed effects binary logistic regressions for low and high identity-relevant categories; choice of Brand A was modeled using reference group as the independent variable and a random effect to control for repeated measures. For low identity-relevance categories, the odds of in-group participants choosing the group-associated Brand A were 2.54 times that of out-group participants (β = 0.93, *S.E.* = 0.26, t(658) = 3.54, *p* < .001). However, the difference in odds nearly doubled to 4.75 when participants were choosing in high identity-relevant categories (β = -1.56, *S.E.* = 0.26, t(658) = 6.00, *p* < .001). Therefore, the tendency for people to choose an in-group associated brand and avoid an out-group associated brand was stronger in consumer categories where choice is more likely to be seen as a signal of identity (see figure 2 for results displayed using median splits of identity-relevance).

Differentiating Choice: Influence of Need for Uniqueness. We also examined choice at the product level. Because we are interested in studying how people simultaneously differentiate within their group, we examined the product choices made

FIGURE 2

STUDY 2: INFLUENCE OF REFERENCE GROUP AND IDENTITY-RELEVANCE

OF THE CONSUMER CATEGORY ON CHOICE OF GROUP-ASSOCIATED
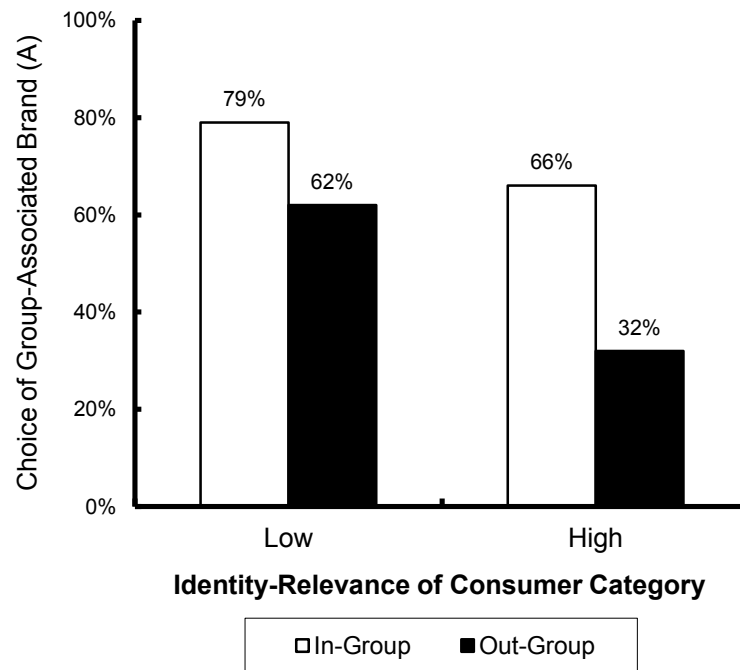
BRAND (A)

by participants conditional upon having chosen an option from the brand strongly linked

to the reference group (i.e., between Products A1 and A2 from Brand A). Importantly, if

our conceptualization is correct, then the identity of the reference group linked to the

brand should moderate the effect. Need for uniqueness should have a stronger influence

on choice of products from the reference group-linked brand when that group is an in-

group (as opposed to out-group); for participants referencing an in-group, higher needs

for uniqueness should be positively associated with choice of the differentiating product.

To test this, we conducted a mixed effects binary logistic regression with reference group

type, need for uniqueness score, and group type by need for uniqueness interaction predicting choice of Product A1 versus A2 (a random effect controlled for repeated measures).

Consistent with our theorizing, a main effect of group type ($\beta = -2.90$, *S.E.* $= 0.94$, $t(773) = -3.08$, $p < .003$) was qualified by a significant group type by need for uniqueness interaction ($\beta = 0.97$, *S.E.* $= 0.38$, $t(773) = 2.54$, $p < .02$). Specifically, among people in the in-group condition, those with higher needs for uniqueness were more likely to choose the less popular Product A2 ($\beta = 0.73$, *S.E.* $= 0.26$, $t(440) = 2.85$, $p < .006$). There was no corresponding relationship between need for uniqueness and product choice among those who referenced an out-group ($p > .44$). Further supporting our hypotheses, the effect of need for uniqueness on choices among in-group associated options was not mediated by desires to be associated with the group, as the confidence interval of the indirect effect crossed zero (95% *CI* $= -0.17$ to 0.09 using the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation).

These results demonstrate that motives for uniqueness influence choice at a within-group level. Among people referencing an in-group who had chosen a Brand A (group-associated) option, those with higher needs for uniqueness were more likely to choose the less popular Product A2 (preferred by fewer in-group members) than those with lower needs for uniqueness. This was not the case among people who referenced an out-group, however, as they should not feel a need to differentiate within a group to which they do not belong.

Discussion

Results of study 2 provide further support for our hypotheses about how various identity motives combine to drive consumer choice. In this case, brands were signals of identity, and choice at the brand level was driven by the desires to signal social identity. People were more likely to choose reference group-associated options (Brand A) when that group was an in-group (vs. out-group), and this was mediated by desires to be associated with the reference group. Further these effects were stronger in identity-relevant domains, consistent with the notion that choice was driven by desires to communicate identity.

Needs for uniqueness did not influence choice at the brand level, but at the product level they influenced choice among the products from the in-group-associated brand. Specifically, among those referencing an in-group, people with higher needs for uniqueness were more likely to choose the product preferred by fewer group members

One might wonder whether within-group differentiation occurred only because between-group differentiation was not sufficiently salient. The choice task used in this study provided only in-group preferences for consideration, which may not have adequately highlighted between-group differences or may have been inferred as a general majority preference. Prior work on optimal distinctiveness suggests that salient out-group comparisons should satisfy psychological needs for differentiation (Brewer 1991). When between-group contrasts are heightened, people's desires for uniqueness could be satisfied by the fact that their in-group is different from an out-group, and this may remove any effects of needs for differentiation from other in-group members through

choice. Ancillary data, however, suggests that this is not the case. In a follow-up study, participants ($N = 33$) identified both an in-group and an out-group and completed a choice task similar to study 2 across six identity-relevant consumer categories. In this case, however, they were told to imagine that 70 people from their in-group preferred Product A1 and 30 people preferred A2, while 70 people from their out-group preferred B3 and 30 people preferred B4. By providing options associated with both an in-group and an out-group, we intended to heighten the salience of between-group comparisons, thus providing an opportunity to differentiate by contrasting against an out-group. Participants also completed the Consumer Need for Uniqueness scale (Cronbach's α = .91; Tian et al. 2001). Results corroborate the findings of study 2. Brand A options were chosen 88% of the time, and need for uniqueness was not associated with brand choice (β = -0.38, $S.E.$ = 0.84, $t(196)$ = -0.45, $p > .65$). Furthermore, need for uniqueness significantly predicted product choice within the brand linked to the in-group ($\beta = 0.88$, $S.E.$ = 0.33, $t(172)$ = 2.68, $p < .009$); those higher in need for uniqueness were more likely to choose the product preferred by fewer in-group members. These results suggest that needs for uniqueness still exert an influence on choice, even when psychological contrasts to out-groups can be made. They also show that while people with higher needs for uniqueness may be willing to select options that are less linked to their own group, they are unlikely to select options linked with other groups; rather, they tend to differentiate within the options associated with their in-group.

STUDY 3: MANIPULATING DRIVES FOR DISTINCTION

To provide further evidence that uniqueness motives are underlying choice at the within group level, study 3 manipulates rather than measures them. We exposed half of participants to images that prime uniqueness (Maimaran and Wheeler 2008), and used a similar choice task to study 2, in which brands were strong markers of social meaning.

Consistent with study 2, we predict that identity-signaling motives should again lead people to select options from the brand linked to their in-group (versus out-group), and this should be driven by how much they wish others to associate them with the group. However, the priming manipulation should affect which product they select from that brand: those primed with uniqueness should be more likely to select the differentiating product from the in-group associated brand.

Method

One-hundred and seventy students participated in this study on a computer as part of a larger set of experiments in exchange for financial payment. They were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (prime: uniqueness vs. control) by 2 (group type: in-group vs. out-group) between subjects design.

First, following study 2, participants specified either an in-group or out-group and rated how much they wanted to be associated with that group.

Next, we primed half the participants with uniqueness (adapted from Maimaran and Wheeler 2008). These individuals were asked to look at eight pictures and identify

the number of circles and squares in each image. Each picture contained an array of shapes in which all the shapes were the same except one (e.g., □ ○ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □). Exposure to such figures has been shown to increase uniqueness seeking behavior by making uniqueness motives more accessible (Maimaran and Wheeler 2008). Control participants did not complete the priming task.

Finally, participants were presented with the choice task from study 2. To simplify the design, they were only asked to make choices from six identity-relevant consumer categories (e.g., cars, shirts, sunglasses, etc.). Choices were analyzed using an approach similar to study 2.

Results

Identity-Signaling Choice: Influence of Reference Group. Consistent with study 2, referencing an in-group (vs. an out-group) increased the odds of choosing an option from the group-associated brand (Brand A). A mixed effects binary logistic regression with reference group type, prime, and their interaction (with a random effect to control for repeated measures) predicting brand choice showed only a main effect of group type: people chose the group-associated brand (Brand A) only 35% of the time when it was preferred by an out-group, but this nearly doubled to 62% of the time when it was preferred by an in-group ($\beta = 1.38$, *S.E.* $=0.39$, $t(1016) = 3.55$, $p < .001$). Neither the uniqueness prime, nor its interaction, affected brand choice (both ps $> .45$).

Identity-Signaling Choice: Mediation by Desires to be Associated with Reference Group. As in study 2, results again demonstrated the mediating effect of desires to be associated with the reference group on brand choice. The confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero (95% *CI* = 0.13 to 1.10 using the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation). The uniqueness prime and the prime by reference group interaction were not significant when included in each step of the mediation (all *p*s > .46) and the overall mediation pattern remained significant (95% *CI* = 0.13 to 1.11).

Differentiating Choice: Influence of Uniqueness Prime. Next, we examined how the uniqueness prime influenced product choices made by participants, conditional upon having chosen an option from the brand strongly linked to the reference group (i.e., Brand A). We conducted a mixed effects binary logistic regression with reference group type, uniqueness prime, and their interaction predicting choice of Product A1 versus A2 (a random effect controlled for repeated measures).

The pattern of results was consistent with study 2. An effect of group type (β = 2.13, *S.E.* = 0.48, $t(486)$ = 4.34, *p* < .001) was qualified by the predicted uniqueness prime by reference group interaction (β = -1.33, *S.E.* = 0.63, $t(486)$ = -2.12, *p* < .04; figure 3). Among people who referenced an in-group, the uniqueness prime increased the choice of the less popular Product A2 (β = -0.81, *S.E.* = 0.35, $t(305)$ = -2.30, *p* < .03). There was no corresponding effect of prime in the out-group condition (β = 0.54, *S.E.* = 0.57, $t(181)$ = 0.95, *p* > .34).

FIGURE 3

STUDY 3: INFLUENCE OF UNIQUENESS PRIME AND REFERENCE GROUP

IDENTITY ON CHOICE OF LESS POPULAR PRODUCT (A2) FROM REFERENCE

GROUP-ASSOCIATED BRAND (A)
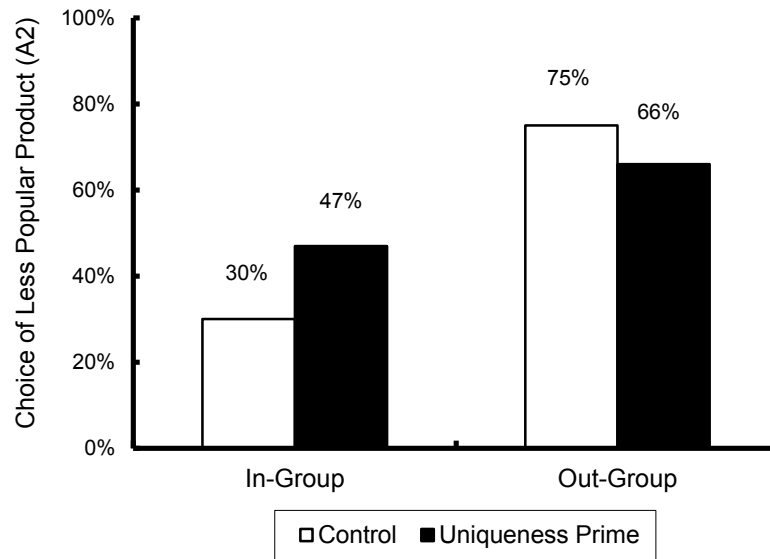
Discussion

By manipulating drives for distinction rather than measuring them, the results of

study 3 underscore the findings of study 2. People chose in ways that simultaneously

allowed them to communicate both social identity and uniqueness. In this case, brands

signaled identity and desires to be associated with particular social identities again drove

assimilation at the brand level. At the same time, activating drives for differentiation, this

time through a situational prime, drove differentiation among in-group linked options.

STUDY 4: MANIPULATING DIMENSIONS FOR DIFFERENTIATION

Studies 2 and 3 used brands as a signal of social identity and products as a means of differentiation, but as we noted in the introduction, this may not always be the case. In any given season, certain product styles or colors are in fashion and multiple brands may carry their own version of this trend. In such instances, product choice may signal social identity (e.g., sneakers vs. dress shoes), and the brand one chooses may provide in-group differentiation (e.g., Keds vs. Converse).

Study 4 tests this possibility by manipulating which dimension of choice—product or brand—is seen as a means to assimilate to or differentiate within one's in-group. If our theorizing is correct, people with higher needs for uniqueness should still choose to differentiate themselves within their in-group, but a priming task should shift which dimension they use (product or brand). Priming brands as a signal of social identity and products as a means for in-group differentiation should lead people with higher needs for uniqueness to prefer the less popular product from the group-associated brand. In contrast, priming people to think of product type as a signal of identity and brands as a means for differentiation should lead them to prefer to differentiate themselves by choosing the group-associated product but from a less popular brand.

Method

One-hundred sixty-three students participated in this study on a computer as part of a larger set of experiments in exchange for financial payment. They were randomly

assigned to either the product differentiation or brand differentiation prime condition in a two-factor between subjects design.

First, participants specified an in-group using the same instructions as previous studies (there was no out-group condition in this study).

Second, they were presented with a sorting task designed to highlight either brands or product types as a point of differentiation within one's in-group. All participants were asked to "Consider Mike, a member of an on-campus group Gamma." Participants primed to think of products as a uniqueness attribute were then told that Mike uses the same brand as Gammas but a different product, while participants primed to think of brands as a uniqueness attribute were told that Mike uses the same product as Gammas but a different brand.

Specifically, participants in the product differentiation condition were told that "Gamma members typically drive BMW's. Most Gammas drive BMW sports cars. Mike also drives a BMW, but he drives a BMW SUV." Thus, participants in this condition were primed to think of products as providing within-group differentiation. After reading these instructions, participants were given a photo sorting task that involved separating different options from the same brand. They were presented with 10 photos of automobiles: 5 BMW sports cars and 5 BMW SUVs; for each photo, participants indicated whether the automobile would be preferred by Mike or other members of Gamma.

In contrast, participants in the brand differentiation condition were told that "Gamma members typically drive sports cars. Most Gammas drive BMW sports cars. Mike also drives a sports car, but he drives a Lexus sports car." Thus, participants in this

condition were primed to think of brands as a uniqueness attribute. They then completed a similar photo sorting task, but in this condition they separated different brands that made the same type of car. They were shown photos of 5 BMW sports cars and 5 Lexus sports cars and asked to indicate whether the automobile would be preferred by Mike or other members of Gamma.

Thus, the key difference between the two conditions was which dimension—brands or product types—was a uniqueness attribute that would provide within-group differentiation.

Third, participants were given a choice task similar to the one used in study 3—this time, choosing among three options. They were asked to imagine that out of 100 people in their reference group, 60 preferred Product A1, 20 preferred Product A2 (a different product type from the same brand), and 20 preferred Product B1 (the same product type from a different brand). Note that Products A2 and B1 were equally less popular (both preferred by 20% of people) which should appeal to those higher in needs for uniqueness. However, we hypothesized that the sorting task would influence preference between the two options that provided some differentiation (Product A2 vs. B1)—thinking of brands as a signal of identity and products as a means of differentiation would increase preference for Product A2, whereas thinking of products as a signal of identity and brands as a means of differentiation would increase preference for Product B1.

Finally, participants completed the Consumer Need for Uniqueness scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$; Tian et al. 2001). There was no effect of prime on need for uniqueness scores ($t(161) = 0.11$, $p > .91$).

Results

The data were analyzed using a mixed effects multinomial logistic regression with condition, need for uniqueness, and the two-way interaction as predictors (a random effect controlled for repeated measures). The overall model revealed a significant effect of the prime ($F(2, 970) = 3.92$, $p < .03$), need for uniqueness ($F(2, 970) = 8.73$, $p < .001$, and a marginally significant interaction ($F(2, 970) = 2.42$, $p = .09$).

As predicted, the prime significantly influenced the choice proportions of the two potentially differentiating options (Products A2 and B1; $\beta = -2.35$, $S.E. = 1.06$, $t(970) = -2.22$, $p < .03$; figure 4). More specifically, the differentiating product from Brand A (A2) was chosen more often when people were primed to think of brands as a signal of social identity and products as a uniqueness attribute (30%) than when they were primed to think of products as a signal of social identity and brands as a uniqueness attribute (18%). Conversely, the differentiating brand for Product 1 (B1) was chosen more often when people were primed to think of products as a signal of social identity and brands as a uniqueness attribute (36%) than when they were primed to think of brands as a signal of social identity and products as a uniqueness attribute (26%). A mixed effects binary logistic regression with condition predicting choice of Product B1 (vs. A1 and A2) showed a significant effect of prime condition ($\beta = -.059$, $S.E. = 0.25$, $t(976) = -2.35$, $p < .02$). When need for uniqueness and the prime by need for uniqueness interaction were included in the model, the effect of the prime remained significant ($p < .04$), the effect of uniqueness was significant ($p < .02$), and the interaction was not significant ($p > .11$).

FIGURE 4

STUDY 4: INFLUENCE OF PRODUCT/BRAND DIFFERENTIATION PRIME ON

CHOICE
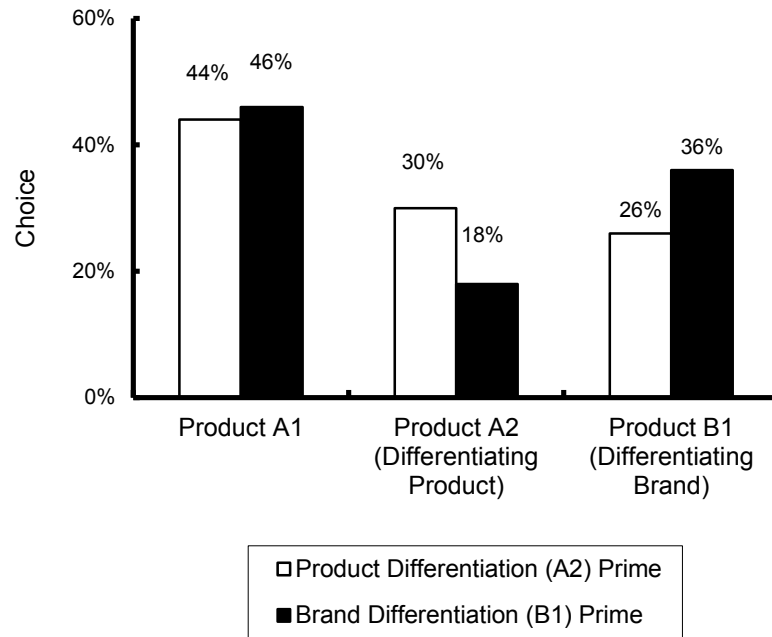
Second, we again found that desires for uniqueness drove choice of less popular

options. Among those primed to think of products as a uniqueness attribute, higher needs

for uniqueness increased the odds of choosing Product A2 over A1 ($\beta = 1.00$, *S.E.* = 0.28,

$t(476) = 3.62$, $p < .001$). Similarly, among those primed to think of brands as a

uniqueness attribute, higher needs for uniqueness increased the odds of choosing Product

B1 over A1 ($\beta = 0.79$, *S.E.* = 0.31, $t(494) = 2.54$, $p < .02$).

Discussion

Study 4 again illustrates that desires for differentiation lead people to choose less popular options relative to others in their in-group. However, consistent with our theoretical position about the meaning of choice dimensions, the way they chose was moderated by manipulating which dimension of choice—product or brand—people viewed as relevant to signaling and uniqueness. When primed to think of products as a uniqueness attribute and brands as the group signal, people with higher needs for uniqueness were more likely to choose less popular product options from the group-associated brand (Product A2). The reverse was found when people were primed to think of brands as a uniqueness attribute and products as a group signal—people higher in needs for uniqueness were more likely to choose the less popular brand option of the group-associated product (Product B1). Therefore, study 4 provides evidence that situational cues or consumption meaning can alter which choice dimensions are better signals of social identity or uniqueness. And consistent with the prior studies, people tended to conform on dimensions they perceived to be a signal of group identity, and differentiated among group-associated options to satisfy desires for uniqueness.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This article integrates research on assimilation, differentiation, and the meaning of consumption to illustrate how people can simultaneously reconcile identity-signaling and uniqueness motives. Previous research has typically studied these motives in isolation or

from a one-dimensional perspective. In contrast, we combine these various research streams and examine different dimensions of choice to gain deeper insight into identity processes, as well as how these processes combine to drive consumer choice.

Four studies demonstrate that by using different choice dimensions, people are able to simultaneously satisfy motives for both identity-signaling and uniqueness within a single choice. As shown in study 1, people's everyday clothing choices allow them to simultaneously be recognized as a member of their social group and express their individual desires for uniqueness relative to other in-group members. People tend to assimilate with in-group choices on dimensions that strongly signal their social identities (studies 2 to 4). Moreover, this increased choice is mediated by desires to be associated with their group (studies 2 and 3) and moderated by the identity-relevance of the consumer category (study 2). At the same time, desires for differentiation tend to play out at a within-group level of choice. Individuals with higher needs for uniqueness (study 2) or primed with uniqueness (study 3) are more likely to choose a less popular product option from the brand linked to their in-group. Finally, situational cues and the meanings attached to consumption choices can alter the dimensions on which people choose to assimilate and differentiate (study 4).

Theoretical Contributions

This research highlights the value of a more multidimensional view of consumer choice and contributes to the literature in several ways. First, while prior perspectives have suggested that people may assimilate or differentiate from others, they have often

focused on either the group or individual level, but not both. Further, they have tended to look at only one dimension of choice (e.g., choosing the same brand or a different brand) or use a single continuous dependent measure (e.g., asking people to rate their perceived similarity to other members of a group). Real choice, however, is much more complex, and explicitly allowing for this complexity provides a richer understanding of the nuances that drive consumer behavior. By studying both group and individual levels of comparison and using a multidimensional dependent measure, we are able to show that people do not simply assimilate or differentiate, but can simultaneously do both on different dimensions.

Second, our perspective provides insight into which specific choice dimensions may be used for assimilation versus differentiation. Beyond reflecting general motives to be similar or different, certain choice dimensions may acquire symbolic meaning as markers of group identity, and these meanings may then come to shape choice. Brands are often seen as signals of social identity. Consequently, people often converge to their in-group preferences on this signaling attribute while differentiating themselves on a uniqueness attribute (e.g., color). However, when other attributes are more relevant to communicating group identity (e.g., wearing a certain color), then these effects may reverse, with people converging on color and using other attributes to differentiate themselves (as in study 4).

Third, the results suggest that uniqueness motives mainly drive choice within groups, rather than between them. While more empirical work is certainly necessary to examine this issue in greater detail, it seems that higher needs for uniqueness drive people to select more differentiated options within their in-group rather than leading them

to select options outside their group. Thus, future work might test how between-group differentiation may be conceptually and practically different than within-group differentiation (also see Hornsey and Jetten 2004). Research might also examine whether and when one motive may supersede the other, either in terms of the degree of influence on choice or the sequence in which the two motives are considered in the decision-making process. While our work shows that both motives can be satisfied simultaneously through a single consumer choice, the order in which each motive is considered and the dimensions of choice evaluated may or may not differ across individuals and situations.

Fourth, the theoretical implications of this research extend beyond the consumer choice literature to inform the social psychology of identity more broadly. Theories of conformity, social identity, and uniqueness have a long and rich history in psychology, and this article contributes to understanding how these related literatures can be woven together. Our research provides insight into decision-making and behavior when there are tensions between motives of assimilation and differentiation, even in situations that may not involve consumption. For example, an employee may desire to both be an integrated team member and have a unique role in the organization. Similarly, elected politicians and their loyal constituents may wish to both toe the party line and voice their individual opinions. In such situations, we may observe expressions and behaviors that broadly communicate affiliation with one's group (e.g., advocating support for a piece of legislation) while also asserting individuality (e.g., emphasizing the importance of a unique component of the legislation).

Finally, our findings shed light on how consumers may navigate complex choice environments in which multiple internal or external drivers may influence a single

choice. Laboratory research is often criticized for the parsimony of its experimental designs. While such approaches are valuable in isolating, understanding, and convincingly demonstrating a specific effect, these insights usually come at the expense of real-world relevance. Although an effect may be observed in the lab, it can be difficult to abstract implications to complex or noisy situations in which multiple forces are at play (Staw 2010). In this article, we have demonstrated one way people can integrate and simultaneously satisfy multiple motives in a single choice—by satisfying each motive on a different dimension. Our results are even more compelling in this regard because the two motives we studied are not only different, but in opposition. While we do not claim that our laboratory studies fully replicate everyday life, we have captured at least one additional level of complexity through our multidimensional dependent variable. Moreover, we have provided converging evidence by observing everyday choices in a natural setting (study 1).

Directions for Future Research and Marketing Implications

As with most research, there are a number of intriguing directions for future study. One is examining how these motivations for assimilation and differentiation extend cross-culturally. While existing research has found that European Americans prefer uniqueness more than East Asians (Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Kim and Markus 1999), this finding says little about *how* such differentiation is actually enacted. One could achieve greater differentiation by joining smaller groups, distinguishing oneself from other in-group members, or differentiating one's group more from out-groups.

Furthermore, research suggests that choice may not be as strongly linked to identity in all cultural contexts (Kim and Drolet 2003; Savani, Markus, and Conner 2008; Stephens, Markus and Townsend 2007). Examining the degree to which these motivations exist in various cultural contexts, as well as how they combine to drive choice, may provide insight not only into differentiation itself, but also the communication of identity across cultures and the integration of multiple motives more broadly.

These findings also have important marketing implications. Creating multiple product options may not only generate better fit with consumer preferences (Lancaster 1990), but also allow consumers to differentiate themselves. Even though different colored iPods are functionally identical, for example, the proliferation of colors allows consumers to see themselves as differentiated, even though they are making essentially the same choice (Pronin, Berger, and Molouki 2007). Other brands offer seemingly endless ways for consumers to differentiate themselves; for example, programs such as NikeID and Trek Project One let consumers customize the materials, styles, and colors of their shoes and bikes, resulting in a unique yet branded product. Future research may help to determine if particular attributes can better communicate social identity or more effectively satisfy uniqueness motives. Methods such as conjoint analysis may prove useful in this regard (e.g., Narayan, Rao, and Saunders 2011).

In summary, this research illustrates one way that people integrate different identity motives through consumer choice. Opposing desires to signal social identity and uniqueness can be resolved by making strategic choices on different choice dimensions: consumers may conform on dimensions that are associated with their in-group and simultaneously differentiate by making a more distinct choice among group-associated

options. Our findings also illuminate the complexity of how people balance different motives when making choices, and the benefits of acknowledging such complexity when designing choice stimuli. Finally, while research in identity-signaling has typically focused on contrasting in-groups and out-groups, we direct our attention to the individuals who form these groups to demonstrate how group and individual influences combine to drive consumer choice.

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ESSAY 2:

EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS FOSTER STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

THAN MATERIAL GIFTS

ABSTRACT

Interpersonal relationships are essential to well-being, and gifts are often given to cultivate these relationships. To both inform gift givers of what to give and gain insight into the connecting function of gifts, this research investigates what type of gift is better at strengthening relationships according to the gift recipients—material gifts (objects for the recipients to keep) or experiential gifts (events for the recipients to live through). 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. 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.

INTRODUCTION

Occasions to give gifts tie up each year. From birthdays to religious holidays, Valentine's Day to Father's Day, each occasion is fraught with the question: What to give?! Should you give your dad a designer tie or golf lessons? Would giving your spouse a watch or concert tickets spark greater affection? Would a set of wine glasses or a wine tasting better cement your friendship with your favorite colleague? And, ultimately, why would one of these gifts strengthen the relationship more than the other?

With Americans spending approximately $300 billion on gifts per year (Unity Marketing 2007), and with gift giving occasions serving as great opportunities (and liabilities) for relationship building, these are consequential questions. Indeed, interpersonal relationships are essential to well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Clark and Lemay 2010; Reis, Collins, and Berscheid 2000), and gifts serve as a means to foster these important connections (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008; Dunn, Huntsinger, Lun, and Sinclair 2008; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983). It is therefore no wonder that gift giving turns out to be a source of anxiety (Wooten 2000) and personal struggle (Ward and Broniarczyk 2011) for many consumers. To help inform gift givers of what to give and to gain insight into the interpersonal benefits of gifts, this research takes the gift recipients' perspective and experimentally investigates which type of gift is more effective at strengthening their relationship with their gift giver—material gifts (objects for the recipients to keep) or experiential gifts (events for the recipients to live through). And why?

MATERIAL VERSUS EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS

Extending Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) definition of material and experiential purchases, we define material gifts as objects to be kept in the recipient's possession (e.g., jewelry or electronic gadgets) and experiential gifts as an event that the recipient lives through (e.g., concert tickets or a photography lesson).

The research comparing material and experiential purchases to date has focused on the effects of making these purchases for oneself, finding that buying an experience is typically more personally beneficial than buying a material good. Compared to possessions, experiences lead to greater satisfaction (Carter and Gilovich 2010), less regret (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and greater happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), especially when the outcome of the experience is positive (Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009). These benefits of acquiring an experience over a possession stem from the fact that experiences are more likely to be shared with others (Caprariello and Reis 2013), contribute more to one's sense of self (Carter and Gilovich 2012), are more unique (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and are harder to compare against alternatives (Carter and Gilovich 2010). Although prior research offers guidance on whether to buy experiences or material goods to improve one's own well-being, the question of what to buy to strengthen one's relationships with others remains unanswered. Would giving something to do or something to keep forge a stronger social bond?

It turns out that people are more inclined to give material gifts. In a survey we conducted among 219 gift givers (66% female; ages 18-74, $M = 34.68$), 78% reported having most recently given a gift that was material. This tendency is consistent with the

argument that giving a gift that is durable will leave a lasting impression, because recipients will not only have something to unwrap, but they will keep the gift as a reminder of the occasion and the gift giver (Ariely 2011).

A pilot study we conducted around Father's Day, however, hints that this tendency to give material gifts might be misguided. Recipients of Father's Day gifts ($N =$ 42; ages 48-75; $M = 55.05$) participated in a two-part survey: one completed the week before Father's Day and one the week after. Both before and after Father's Day, fathers rated the strength of their relationship with their child (1 = *feel extremely distant and disconnected*, 9 = *feel extremely close and connected*); the change reflected the impact of receiving the gift on their relationship. Following Father's Day, fathers also rated (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*) to what extent the gift they received was material and experiential. A multiple regression analysis predicting change in relationship strength showed that gifts that were more experiential strengthened fathers' relationships with their children (β = 0.16, SE = 0.07, $t(39)$ = 2.21, p = .03), whereas the material nature of the gift did not have an effect on the relationship (β = -0.03, SE = 0.07, $t(39)$ = -0.39, p = .70). It is not that experiential gifts were more likely to be given in initially stronger relationships, since the material and experiential gift ratings were unrelated to relationship strength before Father's Day (ps > .43). These results were corroborated by a second pilot study conducted following Mother's Day among mothers who had received a gift from their child (N = 99; ages 38-64, M = 51.9; 11 unspecified). In this study, the experiential versus material nature of the gift was measured on a bipolar scale (1 = *purely material*, 9 = *purely experiential*; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), and the relational impact of the gift was measured on a subjective change scale (1 = *felt more distant and less connected*,

50

9 = *felt closer and more connected*). Like fathers, mothers who received gifts that were more experiential reported having a stronger relationship with their child as a result of receiving the gift (β = 0.21, *SE* = 0.07, *t*(97) = 2.96, *p* = .004). Together, these results provide preliminary evidence to suggest that experiential gifts are more effective at strengthening relationships between gift recipients and their gift givers.

This is consistent with anthropological research suggesting that non-material gifts can be particularly meaningful (Belk and Coon 1993). For example, one interviewer documented a gift recipient who "would rather have nothing and spend time together fishing or camping than to have… expensive items" (403). This is also consistent with work showing that time is a more interpersonally connecting resource than money (Mogilner 2010). Although the Father's Day and Mother's Day studies indicate that experiential gifts may be better for relationships than material gifts, the results are correlational and based on small samples. Plus, the gifts varied considerably and likely in more ways than the material versus experiential distinction. We therefore conducted a series of controlled experiments to more rigorously test for the effect of receiving experiential gifts versus material gifts on relationship strength, and to explore why experiential gifts may be more effective at improving relationships.

RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ROLE OF EMOTION

Although recent experimental research on gift giving has made great strides in understanding how recipients evaluate different types of gifts (Flynn and Adams 2009; Gino and Flynn 2011; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014; Waldfogel 1993; Zhang and Epley

2012), less is known about how giver-recipient relationships are best cultivated through different types of gifts. That is, much of the work on gift giving has focused on how much recipients appreciate, value, or like particular gifts, rather than the impact of these gifts on the relationship. For instance, prior gift giving experiments have shown that despite gift givers' beliefs that expensive gifts will be more appreciated, recipients appreciate expensive and inexpensive gifts alike (Flynn and Adams 2009) and put a lower monetary value on a gift than its actual cost (Waldfogel 1993). And although gift givers think that unsolicited gifts convey greater thoughtfulness and serve as a stronger signal of relationship value, recipients prefer receiving cash or gifts that they had explicitly requested (Gino and Flynn 2011; Ward and Broniarczyk 2014). Additionally, when buying for multiple recipients, gift givers select overly-individuated gifts in an attempt to be thoughtful and understanding of each unique recipient, but this thoughtfulness results in less-liked gifts (Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014), and recipients tend not to appreciate the thought put into gifts they like anyway (Zhang and Epley 2012). In light of these findings that gift givers are poor predictors of what recipients will like, it is fortunate that recipients can re-gift their gifts without offending the giver (Adams, Flynn, and Norton 2012)!

Our research adopts a different approach to assess a gift's value in that we measure its influence on relationship strength from the recipient's perspective, rather than how much the recipient likes the gift. Even though relationship strength is a well-established construct in the consumer-brand domain (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004), we looked to the literature on close relationships to define relationship strength because of our focus on interpersonal relationships between two family members, friends, or

romantic partners. Notably, there is substantial variation among relationship types with respect to what constitutes a strong relationship. For instance, although commitment, monogamy, and sexual satisfaction are key considerations for strong romantic relationships (Roach, Frazier and Bowden 1981; Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew 1998), they are not applicable to relationships among friends and family. Still, there are principle indicators of relationship strength that span across personal relationships, namely the extent to which partners feel close to each other (Algoe et al. 2008; Dibble, Levine, and Park 2011; Kok et al. 2013; Kok and Fredrickson 2010) and connected to each other (Algoe et al. 2008; Dibble et al. 2011; Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross 2008). This sense of interconnection has been visually portrayed and measured through the degree of overlap between two circles that represent each partner's self-concept (Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Aron, Aron, Tudor and Nelson 1991; Brown et al. 2009). Across our experiments, we adopt these indicators of relationship strength and specifically measure how the strength of the relationship between a gift recipient and gift giver changes from before to after receiving a gift.

This perspective on the success of a gift is similar to that taken in qualitative research which explores how gift exchanges produce relationship realignment. A series of depth interviews and surveys offer rich insights into how the context, rituals, meaning, and emotions that surround a gift exchange can lead to different relational outcomes ranging from relationship strengthening to rare cases of relationship severing (Ruth et al. 1999; Ruth, Brunel, and Otnes 2004). For instance, Ruth et al. (1999) observed that gift exchanges that involve highly personalized rituals that imbue the gift with shared meaning often lead to relationship strengthening. The current work builds on these

insights through experiments that specifically test the relational impact of particular types of gifts—those that are material versus experiential. It further examines why experiential and material gifts may differ in their ability to forge a stronger relationship between gift recipients and givers.

A distinction between experiential and material purchases that has yet to be explored is how much emotion they evoke during consumption. Prior research has shown that experiences can induce greater happiness than material goods (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), but it is important to note that experiences can stimulate a wide range of emotions (Derbaix and Pham 1991; Halvena and Holbrook 1986; Richins 1997). For instance, a safari adventure can elicit feelings of awe and fear; a rock concert can fuel excitement; a spa package can promote relaxation and serenity; and an opera may move one to tears. And even though highly materialistic people garner feelings of self-worth and happiness from the things they own (Richins 1994; Richins and Dawson 1992), in general, people's emotional responses to their possessions have proven to be shorter-lived than for their experiences (Nicolao et al. 2009). We thus propose that the emotion felt by recipients when consuming an experiential gift will be more intense than when consuming a material gift.

Research on relationships highlights emotion to be a key feature in relationship development and maintenance. Emotions expressed and experienced within the context of a relationship can yield positive interpersonal effects (Clark and Finkel 2004; Graham, Huang, Clark, and Helgeson 2008; Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, and Keijsers 2011; Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco 1998; Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006), whereas emotional suppression yields negative effects (Butler, Egloff, Wilhelm, Smith, Erickson,

and Gross 2003). For instance, it has been found that disclosing one's emotions to another makes the other feel closer versus disclosing facts and information (Laurenceau et al. 1998), that positive emotions such as gratitude promote relationship maintenance behaviors (Kubacka et al. 2011), and that sharing negative emotions can serve as an effective means towards interpersonal bonding (Graham et al. 2008). It has recently also been found that greater emotional intensity reduces perceived psychological distance (Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, and Dale 2010). Taking these findings together, we assert that a gift that evokes greater emotion should be more effective at strengthening relationships, and thus experiential gifts should be better for relationships than material gifts.

Notably, the emotion evoked by consuming a gift is distinct from the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. In his theoretical model delineating the impact of gifts on relationships, Sherry (1983) highlights the importance of focusing beyond the gift exchange to the "disposal" or consumption of the gift, during which "the gift becomes the vehicle by which the relationship of the donor and the recipient is realigned" (165). Indeed, it is the emotion evoked while consuming the gift that we propose drives the difference between experiential and material gifts on relationship change. Still, given the observation in qualitative research that a gift exchange can be highly emotional, it is important to keep an eye on the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. For instance, it has been found that the combination of negative and positive emotions felt during a gift exchange, as well as the recipient's reaction to the emotions expressed by the gift giver contribute to relationship realignment (Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth et al. 1999, 2004). That said, material and experiential gifts are both likely to elicit emotion during a gift

exchange (e.g., a recipient could feel grateful toward a gift giver whether given a wallet or tickets to a comedy show), whereas experiential gifts should elicit greater emotion during gift consumption as the recipient lives through an event (e.g., a recipient likely feels very little while using a wallet, yet may feel amused and delighted while attending a comedy show). Additionally, although Ruth et al. (1999, 2004) found that the valence of the emotion during a gift exchange mattered more than the intensity of emotion in predicting changes in the relationship (perhaps because the gift giver is often the source and target of the emotions evoked during a gift exchange), we propose instead that it is the intensity of emotion evoked during gift consumption that is responsible for the power of experiential gifts over material gifts to strengthen relationships.

We further propose that the consumption of the experiential gift need not be shared between the gift giver and recipient for it to evoke greater emotion, and thus improve the relationship. Indeed, prior research has shown that people who write about the feelings they have in a relationship are more likely to stay together, even when their writing is not shared with their relationship partner (Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006). In the case of gifts, the mere fact that the experience was given by the relationship partner places the experience and the resulting emotion within the context of the relationship. So, regardless of whether the giver shares in the consumption of the experience, the emotion from the experience will be associated with the giver, thereby strengthening the recipient's relationship with that person.

Altogether, we predict that experiential gifts will improve relationships more than material gifts, and that this is driven by the greater emotion evoked from consuming an experience than a possession. More formally, we predict:

H1: From the recipient's perspective, experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts, irrespective of whether the gift is consumed with the gift giver.

H2: Consuming experiential gifts evokes more intense emotion than consuming material gifts, and this greater emotionality mediates the effect of gift type on change in relationship strength.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted field and laboratory experiments involving actual and hypothetical gift exchanges in the context of existing personal relationships. In experiments 1A and 1B, gift givers were provided with $10 (experiment 1A) or $15 (experiment 1B) to buy a gift for someone they know; in experiment 2, participants were asked to recall a gift they had received from another person; and in experiment 3, participants were asked to imagine receiving a particular gift from a friend. Across the experiments, the experiential versus material nature of the gift was manipulated to test how gift type changed relationship strength from the recipient's perspective. To examine the underlying role of emotion, experiment 2 measured and experiment 3 manipulated the emotion evoked while consuming the gift. Lastly, experiment 3 held the gift itself constant and tested whether highlighting the experiential (vs. material) aspects of a gift (i.e., a book) would produce the same effect. Together, these studies seek to contribute a better understanding of how type of gift can differentially foster stronger relationships.

THE $10 GIFT EXPERIMENT 1A:

ARE EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS BETTER FOR RELATIONSHIPS?

Experiment 1A tests our primary hypothesis that experiential gifts will strengthen relationships more than material gifts. We gave people $10 to spend on a gift for a friend, randomly assigning them to give either a material gift or experiential gift. We then measured how strong gift recipients felt their relationship was with their gift giver as a result of the gift. Because experiences are often shared with others (Caprariello and Reis 2012), there were two experiential gift conditions: one in which the experiential gift was jointly consumed by the gift giver and recipient (shared experiential gift condition) and one in which the gift giver did not consume the gift with the recipient (non-shared experiential gift condition). We predicted that regardless of whether consumption of the experiential gift was shared, experiential gifts would be better for relationships than material gifts.

Method

Two-hundred twenty-four gift givers (63% female, 1% unspecified; ages 18-49; $M = 20.9$) were recruited to participate in a gift giving study as part of a university laboratory session comprised of several unrelated studies. Participants received $10 in exchange for participating in the lab session. For this study, gift givers were provided with an additional $10 to spend on a gift for a friend within three days. To help rule out the possibility that the gift type manipulation would influence who gift givers would give

their gift to, they were first asked to provide the first name and email address of their intended gift recipient.

Gift type manipulation. After identifying their gift recipient, gift givers were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: shared experiential gift, non-shared experiential gift, or non-shared material gift (a shared material gift condition was not included in the experimental design because it would be unrealistic for friends who were likely not cohabitating to share a material gift). Participants in the shared experiential gift condition were instructed to "purchase a gift that is an experience that you and the recipient consume together. Experiential gifts are events or experiences intended for the recipient to do or live through. You must share in the consumption of the gift with [recipient's name]." Participants in the non-shared experiential condition were given similar instructions, but told that they must not share in the consumption of the gift with their recipient: "Purchase a gift that is an experience that the recipient consumes alone. Experiential gifts are…You must not share in the consumption of the gift with [recipient's name]." Finally, participants in the material gift condition were asked to "purchase a material gift that the recipient consumes alone. Material gifts are tangible items intended for the recipient to have and keep for him/herself. You must not share in the consumption of the gift with [recipient's name]."

Gift givers left the laboratory with $10, a printout of the gift instructions corresponding to their assigned condition, and a note to give their gift recipient, which informed the recipient that the gift was part of a university research study and that they would receive an invitation to participate in an online follow-up survey.

Three days later, gift recipients received an email invitation to participate in an online survey in exchange for a $3 Amazon.com gift card. The survey link was created to allow the researchers (but not the gift recipients) to track the gift conditions. One hundred and fourteen gift recipients responded (65% female, ages 16-57, $M = 23.6$; 42 in the shared experiential gift condition, 36 in the non-shared experiential gift condition, and 36 in the material gift condition). Four gift recipients were excluded either because they had not received their gift yet ($n = 2$) or were given the $10 in cash ($n = 2$).

Recipients first described the gift they had received. As examples, shared experiential gifts included being taken out for lunch or to a movie with their gift giver; non-shared experiential gifts included gourmet chocolates or movie tickets; and material gifts included a stuffed animal, a pair of socks, or a pint glass.

Change in relationship strength. Recipients reported how receiving the gift affected the strength of their relationship with their gift giver using the following measures. The first measure was the inclusion of other in self (IOS) scale adapted from Aron et al. (1992). Gift recipients were presented with a set of nine circle pairs, in which one of the circles was labeled "self" and the other circle was labeled "other." These pairs ranged in their degree of overlap to represent the strength of the recipient's relationship with the gift giver. Gift recipients were asked to choose the set of circles that best described their relationship with their gift giver before receiving the gift and the set of circles that best described their relationship after receiving the gift (see appendix A). To assess how the gift changed the relationship, we calculated the difference between the two selected circle pairs by subtracting the 1-9 value of the first pair chosen from the 1-9

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value of the second pair chosen. Positive numbers reflected an improvement in relationship strength, whereas negative numbers reflected a worsening of the relationship.

Gift recipients also reported how receiving the gift affected their relationship on Likert scales assessing closeness (1 = *felt more distant,* 9 = *felt closer*), connection (1 = *felt more disconnected*, 9 = *felt more connected*), and the extent to which receiving the gift damaged or improved their relationship (1 = *greatly worsened relationship*, 9 = *greatly improved relationship*). After standardizing the difference score from the circle measure and these three Likert scales, we calculated the mean to serve as our measure of change in relationship strength (α = .78).

Thoughtfulness and liking. Because much of the experimental research on gift giving has focused on how much recipients like the gift and how thoughtful they perceive the gift to be (Flynn and Adams 2009; Gino and Flynn 2011; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014; Ward and Broniarczyk 2014), we also measured liking and thoughtfulness to assess whether material and experiential gifts differ on these dimensions. Recipients rated how much they liked the gift on three items: how much they liked the gift, how satisfied they were with the gift, and cost aside, how desirable the gift would be to an average other person (third item adapted from Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*; α = .65). Recipients also rated the thoughtfulness of their gift on four items adapted from Flynn and Adams (2009) and Gino and Flynn (2011): the extent to which the gift was thoughtful, considerate, took their needs into account, and took what they really wanted into account (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*; α = .78).

Results and Discussion

Change in relationship strength. An examination of the first circle pair that recipients selected to represent their relationship before receiving the gift confirmed that there were no differences in base levels among participants in the shared experiential condition ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 2.12$), non-shared experiential condition ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 2.32$), and material condition ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.99$; $F(2, 107) = 0.17$, $p = .85$).

An ANOVA conducted on the relationship change measure revealed that gift type had a significant effect on change in relationship strength ($F(2, 107) = 3.26$, $p = .04$). Recipients of a shared experiential gift ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.85$, $t(107) = 2.41$, $p = .02$) and recipients of a non-shared experiential gift ($M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.75$, $t(107) = 1.99$, $p = .05$) exhibited stronger relationships with their gift givers as a result of the gift, compared to those who had received a material gift ($M = -0.27$, $SD = 0.64$; figure 1). There was no difference in change in relationship strength among recipients of shared and non-shared experiential gifts ($p = .75$). These results thus provide experimental evidence supporting our prediction that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts, regardless of whether the experience is shared by the gift giver and recipient (H1).

Thoughtfulness and liking. The effect of experiential versus material gifts on relationship change appears to be orthogonal to any effects of gift thoughtfulness and liking, because experiential and material gifts were similarly thoughtful and liked. Even though greater perceived thoughtfulness was associated with increased relationship strength ($r(108) = .43$, $p < .001$), shared experiential gifts ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 1.10$), non-

FIGURE 1

EXPERIMENT 1: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS OF

EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) GIFTS
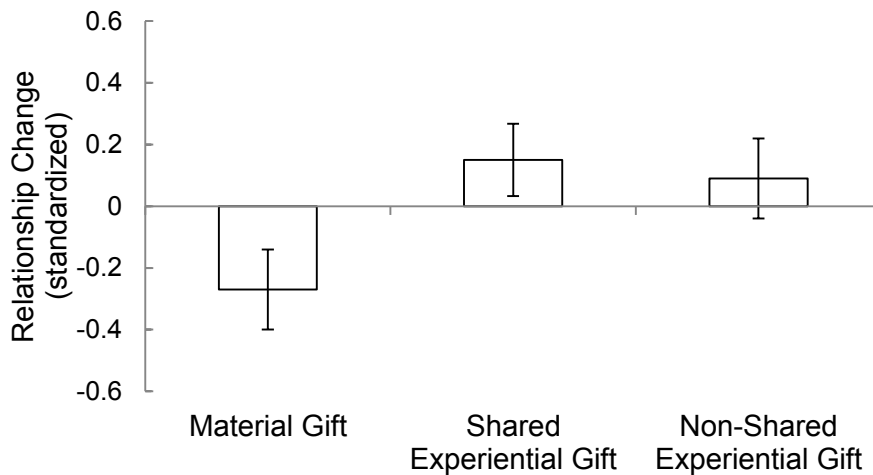
shared experiential gifts ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.25$), and material gifts ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 0.96$)

did not differ in how thoughtful recipients perceived them to be ($F(2, 107) = 0.52$, p

$=.60$). Similarly, even though recipients who liked their gift more reported feeling

stronger relationships ($r(108) = .39$, $p < .001$), shared experiential gifts ($M = 5.58$, $SD =$

0.89), non-shared experiential gifts ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 0.89$), and material gifts ($M = 5.58$,

$SD = 0.82$) did not differ in how much recipients liked the gift ($F(2, 107) = 0.09$, $p = .91$).

The results of this experiment show that people who received either a shared or a

non-shared experiential gift consequently had a stronger relationship with their gift giver

than people who received a material gift. Furthermore, the findings indicate that these

two gift types did not differ in perceived thoughtfulness or liking. Therefore, the effect of

experiential gifts (vs. material gifts) on strengthening relationships cannot be explained by how thoughtful or liked the gift is.

This experiment used several items to measure how the gift changed the relationship between the gift giver and recipient. One limitation of the experimental design, however, was that all measures were collected after the gift had been received. Another potential limitation of this experiment was that some recipients may not have consumed their gift prior to completing the survey. We address these concerns in the following experiment.

THE $15 GIFT EXPERIMENT 1B:

ARE EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS BETTER FOR RELATIONSHIPS?

Experiment 1B tested the robustness of the previous experiment using a two-part design that measured relationship strength at two time periods: before and after the gift was received. With this experiment focusing only on non-shared experiential and material gifts, we expected to replicate the finding that experiential gifts produce greater improvements in relationship strength than material gifts.

Participants were recruited with a friend, and in each pair of participants, one was randomly assigned to be the gift giver and the other to be the gift recipient. Gift givers were provided with $15 and instructed to purchase either an experiential gift or material gift for their friend that they were not to consume with their friend. Gift recipients completed two surveys: one measured the strength of their relationship with their friend

before receiving the gift, and the other measured the strength of their relationship after consuming the gift.

Method

Fifty-nine pairs of friends (118 participants; 57% female, 1% unspecified; ages 18-27; $M = 20.63$) were recruited through a university laboratory to participate in a gift giving study. All participants were paid $10 to complete the set of studies in that session. Upon arriving to the laboratory, participants in each friend pair were randomly assigned to the role of gift giver or recipient. Gift givers were provided with an additional $15 along with instructions for how to spend this money.

Gift type manipulation. Gift givers were randomly assigned to purchase either an experiential or material gift for their friend. Gift givers in the experiential gift condition were instructed, "Purchase a gift that is an experience that your friend consumes without you. Experiential gifts are experiences intended for the recipient to do or live through." Gift givers in the material condition were instructed, "Purchase a gift that is a material good that your friend consumes without you. Material gifts are tangible items for the recipient to have and keep for him/herself." All gift givers were further instructed to give a gift that their friend could consume within the next week, to spend as close to $15 as possible on the gift, to give their friend the gift within the next three days, and not to tell their friend our instructions regarding the type of gift they were to purchase. Gift givers left the laboratory with $15 and a printout of the gift instructions corresponding to their assigned condition.

Change in relationship strength. To serve as the baseline measure of relationship strength, gift recipients rated their relationship with their friend on four items similar to those used in experiment 1A. Presented with nine circle pairs that ranged in their degree of overlap, participants were asked to choose one pair of circles that best represented their relationship with their friend (adapted from Aron et al. 1992). Next, recipients were asked to rate their relationship with their friend on three Likert scales in terms of closeness (1 = *extremely distant*, 9 = *extremely close*), connection (1 = *extremely disconnected*, 9 = *extremely connected*), and relationship strength (1 = *extremely weak*, 9 = *extremely strong*). The average of these four items served as our measure for pre-gift relationship strength (α = .84).

Recipients were then told that they would be receiving a gift from their friend within the next three days and that we would be following up with an online survey in one week. They were instructed to consume the gift they receive once within the next week (before completing the follow-up survey), and to not consume the gift with their friend. Recipients left the laboratory with a printout of their gift instructions.

One week later, gift recipients received an email inviting them to complete the online follow-up survey in exchange for a $5 Amazon.com gift card. Forty-four gift recipients responded (57% female, ages 18-25, *M* = 20.5; 20 in the experiential gift condition and 24 in the material gift condition). After describing the gift they had received, recipients again reported the strength of their relationship with their friend using the same four items. These responses were averaged to serve as the post-gift relationship strength measure (α = .93). The difference between the pre-gift and post-gift relationship strength scores constituted our measure for change in relationship strength.

66

Positive values indicated the relationship had strengthened, and negative values indicated the relationship had declined. One extreme outlier was excluded from further analyses (greater than three standard deviations from the mean, studentized residual = 4.72, and Cook's D = 0.59).

Thoughtfulness and liking. Thoughtfulness and liking of the gift were measured using the same items as in experiments 1A. Again, perceived thoughtfulness of the gift was measured using four items (α = .86), and liking was measured using three items (α = .85).

Manipulation checks. As a check for whether gift givers had followed their gift instructions, we asked recipients to 1) rate to what extent the gift they received was material or experiential (1 = *purely material*, 5 = *equally material and experiential*, 9 = *purely experiential*), and, 2) report whether they had shared in the consumption of their gift with their gift giver, and 3) estimate the price of the gift. Participants also reported how much time they had spent with their gift giver during the gift exchange and how much time they had spent consuming the gift.

Results and Discussion

Gifts received. Experiential gifts included a pass to a barre class and movie tickets. Material gifts included a shirt, a poster, and a wine aerator. Manipulation checks confirmed that recipients in the experiential gift condition rated their gifts to be significantly more experiential (M = 4.89, SD = 2.38) than recipients in the material gift condition (M = 3.17, SD = 2.24; $t(41)$ = 2.45, p = .02); the majority of recipients (86%)

had not consumed their gift with their gift giver; and there was no significant difference in estimated price between recipients of experiential gifts ($M = \$14.01$, $SD = 4.19$) and material gifts ($M = \$13.10$, $SD = 5.53$; $t(41) = 0.59$, $p = .56$). There were no significant differences in how much time recipients had spent with their gift giver during the gift exchange ($p > .99$) or how much time they had spent consuming their gift ($p = .17$).

Change in relationship strength. An examination of the pre-gift relationship measures confirmed that there were no differences in baseline levels of relationship strength among participants in the experiential condition ($M = 6.71$, $SD = 2.12$) and material condition ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 2.12$; $t(41) = 0.95$, $p = .35$).

Of central interest, an analysis of the relationship change measure revealed that recipients of an experiential gift ($M = 0.08$, $SD = 0.79$) showed a more positive change in relationship strength than recipients of a material gift ($M = -0.54$, $SD = 1.10$; $t(41) = 2.06$, $p = .05$). These results are consistent with the findings of experiment 1A, showing that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts (H1).

By collecting the relationship measures both before and after the gift was received, this experiment offers the advantage of documenting any changes in relationship strength over time (instead of a retrospective evaluation of the change, as in experiment 1A). One potential limitation of this method, however, is that it might not detect changes in relationships among participants who rated their pre-gift relationship using the extreme ends of the scales (e.g., 1 or 9 on a 9-point scale). The change measure would not capture a relationship decline if a participant initially responded on the extreme low end of the scale or relationship improvement if a participant initially responded on the extreme high end of the scale, which makes this a conservative measure

of relationship change. Although this would only pose a concern if the pre-gift

relationship measure differed significantly across conditions (which it did not), to be

particularly rigorous, we conducted a robustness check that involved trimming the data of

any participants who reported a pre-gift relationship score greater than 8 ($n = 4$ in the

experiential condition and $n = 7$ in the material condition) or less than 2 (there were

none). Omitting these 11 participants from the analyses strengthened the effect of gift

type on relationship change with recipients of experiential gifts ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.68$)

reporting greater improvements in relationship strength than recipients of material gifts

($M = -0.51$, $SD = 1.03$; $t(32) = 2.41$, $p = .02$).

Thoughtfulness and liking. The type of gift received (experiential or material) was

again unrelated to how thoughtful the recipient considered the gift to be and how much

the recipient liked the gift. Although there was a marginally significant correlation

between perceived thoughtfulness and change in relationship strength ($r(41) .26 = p = $

.09), perceived thoughtfulness did not differ between experiential gifts ($M = 5.49$, $SD = $

2.32) and material gifts ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 2.32$; $t(41) = 0.94$, $p = .35$). Similarly, even

though recipients who liked their gift more showed greater improvements in relationship

strength ($r(41) .32 = p = .04$), liking did not differ between experiential gifts ($M = 5.68$,

$SD = 0.96$) and material gifts ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.43$; $t(41) = 1.61$, $p = .12$).

Taken together, the results of experiment 1B were consistent with those observed

in experiment 1A, thereby confirming the robustness of the effect. Receiving an

experiential gift improved the strength of recipients' relationships with their gift giver,

compared to receiving a material gift. This effect was not driven by perceived

thoughtfulness or liking of the gift as neither of these differed across gift types. The next

experiment explores a mechanism for the effect, testing the underlying role of consumption emotion.

THE RECALLED GIFT EXPERIMENT 2:
WHY ARE EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS BETTER FOR RELATIONSHIPS?

While experiments 1A and 1B provided evidence for experiential gifts being more effective at strengthening relationships than material gifts, experiment 2 explores the underlying role of emotion. In this experiment, participants were asked to recall either an experiential or material gift they had received and then to rate how the gift impacted their relationship with the gift giver. We also measured the emotion evoked from the gift exchange separately from the emotion evoked from consuming the gift. We predict that while a gift exchange can be highly emotional for both material and experiential gifts, consuming an experiential gift will elicit a greater emotional response than consuming a material gift. For example, attending a theatre performance or going on a vacation is likely to be more emotional than wearing a new pair of boots or driving a car. Furthermore, it is the emotion evoked from consuming experiential gifts that we propose is responsible for their positive impact on relationship strength (H2).

A second objective of this experiment was to more completely examine the role of sharing the gift; therefore, a shared material gift condition was included. The experiment thus followed a 2 (gift type: material vs. experiential) × 2 (consumption: shared vs. non-shared) between-subjects design. This allowed us to more robustly test

whether the effect of receiving an experiential versus material gift depends on the gift

being consumed together.

Method

Six-hundred adults (60% female, 2 unspecified; ages 18-78, $M = 33.2$, 2

unspecified) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study

in exchange for $0.75. Participants were randomly assigned to recall a particular type of

gift they had received: shared experiential gift, non-shared experiential gift, shared

material gift, or non-shared material gift. Participants in the experiential gift conditions

were instructed, "Please recall and describe an experiential gift that you have received at

some point in your life from another person." Participants in the material gift conditions

were instructed, "Please recall and describe a material gift that you have received at some

point in your life from another person." Those in the shared consumption conditions were

further instructed, "This should be [a material/an experiential] gift that you consumed

with the person who gave it to you (i.e., you shared the gift with your gift giver)." Those

in the non-shared consumption conditions were further instructed, "This should be [a

material/an experiential] gift that you consumed on your own (i.e., you did not share the

gift with your gift giver)." Participants were provided with a definition of material or

experiential gifts adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003).

Participants who could not recall a gift ($n = 7$), did not complete the survey ($n = 41$), or did not follow the gift recall instructions (described a gift they had given, $n = 1$; described a gift received from multiple people, $n = 15$; described a gift of cash, $n = 1$;

described multiple gifts, $n = 1$) were eliminated from the analysis. This left 534 gift recipients in the analyzed dataset (59% female; ages 18-78, $M = 33.1$).

Change in relationship strength. Measures similar to those in experiments 1A and 1B were used to assess how receiving the gift affected the strength of participants' relationship with their gift giver. Participants chose two pairs of overlapping circles: one to represent their relationship before receiving the gift and one to represent their relationship after receiving the gift (see appendix A; adapted from Aron et al. 1992). Participants also rated their relationship both before ($\alpha = .92$) and after ($\alpha = .91$) receiving the gift in terms of closeness (1 = *extremely distant*, 9 = *extremely close*), connection (1 = *extremely disconnected*, 9 = *extremely connected*), and relationship strength (1 = *extremely weak*, 9 = *extremely strong*). The differences between each of the before and after ratings on the four relationship measures were calculated, and these values were averaged to form an overall indicator of change in relationship strength.

Emotion. Recipients reported how emotional they felt from the gift exchange separately from how emotional they felt during gift consumption. They were specifically instructed, "Think about the emotions you felt from receiving the gift. Focus on the moment when you felt the most emotional from receiving the gift and rate how intensely you felt that emotion" (1 = *did not feel emotional at all from receiving the gift*, 7 = *felt extremely emotional from receiving the gift*); and "Think about the emotions you felt from consuming the gift. Focus on the moment when you felt the most emotional from consuming the gift and rate how intensely you felt that emotion" (1 = *did not feel emotional at all from consuming the gift*, 7 = *felt extremely emotional from consuming the gift*). We asked participants to focus on the moment they felt most emotional to

remove the influence of hedonic adaptation that is more likely to have occurred for the more durable material gifts (Nicolao et al. 2009). To account for this difference in durability, we also asked participants to estimate the total amount of time they had spent consuming the gift.

To explore the specific emotions evoked by their gifts, participants were then asked to identify from a list of 30 randomly-ordered discrete emotions the primary emotion they were feeling at that moment they felt most emotional (see appendix B). This list was followed by a text box, in case the emotion they felt was not provided. The listed emotions were primarily drawn from the Positive and Negative Affective Schedule – Expanded Form (PANAS-X; Watson and Clark 1994), including the two general dimension scales (10 positive and 10 negative emotions), along with 8 additional basic emotions (4 positive and 4 negative). Given our interest in the social aspects of a gift exchange and consumption, we also added two emotions (embarrassed and grateful) that serve important social functions (Fischer and Manstead 2008; Tooby and Cosmides 2008). We used this set of emotions instead of Richins' (1997) consumption emotion descriptors (the CES), because the CES excludes emotions that are evoked through the arts, such as plays and movies; thus, it would not effectively detect many emotions that likely arise from experiential gifts. Further, the CES includes emotions that are too conceptually similar to our primary dependent variable (e.g., loving).

Thoughtfulness and liking. Thoughtfulness and liking of the gift were measured using the same items as in experiments 1A and 1B. Again, perceived thoughtfulness of the gift was measured using four items ($\alpha = .84$), and liking was measured using three items ($\alpha = .73$).

Other features of the gift. Given the recall nature of this experiment and the likely variation among the gifts received, it was important to control for other features of the gifts. Recipients were therefore asked to estimate the price of the gift, to report when they had received the gift, and to indicate how they were related to their gift giver (spouse or significant other, child or grandchild, parent, another family member, close friend, acquaintance, colleague, or other).

Lastly, participants responded to manipulation checks by rating the extent to which the gift they received was material or experiential (1 = *purely material*, 5 = *equally material and experiential*, 9 = *purely experiential*), and by indicating whether they had consumed the gift with their gift giver (*yes*, *no*).

Results

Gifts received. Shared experiential gifts included vacations, meals, and tickets to concerts or sporting events. Non-shared experiential gifts included music or dance lessons, spa services, vacations, meals, and tickets for events that were not attended with the gift giver. Shared material gifts included coffee makers, game consoles, televisions, tablet computers, and cars; and non-shared material gifts included jewelry, clothing, computers, portable music players, and digital cameras. Manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the experiential gift conditions rated their gifts to be significantly more experiential ($M = 7.55$, $SE = 0.13$) than participants in the material gift conditions ($M = 2.90$, $SE = 0.13$; $t(532) = 25.49$, $p < .001$), and most participants in the shared gift conditions (93%) consumed their gifts with their gift giver (vs. 3% in the non-shared gift

conditions; $\chi^2(1) = 435.96$, $p < .001$). Participants in the experiential conditions also reported consuming their gift over a shorter period of time ($M = 3.41$ days, $SE = 12.56$) than participants in the material gift conditions ($M = 118.98$ days, $SE = 12.24$; $t(532) = 6.59$, $p < .001$), consistent with the more durable nature of material gifts.

The estimated price of the gifts ranged from \$1 (a magnet) to \$19,000 (a car). The majority of gifts (60%) were received within the past year, but the oldest gift was received in 1969. Most gifts were received from a spouse or significant other (37%), parent (19%), another family member (16%) or a close friend (19%). Given the wide range of gifts, the following analyses control for estimated price, date of receipt, and how the recipient was related to the gift giver (dummy coded), and the corresponding estimated marginal means are reported.

Change in relationship strength. Although a 2 (gift type) × 2 (shared) ANCOVA conducted on pre-gift relationship strength showed no differences across conditions (the effect of gift type, shared consumption, and their interaction were not significant, ps > .28), the 2 × 2 ANCOVA conducted on the change in relationship strength showed that receiving an experiential gift resulted in a greater improvement in relationship strength than receiving a material gift ($M_{experiential} = 0.72$, $SE = 0.07$ vs. $M_{material} = 0.52$, $SE = 0.07$; $F(1, 520) = 6.83$, $p = .009$). Moreover, a non-significant main effect of whether the gift was shared ($p = .72$), a non-significant interaction effect ($p = .32$), and only the significant main effect of gift type on relationship change suggests that the relationship strengthening effect of receiving an experiential gift occurred regardless of whether the recipient consumed the gift with their gift giver. Removing the covariates did not affect the significance levels of the interaction effect ($p = .50$) or the shared consumption main

effect ($p = .81$), but it did strengthen the main effect of gift type ($M_{experiential} = 0.66$, $SE =$ 0.05 vs. $M_{material} = 0.40$, $SE = 0.05$; $F(1, 530) = 11.81$, $p < .001$; figure 2).

FIGURE 2

EXPERIMENT 2: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS OF

EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) GIFTS
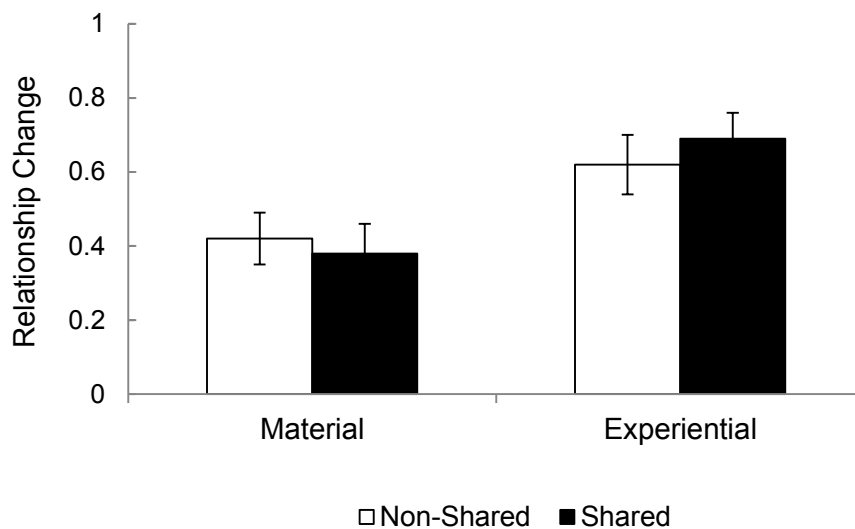
A robustness check similar to the one in experiment 1B was conducted by trimming the data of 135 recipients who reported pre-gift relationship strength scores greater than 8 ($n = 36$ in the shared experiential condition, $n = 17$ in the non-shared experiential condition, $n = 34$ in the shared material condition, and $n = 39$ in the non-shared material condition) or less than 2 ($n = 3$ in the shared experiential condition, $n = 4$ in the non-shared experiential condition, $n = 1$ in the shared material condition, and $n = 1$ in the non-shared material condition). A 2 × 2 ANCOVA conducted on the change in

relationship strength again showed that receiving an experiential gift resulted in a greater improvements in relationship strength than receiving a material gift ($M_{\text{experiential}}$ = 0.74, *SE* = 0.08 vs. M_{material} = 0.55, *SE* = 0.08; *F*(1, 385) = 4.64, *p* = .03). Moreover, the main effect of whether the gift was shared (*p* = .59) and the interaction effect (*p* = .09) remained non-significant. Removing the covariates did not affect the significance levels of the shared consumption main effect (*p* = .30) or the interaction effect (*p* = .09), but again strengthened the main effect of gift type (*F*(1, 395) = 5.39, *p* = .02).

Emotion from consumption. To examine the emotion evoked while consuming the gift, we first conducted a 2 (gift type) × 2 (shared) ANCOVA on recipients' rating of the extent to which consuming the gift made them feel emotional. The results revealed only a main effect of gift type, with experiential gifts (*M* = 4.97, *SE* = 0.12) being more emotional than material gifts (*M* = 4.44, *SE* = 0.12; *F*(1, 520) = 15.55, *p* < .001). There was a non-significant effect of sharing (*p* = .92) and a non-significant interaction effect (*p* = .90). These effects held when the covariates were removed from the model, with the effect of gift type remaining significant ($M_{\text{experiential}}$ = 5.14, *SE* = 0.09 vs. M_{material} = 4.70, *SE* = 0.09; *F*(1, 530) = 11.08, *p* < .001) and the main effect of sharing and the interaction remaining non-significant (*p*s > .13). This suggests that regardless of whether recipients consumed their gift with their gift giver, consuming an experiential gift evoked greater emotion than consuming a material gift. The specific emotions that participants felt most intensely while consuming the gift were mostly positive (97.6%; table 1).

We next conducted a mediation analysis to test whether the emotion evoked while consuming the gift can explain the positive effect of receiving an experiential gift (vs. material gift on relationship strength. In this analysis, we entered recipients' ratings of

TABLE 1

EXPERIMENT 2: EMOTIONS FELT MOST INTENSELY DURING GIFT

CONSUMPTION AND GIFT RECEIPT (FIVE MOST COMMONLY REPORTED)

Gift Consumption		Gift Receipt	
Emotion	% of participants	Emotion	% of participants
Happy	29.0%	Grateful	20.0%
Delighted/cheerful	15.9%	Delighted/cheerful	17.6%
Grateful	13.1%	Excited	17.4%
Excited	10.3%	Happy	13.7%
Enthusiastic	6.9%	Surprised	13.5%

how emotional consuming the gift was as the mediator, and again controlled for estimated price, date of receipt, and how the recipient was related to the gift giver (dummy coded). As before, experiential gifts strengthened relationships more than material gifts ($\beta = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(522) = 2.70$, $p = .007$). In addition, gifts that were more emotional were more effective at changing relationship strength ($\beta = 0.14$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(522) = 33.95$, $p < .001$). When both gift type and emotion were entered into the model to predict change in relationship strength, the effect of consumption emotion remained significant ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.02$, $t(521) = 5.44$, $p < .001$), whereas the effect of gift type was no longer significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(521) = 1.80$, $p = .07$). Corroborating evidence was obtained in a bootstrap analysis which generated a

confidence interval of the indirect effect that did not cross zero (95% *CI* = [.03, .12];

Hayes 2012; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010; figure 3). A significant indirect effect was

also observed when the covariates were removed from the mediation model (95% *CI* =

[.02, .10]). In sum, experiential gifts tend to be more emotional to consume, and gifts that

are more emotional to consume lead recipients to have a stronger relationship with their

gift giver, thus supporting our hypothesis (H2) that experiential gifts strengthen

relationships more than material gifts because they evoke greater emotion during

consumption.

FIGURE 3

EXPERIMENT 2: EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS WERE MORE EMOTIONAL TO

CONSUME AND THEREFORE MORE CONNECTING
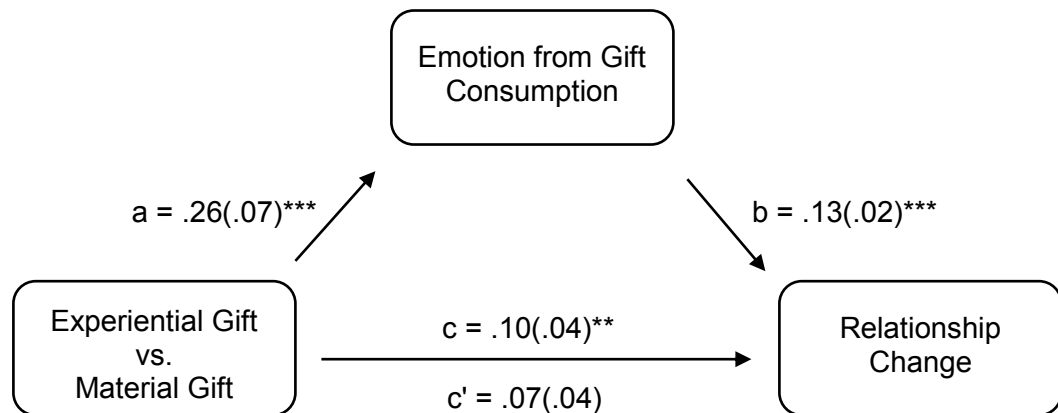
Note: * *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001, two-tailed test. Parameter estimates are listed with standard errors in parentheses, with estimated price of gift, date of gift receipt, and how the recipient was related to the gift giver (dummy coded) as model covariates.

Emotion from gift exchange. Having identified the significant role of the emotion evoked during gift consumption in the relationship strengthening effect of experiential gifts, we next examined the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. A 2 × 2 ANCOVA conducted on recipients' ratings of how emotional they felt when receiving the gift showed a non-significant main effect of gift type. As expected, material and experiential gifts did not differ in how emotional it was to receive the gift ($p = .41$). The main effect of shared consumption ($p = .17$) and the gift type × shared interaction ($p = .69$) were also not significant. Like the emotions evoked during gift consumption, the specific emotions participants reported feeling most during the gift exchange were mostly positive (96.8%; table 1). These findings are consistent with our theorizing that experiential and material gifts are similarly emotional when received, and thus it is the emotion from consuming the gift, rather than the gift exchange, that is responsible for the greater relationship strengthening power of experiential gifts.

Thoughtfulness and liking. A 2 × 2 ANCOVA predicting thoughtfulness revealed a main effect of shared consumption, with non-shared gifts ($M = 5.83$, $SE = .09$) considered more thoughtful than shared gifts ($M = 5.60$, $SE = 0.10$; $F(1, 520) = 4.93$, $p = .03$), but no significant effects for gift type or their interaction ($ps > .21$). However, when the covariates were removed from the model, neither of the main effects nor the interaction were significant ($ps > .08$). A 2 × 2 ANCOVA predicting liking revealed a main effect for gift type, with experiential gifts ($M = 6.04$, $SE = .08$) being better liked than material gifts ($M = 5.86$, $SE = 0.08$; $F(1, 520) = 4.05$, $p = .04$), and no significant effects for shared consumption or their interaction ($ps > .84$). Notably, however, there were no significant effects once the covariates were removed from the model ($ps > .18$).

Furthermore, thoughtfulness and liking did not explain the effect of gift type on consumption. When relationship change was regressed on gift type, shared consumption, gift type × shared consumption, thoughtfulness, liking, and the three covariates, the effect of gift type maintained its significance ($F(1, 518) = 5.46$, $p = .02$). The effect of gift type on relationship change was even stronger when the covariates were removed from the model ($F(1, 528) = 11.40$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

Examining a wide range of real-world gifts across a variety of relationships, the results of this experiment provide robust evidence that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts, regardless of whether gift recipients and givers consume the gift together (H1). Furthermore, the mechanism underlying this effect is the emotion evoked while consuming the gift, which is distinct from the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. Specifically, consuming experiential gifts evokes greater emotion than consuming material gifts, and it is this emotion that strengthens recipients' relationships with their gift givers (H2).

Because the vast majority of participants in experiment 2 reported the emotion they felt most intensely while consuming their gift to be positive, there was not sufficient data to assess whether the effect of emotion on relationship strength would generalize to negative emotions felt during gift consumption. For example, would an intense feeling of sadness while watching a performance of *Madame Butterfly* or an intense feeling of fear while watching *Silence of the Lambs* strengthen the giver-recipient relationship? To

explore the role of emotional valence, we conducted a similar experiment in which we asked participants ($N = 523$; 46% female, 3 unspecified; ages 18-66, $M = 32.0$, 1 unspecified) to recall a significant material or experiential gift that had been shared or not shared with their gift giver. Participants rated how much their relationship with their gift giver had strengthened as a result of the gift, as well as how intensely they felt each of 30 discrete emotions while consuming their gift (15 were positive emotions and 15 were negative emotions; see appendix B). Ratings for all 30 emotions were averaged to create an index of overall emotion. In addition, the ratings for the positive and the negative emotions were also averaged separately. The results showed that recipients of experiential (vs. material) gifts felt more emotional overall ($M_{experiential} = 3.29$, $SE = 0.07$ vs. $M_{material} = 3.02$, $SE = 0.07$; $F(1, 510) = 20.02$, $p < .001$), and this effect held for purely positive emotions ($M_{experiential} = 3.73$, $SE = 0.06$ vs. $M_{material} = 3.52$, $SE = 0.07$; $F(1, 510) = 12.96$, $p < .001$), and purely negative emotions ($M_{experiential} = 2.22$, $SE = 0.07$ vs. $M_{material} = 2.08$, $SE = 0.07$; $F(1, 510) = 5.09$, $p = .03$). Furthermore, significant indirect effects were observed when using the average of all 30 discrete emotions (95% $CI = [.05, .15]$), just the 15 positive emotions (95% $CI = [.04, .14]$), and just the 15 negative emotions (95% $CI = [.003, .08]$) as mediators for the effect of gift type on change in relationship strength. This offers preliminary evidence suggesting that strong negative emotions evoked through gift consumption can also strengthen the relationship.

THE BOOK EXPERIMENT 3: CAN HIGHLIGHTING THE EXPERIENCE FROM A GIFT MAKE IT BETTER FOR RELATIONSHIPS?

The previous two experiments demonstrate that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts. Notably though, many gifts have both material and experiential components. For example, a stereo is a material object that is kept in one's possession for years, yet it also provides the experience of listening to music. Similarly, a bottle of wine has a tangible, physical presence that can contribute to a collection, but it can also provide a multi-sensory experience when enjoyed with a perfectly paired cheese. The primary objective of this final experiment was to see if framing a gift as more experiential would make it more effective at strengthening the relationship.

We conducted a pilot study as an initial test of whether the malleable experiential-material distinction could be leveraged to increase the relationship strengthening power of a gift. We provided 200 participants (57% female; ages 18-39, $M = 20.6$) with a gift-wrapped coffee mug to give as a gift to someone they know. The inscription on the mug highlighted either its material nature (i.e., "my coffee mug") or the experience of drinking coffee (i.e., "my coffee time"). A separate between-subjects pre-test confirmed that the "my coffee time" mug was viewed as more experiential ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 2.20$) than the "my coffee mug" mug ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.83$; $t(67) = 2.13$, $p = .04$; 1 = *purely material*, 9 = *purely experiential*), while not differing in desirability, positivity, or favorability ($\alpha = .90$; $t(67) = 0.06$, $p = .95$). Recipients of the gift were invited to complete an online survey in exchange for a \$5 voucher to a local coffee shop. Of those who completed the survey ($N = 109$; $n_{material} = 64$; $n_{experiential} = 45$; 64% female; ages 16-58, $M = 21.5$),

recipients of the more experiential gift ($M = 7.47$, $SD = 1.50$) reported a stronger relationship with their gift giver than did recipients of the more material gift ($M = 6.92$, $SD = 1.34$; $t(107) = 1.99$, $p = .05$; 1 = *felt more disconnected*, 9 = *felt more connected*). This pilot study conducted among real gift recipients of an actual gift suggests that even the relatively material gift of a coffee mug could be more effective at strengthening relationships by highlighting the experience of using the mug. Experiment 3 tests the robustness of this effect by looking at another gift (i.e., a book) and builds on the pilot study by taking a hypothetical approach to more cleanly manipulate recipients' focus on the material versus experiential aspects of the gift.

A second objective of experiment 3 was to further test for the underlying role of emotion from gift consumption. In the previous experiment we measured recipients' emotion from consuming the gift and found support for its role through mediation. Here, we manipulated whether recipients thought about the emotion they would feel while consuming the gift to test for its role through moderation.

Experiment 3 thus followed a 2 (gift type: material vs. experiential) × 2 (emotion: control vs. emotion) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to imagine receiving a book from a friend and to write about the material or experiential aspects of the book; some participants were further instructed to write about the emotions the book might make them feel. We predicted that compared to recipients who focused solely on the material aspects of the gift, recipients who thought about the experience the gift could provide would subsequently have a stronger relationship with their gift giver. Additionally, because we argue that experiential gifts strengthen relationships by eliciting greater emotion, we further predicted that recipients in the material condition who

thought about their emotion while consuming the gift would similarly have a stronger relationship with their gift giver. This experiment thus provides a highly controlled test for the relationship strengthening power of experiential gifts by holding the gift itself constant and by only varying whether it was perceived as more experiential or material and the intensity of emotion evoked.

Method

Five hundred sixty participants (39% female, 2 unspecified; ages 18-75, $M = 30.4$, 1 unspecified) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study in exchange for $0.50. Participants who did not complete the survey ($n = 25$) or did not follow the instructions (wrote about giving a book to their friend, $n = 2$; wrote that their friend would never give them a book, $n = 2$) were eliminated from the analysis. This left 531 participants in the analyzed dataset (40% female, 2 unspecified; ages 18-75, $M = 30.3$, 1 unspecified).

Gift manipulations. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions comprising the 2 (gift type: material vs. experiential) × 2 (emotion: control vs. emotion) design through a specific writing task. Participants were asked to imagine that a friend had given them a book as a gift, and those in the material [experiential] conditions were instructed, "Take a moment to think about what it would be like to have [read] this book. Please write a paragraph describing the material [experiential] aspects of the book (e.g., what it might look like [be about], where you would keep [read] it)."

Participants in the emotion conditions were further instructed, "Please write about the emotions that this book might make you feel. Focus only on the emotions you would feel as a result of the book itself (not the emotions you would feel when receiving the book as a gift)." Participants in the control conditions did not receive this additional instruction.

Change in relationship strength. The relationship strength measures were the same as those used in experiments 1B and 2. First, prior to receiving any instructions about the gift, participants provided the first name of a friend and then chose one pair of overlapping circles to represent their relationship was with that friend (similar to those in appendix A; adapted from Aron et al. 1992). Participants also rated their relationship on three 9-point Likert scales that assessed closeness (1 = *extremely distant*, 9 = *extremely close*), connection (1 = *extremely disconnected*, 9 = *extremely connected*), and relationship strength (1 = *extremely weak,* 9 = *extremely strong*). The four items were averaged to form an index of relationship strength before receiving the gift (α = .90). Then, after participants had been randomly assigned to a gift condition and wrote about the gift, they again rated their relationship with their friend using the same four items. The average of these four items served as the index of relationship strength after receiving the gift (α = .90). The pre-gift relationship index was subtracted from the post-gift relationship index to form the measure of change in relationship strength.

Manipulation checks. To check the gift type manipulation, participants rated to what extent the gift they received was material or experiential (1 = *purely material*, 5 = *equally material and experiential*, 9 = *purely experiential*).

To check the emotion manipulation, the text written by participants was analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, and Francis 2007), which is an effective measure of the amount of emotion expressed (Kahn, Tobin, Massey, and Anderson 2007). The LIWC enumerated the percentage of words written by each participant that were (1) affective process words, (2) positive emotion words, and (3) negative emotion words. These percentages were multiplied by the total number of words written to produce a count of the number of affective process, positive, and negative emotion words written by each participant.

Results

The gift type manipulation check confirmed that participants in the experiential gift conditions rated the gift to be significantly more experiential ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 2.07$) than participants in the material conditions ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.01$; $F(1, 527) = 22.18$, $p < .001$); the effect of the emotion manipulation ($p = .39$) and the gift type × emotion interaction ($p = .59$) were not significant.

The emotion manipulation check revealed that participants in the emotion conditions expressed greater emotion when writing about the gift, and participants in the control condition who were led to focus on the experiential aspect of the gift also expressed greater emotion when writing about the gift. Specifically, participants in the experiential emotion ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 2.48$), material emotion ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 2.84$), and experiential control ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.98$) conditions wrote significantly more affective process words than did participants in the material control condition ($M = 1.63$, $SD =$

1.72; planned contrast $F(1, 527) = 97.84$, $p < .001$). Similarly, participants wrote more positive emotion words in the experiential emotion ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 2.21$), material emotion ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 2.98$), and experiential control ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.90$) conditions than did those in the material control condition ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.82$; planned contrast $F(1, 527) = 66.39$, $p < .001$). Additionally, participants wrote more negative emotion words in the experiential emotion ($M = 0.86$, $SD = 1.30$), material emotion ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.58$), and experiential control ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.94$) conditions than did those in the material control condition ($M = 0.10$, $SD = 0.40$; planned contrast $F(1, 527) = 21.67$, $p < .001$).

Change in relationship strength. As expected from random assignment, there were no significant differences in pre-gift relationship strength by gift type ($p > .99$), emotion ($p = .16$), or their interaction ($p = .13$). More importantly, planned contrasts examining change in relationship strength revealed that among those in the control conditions (who were not explicitly directed to focus on emotion), experiential gift recipients ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.63$) showed greater improvements in relationship strength than material gift recipients ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.46$; $F(1,527) = 3.65$, $p = .06$). However, in the conditions in which gift recipients were led to think about their emotion from consuming the gift, there were no significant differences in relationship change between material gift recipients ($M = 0.48$, $SD = 0.70$) and experiential gift recipients ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.86$; $F(1, 527) = 0.10$, $p = .75$). In addition, recipients of a material gift reported a more positive relationship change when focused on consumption emotion than when not ($F(1, 527) = 6.40$, $p = .01$). That is, contrasts comparing the material control condition with the other three conditions showed that the latter three conditions did not

significantly differ from one another ($ps > .49$) and produced greater improvements in relationship strength than the material control condition ($F(1, 527) = 7.60$, $p = .006$; figure 4).

FIGURE 4

EXPERIMENT 3: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS

FOCUSED ON THE GIFT'S EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) ASPECTS OR

CONSUMPTION EMOTION
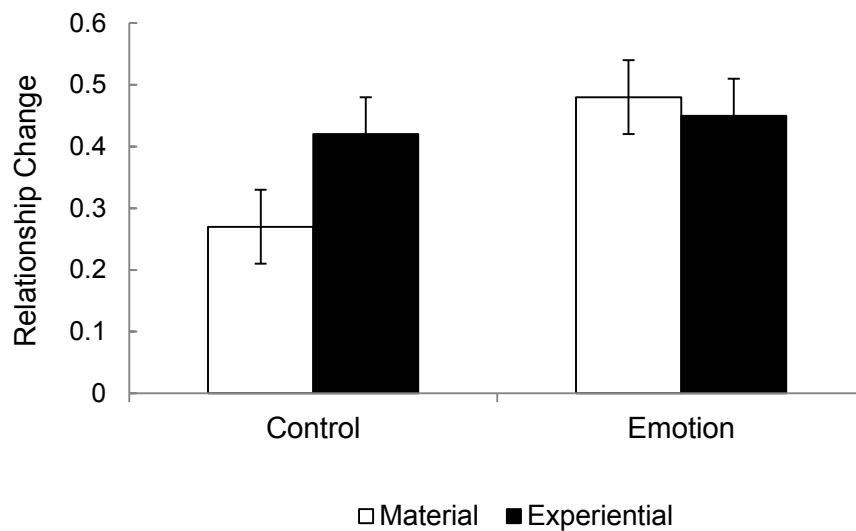
We again performed a robustness check by trimming the data of 105 participants who reported pre-gift relationship strength scores greater than 8 ($n = 24$ in the experiential control condition, $n = 23$ in the material control condition, $n = 29$ in the experiential emotion condition, and $n = 26$ in the material emotion condition) or less than 2 ($n = 1$ in experiential control condition, $n = 2$ in material emotion condition). The

results strengthened when these participants were omitted from the analyses: material control recipients reported a lower relationship change ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.49$) than those in the experiential control condition ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.67$; $F(1, 422) = 4.01$, $p = .05$), the material emotion condition ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.74$; $F(1, 422) = 8.95$, $p = .003$), and the experiential emotion condition ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.89$; $F(1, 422) = 9.56$, $p = .002$), and the latter three conditions did not differ from one another ($ps > .24$).

Discussion

Experiment 3 provides a conservative and controlled test for the effect of gift type on change in relationship strength by holding the gift constant across conditions and manipulating its experiential framing. Results showed that the gift of a book can be more effective at strengthening a relationship if the recipient is reminded of the experience of reading the book, rather than its material attributes. Since many gifts have both experiential and material elements, this experiment demonstrates that some of the relational benefit of giving an experiential gift can be enjoyed by merely highlighting the experience that the gift provides.

These results also provide further support for the underlying role of consumption emotion. When recipients of a material gift focus on the emotion they would feel consuming the gift, they exhibit equally high improvements in their relationship as recipients of an experiential gift. This not only helps confirm that consumption emotion is responsible for the relationship strengthening effect of experiential gifts, but it also

suggests that drawing recipients' attention to the emotion they will feel while consuming a material gift may afford the same benefits as giving an experiential gift.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers spend a lot of money on others (in fact, the average household spends almost 2% of their annual income on gifts; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013), and spending money on others has been proven to increase one's own happiness (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008). The current research explores the more far-reaching effect on relationships *between* people, finding that not all prosocial expenditures are equally beneficial. Despite gift givers' tendencies to give material possessions, material gifts turn out to do little to foster relationships between gift recipients and their gift givers. Experiential gifts, in contrast, strengthen these relationships, regardless of whether the experience is consumed together by the gift recipient and giver.

The results of field and lab experiments conducted across a variety of real-life gift exchanges provide guidance for gift givers on what to give and offer insight into the relational function of gifts. Taking the recipients' perspective to assess the success of gifts, we found that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts (experiments 1A, 1B, and 2), an effect that also emerged when the very same gift was framed as being relatively more experiential (experiment 3). A driving factor underlying this effect is the greater level of emotion elicited when consuming experiential gifts versus material gifts, which we identified through tests of mediation (experiment 2) and moderation (experiment 3). Even though there was no difference in the intensity of

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emotion felt upon receiving experiential and material gifts, recipients felt more emotional when consuming experiential (vs. material) gifts, which served to strengthen their relationship with their gift giver. From this, we learn that gift givers should give experiential gifts, rather than material gifts, to foster their relationships with others.

Theoretical Contributions

Existing research has demonstrated that purchasing experiences (vs. material goods) for oneself positively affects one's personal well-being (Carter and Gilovich 2010; Nicolao, et al. 2009; Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). More recent findings suggest that the benefit of acquiring experiences for the purchaser can be largely explained by the typically more social nature of experiences (Caprariello and Reis 2012). Our findings build on this burgeoning stream of research by being the first to show the interpersonal outcomes of purchasing experiences rather than material goods. Our findings also identify another novel advantage of experiential purchases: consuming an experience evokes greater emotion than consuming a material possession. This intensity of emotion associated with experiences offers another layer of explanation for why experiences reflect who we are more than the things we have (Carter and Gilovich 2012).

Our finding that the emotion felt during gift consumption is responsible for strengthening the relationship is consistent with past work on interpersonal relationships that has highlighted the importance of emotion in close relationships (Aron et al. 2000; Bazzini, Stack, Martincin, and Davis 2007; Clark and Finkel 2004; Laurenceau et al.

1998; Nummenmaa, Glerean, Viinikainen, Jääskeläinen, Hari, and Sams 2012; Peters and Kashima 2007; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007; Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006). Our research builds on this literature by showing that the gift of an emotional experience can strengthen relationships, even when the gift is not consumed together and thus the emotion is only vicariously shared with the relationship partner.

Our research also contributes to gift giving research by testing how different types of gifts impact relationships and by examining the emotion evoked from gift consumption. The bulk of the existing experimental work on gift giving has focused on identifying gifts that are better liked and appreciated (Flynn and Adams 2009; Gino and Flynn 2011; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014), rather than on understanding how gifts can change the relationship between the gift giver and recipient. Although our findings indicate that gift liking is positively related to change in relationship strength, we did not find significant differences in how much recipients liked experiential and material gifts, nor did liking mediate the effect of gift type on changes in relationship strength. This suggests that the extent to which a gift is liked is orthogonal to the effect of giving an experiential gift on the relationship. Rather, the gift's emotionality is what seems to make experiential gifts better for relationships. Qualitative research on gift giving has examined how emotion can affect relationships, but this work has mostly examined the emotion that arises during the gift exchange and often directed toward the gift giver (Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth et al. 1999, 2004). By studying the emotion evoked from gift consumption and testing its impact on relationships, the results of our experiments thus provide new insights into gift giving.

Future Research and Marketing Implications

Although experiences tend to be more emotional, are there ways to attach greater emotion to material goods so as to make them better candidates for gifting? Anthropological work has argued that possessions can assume a great deal of personal meaning (Belk 1988). Future work should further investigate this question of how possessions become associated with emotion, and what types of possessions are most meaningful. Gift giving is a ripe context for such investigations, in light of the underlying role of emotion and the focus on interpersonal relationships. A related question is whether there are particular emotions that are more connecting than others. For instance, are gifts given out of gratitude versus guilt differentially connecting (Chan, Mogilner, and Van Boven 2014)?

A more specific exploration into the negative emotions that can arise through consumption would also be worthwhile. For example, future research should contrast the effects of intended negative emotions (e.g., fear from watching a scary movie) versus unintended negative emotions (e.g., anger due to bad service at a restaurant), and the effects of negative emotions directed at the experience versus negative emotions directed at the relationship partner, to deepen our understanding of how experiential gifts can affect relationships. For instance, prior work showed that the benefits of purchasing experiences over material goods for oneself are attenuated and sometimes reversed when the purchase outcome is negative (Nicolao et al. 2009); therefore, it is quite possible that the effects of unintended negative consumption emotions due to failed experiential gifts could be particularly detrimental for relationships. Additionally, although our findings

suggest that any anger or sadness felt while attending a theatre performance of Les Misérables should strengthen a recipient's relationship with the person who gave the theatre tickets (and more so than if the theatre performance did not elicit an emotional response), any feelings of anger or sadness that are directed at the gift giver upon receiving the gift may instead hurt the relationship.

A longer-term examination of the effects of gifts on relationships would further contribute to the literature on gift giving. Across our studies, we focused on the short-term effects of receiving a single gift. However, a gift could have a longer-lasting effect on a relationship (Algoe et al. 2008), and might perpetuate to influence future gift giving interactions. Although we did not observe a significant effect of sharing in the consumption of the gift, it may be that the benefits of sharing in experiential gift consumption could emerge later on as those cherished shared memories gain greater interpersonal value.

Although the current research emphasizes the interpersonal benefits of experiential gifts future work could explore potential intrapersonal benefits of giving experiences. In light of research documenting the personal happiness gained from prosocial spending (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008), our findings imply that spending to give an experience might produce greater hedonic benefits than spending to give a material good. Indeed, engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors have been found to increase individual well-being when these efforts are successful in improving relationship quality, but to decrease well-being when these efforts are unsuccessful (Baker, McNulty, Overall, Lambert, and Fincham 2012). Because giving experiential gifts is more effective at fostering relationships, gift givers might feel happier having

given an experience than a possession. Furthermore, gift givers might reap personal benefits from sharing in the experience with the recipient, given that giving one's own time can lead to greater feelings of interpersonal connection and self-efficacy (Mogilner, Chance, and Norton 2012).

Future research could also examine whether the relational benefits observed in this research extend to consumer-brand relationships. For example, rather than promoting merchandise rewards, the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Starwood Preferred Guest loyalty program encourages their members to redeem their Starpoints for "incredible experiences" and "unforgettable events." We also see that retailers, such as Sephora, Nordstrom, and Saks Fifth Avenue, give private parties and events for their loyal customers as well as more material gifts, like free cosmetic items. Follow-up work should test whether experiential rewards are more effective at strengthening consumer-brand connections than material rewards.
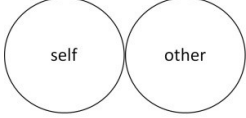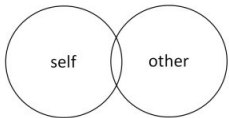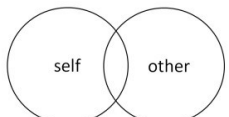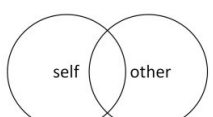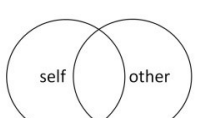
Companies that sell experiences, such as those in the travel or entertainment industry, should encourage consumers to purchase their 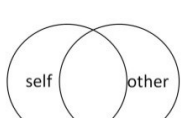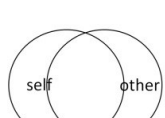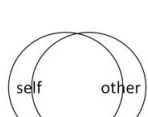experiences to give as gifts. One way to do this would be to get onto gift registries. For example, Travelers Joy is a service that enables engaged couples to create an experiential gift registry for their honeymoon, so that the couple's family and friends can select part of the honeymoon to give as a wedding gift (e.g., a surf lesson, dinner, adventure tour, etc.). Given that gift recipients prefer receiving gifts from their registry over individually selected gifts (Gino and Flynn 2011), our research implies that such experiential gift registries should benefit gift givers, recipients, and the companies that provide experiences.

Conclusion

     Consumers frequently struggle with the challenge of choosing what to give. Most gift giving occasions are therefore accompanied by a flurry of advice columns and top 10 lists of gift ideas, as media and marketers try to help consumers make choices that will improve their relationships. This research offers simple guidance: To make your friend, spouse, or family member feel closer to you, give an experience.

APPENDIX A

EXPERIMENTS 1 AND 2: INCLUSION OF OTHER SCALE ADAPTED FROM ARON, ARON, AND SMOLLAN 1992

	Relationship BEFORE receiving gift	Relationship AFTER receiving gift
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐
self other	☐	☐

APPENDIX B

EXPERIMENT 2: 30 DISCRETE EMOTIONS MEASURED

PANAS-X General Dimension Scales

    Positive Affect: active, alert, attentive, determined, enthusiastic, excited, inspired, interested, proud, strong

    Negative Affect: afraid, scared, nervous, jittery, irritable, hostile, guilty, ashamed, upset, distressed

Other Positive: happy, delighted/cheerful, calm, surprised, grateful

Other Negative: sad, lonely, angry, disgusted, embarrassed

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ESSAY 3:

GRATITUDE, GUILT, AND GIFT GIVING

ABSTRACT

Gratitude and guilt are both socially-adaptive emotions that help cultivate interpersonal relationships and motivate gift giving. This research shows that the same situation of social inequity can elicit feelings of gratitude or guilt and explores the downstream social consequences of gifts that say "thanks" versus "sorry." When one person has contributed less than the other in a relationship, giving a gift can help restore social equity, but with differential effects for the gift giver and recipient. Gift givers report greater improvements in relationship closeness from giving out of guilt, whereas recipients tend to report greater relationship improvements from receiving a gift given out of gratitude. These asymmetrical social benefits pose a challenge for gift givers seeking to build closer relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

Gifts can communicate how a gift giver feels to a relationship partner. Rodger Berman gave his wife, celebrity stylist Rachel Zoe, a ten-carat diamond ring as a push present after she carried and delivered their first child—an expression of his gratitude. NBA star Kobe Bryant gave his (now former) wife, Vanessa Bryant, an eight-carat diamond ring that became dubbed as the 'apology ring' after he admitted to cheating on her—an expression of his guilt. What is notable about these examples, and other common gifts such as flowers and greeting cards, is that the emotion underlying the gift can vary greatly even if the gift itself is very similar. Therefore, the emotional motivation of the gift giver seems to play a critical role in gift exchange. This research examines how feelings of gratitude or guilt can arise when there is a social inequity in a relationship and can motivate people to give gifts to restore the relationship. We further examine the downstream relationship consequences of gratitude- and guilt-motivated gifts by testing how much closer and more connected gift givers and recipients feel to each other as a result of the gift.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Social connection is fundamental to personal and societal well-being (Clark and Lemay, 2010; Reis Collins, and Berscheid 2000; Seligman, 2011). People who are very happy have more satisfying social relationships than those who are unhappy (Diener and Seligman 2002) and regrets about social relationships represent the most intense life

regrets (Morrison, Epstude, and Roese forthcoming). Even moderate social isolation has been linked to a host of health risks and poor outcomes (Adam, Hawkley, Kudielka and Cacioppo 2006; Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Berntson 2003; Hawkley, Masi, Berry, and Cacioppo 2006; Hawkley, Thisted, Masi, and Cacioppo 2010; Heinrich and Gullone 2006). Therefore, people employ a variety of means in an attempt to gain a sense of social connection (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2008; Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, and Knowles 2005; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller 2007; Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister 2003).

Emotions are a trademark of an intimate social connection. People experience and express emotions most frequently and intensely in close interpersonal relationships, and both positive and negative emotional expressions can help maintain and strengthen relationships (Berscheid and Ammazzalorso 2001; Clark and Finkel 2004; Fischer and Manstead 2008; Graham, Huang, Clark, and Helgeson 2008). Some emotions in particular are revered for their value in facilitating social interactions. Two such emotions are gratitude and guilt.

GRATITUDE AND GUILT

The emotions of gratitude and guilt are surprisingly similar—particularly in their functional benefit of cultivating close relationships (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008; Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994; Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, and Keijsers 2011; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, and Graham 2010). Both gratitude and guilt are praised as moral and socially adaptive emotions, in large part because they motivate

cooperation, helping behavior, responsiveness to others, reciprocity, and other prosocial acts (Algoe and Haidt 2009; Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; Grant and Gino 2010; Goei and Boster 2005; Kubacka et al. 2011; McCullough et al. 2001, 2008; Sheikh and Janoff-Bulman 2010; De Hooge et al. 2007; 2011; Tangney 1991). From an evolutionary perspective, it has been theorized that gratitude and guilt evolved to help detect and remediate welfare imbalances between relationship partners (Tooby and Cosmides 2008). For example, an individual who notices that a friend provides social support during difficult times (e.g., in response to work-related stress or romantic difficulties) may feel grateful for the social support. That gratitude may, in turn, motivate the individual to behavior prosocially toward the friend. Alternatively, an individual who notices that a friend provides social support during difficult times could feel guilty for being a burden to the friend. This guilt, like the gratitude, may also motivate prosocial action.

We conducted a study to compare how feeling grateful or guilty would motivate the prosocial action of gift giving. Participants ($N = 370$) were asked to imagine a friend had spent the weekend helping them move into a new apartment, and they identified a friend who would likely help them in this scenario. They were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: gratitude, guilt, and unemotional control. In the two emotion conditions, participants wrote about reasons why they would feel grateful or guilty in the situation. In the unemotional control condition, participants wrote about their thoughts in the situation in an objective, unemotional way. Participants next indicated how likely they would be to give a gift to their friend after the move (1 = not at all likely; 7 = extremely likely). An ANOVA conducted on likelihood-to-give revealed a significant effect of the emotion manipulation ($F(2, 367) = 3.40$, $p = .03$). Individual contrasts

showed that participants in the gratitude condition ($M = 6.23$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(367) = 2.01$, $p = .04$) and guilt condition ($M = 6.30$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(367) = 2.45$, $p = .01$) were more likely to give a gift to their friend for helping them move, compared to those in the unemotional control condition ($M = 5.93$, $SE = 0.11$); there was no significant difference in the likelihood of giving a gift between participants in the gratitude and guilt conditions ($t(367) = 0.44$, $p = .66$).

Gratitude and guilt are thus two emotions that can arise from similar conditions—a perceived imbalance of resources exchanged in a relationship—and can produce superficially similar prosocial behaviors. In spite of these similarities, the emotions of gratitude and guilt have been separately examined in prior research (one exception is Grant and Wrzesniewki 2010 who examine anticipated guilt and gratitude). Research and theorizing on gratitude has contrasted the emotion against other positive emotions such as happiness, amusement, admiration, and elevation, as well as feelings of obligation and indebtedness (Algoe and Haidt 2009; Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; Goei and Boster 2005; Jackson, Lewandowski, Fleury, and Chin 2001; McCullough, Kimeldorf, and Cohen 2008; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson 2001; Tsang 2006, 2007; Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts 2011). A separate stream of research on guilt has sought to distinguish this emotion from the negative emotions of shame, embarrassment, and sympathy (De Hooge, Nelissen, Breugelmans, and Zeelenberg 2011; De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans 2007; Fromson 2006; Giner-Sorolla and Espinosa 2011; Lickel, Schmader, and Spanovic 2007; Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski 1994; Polman and Ruttan 2012; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Smith, Webster, Parrott, and Eyre 2002; Tangney 1991; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Hill-Barlow 1996a; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-

Barlow, Marschall, and Gramzow 1996b). We bring together these distinct literatures to examine the social consequences of prosocial acts motivated by gratitude and guilt.

THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF
GRATITUDE- AND GUILT-MOTIVATED GIFTS

This research examines the emotions of gratitude and guilt in the context of the prosocial act of gift giving. Although prior gift giving research has examined the emotions that recipients feel when consuming gifts (Chan and Mogilner 2014) and in response to receiving gifts (Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Ruth, Brunel, and Otnes 2004), we instead examine the emotions that motivate the gift giver to give a gift. We focus on the prosocial emotions of gratitude and guilt because of their important function in the context of social relationships and gift giving. And given the prosocial function of these emotions, we test how expressions of gratitude and guilt can change how close each relationship partner feels to the other. This approach differs from previous research and offers several contributions.

First, whereas prior research has typically examined gratitude and guilt independently, we propose and demonstrate that the very same situation of social inequity could elicit feelings of gratitude and guilt. Gratitude can arise when an individual has benefitted from another person's actions, whereas guilt can arise when an individual's own actions have troubled another person. We suggest that these two actions are frequently intertwined in the context of close relationships. That is, one relationship partner's benevolent actions are often instigated by the other relationship partner's

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actions or needs. For example, if one spouse performs the lion's share of the housework, the idle spouse may feel grateful (for the other's benevolence) or guilty (for inadequately contributing), and give their spouse a gift. One relationship partner's actions are linked to the other partner, and we hypothesize that a situation of social inequity could cause the beneficiary to feel grateful or guilty depending on how they evaluate each person's actions (study 1).

Second, we test how a grateful or guilty person's prosocial act of gift giving changes how close and connected each relationship partner feels to the other. Prior research on gratitude and guilt has typically focused on either the antecedents of the emotions or the subsequent act. Prior empirical research on gift giving has typically focused on the choice process or the recipient's valuation of the gift. We focus instead on the overarching objective of the emotional expression and gift—forging a stronger social connection—and test whether, despite their similarities, gratitude and guilt may result in distinctly different social outcomes. Specifically, we examine how effectively gratitude- and guilt-motivated gifts can improve how connected a gift giver feels to the recipient (studies 2A and 3A), as well as how connected a recipient feels to the gift giver (studies 2B and 3B).

STUDY 1: CAN THE SAME SITUATION ELICIT GRATITUDE OR GUILT?

Study 1 tests the hypothesis that feelings of both gratitude and guilt can arise from the same situation of social inequity, but that gratitude and guilt are differentially associated with the actions of others and the self. People can feel grateful or guilty when

there is a disparity in how much each relationship partner has contributed to the relationship; however, gratitude should be more strongly associated with a focus on the other's generosity; guilt should be more strongly associated with a focus on one's own shortcomings.

Method

One hundred twenty-two students participated in this study in exchange for financial payment.

We constructed four scenarios portraying one person helping another person, and asked participants to imagine themselves in each scenario (Appendix A). For example, one paragraph described this situation between two roommates:

You wake up one morning and make yourself a big breakfast. By the time you finish eating, you realize you are running late to meet up with some friends. You leave a mess of dirty pans and dishes in the kitchen and plan to wash them later. When you get home from your meeting, your roommate has already done the dishes.

Each participant imagined themselves in all four scenarios (randomly ordered), and responded to a several questions immediately after reading each scenario. First, participants rated how grateful and guilty they would feel in the scenario (1 = not at all; 7 = very; order of questions was counterbalanced). Next, participants rated to what extent

the other person went above and beyond what was required of him/her and to what extent they themselves fell short of what was expected of them (1 = not at all; 7 = a great deal; order of questions was counterbalanced).

Results and Discussion

Gratitude was strongly associated with other's actions. A mixed effects multiple linear regression tested the relationship between feelings of gratitude and guilt with ratings of the other person's benevolence (a random intercept controlled for repeated measures). Results showed that gratitude was more closely associated with ratings of the other person's actions than guilt. Both emotions were positively associated with perceptions of benevolence, however the parameter estimate of gratitude ($\beta = 0.76$, *S.E.* = 0.04, $t(485) = 17.30$, $p < .001$) was four times that of guilt ($\beta = 0.19$, *S.E.* = 0.03, $t(485) = 7.42$, $p < .001$; figure 1A).

Guilt was strongly associated with one's own actions. A mixed effects multiple linear regression tested the relationship between feelings of gratitude and guilt with ratings of one's own shortcomings (a random intercept controlled for repeated measures). Results showed that guilt was more closely associated with ratings of one's own actions than gratitude. Both emotions were positively associated with perceptions of personal shortcomings, however the parameter estimate of guilt ($\beta = 0.64$, *S.E.* = 0.04, $t(485) = 15.24$, $p < .001$) was four times that of gratitude ($\beta = 0.16$, *S.E.* = 0.07, $t(485) = 2.24$, $p < .03$; figure 1B).

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FIGURE 1A

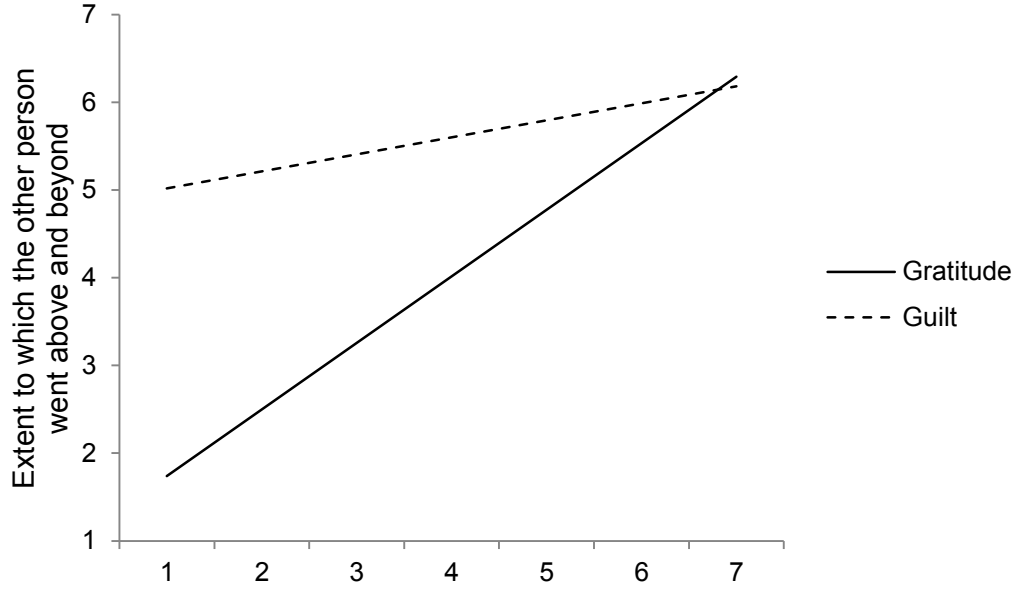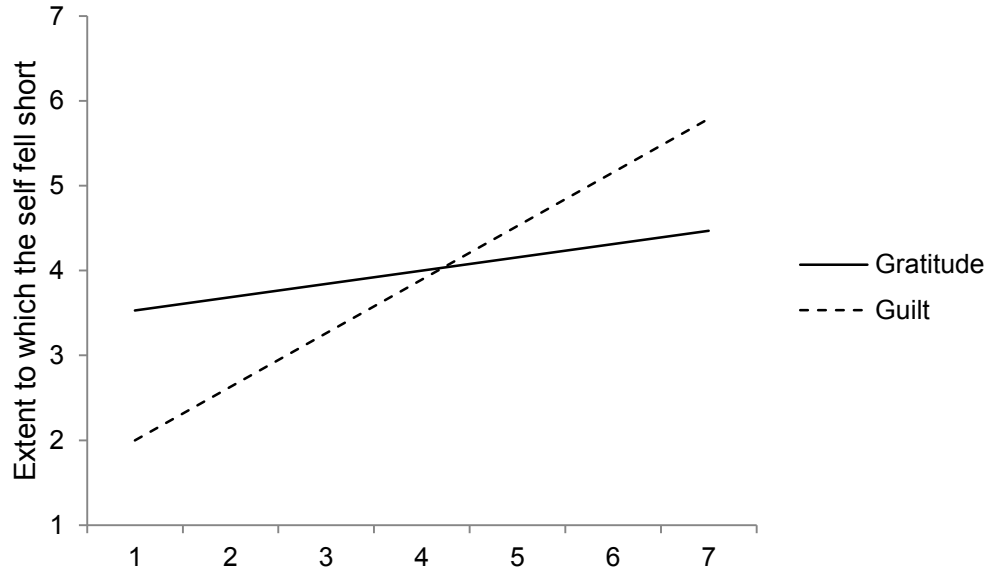STUDY 1: RATINGS OF OTHER'S ACTIONS BY GRATITUDE AND GUILT

FIGURE 1B

STUDY 1: RATINGS OF ONE'S OWN ACTIONS BY GRATITUDE AND GUILT

Study 1 demonstrated that feelings of gratitude and guilt can arise in the same situation, and that this varies with how one appraises the situation. Gratitude was more closely related with the extent to which the participants perceived the other person went above and beyond in a situation; those who felt the other person's actions were more benevolent also reported feeling more grateful. Conversely, guilt was more closely related with the extent to which participants felt they had fallen short in the situation; those who felt their actions were below expectations also reported feeling more guilty.

STUDY 2A: GIVING A DRINK OUT OF GUILT IS CONNECTING

Study 2A uses the findings from the Study 1 to manipulate feelings of gratitude and guilt, and tests how giving a gift can change how connected gift givers feel to their recipients.

Method

One hundred sixty-two students participated in this study in exchange for financial payment. Participants read and imagined themselves in the roommate scenario used in the pilot study and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: gratitude, guilt, or control. Participants in the [gratitude / guilt] condition were asked to "Please write about how you feel about [your roommate's / your] actions in the situation and the extent to which [your roommate went above and beyond / you fell short of] what was

expected of [him/her / you] as a roommate." Participants in the control condition did not write an essay.

Participants rated how close (1 = extremely distant; 9 = extremely close) and connected (1 = extremely disconnected; 9 = extremely connected) they felt to their roommate in the scenario (α = .95).

Participants next imagined they had decided to give their roommate a gift of his/her favorite drink and, as a manipulation check, chose one of two drink options to give: one with a note that said "thanks!" or one with a note that said "sorry!" (randomly-ordered; drink images in Appendix B).

Finally, participants rated how close and connected they would feel after giving the gift to their roommate using the same two items as before (α = .95). The change in connection was calculated by subtracting the pre-gift from the post-gift connection ratings with positive values reflecting a greater improvement in connection as a result of giving the gift.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Participants in the guilty condition were more likely to choose the "sorry!" drink option (55%), compared to participants in the grateful condition (29%) and control condition (29%; Likelihood Ratio χ^2 (2) = 10.02, p = .007).

Change in connection. An ANOVA prediction change in connection revealed a significant effect of emotion (F(2, 159) = 3.82, p = .02; figure 2A). Guilty gift givers reported the most improvement in connection as a result of giving a gift (M = 0.75, SE =

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0.17), which individual contrasts showed to be significantly greater than grateful gift givers ($M = 0.09$, $SE = 0.17$; $t(159) = 2.70$, $p = .008$) and marginally greater than control gift givers ($M = 0.29$, $SE = 0.17$; $t(159) = 1.91$, $p = .06$); there was no significant difference between the gratitude and control conditions ($p = .41$).

FIGURE 2A

STUDY 2A: GUILTY GIFT GIVERS REPORTED THE GREATEST IMPORVEMENT IN CONNECTION TO ROOMMATE AS A RESULT OF GIVING GIFT
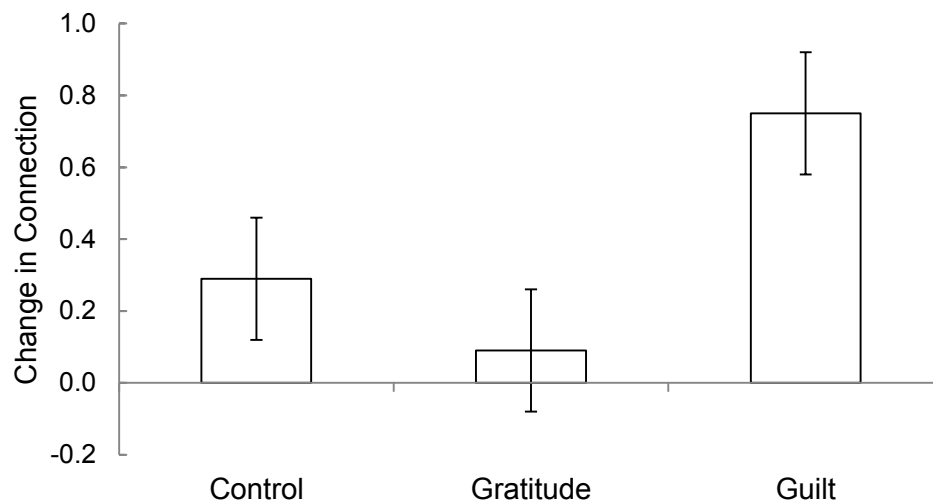
Pre-gift and post-gift connection. A further examination showed that feeling guilty initially had a distancing effect on gift givers ($F(2, 159) = 4.68$, $p = .01$). Prior to giving the gift, guilty participants reported feeling less connected to their roommate ($M = 6.06$, $SE = 0.22$), compared to grateful participants ($M = 6.98$, $SE = 0.21$; $t(159) = 3.01$, $p = .003$) and control participants ($M = 6.69$, $SE = 0.21$; $t(159) = 2.06$, $p = .04$). After

giving a gift, however, participants across all three conditions did not differ in how connected they felt to their roommate (ps > .28).

Therefore, feeling guilty caused participants to feel less connected to their roommates; fortunately, guilty participants also experienced the greatest change in connection through giving a gift, thereby restoring the relationship from the gift givers perspective.

STUDY 2B: RECEIVING A DRINK OUT OF GRATITUDE IS CONNECTING

Study 2A showed that guilty gift givers experienced the most improvements in how connected they felt to their recipient through giving a gift. Study 2B takes the perspective of the recipient to test how receiving a gift given out of guilt or gratitude affects how close and connected they feel to their gift giver.

Method

One hundred ninety-eight students participated in this study in exchange for financial payment. Participants read a scenario that was similar to the roommate scenario used in study 2A, however participants in this study imagined they were the roommate who had found and cleaned up the messy kitchen. The read, "You wake up on a weekend morning and go into the kitchen. You see that your roommate has left behind a mess of dirty pans and dishes from the breakfast he/she made earlier. Your roommate has gone out, so you clean up the mess your roommate made in the kitchen."

Participants rated how close (1 = extremely distant; 9 = extremely close) and connected (1 = extremely disconnected; 9 = extremely connected) they felt to their roommate ($\alpha = .94$). They next imagined they had received a gift of their favorite drink from their roommate with a note attached that said either "thanks!" or "sorry!" (images were the same as those used in study 2A and were randomly-assigned). Participants rated how close and connected they would feel to their roommate after receiving the gift ($\alpha = .95$), and the pre-gift measures were subtracted from the post-gift measures to assess change in connection.

Results and Discussion

Pre-gift connection. As expected due to random assignment, there were no significant differences between conditions in how connected participants felt to their roommate prior to receiving the card ($t(196) = 1.13$, $p = .26$).

Change in connection. We next examined how receiving a card changed how connected recipients felt to their gift giver and found a greater improvement among those who had received a "thanks" gift ($t(196) = 2.37$, $p = .02$). Recipients of gifts that conveyed gratitude felt significantly more connected to their roommate as a result of receiving the gift ($M = 2.43$, $SE = 0.15$) than recipients of gifts that conveyed guilt ($M = 1.91$, $SE = 0.16$).

FIGURE 2B

STUDY 2A: RECIPIENTS REPORTED THE GREATEST IMPORVEMENT IN

CONNECTION TO ROOMMATE AS A RESULT OF RECEIVING A GIFT OUT OF

GRATITUDE
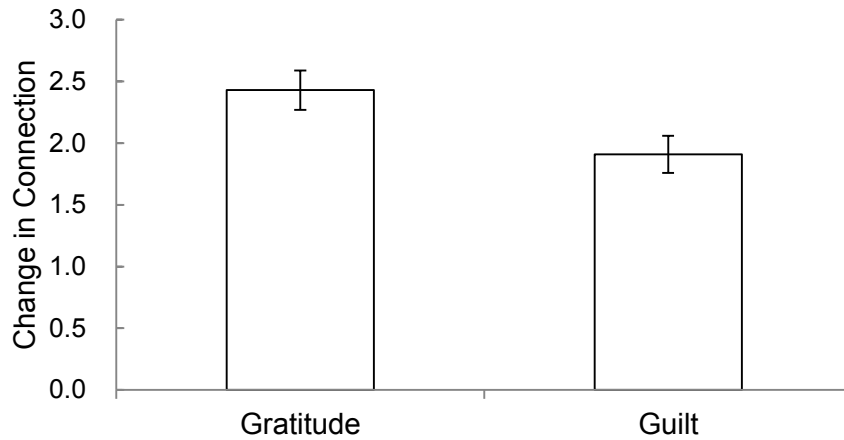
Study 2B demonstrates that gratitude-motivated gifts, rather than a guilt-motivated gift, have a stronger effect on changing how connected recipients feel to their gift givers. These findings are a notable contrast to those of study 2A, in which gift givers who were motivated by guilt experienced the greatest change in how connected they felt to their gift giver. Therefore, the relationship benefits of the gift are asymmetrical for gift givers and recipients.

STUDY 3A: GIVING A CARD OUT OF GUILT IS CONNECTING

Studies 3A and 3B replicate and extend the findings of studies 2A and 2B using a more naturalistic expression of gratitude and guilt: a handmade card.

Method

Two hundred four students participated in this study in exchange for financial payment. Participants read and imagined themselves in the roommate scenario used in study 3A, and were randomly assigned to write one of three essays. Participants in the [gratitude / guilt] condition were asked to "Please write about how you feel about [your roommate's / your] actions in the situation and the extent to which [your roommate went above and beyond / you fell short of] what was expected of [him/her / you] as a roommate." Participants in the control condition were asked to "Please write about how you feel about this situation."

Next, participants rated how close (1 = extremely distant; 9 = extremely close) and connected (1 = extremely disconnected; 9 = extremely connected) they felt to their roommate (α = .88). Participants were then given a box of colored markers and a piece of white cardstock, and asked to create a card for their roommate. After creating the card, participants imagined they gave the card to their roommate, and again rated how close and connected they felt to their roommate (α = .86). We calculate the difference between the pre- and post-gift connection measures to assess change in connection.

Results and Discussion

Change in connection. A three-factor ANOVA revealed that relationship improvements differed across conditions ($F(2, 200) = 9.83$, $p < .001$; figure 3A). Specifically, guilty participants experienced significant improvements in connection ($M = 0.85$, $SE = 0.12$) compared to grateful participants ($M = 0.09$, $SE = 0.13$; $F(1,200) = 19.18$, $p < .001$) and control participants ($M = 0.39$, $SE = 0.12$; $F(1,200) = 7.40$, $p = .007$).

Pre-gift and post-gift connection. We again examined participant's feelings of connection before they imagined giving the card and found a distancing effect of guilt. Prior to giving the card, guilty participants felt less connected to their roommate ($M = 5.99$, $SE = 0.18$) than grateful participants ($M = 7.06$, $SE = 0.19$) and control participants ($M = 6.89$, $SE = .18$; $F(2, 200) = 10.30$, $p < .001$). Individual contrasts showed that guilty participants felt significantly less connected than grateful and control participants (both ps $< .001$), whereas the latter two did not differ from one another ($p = .51$). After giving the card, there were no significant differences across conditions in how connected participants to their roommate ($F(2,200) = 1.76$, $p = .17$).

In study 3A, we allowed gift givers to express their feelings to their roommate by creating a handmade card, rather than the forced choice task used in study 2A, and found once again that givers who felt guilty experienced the greatest improvement in how connected they felt to their recipient.

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FIGURE 3A

STUDY 3A: GUILTY GIFT GIVERS REPORTED THE GREATEST IMPORVEMENT

IN CONNECTION TO ROOMMATE AS A RESULT OF GIVING A CARD

STUDY 3B: RECEIVING A CARD OUT OF GRATITUDE IS CONNECTING

Study 3B uses the cards generated by guilty, grateful, and control participants in study 3A to test how recipients of these cards would feel toward the card giver.

Method

One hundred seventy-eight students participated in this study in exchange for financial payment. Participants read the scenario used in study 2B in which they imagined themselves in the role of the roommate who had found and cleaned up the messy kitchen. Next, participants rated how close (1 = extremely distant; 9 = extremely close) and connected (1 = extremely disconnected; 9 = extremely connected) they felt to

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their roommate (α = .87). Participants were then given a card that had been created by a participant in study 3A. Each participant was randomly assigned to receive a different card and was not given any information about the study in which the card had been created. Each card was marked with a code that allowed the researchers—but not the participants or research assistants conducting the study—to track whether the card had been created by a grateful, guilty, or control card-maker. Participants were asked to imagine they had received the card from their roommate, and again rated how close and connected they felt to their roommate (α = .97). We calculated the difference between pre- and post-card connection to assess change in connection.

Results and Discussion

Pre-gift connection. As expected due to random assignment, there were no significant differences between conditions in how connected participants felt to their roommate prior to receiving the card ($F(2, 175) = 1.10, p > .33$).

Change in connection. We next examined how receiving a card changed how connected recipients felt to their gift giver. Across all conditions, we observed significant improvements in how close and connected participants felt toward their roommate as a result of receiving a card; however, the greatest improvement was seen among those who received a card from a grateful roommate ($F(2, 175) = 3.01, p = .05$; figure 3B). Recipients of grateful cards felt significantly more connected as a result of receiving a card from their roommate ($M = 3.55, SE = 0.29$) than recipients of guilty cards ($M = 2.61$,

SE = 0.25; *p* = .02); recipients of control cards did not differ significantly from the other two conditions (*M* = 3.05, *SE* = 0.26; both *p*s > .19).

Study 3B thus provides additional evidence that recipients feel more socially connected to their gift giver after receiving a gratitude-motivated gift, rather than a guilt-motivated gift. Participants who received a card from a grateful card-giver showed a greater improvement in how connected they would feel toward a roommate, compared to those who received a card from a guilty card-giver. Moreover, across studies 3A and 3B, we again observed an asymmetry in the change in connection felt by givers and recipients: guilty givers experienced the greatest change in connection whereas recipients of grateful gifts experienced the greatest change in connection as a result of the gift.

FIGURE 3B

STUDY 2A: RECIPIENTS REPORTED THE GREATEST IMPORVEMENT IN CONNECTION TO ROOMMATE AS A RESULT OF RECEIVING A CARD GIVEN OUT OF GRATITUDE
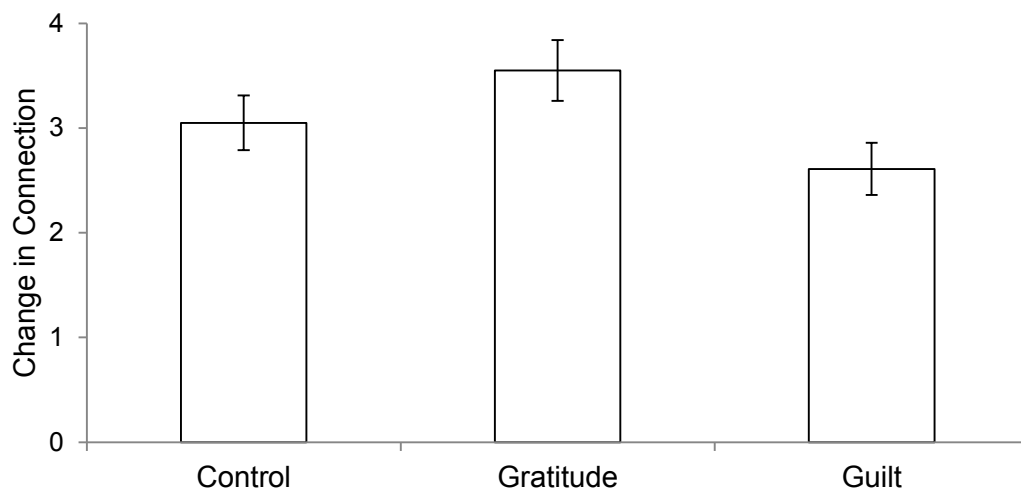
GENERAL DISCUSSION

Integrating literatures on social connections, emotions, and gift giving, this research revealed how the prosocial emotions of gratitude and guilt can arise from the same situation of social inequity between two people, and examined the downstream social consequences of gifts motivated by gratitude and guilt. People who focused on how their shortcomings contributed to the social inequity tended to give a gift to their relationship partner that conveyed feelings of guilt whereas those who focused on their relationship partner's benevolence tended to give a gift that conveyed feelings of gratitude. The act of gift giving had a more connecting effect for guilty gift givers, as they experienced the greatest improvement in how connected they felt to their recipient from before to after giving. In contrast, receiving a gift from a grateful gift giver had a more connecting effect for recipients, as recipients of gratitude-motivated gifts reported the greatest improvements in how connected they felt to their gift giver.

This research contributes to the emotion literature by directly comparing the emotions of gratitude and guilt, which are typically studied separately, and highlighting their functional similarities in maintaining and building social relationships. Further, prior research has typically focused on the prosocial action that results from feeling grateful or guilty, and we build on this research by examining the social consequences that result from these prosocial actions. Our paper also contributes to the gift giving literature by showing how gift giving can improve interpersonal relationships, as well as how the connecting effect of the gift differs for gift givers and recipients.

Future research could integrate the emotions of the relationship partner to test if these act as social cues and boundary conditions for whether gift givers should convey gratitude or guilt. For example, research has shown that angry facial expressions are social cues that one should feel guilty (Giner-Sorolla and Espinosa 2011; Tangney et al. 1996b); therefore, if a relationship partner feels angry as a result of a social inequity, a gift that conveys guilt could be the more effective in this situation. Alternatively, it is possible that a gift that expresses gratitude may still be more effective than an expression of guilt in making amends with an angry relationship partner.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates how situations of social inequity can evoke feelings of gratitude or guilt and reveals the social benefits derived from gifts given out of gratitude and guilt to be asymmetrical. Whereas giving a gift out of guilt proves more connecting, receiving a gift given out of gratitude proves more connecting. These findings pose a challenge for gift givers seeking to build closer relationships and highlight the important role of emotions in gift giving.

APPENDIX A

STUDY 1: SCENARIOS

1. You and your friend have decided to throw a party together this Friday. Your friend suggests meeting on Wednesday night to shop for food and drinks. You already made dinner plans with another friend on Wednesday, so your friend picks up the food and drinks on his/her own.

2. You and a classmate are working together on a class project that is worth 40% of your grade. You go away with some friends for spring break and are not able to complete your assigned portion of the project. Your classmate steps in to help. You and your classmate get an A on the project.

3. You wake up one morning and make yourself a big breakfast. By the time you finish eating, you realize you are running late to meet up with some friends. You leave a mess of dirty pans and dishes in the kitchen and plan to wash them later. When you get home from your meeting, your roommate has already done the dishes.

4. It's the night before an exam and you are cramming to study. You are having trouble understanding the material. Your friend took the course last semester and did very well. You decide to call your friend with some questions. Your friend skips a party to come over and spends 3 hours tutoring you.

APPENDIX B

STUDY 2A: DRINK OPTIONS

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