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How Gift Prices Affect Gratitude? “Right” Gift-Price Effect

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Abstract

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Keywords: Appreciation, culture, gift prices, relationship closeness, thoughtfulness

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Five studies show that recipients are most likely to appreciate gifts of monetary values aligning with their expectations, especially when cultural norms call for reciprocity and when givers and recipients have close relationships. Two parallel underlying mechanisms explain the inverted U-shaped relationship: when gift prices are lower than expected, recipients perceive givers as inconsiderate; when gift prices are higher than expected, recipients feel indebted. In addition, this research examines two boundary conditions. Compared with North Americans, Asians are more likely to show the inverted U-shaped relationships. Also, close friends rather than distant friends are more likely to show the inverted U-shaped relationship. The paper concludes with a discussion of contributions to the literature of gift giving and practical implications.

Keywords: appreciation; culture; gift prices; relationship closeness; thoughtfulness

1. Introduction

Gift-givers usually hope that the receiver will appreciate their gifts, but they often incorrectly gauge receivers' preferences or expectations (Aknin & Human, 2015; Givi & Galak, 2019; Givi, Galak, & Olivola, 2021). Poorly chosen gifts may irritate recipients, damage relationships, or even sever connections (Otnes et al., 1993; Ruth et al., 1999; Sherry, 1983; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016).

When a gift is given, recipients are often expected to reciprocate the gift (Givi, 2020). Importantly, the norm of reciprocity obliges gift receivers to repay with reciprocal gifts of equal monetary value (Gouldner, 1960; Mauss, 1967). In contrast, the economic exchange model predicts that expensive gifts evoke more gratitude, but research has failed to find supporting evidence. Although recipients assumed that gift price has a linear relationship with appreciation, recipients' gratitude is not significantly associated with gift prices (Flynn & Adam, 2009). Although research has increasingly revealed social, economic, and emotional dimensions affecting gratitude (e.g., Sherry, 1983), only a few researchers have empirically investigated effects of gift prices (Belk & Coon, 1993; Joy, 2001; Flynn & Adam, 2009; Givi et al., 2021).

The objective for this research is to fill the gap in the literature and reconcile seemingly inconsistent results by proposing an inverted U-shaped relationship between gift price and recipients' appreciation. Focusing on recipients' perspectives, we posit that recipients are most likely to appreciate gifts of monetary values aligning with their expectations, especially when cultural norms call for reciprocity. However, when gifts fail to meet recipients' expectations, they will question the giver's thoughtfulness and, in turn, feel less appreciation. Conversely, highly expensive gifts will elicit feelings of indebtedness and cause the receiver to feel burdened, especially when reciprocity is expected.

Our research offers several contributions to the gift-giving literature. First, despite recommendations that gifts should be of appropriate value (e.g., Sherry, 1983), we lack consensus or direct evidence. By revealing an inverted U-shaped curve regarding gift appreciation dynamics, we explain why Flynn and Adams (2009) found insignificant differences regarding appreciation of gifts perceived as either too cheap or too expensive. Second, we deepen our understanding of recipients' psychological reactions to gifts by identifying two distinct mechanisms affecting the inverted U-shaped relationship. Third, we demonstrate that the inverted U-shaped relationship is likely to occur for Asians because they are more subject to reciprocal norms, in contrast with North Americans who are not. Furthermore, individuals have higher expectations regarding gift exchanges with closer friends and thus exchanges among closer friends are most likely to show the inverted U-shaped relationship.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Gift and Affective Reactions

Gratitude is a feeling of thankful appreciation for benefits received (Watkins et al., 2006). When individuals receive help, favors, or gifts, they enjoy positive feelings of gratitude toward the benefactors (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gift receivers will appraise the intrinsic value of the gift, the effort the benefactor expended, the reason for the gift, and what is expected to do in return (Shen et al. 2011).

Although givers generally anticipate that their gift will evoke appreciation, recipients might have negative affective reactions if the gift makes them feel *indebtedness* (Greenberg & Westcott, 1983), “a state of obligation to repay” (Greenberg, 1980, p. 4), which creates emotional discomfort and drives desires to reduce the distress (Watkins et al., 2006). To maintain

equity in social relationships, humans tend to feel strong obligations to reciprocate (Gouldner, 1960; Greenberg, 1980). Thus, when a recipient receives a gift from a friend, and the gift is more valuable than any gift the recipient has ever given to the friend in the past, the recipient may feel indebted (Gouldner, 1960) rather than appreciative (Heider, 1958).

2.2. Effects of Gift Prices

Prior research used economic and social exchange models to explain the dynamics involved in gift exchange (Belk & Coon, 1993). The economic exchange model focuses on economic values of gifts. It posits that factors such as scarcity or monetary price determine the worth of a gift exchange, suggesting that expensive gifts are more preferred and appreciated (Belk & Coon, 1993). Following this logic, the economic exchange model predicts that givers intend to send strong signals of commitment by offering expensive gifts and expect the recipient to react positively, although expensive and inexpensive gifts may evoke similar levels of appreciation (Flynn & Adams, 2009).

Gift giving is a symbolic ritual in which givers attempt to communicate positive attitudes toward recipients and commitment to invest resources into enhancing the relationship (Camerer, 1988; Mauss, 1967). The social exchange model centers on the symbolic meanings of gifts rather than their economic values. It suggests that gifts convey symbolic meanings indicating the level of caring and thoughtfulness behind the gift and the amount of reciprocity required (Belk & Coon, 1993; Burgoyne & Routh, 1991). The symbolic meanings reflected in the price or quality of a gift can create, maintain, change, or sever interpersonal relationships (Sherry, 1983).

Despite scarce empirical evidence regarding appropriate prices for gifts, research states that appropriate gifts in terms of price and category should evoke positive recipient reactions

(Sherry, 1983), including reciprocity to equalize exchanges (Belk & Coon, 1993; Belshaw, 1965; Cancian, 1966; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Accordingly, reciprocal gifts of equal or similar value are considered appropriate (Mauss, 1967) for drawing appreciation (Sherry, 1983).

Following the social exchange model, we predict that gift prices are likely to be influential, and recipients may judge the giver's thoughtfulness according to the value of a gift. When gifts appear to have low monetary values or are below expectations, recipients may feel ungrateful, perceiving that the giver is thoughtless, inconsiderate, and is signaling weak commitment (Ames et al., 2004; Flynn & Adams, 2009). Because people are highly averse to feeling indebted (Greenberg & Westcott, 1983), highly expensive gifts may evoke daunting feelings of indebtedness and resentment rather than gratitude and appreciation (Gergen et al., 1975; Giesler, 2006; Godelier, 1999; Joy, 2001). Consequently, we propose that gift price has an inverted U-shaped relationship with appreciation.

***H1:** Moderately priced gifts with values matching the recipient's expectation will evoke greater appreciation than gifts of too low or too high value.*

***H2:** Inexpensive gifts with values below the recipient's expectation will decrease appreciation and cause the recipient to judge the giver as inconsiderate. Expensive gifts with values above the recipient's expectation will decrease appreciation because the recipient will feel indebted.*

2.3. Cultural Differences in Reciprocal Norms

Culture indicates shared beliefs or standards (Shen et al., 2011) that shape a wide range of behaviors and determine how individuals interpret the behaviors of others (Brislin, 2009). One possible source of misunderstanding in interpersonal relations concerns gift exchanges (Shen et al., 2011). Norms and values vary across cultures and social groups to govern interpretations of

gift giving behaviors as forms of social communications (Shen et al., 2011). Thus, cultural differences should influence how people interpret and react to gifts.

A most prevalent cultural difference between Asians and North Americans is that Asians generally hold collectivist views about relations, while North Americans generally construe themselves as independent from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Shen et al., 2011). This cultural difference in self-construals has particular implications for understanding reactions to gifts (Shen et al., 2011). North Americans are more likely to focus on the attractiveness or value of a gift, apart from considering connections with the givers. Without salient cues calling for reciprocity, they will feel less obliged and feel indebted. In contrast, Asians focus on their deep interpersonal connections, are sensitive to reciprocal norms, and desire to balance between benefits obtained and benefits offered (Chen & Rau, 2016; Shen et al., 2011). Therefore, when receiving gifts, they are more likely to feel indebted and obligated to reciprocate (Hofstede, 1980; Shen et al., 2011). Thus, we hypothesize:

***H3:** Asians (North Americans) will be more (less) likely to appreciate moderately priced gifts of values matching their expectations.*

2.4. Closeness and Gift Price

Gifts can express emotions, symbolize social closeness (Otnes et al., 1993; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016), confirm recipients' expectations, and even foster intimacy (Aknin & Human, 2015; Ruth et al., 1999). Reciprocity has value in communicating appreciation for benefits received. It shows that the receiver cares about the giver and wants to continue the relationship (Molm et al., 2007). When parties exchange gifts, both will desire to reciprocate appropriately and equally to maintain the relationship (Gouldner, 1960; Joy, 2001).

Although romantic partners and close friends occasionally show communal relationships like family (Joy, 2001), reciprocal exchange is still compatible with and prominent in close relationships especially for close friendships (Molm et al., 2007; Molm et al., 2012). Research indicates that inappropriate gifts are riskier for closer friends because they more aware of interpersonal expectations and the outcome of gift exchange is more emotionally charged (Joy, 2001). Consequently, gift givers will expend significant effort in selecting gifts for close friends, to ensure that the gift gives pleasure and symbolizes the intimacy (Otnes et al., 1993; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016).

Thus, when close friends choose a highly expensive gift, recipients may feel burdened by expectations for equal reciprocation (Greenberg, 1980; Greenberg & Westcott, 1983). Close friends attach greater importance to the symbolic meanings of gifts (Otnes et al., 1993; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016). Thus, cheap gifts will indicate that the giver is inconsiderate and generate intensified emotional reactions to close rather than distant friends. Together, we predict that gifts exchanged between close rather than distant friends are more likely to show the inverted U-shaped relationship.

***H4:** Close rather than distant friends will be more likely to appreciate moderately priced gifts of values matching their expectations.*

3. Pretest

We ran a pretest to confirm that individuals expect equitable gift exchange, which indicates the existence of an appropriate gift price. We also examined whether gift recipients consider gift prices and other characteristics. We used Amazon MTurk to recruit 232 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.40$; 132 women) who had received a gift available online within the last six months.

Participants specified the gift and the giver, reported up to five thoughts the gift generated, and then categorized each thought according to attention given to 1 = gratitude, 2 = *the giver's effort*, 3 = *price*, 4 = *usefulness*, 5 = *quality*, 6 = *other*.¹ Participants also indicated whether they considered affordability of the gift on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*).² Next, we asked participants to search the internet for the gift and to report the price. We also asked whether they had reciprocated. If so, we asked what they paid for the gift and whether the price was similar to, cheaper, or more expensive than the gift that they had received, on a 7-point scale (1 = *cheaper*, 4 = *similar*, 7 = *more expensive*). Those who had not reciprocated indicated whether they would do so in the near future, and whether the reciprocal gift would be similar, cheaper, or more expensive. Then participants reported the relationship with the giver (1 = *friend*, 2 = *romantic partner*, 3 = *family*, 4 = *other*) and perceived power balance in the relationship.³ Last, participants indicated how often they check gift prices (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *usually*, 5 = *always*). Finally, they provided age and gender demographic information.⁴

Confirming the pervasiveness of reciprocity, we found that 64% (N = 149) of participants had reciprocated for a gift within the past six months. Also, those who had not yet returned a gift (N = 83) showed relatively high intentions to do so ($M = 5.66$). Although reciprocity intentions

¹ We selected the options based on research observing emotional and cognitive reactions to gift-receiving (Belk & Coon, 1993; Flynn & Adams, 2009; Steffel & LeBoeuf, 2013).

² Recipients considered how well the giver could afford the gift, showing a significant difference from the median value (4) ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 2.10$, $t(231) = 10.84$, $p < .001$), similarly across relationship types ($F(1, 229) = .54$, $p = .585$) and whatever the gift price ($r = .03$, $p = .672$).

³ To examine the impact of power positions on gift prices and reciprocal norms, we asked participants to indicate whether they or the giver make the most decisions about their interpersonal activities and who has more power in the relationships on a 7-point scale (1 = I do, 7 = The giver does). The average value of the two items ($r = .65$, $p < .001$) was not significantly correlated with the price of the received gift ($r = -.04$, $p = .529$), the price of the returned gift ($r = -.04$, $p = .595$), and price difference ($r = .02$, $p = .787$).

⁴ Most noticeably, 63% (N = 147) generated at least one thought expressing gratitude. As anticipated, participants most frequently mentioned thinking about gratitude and the giver's effort (53%, N = 122), but they also thought about usefulness (57%; N = 131), quality (38%, N = 87), and price (23%, N = 53). Most reported that they checked prices at different levels of frequencies, and only 26% (N = 60) said they never checked gift prices. The results indicate that gift recipients consider price as one aspect that affects their perceptions.

slightly varied across relationships, the difference was not significant ($M_{\text{friendship}} = 5.08$, $SD = 1.82$ vs. $M_{\text{romantic}} = 5.85$, $SD = 1.68$ vs. $M_{\text{family}} = 5.938$, $SD = 1.44$; $F(2, 80) = 2.15$, $p = .124$). Separate t-tests comparing the median (4) for each type of relationships further supported high intentions to return a gift across various relationships ($t_s > 2.92$, $p_s < .009$). We examined whether a “right” gift price exists. That is, whether a reciprocal gift should be priced the same as the previously offered gift. Received gifts ($M = 111.55$, $SD = 175.56$) were priced similarly to reciprocal gifts ($M = 99.12$, $SD = 143.62$; $F(1, 230) = 2.50$, $p = .116$). Similarly, perceptions of gift price were not significantly different from the median ($4 = \text{similar}$) ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.70$; $t(231) = -1.04$, $p = .299$). These results indicate that reciprocal gifts are likely to have prices similar to the prices of previously exchanged gifts.

Although reciprocal norms are common in all types of relationships, friends and romantic partners are more likely to reciprocate with equivalent gifts, perhaps because family members are more likely to have communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993).⁵ In romantic relationships, desire, relationship satisfaction, and commitment can influence gift exchange behavior (Belk and Coon 1991). To minimize those effects, we focused on friendships in this research.

4. Study 1

We conducted Study 1 first to test our prediction that gift recipients are more appreciative when gift prices align with their expectations and disapprove of gifts that are either cheaper or

⁵ Gift prices were positively skewed when four respondents reported gifts that cost more than \$1,000, so we log transformed the values and successfully reduced skewness (.35 for received gift and .42 for returned gift) and kurtosis (-.32 for received gift and -.17 for returned gift) as in Simpson et al. (2017). Using the log transformed values, we ran a repeated-measures ANOVA with relationship type as a covariate to test whether the prices differ across relationships. The results showed non-significant differences in the prices ($F(1, 224) = .07$, $p = .787$) as well as the interaction effect with relationship types ($F(1, 224) = 1.87$, $p = .157$). We further tested perceived gift price. Friendships ($M = 4.37$) and romantic relationships ($M = 4.00$) showed no significant difference with the median value, but participants who were gifted by a family member tended to reciprocate with a cheaper gift ($M = 3.54$; $t(95) = -2.78$, $p = .007$).

more expensive than expected. Second, we demonstrate why prices that are lower or higher than expected would decrease appreciation. To test the proposed mechanisms, we used a 3(price levels: lower, similar, vs. higher) between-participants design, and measured recipient perceptions regarding giver thoughtfulness and burdensome reciprocal obligations.

4.1.Method

We recruited 431 college students (241 women, 91% from 20 to 35 years-old, 2% younger than 20; 7% older than 35) by sending the link of an online questionnaire via WeChat, an online social network application in China, for a small monetary compensation. We asked participants to imagine a scenario in which they received a birthday gift from a friend. Participants in the lower (higher) price-level condition were told that the gift was less (more) expensive than they expected; participants in the similar price-level condition were told that the gift was as expensive as they expected. Then they used three items to indicate their appreciation of the gift; for example, “To what extent do you appreciate the gift?” (Flynn & Adams, 2009) on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a great extent*). We then measured their perceptions of the giver’s thoughtfulness by their responses to statements such as “This would be a thoughtful gift”; “This would be a considerate gift” (Flynn & Adams, 2009) and their perceptions of being burdened with reciprocal responsibilities on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *to a greater extent*). Last, to examine whether materialistic recipients prefer expensive gifts (McKeage et al., 1993), we asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with six statements measuring materialistic tendencies, such as, “I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes” (Richins, 2004) on a 7-point scale.

4.2. Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that gift price significantly impacted appreciation ($\alpha = .84$; $F(2,428) = 16.41$, $p < .001$; Figure 1). Consistent with H1, participants in the similar price condition appreciated the gift more ($M = 6.09$, $SD = .82$) than participants in the lower price condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = .94$; $t(428) = -5.73$, $p < .001$), as well as participants in the higher price condition ($M = 5.77$, $SD = .98$; $t(428) = 2.91$, $p = .004$). Participants in the higher price condition appreciated the gift more than participants in the lower price condition ($t(428) = -2.87$, $p = .004$). A regression analysis further confirmed an inverted U-shaped relationship by showing a positive coefficient of price ($\beta = 2.03$, $p < .001$) and a negative coefficient of price² ($\beta = -.47$, $p < .001$). We conducted an additional regression analysis to test whether materialistic tendencies interacted with price to affect appreciation. Materialism had a non-significant interaction effect with the quadratic form of the price ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .121$). Although it was marginally significant, the interaction of materialism and price showed a positive coefficient ($\beta = .71$, $p = .071$), suggesting that materialistic individuals have a greater appreciation for more expensive gifts.

*** Insert Figure 1 about here ***

Next, we tested the underlying mechanisms of the gift-price effects. One-way ANOVAs revealed significant differences in perceptions of both thoughtfulness ($\alpha = .88$; $F(2,428) = 19.49$, $p < .001$; Table 1) and burdened feelings ($F(2, 428) = 36.04$, $p < .001$) across the conditions. Planned contrasts further confirmed that participants in the lower price condition ($M = 5.30$, $SD = .88$) considered the giver less thoughtful than did those in the similar ($M = 5.92$, $SD = .79$; $t(428) = -6.00$, $p < .001$) and the higher price conditions ($M = 5.76$, $SD = .93$; $t(428) = -4.52$, $p < .001$). Also, participants in the higher price condition ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.36$) perceived greater

burdens than did those in the similar ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(428) = -7.94$, $p < .001$) and lower price conditions ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.36$, $t(428) = -6.51$, $p < .001$). We further conducted a mediation analysis including the proposed mediators by following the bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Supporting our predictions, perceptions of thoughtfulness (95% CI [.074, .219]) and feelings of being burdened (95% CI [-.060, -.003]) showed significant indirect effects.

Last, gender did not significantly interact with both price and its quadratic form ($ps > .10$), suggesting that men and women respond similarly to gift prices.

*** Insert Table 1 about here ***

5. Study 2A

To replicate our finding in Study 1, we recruited Chinese participants for Study 2A. Instead of using a scenario, we asked participants to recall an actual gift-receiving experience.

5.1. Method

As in Study 1, college students in China accessed our online questionnaire through a link to an online social network application. One-hundred and eight-two students (113 women, 95% from 20 to 35 years-old, 2% younger than 20, and 3% older than 35) participated for monetary compensation. Participants first recalled a gift they received from a friend for their most recent birthday and indicated their appreciation using the items as in Study 1. Next, they indicated whether they estimated the gift price to be lower than, similar to, or higher than their

expectations (1 = *lower than expected*, 2 = *similar to the price expected*, 3 = *higher than expected*).

We also tested potential impacts of gift characteristics. Recipients usually care more about their consumption experience than about the motives behind the gift and thus prefer useful gifts (Baskin et al., 2014; Teigen et al., 2005). To test whether usefulness attenuates the impacts of symbolic meanings of gifts, we asked participants to report the usefulness of the gift (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Also, we measured materialistic tendencies as in Study 1.

5.2. Results

We divided participants into three groups based on whether gift prices met their expectations and averaged the three items measuring appreciation ($\alpha = .79$). A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in appreciation across three groups ($F(2, 179) = 16.11, p < .001$; Table 1). Planned contrasts also confirmed that when gift prices were similar to expectations, participants appreciated the gift more ($M = 6.25, SD = .68$) than did participants who thought the gift was less expensive ($M = 5.45, SD = .86; t(179) = -5.52, p < .001$) or more expensive than expected ($M = 5.88, SD = .81; t(179) = 2.52, p = .013$). A regression analysis further confirmed the inverted U-shaped relationship between gift price and appreciation by showing a positive coefficient of price ($\beta = 2.55, p < .001$) and a negative coefficient of its quadratic form ($\beta = -.58, p < .001$). Those findings replicate findings from Study 1, but using Chinese participants. Additional regression analyses tested whether usefulness, materialistic tendencies, and gender interact with price to affect appreciation. However, usefulness, materialism, and gender showed no significant interaction effects with both gift price and the quadratic form of the price ($ps > .334$).

6. Study 2B

We conducted Study 2B to examine the role of cultural differences in reciprocal norms. If North Americans are less likely than Chinese to be influenced by reciprocal norms, they would appreciate expensive gifts more than they would appreciate equally to moderately priced gifts of values equal to their expectations. The overall procedures and measures were similar to Study 2A except that we counterbalanced the order of two key variables, appreciation and estimation of gift price, to control the measurement order effect.

6.1. Method

We recruited 253 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.24$; 135 women) on Amazon MTurk. We asked participants to first recall a gift they received from a friend for their most recent birthday. Then they indicated their appreciation using the three items from Study 2A ($\alpha = .94$) and reported whether the gift price was lower than, similar to, or higher than their expectations. We randomized the order of these two variables across participants. Next, we asked participants to report their perceptions regarding the usefulness of the gift and their materialistic tendencies as in Study 2A.

6.2. Results

The interaction effect and the main effect of the measurement order were not significant (all $ps > .442$). Therefore, we ignored this factor in the further analyses.

A one-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in appreciation across three price conditions ($F(2, 250) = 7.14, p = .001$; Table 1). Planned contrasts also confirmed that when gift prices were similar to expectations, participants ($M = 6.19, SD = 1.20$) appreciated the gift more than did participants who thought the gift was less expensive ($M = 5.33, SD = 1.30; t(250) = -2.58, p = .010$). However, inconsistent with Study 2A, participants who thought the gift prices were similar to expectations appreciated the gift less than did participants who thought the gift was more expensive ($M = 6.52, SD = .74; t(250) = -2.32, p = .021$). A regression analysis showed a marginally significantly positive coefficient of price ($\beta = 1.65, p = .064$) and a non-significant coefficient of price² ($\beta = -.27, p = .166$), not supporting the inverted U-shaped relationship. The results rather support a positive relationship between gift price and appreciation.

We additionally performed regression analyses to see whether usefulness, materialistic tendencies, and gender might have interacted with price to affect appreciation. Consistent with Study 2A, usefulness, materialism, and gender showed no significant interaction effects with gift price and the quadratic form of the price ($ps > .130$).

7. Study 3

The purpose of Study 3 was to find further support for cultural differences in the relationship between gift price and appreciation. If North Americans care less about reciprocal norms and thus have greater appreciation for expensive gifts, high expectations of reciprocity should lower appreciation. We focused on the similar and high price levels, where cultural differences occur and used a 2 (price levels: moderate vs. high) x 2 (levels of reciprocity: low vs. high) between-participants design.

7.1.Method

We recruited 245 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.30$; 139 women) on Amazon MTurk. We diverged from the earlier studies by implicitly manipulating gift price. Participants read a scenario in which they imagined receiving a birthday gift from a friend. Participants in the low reciprocity condition imagined that the friend recently celebrated a birthday and would soon move to another country. Participants in the high reciprocity condition imagined that the friend will have a birthday in a week and recently moved back to the United States after living abroad. Participants in the high (moderate) price condition read that the gift was a t-shirt from a designer (mediocre) brand. After participants read the scenario, we measured appreciation as in the earlier studies. To check our manipulations, we asked participants whether the gift was more or less expensive than their expectations: (1 = *less expensive*, 7 = *more expensive*). Participants also indicated how likely they were to reciprocate in the near future (1 = *very unlikely*, 7 = *very likely*). Last, we measured usefulness of the gift and materialism.

7.2.Results

Confirming our manipulation of price levels, participants in the high price condition ($M = 2.907$, $SD = .320$) reported that the gift was more expensive than expected, compared with participants in the moderate price condition ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .56$; $F(1,243) = 111.55$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, participants in the high reciprocity condition ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.80$) perceived that they were more likely to reciprocate in the near future, compared with participants in the low reciprocity condition ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.94$, $F(1, 243) = 6.64$, $p = .011$).

A two-way ANOVA showed that gift price significantly interacted with reciprocity levels on appreciation ($\alpha = .90$; $F(1, 241) = 4.35, p = .038$; Table 1 & Figure 2). Consistent with Study 2B, participants in the high price condition ($M = 6.15, SD = 1.17$) appreciated the gift more than participants in the moderate price condition ($M = 5.62, SD = 1.27$; $t(241) = -2.45, p = .015$) when expectations to reciprocate were low. In contrast, under high expectations to reciprocate, price level differences became non-significant ($M_{high} = 5.67, SD = 1.34$; $M_{moderate} = 5.81, SD = 1.22$; $t(241) = .59, p = .557$). Supporting cultural differences in reciprocity, the high-price gift significantly decreased appreciation in the high reciprocity condition ($M = 5.67, SD = 1.34$) compared with the low reciprocity condition ($M = 6.15, SD = 1.17$; $t(241) = -2.08, p = .039$). The finding suggests that the lack of consideration of reciprocity may have led North Americans to appreciate expensive gifts in our earlier study. However, they do not have increased appreciation when reciprocity is highly expected.

Varying incomes may affect perceptions regarding gift prices. An ANCOVA showed consistent results when it controlled for income ($F(1, 240) = 5.29, p = .021$). Regression analyses showed that gift usefulness and materialistic tendencies do not significantly interact with gift price, reciprocity, and the quadratic forms ($ps > .178$).

*** Insert Figure 2 about here ***

8. Study 4

In Study 4, we tested whether closer relationships are more likely to display the gift-price effect. We thus manipulated gift price and social closeness using a 3 (price levels: low, moderate, vs. high) x 2 (social closeness: close vs. distant) between-participants design.

8.1.Method

We asked participants to specify a close or distant friend who would probably give them a gift on their next birthday. We filtered out 47 who specified a family member or a romantic partner instead of a friend, leaving 253 participants ($M_{age} = 34.85$; 131 women).⁶

As in Study 3, we modified Flynn and Adams's (2009) scenario to manipulate gift price. We chose three clothing items: a basic tank top (low price), a branded T-shirt (moderate price), and a designer T-shirt (high price). We asked participants to imagine receiving one of the items, randomly assigned, as a birthday gift from the friend specified earlier. Next, we measured perceptions of appreciation, feelings of burdensome reciprocal requirements, and perceptions regarding the giver's thoughtfulness, as in Study 1. Then we checked our manipulation of gift prices by asking participants whether they considered the gift to be more or less expensive than their expectations: (1 = *less expensive*, 7 = *more expensive*). Also, we checked the manipulation of social closeness using three statements (e.g., "Our relationship is not important to me" [reverse-coded]; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

8.2.Results

Confirming our manipulation of social closeness, participants in the close condition perceived having a closer relationship with the friend ($\alpha = .62$; $M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.33$) than did those in the distant condition ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.39$; $F(1, 251) = 59.620$, $p < .001$). As predicted, across three conditions, participants perceived gift prices to be significantly different ($M_{low} =$

⁶ To control for the nature of relationships, at the end of the survey, we asked participants to indicate their relationship with the person specified earlier (1 = friend, 2 = romantic partner, 3 = family member, 4 = other) and excluded the relationships that were inappropriate for the analyses.

2.82, $SD = 1.77$ vs. $M_{moderate} = 5.11$, $SD = 1.22$ vs. $M_{high} = 6.42$, $SD = .89$; $F(2, 250) = 153.99$, $p < .001$).

A two-way ANOVA revealed that only price significantly interacted with social closeness for appreciation ($\alpha = .91$; $F(2, 247) = 6.43$, $p = .002$; Figure 3). For close relationship conditions, participants in the moderate price condition appreciated the gift more ($M = 6.19$, $SD = .10$) than did participants in the low ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.69$; $t(118) = -2.82$, $p = .006$) and the high price conditions ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.60$; $t(118) = 1.96$, $p = .052$), supporting the inverted U-shaped relationship. Confirming our underlying mechanisms, participants in the close relationship and low price conditions considered the giver to be less thoughtful ($M = 4.54$) than did those in the moderate ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.68$; $t(118) = -1.66$, $p = .099$) and high price conditions ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.57$; $t(118) = -2.31$, $p = .023$). Thus, recipients consider socially close givers to be less thoughtful as the gift price decreases. Also, participants in the close relationship and high price condition perceived greater burdensome obligations to repay ($M = 4.98$) than did those in the moderate ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.99$; $t(118) = -3.92$, $p < .001$) and low price conditions ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 2.23$; $t(118) = -2.62$, $p = .010$). A regression analysis revealed a significantly positive coefficient of price ($\beta = 3.25$, $p = .005$) and a significantly negative coefficient of quadratic form ($\beta = -.78$, $p = .007$), further supporting an inverted U-shaped relationship. In contrast, in the distant relationship conditions, the expensive gift drew more appreciation ($M = 6.15$, $SD = 1.20$) than did the moderate-priced gift ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.73$; $t(129) = -2.46$, $p = .015$). Lower gift prices did not evoke impressions of a thoughtless giver ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.66$; $ps > .129$). High gift prices ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 2.13$) evoked greater burdened feelings when compared with low prices ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.86$; $t(129) = -2.39$, $p = .018$), but not when compared with moderate gift prices ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 2.09$; $ps > .142$). Consistently, a regression

analysis failed to find an inverted U-shaped relationship for distant relationship conditions ($\beta_{price} = -2.31, p = .033; \beta_{price}^2 = -.62, p = .023$). Consistent with Study 3, our regression results remained consistent after controlling for income.

We confirmed our underlying mechanism by using a moderated mediation test (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007, Model 7), with giver thoughtfulness and feelings of burden as mediators and relationship closeness as a moderator. Thoughtfulness showed a positive indirect effect in the close relationship condition (95% CI [.029, .466]), but a non-significant effect in the distant relationship condition (95% CI [-.063, .287]). Burdened feelings had a negative indirect effect both in the close relationship condition (95% CI [-.124, -.002]) and in the distant relationship condition (95% CI [-.104, -.001]). The results indicate that gifts exchanged in closer relationships are more likely to show the inverted U-shaped relationship between gift price and appreciation.

*** Insert Figure 3 about here ***

9. General Discussion

Research has continuously shown that givers inaccurately predict recipients' perceptions and reactions to gifts (e.g., Flynn & Adams, 2009; Givi, 2020; Givi et al., 2021). For example, Givi et al. (2021) showed that givers tend to overestimate the importance of gift value because of a self-other discrepancy, wherein givers incorrectly assume that recipients would focus greater on relative gift value than they would do. Also, Givi (2020) revealed that givers are likely to underestimate how uncomfortable recipients would feel when they fail to reciprocate. We extend this line of research by focusing on recipients and their perceptions of gifts of varying values.

Social expectations regarding gift exchange often assume reciprocity and suggest that the value of a reciprocal gift should be appropriate. However, only a few studies have directly examined how different levels of gift prices can influence gratitude responses. Moreover, overlooking whether gift values match recipients' expectations, prior research concludes that price fails to affect how recipients evaluate the gifts or the givers (Flynn & Adams, 2009).

This research fills in the gap in the literature how recipients react to different price levels of gifts. We draw on recall of actual experiences or imagined scenarios to show that recipients are more likely to appreciate gifts priced similarly to expectations, not too expensive and not too cheap. In addition, we show that cheap gifts can cause recipients to consider the giver thoughtless, while expensive gifts evoke burdensome obligations to reciprocate equally. Furthermore, we examined important boundary conditions. We demonstrate that Asians rather than North Americans are more likely to show the inverted U-shaped relationships for close rather than distant friendships. The findings deepen our understandings of how cultural and relationship characteristics affect recipients in forming gratitude and judging gift prices.

When selecting gifts, givers often suffer anxiety in trying to choose the most appropriate gifts in alignment with recipients' preferences (Baskin et al., 2014; Waldfogel, 1993; Wooten, 2000). We conducted several studies to identify the most appropriate gift prices for maximizing recipients' appreciation. Based on our findings, we recommend that gift givers meet expectations by choosing gifts of equal or similar monetary values to gifts previously exchanged with the recipient. To avoid evoking indebtedness, givers should consider cultural expectations and relationship intimacy. The findings also offer an important insight to practitioners, especially retailers. Consumers often ask retailers for gift recommendations and retailers also recommend gifts for different relationships (e.g., "Friendship Gifts for Him and Her");

<https://www.amazon.com/slp/friendship-gifts-for-him-and-her/kws3a3rwjdqv6ku>), we use our findings to recommend that retailers should advise givers to choose gifts priced according to cultural norms and relationship intimacy.

Our findings open avenues for future research. We know that gifts cultivate interpersonal relationships (Chan & Mogilner, 2017), but few researchers have examined modifications in gift-giving dynamics (Ruth et al., 1999). Experiential (vs. material) gifts are more likely to improve relationships (Chan & Mogilner, 2017). Gifts that reflect giver and receiver characteristics promote relationship closeness and satisfaction (Aknin & Human, 2015). In addition to those comprehensive understandings, future research can examine how gift prices cultivate interpersonal relationships over time and affect subsequent gift exchanges.

Our pretest shows that gift prices carry different symbolic meanings for various interpersonal relationships. In romantic relationships, equity may not govern gift exchanges because a costly gift reflects the giver's power and status (Belk & Coon, 1991, 1993) and signals commitment to strengthening the relationship. Our pretest also shows that communal relationships (e.g., close family members) may diverge from reciprocal norms and dismiss concerns about gift prices. However, in exchange relationships such as business associations, the parties expect to exchange comparable benefits (Clark, 1986) and will have greater appreciation when reciprocal gifts meet their expectations. Given the inconsistent dynamics across relationships, future research should consider other types of interpersonal relationships, particularly business relationships. Relatedly, future research should further consider how power dynamics influence evaluations of gift prices across various relationships.

In Study 1, we find that gift price and materialistic inclinations have a marginally significant interaction effect on appreciation, suggesting that materialistic recipients prefer expensive gifts. However, our other studies failed to support that contention. Furthermore, consistent with Eastman et al. (1997), Studies 2A and 2B showed that Asians ($M = 4.75$) had higher materialistic inclinations than North Americans ($M = 3.99$, $t(682) = 8.00$, $p < .001$). Nevertheless, Asians indicated less appreciation for expensive gifts, perhaps because cultural norms regarding reciprocity surpass materialistic inclinations. We expect that further research on the role of materialistic inclinations will deepen our understanding of gratitude in reaction to gifts.

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Figure 1.

Feelings of appreciation across three gift-price levels (Study 1)



Figure 2.

Interaction effect of gift price and reciprocity on feelings of appreciation (Study 3)

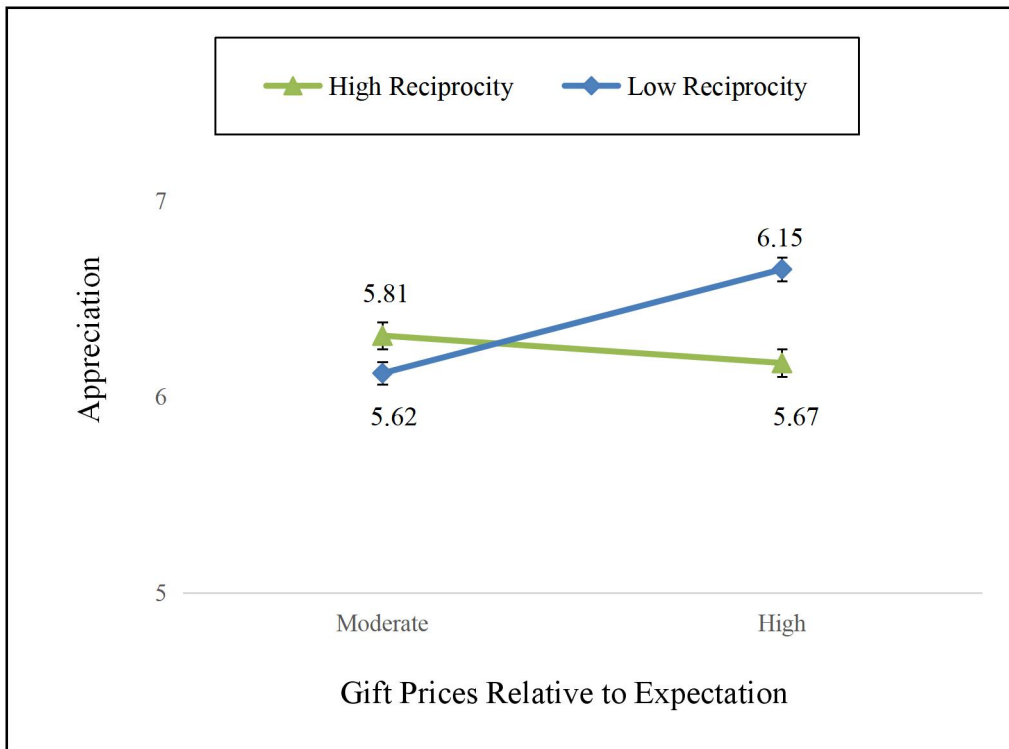


Figure 3.

Feelings of appreciation across gift-price levels for close vs. distant relationships (Study 4)

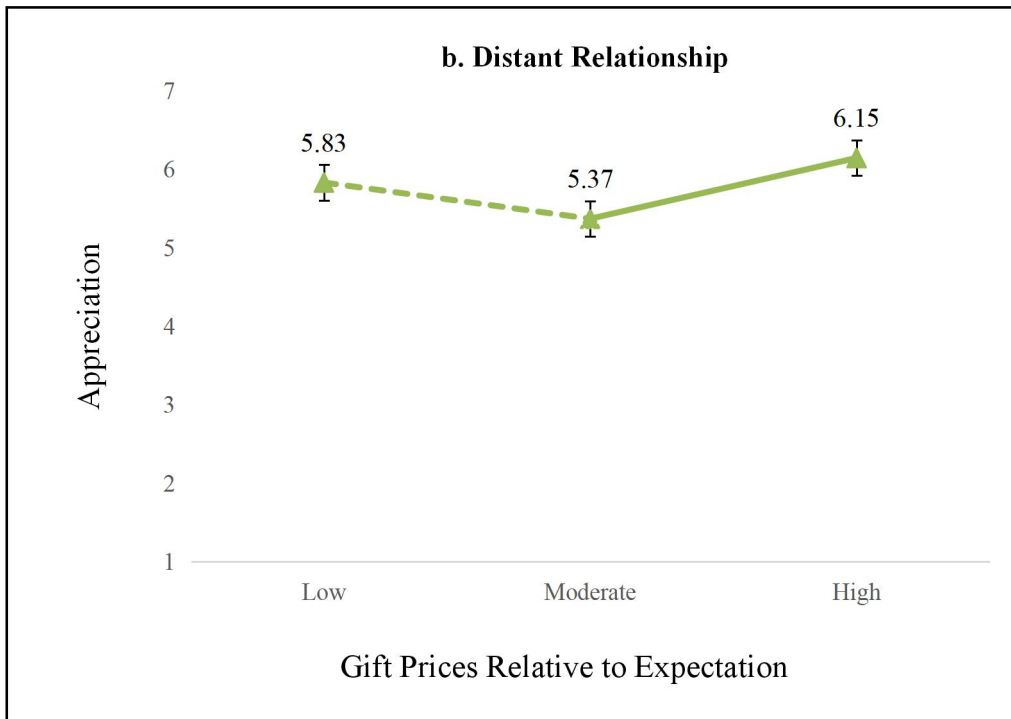
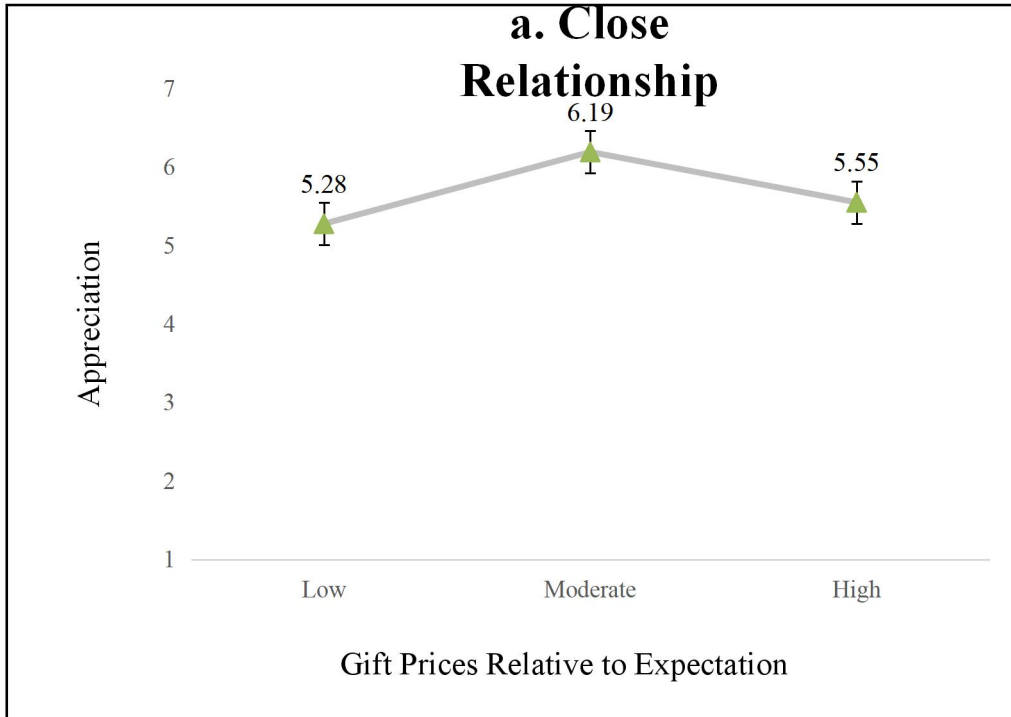


Table 1.

Summary of Studies 1-4: Means for dependent variable and mediators

| Study | Variable | Mean | SD | Cell size |
|--------------------------|--|------------------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Study 1 | Appreciation $F(2, 428) = 16.41, p < .001$ | $M_{\text{lower}} = 5.46$ | 0.94 | 142 |
| | | $M_{\text{similar}} = 6.09$ | 0.82 | 142 |
| | | $M_{\text{higher}} = 5.77$ | 0.98 | 147 |
| | Thoughtfulness $F(2, 428) = 19.49, p < .001$ | $M_{\text{lower}} = 5.30$ | 0.88 | 142 |
| | | $M_{\text{similar}} = 5.92$ | 0.79 | 142 |
| | | $M_{\text{higher}} = 5.76$ | 0.93 | 147 |
| | Burden to repay $F(2, 428) = 36.04, p < .001$ | $M_{\text{lower}} = 4.00$ | 1.36 | 142 |
| | | $M_{\text{similar}} = 3.76$ | 1.53 | 142 |
| | | $M_{\text{higher}} = 5.09$ | 1.36 | 147 |
| Study 2A | Appreciation $F(2, 179) = 16.11, p < .001$ | $M_{\text{lower}} = 5.45$ | 0.86 | 34 |
| | | $M_{\text{similar}} = 6.25$ | 0.68 | 116 |
| | | $M_{\text{higher}} = 5.87$ | 0.81 | 32 |
| Study 2B | Appreciation $F(2, 250) = 7.14, p = .001$ | $M_{\text{lower}} = 5.33$ | 1.30 | 11 |
| | | $M_{\text{similar}} = 6.19$ | 1.20 | 152 |
| | | $M_{\text{higher}} = 6.52$ | 0.73 | 90 |
| Study 3 | High reciprocity: | | | |
| | Appreciation $t(241) = .588, p = .56$ | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 5.81$ | 1.22 | 55 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 5.67$ | 1.34 | 56 |
| | Low reciprocity: | | | |
| | Appreciation $t(241) = -2.45, p < .05$ | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 5.62$ | 1.27 | 72 |
| $M_{\text{high}} = 6.15$ | | 1.17 | 62 | |
| Study 4 | Close Relationship: | | | |
| | Appreciation $F(2, 118) = 4.16, p < .05$ | $M_{\text{low}} = 5.28$ | 1.69 | 41 |
| | | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 6.19$ | 1.00 | 40 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 5.55$ | 1.60 | 40 |
| | Thoughtfulness $F(2, 118) = 2.85, p = .06$ | $M_{\text{low}} = 4.54$ | 2.17 | 41 |
| | | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 5.21$ | 1.68 | 40 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 5.48$ | 1.57 | 40 |
| | Burden to repay $F(2, 118) = 7.96, p = .001$ | $M_{\text{low}} = 3.78$ | 2.23 | 41 |
| | | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.18$ | 1.99 | 40 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 4.98$ | 1.93 | 40 |
| | Distant Relationship: | | | |
| | Appreciation $F(2, 129) = 3.07, p = .05$ | $M_{\text{low}} = 5.83$ | 1.35 | 48 |
| | | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 5.37$ | 1.73 | 43 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 6.15$ | 1.20 | 41 |
| | Thoughtfulness $F(2, 129) = 2.43, p = .09$ | $M_{\text{low}} = 5.28$ | 1.66 | 48 |
| | | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 4.95$ | 1.74 | 43 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 5.74$ | 1.53 | 41 |
| | Burden to repay $F(2, 129) = 2.88, p = .06$ | $M_{\text{low}} = 3.44$ | 1.86 | 48 |
| | | $M_{\text{moderate}} = 3.81$ | 2.08 | 43 |
| | | $M_{\text{high}} = 4.46$ | 2.13 | 41 |