

Experiential Gifts Are More Socially Connecting than Material Gifts

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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 experimentally investigates what type of gifts best connects people—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 people who receive experiential gifts consequently feel more connected to their gift giver than those who receive material gifts, regardless of whether the gift is consumed together. The connecting power of experiential gifts stems 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.

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 be more connecting 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 (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 as well as to gain insight into the connecting function of gifts, this research experimentally investigates what type of gift best connects people— 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 more personally beneficial than buying a material good. Compared to possessions, experiences lead to greater satisfaction (Carter and Gilovich 2010), less regret from missing out (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and ultimately greater happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), especially when the outcome of the experience is positive (Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009). Furthermore, the positive effect of purchasing an experience on one's happiness is enduring. Merely reflecting on a past experiential purchase can elevate one's current mood (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), and consumers are slower to hedonically adapt to them (Nicolao et al. 2009). These benefits of acquiring an experience over a possession stem from the fact that experiences contribute more to one's sense of self (Carter and Gilovich 2012), are more likely to be shared with others (Caprariello and Reis 2013), are often more unique (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and are harder to compare against alternatives (Carter and Gilovich 2010). When making a purchase for someone else (rather than for oneself), the relevance of these benefits becomes less clear—particularly if the intent is to foster a relationship and not merely to give a gift the recipient will like. So, although prior research offers guidance for what to buy to improve one's own well-being, question remains as to what to buy to improve relationships with others. Would giving something to do or something to keep forge a stronger social connection?

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 durable

gift can leave a lasting impression (Ariely 2011), because recipients might benefit from receiving a tangible gift to unwrap and keep as a reminder of the occasion and the gift giver.

A pilot study we conducted around Father's Day, however, hints that this tendency to give material gifts may 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 reported how close and connected they felt to their child (1 = *feel extremely distant and disconnected*, 9 = *feel extremely close and connected*), with the change in ratings reflecting 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 had received was material and experiential. A multiple regression analysis showed that gifts that were more experiential significantly improved fathers' relationships with their children ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(39) = 2.21$ ,  $p = .03$ ), whereas the material nature of the gift did not change the relationship between father and child ( $\beta = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(39) = -0.39$ ,  $p = .70$ ). Moreover, the material and experiential gift ratings were unrelated to feelings of connection before Father's Day ( $ps > .43$ ), indicating that experiential gifts were not more likely to be given in initially closer relationships. 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*, 9 = *felt closer and more connected*). Like fathers, mothers who received gifts that were more experiential reported feeling closer and more connected to their child as a result of receiving the gift ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(97) = 2.96$ ,  $p <$

.004). Together, these results provide preliminary evidence to suggest that experiential gifts lead recipients to feel more connected to their gift giver.

This is consistent with anthropological research suggesting that non-material gifts can be more 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 more connecting than material gifts, the results are correlational and based on small samples. Plus, the gifts received varied considerably and likely in more ways than the material versus experiential distinction. We therefore conducted three controlled experiments to more rigorously test for the greater connecting power of experiential gifts over material gifts, and to explore why experiential gifts may be more connecting.

## **GIFTS AND THE CONNECTING 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 2013; 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 connection. 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 2013). 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 2013), 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 in that we measure a gift's value by its ability to improve the relationship between a gift giver and recipient, rather than by the recipient's liking of the gift. That is, instead of focusing on the recipient's feelings about the gift, we focus on the recipient's feelings toward the gift giver, measuring how these change as a result of the type of gift received. This perspective is similar to that taken by existing qualitative research that explores how relationship realignment can result from a gift exchange. 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 greater connection between gift recipients and givers.

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 yield positive interpersonal effects (Clark and Finkel 2004; Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco 1998; Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006), whereas emotional suppression yields negative effects (Butler, Egloff, Wilhelm, Smith, Erickson, and Gross 2003). Indeed, disclosing one's emotions to another has been found to make the other feel closer than disclosing facts and information (Laurenceau et al. 1998). In addition, greater emotional intensity has been found to reduce perceived psychological distance (Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, and Dale 2010).

This means that a gift that evokes greater emotion should be more effective at improving relationships. An examination of prior research suggests that experiences not only increase positive emotions (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), but they can also 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 short-lived, which is not the case for experiences (Nicolao et al. 2009). We thus propose that the emotion felt by recipients when consuming an experiential gift will be stronger than when consuming a material gift, and this emotion will translate into gift recipients feeling closer and more connected to their gift givers.

Notably, the emotion evoked while 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 equally likely to elicit emotion during a gift exchange (e.g., a recipient could feel grateful 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 it was found that the valence of the emotion during a gift exchange mattered more than the intensity of emotion in predicting changes in the relationship (Ruth et al. 1999, 2004), we propose that it is the level of emotion during gift consumption that is responsible for the greater connecting power of experiential gifts over material gifts. For example, feelings of anger or sadness during a gift exchange may make a recipient feel less connected to the gift giver, whereas feelings of anger or sadness while attending a theatre performance of *Les Misérables* may make a recipient feel more

connected to the person who gave him the theatre tickets—and more so than if the theatre performance did not elicit a strong emotional response.

We further propose that the consumption of the experience need not be shared between the gift giver and recipient for it to evoke greater emotion, and thus be more connecting. Indeed, prior research has shown that people who write about the feelings they experience 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 making the recipient feel closer to the person.

Altogether, we predict that experiential gifts will make recipients feel more connected to their gift giver 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:** Recipients of experiential gifts will feel more connected to their gift giver than recipients of material gifts, irrespective of whether the gift is consumed together.
  
- H2:** Consuming experiential gifts evoke more emotion than consuming material gifts, and this greater emotionality mediates the effect of gift type on feelings of connectedness.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted field and laboratory experiments involving actual and hypothetical gift exchanges in the context of existing personal relationships. In study 1, gift givers were provided \$10 to buy a gift for someone they know; in study 2, participants were asked to recall a gift they had received from another person; and in study 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, and we measured gift recipients' feelings of connection toward their gift giver. To test for the underlying role of emotion, study 2 measured and study 3 manipulated the emotion evoked from consuming the gift distinctly from the emotion evoked from the gift exchange. Lastly, study 3 held the gift itself constant and tested whether highlighting the experiential (vs. material) aspects of a gift (i.e., a book) would increase connectedness. Together, these studies seek to contribute a better understanding of how different types of gifts can help foster closer relationships.

### **THE \$10 GIFT EXPERIMENT 1: ARE EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS MORE CONNECTING?**

Experiment 1 tests our primary hypothesis that recipients of experiential gifts will feel more connected to their gift giver than recipients of 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 connected gift recipients felt to their gift giver. 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 more socially connecting than material gifts.

## Method

Two-hundred twenty-four gift givers (63% female, 1% unspecified; ages 18-49;  $M = 20.9$ ) were recruited through a university laboratory to participate in a gift giving study. Gift givers were provided with \$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. 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.

*Relationship change.* 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. For example, 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 a movie tickets; and material gifts included a stuffed animal, a pair of socks, or a pint glass.

Recipients then reported how receiving the gift affected their relationship with their gift giver using the following measures. The first measure to gauge relationship closeness was the inclusion of other circle measure adapted from Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992). Gift recipients were presented with two identical sets of nine circle pairs representing their relationship with the gift giver; the first set represented their relationship before receiving the gift, and the second set represented their relationship after receiving the gift. In each of the nine circle pairs, one circle

was labeled “self” and the other circle was labeled “other,” and the circles varied in how much they overlapped (see appendix A). 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. 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 value of the second pair chosen. Positive numbers reflected an improvement in the relationship, 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 generate our measure of relationship change ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

*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 2013; Ward and Broniarczyk 2013), we also measured liking and thoughtfulness to assess whether material and experiential gifts differ on these dimensions. Recipients 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*;  $\alpha = .78$ ). Recipients also 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*;  $\alpha = .65$ ).

## Results and Discussion

*Relationship change.* 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 the base levels of connectedness 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 ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ;  $F(2, 107) = 0.17$ ,  $p > .84$ ).

An ANOVA conducted on the relationship change measure revealed that gift type had a significant effect on change in connectedness ( $F(2, 107) = 3.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Recipients of shared experiential gifts ( $M = 0.15$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) and non-shared experiential gifts ( $M = 0.09$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) felt more connected to their gift giver as a result of the gift, compared to those who had received a material gift ( $M = -0.27$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ; both  $ps < .05$ ; Figure 1). There was no difference in how connected recipients of shared and non-shared experiential gifts felt to their gift giver ( $p > .75$ ). These results thus provide experimental evidence supporting our prediction that experiential gifts are more connecting than material gifts, regardless of whether the experience is shared by the gift giver and recipient (H1).

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*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 connectedness ( $r(108) = .43, p < .001$ ), shared experiential gifts ( $M = 6.05, SD = 2.12$ ), non-shared experiential gifts ( $M = 5.76, SD = 2.32$ ), and material gifts ( $M = 5.88, SD = 1.99$ ) did not differ in how thoughtful recipients perceived them to be ( $F(2, 107) = 0.17, p > .84$ ). Similarly, even though recipients who liked their gift more reported feeling more connected ( $r(108) = .39, p < .001$ ), shared experiential gifts ( $M = 5.58, SD = 0.89$ ), non-shared experiential gifts ( $M = 6.05, SD = 2.12$ ), and material gifts ( $M = 5.88, SD = 1.99$ ) did not differ in how much recipients liked the gift ( $F(2, 107) = 0.17, p > .84$ ). Moreover, when gift type condition, thoughtfulness, liking, and the interactions of condition  $\times$  thoughtfulness and condition  $\times$  liking were included in a model predicting change in connectedness, the effects of gift condition, thoughtfulness, and liking all remained significant ( $ps < .05$ ), whereas the interaction effects were not ( $ps > .09$ ). This suggests that the experiential versus material nature of a gift has a significant and distinct effect on the relationship between the gift giver and recipient than the extent to which the gift is thoughtful and liked.

The results of this study show that people who received either shared or non-shared experiential gifts consequently felt more connected to their gift giver than people who received material gifts. 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 increased connectedness cannot be explained by how thoughtful or liked the gift is. The next study examines how emotion may be an underlying driver of the effect.

## **THE RECALLED GIFT EXPERIMENT 2: WHY ARE EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS MORE CONNECTING?**

Experiment 1 provided evidence for experiential gifts being more socially connecting than material gifts, and experiment 2 explores the underlying role of emotion in this connection. 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 stronger 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 improvement (H2).

A second objective of this study 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)  $\times$  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,  $M = 33.1$ ).

*Relationship change.* Measures similar to those in experiment 1 were used to assess how receiving the gift affected participants’ relationship with their gift giver. Participants again chose two pairs of overlapping circles: one to represent how close their relationship was before receiving the gift and one to represent how close their relationship was after receiving the gift

(see appendix A; adapted from Aron et al. 1992). Participants also rated their relationship both before and after receiving the gift on three pairs of 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 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 relationship change ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*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 when 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 the primary emotion they were feeling at that moment they felt most emotional from a list of 30 randomly-ordered discrete emotions (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), which included 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 of connectedness (e.g., loving).

*Thoughtfulness and liking.* Thoughtfulness and liking of the gift were measured using the same items as in experiment 1. 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 also asked to estimate the price of the gift, to report when they had received the gift, and to indicate their gift giver's relation to them (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 to what extent 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, and vacations, meals, and event tickets that were not consumed 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 (magnet) to \$19,000 (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 relation to the gift giver, and the corresponding estimated marginal means are reported.

*Relationship change.* Although a 2 (gift type)  $\times$  2 (shared) ANCOVA conducted on pre-gift connectedness showed no differences across conditions (the effect of gift type, shared

consumption, and their interaction were not significant,  $ps > .28$ ), the  $2 \times 2$  ANCOVA conducted on the measure of relationship change showed that receiving an experiential gift resulted in a greater change in connection than receiving a material gift ( $M_{\text{experiential}} = 0.72$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{material}} = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 520) = 6.83$ ,  $p = .009$ ). 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 greater connecting effect of receiving an experiential gift occurred regardless of whether the recipient consumed the gift with the 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 ( $F(1, 530) = 11.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Figure 2).

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 Insert figure 2 about here  
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*Emotion from consumption.* To examine the emotion evoked from consuming the gift, we first conducted a  $2$  (gift type)  $\times$   $2$  (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 and a non-significant interaction effect ( $ps > .89$ ). 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.  $M_{\text{material}} = 4.70$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ;  $F(1, 530) = 11.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the main effect of sharing

and the interaction remaining non-significant ( $ps > .13$ ). This suggests that regardless of whether consumption of the gift was shared with the gift giver, consuming an experiential gift evoked greater emotion than consuming a material gift. An examination of the specific emotions that participants felt most intensely while consuming the gift showed them to be mostly positive (97.6%; table 1).

We next conducted a mediation analysis with recipients' ratings of how emotional consuming the gift was as the mediator for the positive effect of receiving an experiential gift (vs. material gift) on relationship change, again controlling for estimated price, date of receipt, and relation to the gift giver. As before, experiential gifts were more connecting than material gifts ( $F(1, 522) = 7.30, p < .008$ ). In addition, gifts that were more emotional were more connecting ( $\beta = 0.14, SE = 0.02, t(522) = 33.95, p < .001$ ). When both gift type and emotion were entered into the model to predict relationship change, 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 ( $F(1, 521) = 3.24, p > .07$ ). 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 feel more connected to their gift giver, thus supporting our hypothesis (H2) that experiential gifts are more connecting than material gifts because they evoke greater emotion during consumption.

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Insert figure 3 about here

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*Emotion from gift exchange.* Having identified the significant role of the emotion evoked during gift consumption in the connecting ability of experiential gifts, we next examined the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. A  $2 \times 2$  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  $\times$  shared interaction ( $p = .69$ ) were also not significant. An examination of 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 connecting power of experiential gifts.

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Insert table 1 about here

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*Thoughtfulness and liking.* A  $2 \times 2$  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  $2 \times 2$  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 ( $ps > .18$ ).

Therefore, participants across all four gift conditions recalled gifts that were similarly thoughtful and liked. Furthermore, thoughtfulness and liking did not explain the effect of gift type on consumption. When change in connection was regressed on gift type, shared consumption, gift type  $\times$  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 connectedness was even stronger when the covariates were removed from the model ( $F(1, 528) = 11.40, p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

The results of this study containing a wide range of real-world gifts across a variety of relationships provide robust evidence that experiential gifts are more connecting 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 from the gift exchange. Specifically, consuming

experiential gifts evokes greater emotion than consuming material gifts, and it is this emotion that increases connection to the gift giver (H2).

Because the vast majority of participants in experiment 2 reported feeling a positive emotion when asked for the single emotion they felt most intensely while consuming their gift, there was not sufficient data for negative emotions to assess whether the connecting effect of emotion would generalize to negative emotions felt during 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 connected they felt to their gift giver 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 ( $M_{\text{material}} = 3.02$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{experiential}} = 3.29$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 510) = 20.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and this effect held for purely positive emotions ( $M_{\text{material}} = 3.52$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{experiential}} = 3.73$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ;  $F(1, 510) = 12.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and purely negative emotions ( $M_{\text{material}} = 2.08$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{experiential}} = 2.22$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 510) = 5.09$ ,  $p < .03$ ). Furthermore, significant indirect effects were observed when using the average of all 30 discrete emotions (95%  $CI = [.05, .15]$ ), the 15 positive emotions (95%  $CI = [.04, .14]$ ), and the 15 negative emotions (95%  $CI = [.003, .08]$ ) as mediators for the effect of gift

type on connectedness. This offers preliminary evidence suggesting that strong negative emotions evoked through gift consumption can also have a positive effect on connectedness.

### **THE BOOK EXPERIMENT 3: CAN HIGHLIGHTING THE EXPERIENCE PROVIDED BY A GIFT MAKE IT MORE CONNECTING?**

The previous two experiments demonstrate that material gifts are less socially connecting than experiential 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 connecting.

We conducted a pilot study as an initial test of whether the malleable experiential-material distinction could be leveraged to increase the connecting 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 ( $N = 109$ ;  $n_{\text{material}} = 64$ ;  $n_{\text{experiential}} = 45$ ; 64% female; ages 16-58,  $M = 21.5$ ), recipients of the more experiential gift ( $M = 7.47, SD = 1.50$ ) felt more connected to their gift giver than recipients of the more material gift ( $M = 6.92, SD = 1.34$ ;  $t(107) = 1.99, p < .05$ ;  $1 = \textit{felt more disconnected}, 9 = \textit{felt more connected}$ ). 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 made more connecting 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 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 from consuming the gift to test for its role through moderation.

Experiment 3 thus followed a 2 (gift type: material vs. experiential)  $\times$  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 feel more connected to their gift giver. Additionally, because we argue that experiential gifts increase connection by eliciting greater

emotion, we further predicted that recipients in the material condition who thought about their emotion from consuming the gift would similarly feel more connected to their gift giver. This experiment thus provides a highly controlled test for the connecting 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 amount 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)  $\times$  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.

*Relationship change.* The relationship measures were similar to those used in experiments 1 and 2, but they were adapted to separately measure the participant’s relationship with their friend before and after receiving the gift. 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 how close 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 measured closeness (1 = *extremely distant*, 9 = *extremely close*), connection (1 = *extremely disconnected*, 9 = *extremely connected*), and strength (1 = *extremely weak*, 9 = *extremely strong*). The four measures were averaged to form an index of relationship closeness before receiving the gift ( $\alpha = .90$ ). 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 measures. The average of these four items served as the index of relationship closeness after receiving the gift ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The pre-gift relationship index was subtracted from the post-gift relationship index to form the measure of relationship change

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

## Results

The 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  $\times$  emotion interaction ( $p = .59$ ) were not significant.

*Relationship change.* As expected from random assignment, there were no significant differences in pre-gift relationship closeness by gift type ( $p > .99$ ), emotion ( $p = .16$ ), or their interaction ( $p = .13$ ). More importantly, planned contrasts examining relationship change 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 relationship improvement 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 ( $F(1, 527) = 6.40$ ,  $p < .02$ ). 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 relationship improvement than the material control condition ( $F(1, 527) = 7.60$ ,  $p = .006$ ; Figure 4).

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Insert figure 4 about here  
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## Discussion

Experiment 3 provides a conservative and controlled test for the effect of gift type on relationship change by holding the gift constant across conditions and manipulating its experiential framing. Results showed that the gift of a book could be made more connecting by reminding the recipient 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 connecting effect of experiential gifts, but it also suggests that drawing recipients' attention to the emotion they will feel while consuming the gift may afford the same benefits as giving an experiential gift.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

People 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 connections *between* people, finding

that not all prosocial expenditures are equally beneficial. Indeed, despite gift givers' tendencies to give material possessions, material gifts turn out to do little to foster the relationships between gift givers and recipients. Experiential gifts, in contrast, make recipients feel closer to the person who gave them the gift, regardless of whether the experience is consumed together with the gift giver. Experiential gifts have this connecting effect because of the emotion they evoke when consumed, particularly when the emotion is shared.

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 connecting function of gifts. Recipients of experiential gifts felt more connected to their gift giver than recipients of material gifts (experiments 1 and 2), and the very same material gift framed as being relatively more experiential also made recipients feel more connected to the gift giver (experiment 3). A driving factor of this effect is the greater level of emotion elicited by consuming experiential gifts (experiment 2 and 3). Even though there was no difference in the intensity of emotion felt from receiving experiential and material gifts, recipients felt more emotional when consuming experiential (vs. material) gifts, and they became more connected to their gift giver as a result. From this, we learn that gift givers should give experiential gifts, rather than material gifts, to foster their relationships with others. Furthermore, experiences that are emotionally laden prove particularly connecting.

### Theoretical Contributions

Existing research has demonstrated that purchasing experiences (vs. material goods) for oneself positively affects one's personal well-being in terms of happiness, satisfaction, and

reduced regret (Caprariello and Reis 2012; Carter and Gilovich 2010; Nicolao, et al. 2009; Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Our findings build on this research by being the first to show the interpersonal benefits of purchasing experiences rather than material goods. Our findings also identify a novel advantage of experiential purchases that underlies the effect of experiential gifts on relationships: the greater emotion evoked when consuming an experience versus a material possession. Importantly, our research shows that the connecting effect of experiential gifts is not limited to gifts that are jointly consumed by the gift giver and recipient. Because the experience is received as a gift, the experience and the associated emotion are placed in the context of the relationship. The emotion associated with experiences may also provide 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 increased social connectedness 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.

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

2013), 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 feelings of connectedness, 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 connection. This suggests that the extent to which a gift is liked is orthogonal to the effect of giving an experiential gift on social connectedness. Rather, the gift's emotionality is what seems to make experiential gifts more connecting. 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 (Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth et al. 1999, 2004). Thus, by studying the emotion evoked from gift consumption and testing its impact on relationships, the results of our experiments 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 2013)?

The current research emphasizes the interpersonal benefits of giving experiences, but giving experiences may also produce intrapersonal benefits for the gift giver. In light of research documenting the personal happiness gained from prosocial spending (Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008), our findings suggest 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). Our finding that giving experiential gifts is more effective at fostering closer relationships therefore implies that gift givers should feel happier as a result of giving an experiential gift compared to a material gift. 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

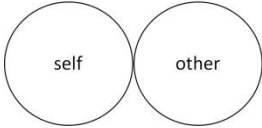
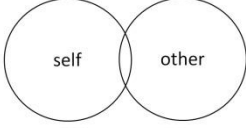
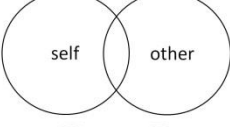
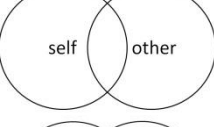
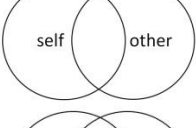
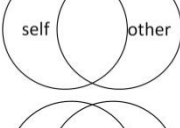
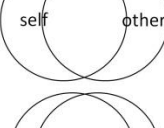
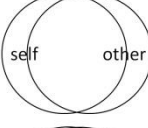

would be to get onto gift registries. For example, Travelers Joy is a service that enables soon to be married couples to create an experiential gift registry for their honeymoon, so that the couple's family and friends can select part of the honeymoon to give as a wedding gift (e.g., a surf lesson, dinner, 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: 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
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## 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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**Table 1**

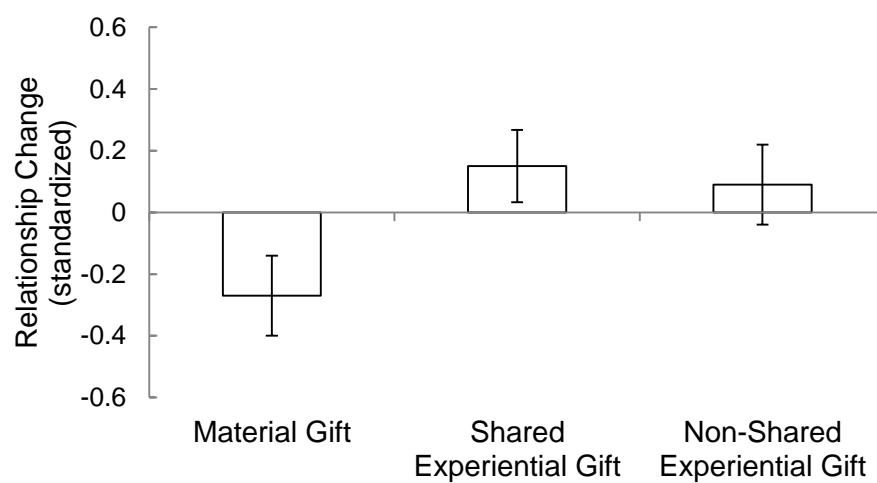
Experiment 2: Emotions felt most intensely during gift consumption and gift receipt (five most commonly reported)

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%



**FIGURE 1**

EXPERIMENT 1: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS OF EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) GIFTS



**FIGURE 2**

EXPERIMENT 2: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS OF  
EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) GIFTS

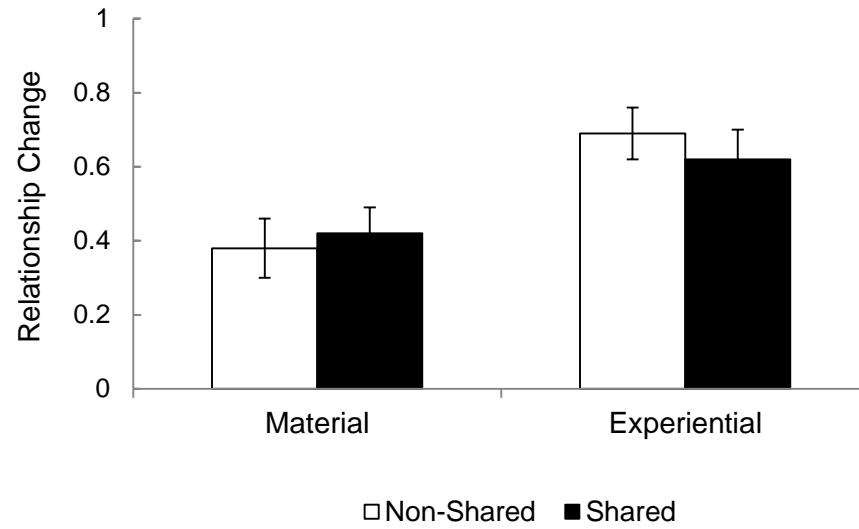
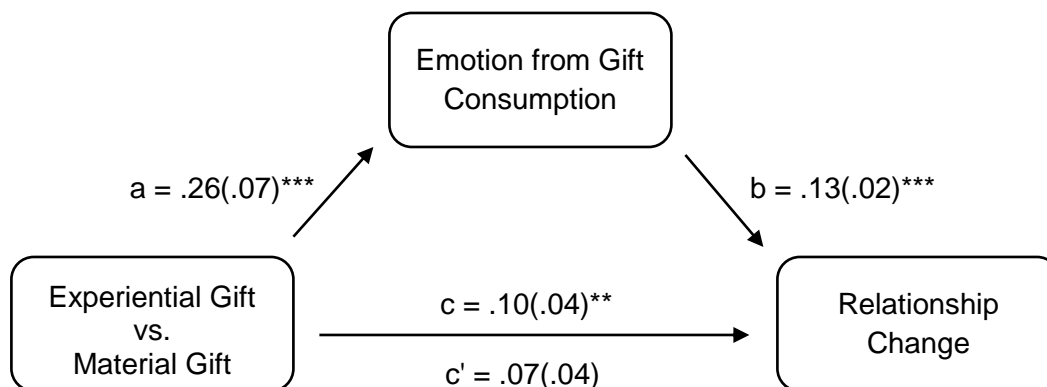


FIGURE 3

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 relation to gift giver as model covariates.

**FIGURE 4**

EXPERIMENT 3: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS FOCUSED  
ON THE GIFT'S EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) ASPECTS OR CONSUMPTION

