

Ask and You Shall (Not) Receive:

Close Friends Prioritize Relational Signaling Over Recipient Preferences in Their Gift Choices

MORGAN K. WARD

SUSAN M. BRONIARCZYK*

Morgan K. Ward is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Cox School of Business, Southern Methodist University, 6212 Bishop Blvd. Dallas, Texas 75275, (mkward@cox.smu.edu). Susan M. Broniarczyk is the Susie and John L. Adams Endowed Chair of Business and Professor of Marketing at the McCombs School of Business at The University of Texas at Austin, 2110 Speedway Stop B6700, Austin, Texas, 78712-1275, (susan.broniarczyk@mcombs.utexas.edu).

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Abstract

Gift givers balance their goal to please recipients with gifts that match recipients' preferences against their goal to signal relational closeness with gifts that demonstrate their knowledge of the recipient. Five studies in a gift registry context show that when close (vs. distant) givers receive attribution for the gifts they choose, they are more likely to diverge from the registry to choose items that signal their close relationships. We find that close givers' divergence from the registry is not the result of their altruistic search for a "better" gift, but is a strategic effort to express relational signals as it only occurs when they will receive attribution for their choice. We show that close givers reconcile their goal conflict by engaging in motivated reasoning resulting in their perceptual distortion of the gift options in favor of relationally signaling gifts. Ironically, distant givers are more likely to choose gifts from the registry, resulting in the selection of items that better match recipients' preferences.

Keywords: gift giving, social closeness, goal conflict, motivated reasoning, relational signaling

Imagine your birthday is approaching and a friend asks you what you want as a gift. You consider for a moment, then tell your friend *exactly* what you want. When your birthday arrives, does your friend present you with the gift you suggested, or an alternative s/he has chosen especially for you? This familiar scenario illustrates the persistent tension between whether to prioritize satisfying relationship partners' requests or signaling relationship closeness.

We examine these tradeoffs in the context of gift registries, which have received surprisingly little attention in consumer research, despite generating more than \$5 BN annually for retailers in the U.S. (Gift Registries, Mintel 2013) and spanning many milestone occasions, including weddings, baby showers, graduations, housewarmings, birthdays, anniversaries and religious events. The increase in the popularity of gift registries indicates givers' desire to mitigate misprediction of recipients' preferences, which often results in offering undesirable gifts (Gino and Flynn 2011). Indeed, registries enable givers to efficiently and effectively choose gifts that exactly match recipients' explicit preferences (Bradford and Sherry 2013). However, a registry also restricts givers from expressing relational sentiments by designating the gifts they should choose, rather than allowing them to choose gifts freely. Accepting explicit suggestions for gift purchases could be interpreted as the giver not knowing the recipient well enough to identify a desirable gift, or not wishing to expend time and effort to determine what such a gift might be (Belk 1996; Camerer 1988), thus inhibiting givers' goal to signal relational closeness. Consequently, the way in which givers prioritize their gift motives is likely to determine whether they purchase from the registry or favor freely chosen gifts.

In this research, we focus on gift exchange between friends and show that social closeness between givers and recipients affects how givers resolve whether to choose a registry gift or make a free choice. Close givers are especially invested in their friends' happiness and, as

such, are particularly motivated to select gifts that please the recipients. However, close givers experience the conflict about which gift to choose more acutely than do distant givers, as they are also strongly motivated to signal the intimacy of the relationship with their chosen gift. We find that despite their stated primary intention to please recipients, close (vs. distant) givers ultimately are more likely to ignore recipients' explicit registry preferences in favor of freely chosen gifts. We find that close givers' divergence from the registry is not the result of their altruistic search for a "better" gift, but is strategic, and only occurs when givers will receive attribution for their choice. We show that close givers reconcile their goal conflict by engaging in motivated reasoning resulting in their perceptual distortion of the gift options such that freely chosen relational-signaling gifts appear to better match recipients' preferences than the registry gifts recipients explicitly selected. In contrast, we find that distant givers feel less conflict and thus are less prone to distort their perceptions of the gift options. Consequently, distant givers are more likely to choose from gift registries, ironically resulting in the selection of items that better match recipients' preferences.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two Gift-giving Motives

Gift givers possess dual motivations: to choose gifts altruistically, which maximizes recipients' pleasure, versus choosing relational-signaling gifts that demonstrate givers' insights into the unique preferences, tastes and identities of their recipients (Belk 1996; Schwartz 1967), thereby confirming their commitment to the relationship. Prior research (Otnes et al. 1993; Sherry 1983; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014) finds that givers endorse choosing an item the recipient likes as their most important objective when selecting a gift. To achieve this goal, givers often

bait recipients into expressing their gift preferences and observe their daily activities to deduce which products they want, all in an effort to identify gifts that will be well liked by their intended recipients (Belk 1996). Givers often feel anxious about choosing the right items (Wooten 2000), as there are substantial interpersonal repercussions from offering gifts that are insensitive, offensive or incompatible with recipients' preferences, such as potentially undermining the relationship (Sherry et al. 1993).

On the other hand, consumer behavior researchers and social psychologists recognize that gift giving requires more than accurately matching recipients' preferences with appropriate products; it is a semiotic activity (Belk 1979; Schwartz 1967; Sherry 1983). Belk (1979) proposed that "establishing, defining and maintaining interpersonal relationships" are major social functions of gift giving. Sherry (1983) presented similar thoughts in his discussion of the social dimensions of gift giving, characterizing gift exchange as a reflection of the social connection between the giver and the recipient. Specifically, givers endeavor to find gifts that illustrate that they understand and can predict the preferences of recipients (Prendergast and Stole 2001). There are a myriad of ways that givers may choose gifts that signal relational intimacy between themselves and recipients, including investing large amounts of time, money or energy in the purchase. All of the various resources dedicated to gift procurement are intended to express that the item is more than an object to satisfy the recipient, but is also a social signal sent by a giver that s/he empathizes with and cares about the recipient's preferences (Prendergast and Stole 2001).

Most importantly, for a giver to effectively send a relational signal via a gift, s/he must choose an item that demonstrates that s/he can "infer the recipient's fondest desires without needing to be told" (Belk 1996, pg. 66). Doing so reveals the depth of his/her understanding and

empathy with the recipient (Belk 1996; Berg and McQuinn 1986). Belk explains that a giver's attentiveness to the recipient's particular needs and wishes is represented by an object that is uniquely appropriate for that recipient (Belk and Coon 1993). Camerer (1988) gives an example of this phenomenon when he writes, "When my friend surprises me with an obscure Hüsker Dü recording, he reveals his knowledge of my tastes," whereas choosing a token or prescribed gift (i.e. a registry gift) indicates a superficial, rather than deep knowledge of the recipient's attitudes and desires (Belk 1996). For this reason, cash gifts, which could be viewed as highly altruistic, as they enable recipients to purchase whatever they desire, are usually rejected by givers, as they does not express relational sentiments to their intended recipients (Prendergast and Stole 2001).

Pre-test of Gift Motivations

We conducted a pre-test to confirm that the motivations of choosing a gift which matches recipients' preferences and selecting a relational-signaling gift are givers' two dominant gifting goals within a comprehensive set of gifting motivations (see Table 1).

One hundred and seventeen participants (average age 33 years old) were instructed to rate a set of eight gifting goals on their importance (1 = very unimportant/7 = very important) in the context of a gift choice for either a close or distant recipient. Overall, their top goal was to "choose something that the recipient would like" ($M = 6.24$) and their secondary goal was to "choose something that acknowledges or expresses the relationship you have" ($M = 5.38$). Notably, choosing a gift that matched recipients' preference was significantly more important than givers' secondary goal of relational signaling, as well as the other gifting goals they rated ($M_{\text{Recipient Liking}} = 6.24$ vs. $M_{\text{Other Goals}} = 4.27$, $t=16.73$; $p < .0001$). Furthermore, both close and distant givers asserted that choosing gifts that matched recipients' preferences ($M_{\text{Close Friend}} = 6.66$

and $M_{\text{Distant Friend}} = 5.83$) was significantly more important than their secondary goal of relational signaling ($M_{\text{Close Friend}} = 5.85$ and $M_{\text{Distant Friend}} = 4.91$), ($M_{\text{Close Friend}} = 4.16$, $p < .0001$ and $M_{\text{Distant Friend}} = 3.81$, $p < .0003$). As expected, participants endorsed this socially desirable goal ordering, which prioritizes recipients' desires over their own relational needs. Yet, prior literature indicates that givers may diverge from their stated primary goal of preference-matching when actually selecting a gift (Gershoff and Johar 2006; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014). We contend that close (vs. distant) friends will feel the desire to relationally signal more intensely and hence their actual gift selection is more likely to deviate from their stated gifting goals.

Insert table 1 about here

The Role of Social Closeness in Givers' Motivations

The moderating role of social closeness in gift giving has been well established in prior literature and indicates that close friends place greater importance on gift exchange (Komter and Vollebergh 1997; Belk 1976; Sherry 1983) than do distant friends. In fact, the pre-test above corroborates these findings insofar as close friends reported that each of these two gifting goals were of higher importance than did distant friends ($M_{\text{Close Friend Top Two Goals}} = 6.25$ vs. $M_{\text{Distant Friend Top Two Goals}} = 5.37$, $F=21.67$; $p < .0001$). Further, it is not surprising that close friends are especially invested in their friends' happiness and report that their primary motive when selecting gifts is to please their intended recipients (Steffel and Leboeuf 2014; Belk and Coon 1993; Sherry 1983; Otnes et al 1993). Research indicates that close givers make personal sacrifices to choose items they think will delight their recipients. For instance, Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) show that in efforts to please recipients, close givers may even select gifts at odds with their own internal motivations or values, often resulting in an identity threat for the

givers. Similarly, Waldfogel explains that it is givers' desire to purchase altruistic gifts -- items that perfectly reflect recipients' preferences -- that drives them to select overpriced items for their intended recipients (1993).

Close givers are more invested in their relationships with close friends than with distant friends and thus feel a greater desire to relationally signal with their choice of gift. Because close friends place greater significance on gifts as signals of relationship health and quality than do distant friends (Camerer 1988; Joy 2001; Ruth et al. 1999), they are more likely to expend resources (i.e., travel long distances, perform extended searches, employ complex selection strategies and make larger monetary expenditures) (Belk 1976; Sherry 1983; Joy 2001; Otnes et al. 1993, Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014) in order to imbue gifts with relational signals. Together, these studies show that close givers are more attuned than distant givers to the social and interpersonal expectations that underlie gift exchanges and calculate their gift-selection strategies to demonstrate appropriate acknowledgment of social ties and relationship strength. Gifts that are easily acquired, widely available, or suggested by recipients may be rejected by close givers because they would not symbolize the relationship between themselves and recipients.

Contrary to close relationships, distant relationships are characterized by having greater emotional distance between givers and recipients (Aron and Aron 1986), resulting in fewer feelings of personal investment, sympathy, or involvement (Komter and Vollerberg 1997). Belk (1982) underscores the disparity in the importance of the signal that gifts carry in close versus distant relationships when he contrasts the selection of a first anniversary gift for a spouse with the selection of an obligatory graduation present for a distant relative. While the former may be a defining event in the relationship, the latter carries much less relational significance for both parties. Consequently, in distant relationships, giving gifts is more of a social obligation, in

which givers' intentions are generally limited to pleasing the recipient, rather than expressing relational sentiments. As such, gifts tend to be less symbolic, less likely to communicate feelings and more practical (Goodwin et al. 1990).

In sum, although both close and distant givers endorse wanting to please their recipients, close friends are more likely than distant friends to experience internal conflict when faced with a tradeoff between giving something that is certain to be well liked at the cost of signaling relational intimacy to the recipient.

Implications of Social Closeness and Conflicting Gift Motives for Gift Registry Choices

In this research, we examined the impact of givers' competing desires to please their intended recipients (versus relationally signal to them) on their decision to choose or reject gift-registry items. Because close gift givers have extensive personal knowledge of recipients' tastes, they may presume that they can diverge from the registry and select gifts that are as desirable to recipients' as the items they choose for themselves. However, it is doubtful that givers would have more insight into what recipients might like than the recipients themselves. Moreover, given the almost infinite items to choose from, the likely outcome of divergence from the registry is that givers will miss the mark and choose gifts that are less appealing to recipients than the ones they specifically requested (Gino and Flynn 2011). Thus, freely choosing non-registry gifts is a risky strategy, as it decreases the likelihood that recipients will like the gifts.

In the context of distant relationships, individuals also strive to seek positive exchanges with relational partners, although they are less emotionally attached to the recipients.

Thus Indeed, distant friends are motivated to please recipients, but simultaneously constrained by their incomplete knowledge of recipients' preferences. One important way to maintain distant

relationships and avoid uncomfortable interactions is to choose appropriate gifts for social occasions.

In light of close and distant givers' differing relational goals with respect to gift giving, we contend that givers' likelihood to select an item from a gift registry will reflect the social closeness between the two individuals. Consequently, we predict that close friends are more likely than distant friends to reject the registry gifts that are explicitly chosen by the recipient and, instead, select items that are symbolic of the relationship to demonstrate their connection to the recipients.

Receiving Attribution for Gift

Given that close givers diverge from registries in order to relationally signal, we would expect this only to occur when they anticipate receiving attribution for their gifts. According to Harbaugh (1998), givers receive a 'prestige benefit' (i.e. receipt of recognition and resulting positive perceptions) from recipients when they are aware that a gift has been given and who has given it. On the other hand, when given anonymously, gifts do not reliably function as relational signals and consequently givers do not receive relational benefits from their choices. Research on giving anonymously finds that people give less generously (even when they have close relationships with recipients) under conditions in which they receive no attribution (Hoffman et al. 1994; Burnham 2003). Thus, we propose that close givers' motivation to select relational-signaling items will be greatly diminished when they can no longer signal social closeness. Furthermore, if gift attribution affects the likelihood of registry divergence, this would evince a relational signaling motivation and rule out the explanation that divergence is a result of their altruistic search for gifts that better match recipients' preferences.

Motivated Reasoning and Distortion: An important question that arises is how close givers who receive gift attribution justify their rejection of items recipients have explicitly requested. We propose that motivated reasoning is one of the key mechanisms driving close givers' divergence from their stated primary goal to select an item most likely to please their intended recipients.

The theory of motivated reasoning proposes that people selectively retrieve, construct and process information in a manner that enables them to reach their desired conclusions (Kunda 1990; Kruglanski 1990). Balci et al. (2006) convincingly demonstrate this process by showing that people are likely to interpret an ambiguous situation in a way that is consistent with their goals for an outcome. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2010) show that an individual's cognitions and judgments are heavily influenced by their motivational states, and thus, when an individual's own goals clash, s/he may be motivated to alter his/her assessment of the options as a method of resolving the conflict.

Hence, we posit that close givers, who are striving to simultaneously please their recipients and signal the closeness of their relationships, are likely to distort their perceptions such that they will perceive freely chosen gifts that signal relationship closeness (rather than registry gifts), as those that best match recipients' preferences, thereby enabling givers to simultaneously satisfy both gifting motivations.

Hypotheses and Study Overview

In summary, our central thesis is that both close and distant givers must manage their two central goals: to choose a gift that simultaneously matches recipients' preferences and signals the relationship between them. In the context of the gift registry, we show that as the closeness

between givers and recipients increases, the likelihood of favoring relational signaling over matching recipients' preferences will increase, even when the signal comes at the cost of offering a less desirable gift. Accordingly, we predict that when choosing for close (vs. distant) recipients, givers who receive attribution for the gifts they choose will reject recipients' explicit preferences specified on the registry and, instead, satisfy their relational-signaling goals by diverging to a freely chosen gift. We demonstrate that rejection of the registry is a way close givers resolve their gifting conflict. Specifically, we show that givers engage in motivated reasoning, which leads them to distort their perceptions of gift options such that they perceive non-registry, relationally signaling gifts as a better match to recipients' preferences than registry gifts that the recipients, themselves, have chosen.

Five studies examine these hypotheses. In order to test our predictions, we intentionally created tightly controlled situations that directly pitted givers' two goals against one another. In our first study, using giver-recipient dyads, we found that close (vs. distant) friends were less likely to choose recipients' explicitly preferred items, resulting in less satisfactory gifts. In Study 2, we examined why givers are prone to making misguided gift choices and found that close (vs. distant) friends diverge from the registry in order to relationally signal, rather than because they conflate their own preferences with those of the recipient. In Study 3A, we manipulated whether close givers receive gift attribution from recipients and found that givers chose non-registry gifts because they enabled givers to signal relational sentiments, rather than because they were making an altruistic attempt to better match recipients' preferences. Next, in Study 3B, we sought the mechanism underlying close givers' selection of relationally signaling gifts and showed that close (vs. distant) givers distorted their perceptions of the gift options in favor of relationally signaling gifts only when they received attribution and were in gift purchase (vs.

browsing) mode. Finally, in Study 4, we relaxed the constraints of the prior studies and allowed givers to select registry items that align with recipients' preferences and tested the boundary condition of the gift occasion. We found that even under conditions in which situational norms encouraged givers to choose items from the registry that match recipients' preferences, close (vs. distant) givers were still more likely to diverge to relationally signaling gifts.

STUDY 1

In our first study, we used giver-recipient dyads and simulated a realistic registry choice (in which recipients created their own registries), which revealed their true preferences to the giver. After the givers made their gift choices, we investigated recipients' assessments of the gifts they received from their friends. Despite their expressed primary goal to match recipients' preferences, we predict that close (vs. distant) givers are more likely to reject registry gifts, thus ignoring recipients' explicit preferences in favor of a freely chosen gifts that signal their close relationship. Consequently, close (vs. distant) givers will be more likely to choose gifts that are less satisfactory to recipients.

Design and Procedure

Ninety undergraduate students from six different campus-based student groups participated in this experiment in return for a donation to their group. However, during the course of the study, two participants dropped out. In this 2 (social closeness: close vs. distant recipient) x 2 (participant role: giver vs. recipient) between-subjects experimental design, we designated half the participants as gift givers and the other half as gift recipients. One week prior to conducting the experiment, we asked each recipient to identify his/her three closest friends in the group. We used this information to manipulate social closeness by matching half the

recipients with givers who were among their three closest friends and the other half with givers who were not among the recipients' three closest friends. Thus, relationship closeness between giver and recipient varied based on recipients' assessment of their relationship. In order to verify our matching process, givers later completed an assessment of their social closeness to the recipient by responding to the question, "Relative to your other close friends at college, how close do you feel to [gift recipient name]?" on a (1 = very distant/10 = very close) Likert scale. Confirming our manipulation, we found that both givers ($M_{\text{Close friend}} = 6.8$ vs. $M_{\text{Distant friend}} = 4.2$, $F(1, 44) = 3.3$, $p < .002$) and recipients ($M_{\text{Close friend}} = 7.0$ vs. $M_{\text{Distant friend}} = 5.2$, $F(1, 44) = 2.21$, $p < .03$) in the Close Friend condition indicated having a closer relationship than those in the Distant Friend" condition.

The experimental scenario instructed all of the recipients to imagine that they were creating a gift registry that would include three product categories for their upcoming birthday party. Based on industry research by Mintel (Gift Registries, 2013) showing that most registrants specify "everyday household items that they did not own or wanted to upgrade/replace," we included familiar household items on the registry. Participants then were presented with five products from three different product categories (clocks, lamps and frames) and told to rate each product in the category on a 1 – 10 Likert scale (1 = strongly dislike/10 = strongly like). Recipients were instructed to circle their most-preferred product in each category, which would be added to their registry.

After a 24-hour time period, givers were sent an email and told to imagine that they were shopping for the birthday party of the recipient with whom s/he had been matched. Each giver was informed that the recipient had created a gift registry for him/herself and received the recipient's choices within only the lamp category (see appendix A). Givers were told the name of

the lamp that the recipient had registered for and instructed to go to an online shopping page which displayed five lamp choices, one of which was indicated to be the lamp registered for by the recipient. Next, givers chose one of the lamps as a gift for the recipient. Finally, we contacted the recipients and asked them to imagine actually receiving the gift selected by the givers and to assess their satisfaction with it on a 1 – 10 Likert scale (1 = not at all/10 = very much).

Results

The results show that givers choosing for a close (vs. distant) recipient were more likely to diverge from recipients' explicit preferences and instead opt for a freely chosen lamp. Supporting our prediction, a logistic regression reveals a main effect of social closeness on givers' likelihood to choose one of the non-registry lamps ($\chi^2 = 5.9, p < .01$) such that 61.00% of close friends versus 23.00% of the distant friends chose a non-registry gift.

Next, we examined recipients' satisfaction with the gifts they received. Consistent with Gino and Flynn (2011), the results reveal a main effect of gift choice on satisfaction such that recipients indicated that they are more satisfied by gifts chosen from the registry (vs. non-registry gifts) ($M_{\text{Registry}} = 8.4$ vs. $M_{\text{Non-registry}} = 6.6, F(1, 42) = 3.3, p < .002$). Notably, this main effect was qualified by a marginal interaction of social closeness ($F(1, 42) = 1.85, p < .07$), indicating that those in the Close Friend condition were less satisfied by a non-registry gift than those in the Distant Friend condition. Specifically, recipients were significantly happier with their close friends' gifts when the giver chose the registry item ($M = 9.25$) than when they selected a non-registry gift ($M = 6.36, F(1, 42) = 12.8, p < .001$), whereas recipients were equally satisfied with distant friends' gifts when they came from the registry ($M = 7.93$) as when they chose a non-registry item ($M = 7.20, F(1, 42) = .29, p > .59$). These results support our

contention that when close friends diverge from the registry, they are more likely to purchase a gift that is less preferred by the recipient.

Insert figures 1A and 1B about here

Discussion

This study provides evidence that givers in close relationships with their intended recipients are more likely to reject the registry comprising recipients' explicit preferences in favor of selecting freely chosen gifts, which fulfill their relational-signaling goals. This finding contributes to our understanding of givers' priorities when making a gift selection by showing that close givers often ignore recipients' explicit preferences, leading to their selection of less-liked gifts. While givers choosing for close friends may feel that by rejecting registry gifts and making their own choices they are expressing the intimacy they feel with the recipient, we find evidence that these gift choices are not looked upon positively by recipients.

While Study 1 results are consistent with our predictions that givers are motivated by different goals when choosing for close (vs. distant) friends, it remains unclear what drives givers to diverge from the registry. Our hypothesis is that close (vs. distant) givers are more likely to diverge because they are motivated to signal relationship closeness by demonstrating their knowledge of the recipients' tastes than to choose something the recipient would be assured of liking. Despite the explicit preference information provided, an alternative explanation is that close givers conflate their own preferences with recipients' tastes and choose accordingly (Aron et al. 1991; Gershoff and Johar 2006; Lerouge and Warlop 2006). For instance, spouses choosing items for one another have been shown to use their own tastes as a proxy for those of their relationship partner, even when provided explicit information indicating that their spouse's preferences differ from their own (Lerouge and Warlop 2006). Study 2 provided more direct

evidence of relational signaling and ruled out conflation as the mechanism underlying registry divergence by close givers. Moreover, rather than using participants with extant close and distant relationships, we manipulated social closeness for a more conservative test of our predictions.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we manipulated the social distance between the givers and recipients using a prime and specifically designed the gift-choice stimuli so that each item corresponded to the givers' gifting motivations. This design allowed us to observe how social closeness between givers and recipients influences which gift-giving goal givers pursue.

Design and Procedure

One hundred and fifty-three participants took part in a single-factor design experiment, in which we varied the social closeness between the givers and recipients and examined how social closeness influences givers' choice strategies. First, we primed the social closeness of the relationship using a word-search task in which participants (designated "givers") looked for words related to close friends (e.g., companion, dearest, intimate), or distant friends (e.g., stranger, associate, unknown). After completing the word search, participants moved on to an ostensibly unrelated study, in which they read a scenario directing them to choose a gift for a friend's housewarming party. Next, we confirmed our prime was successful by comparing participants' perceived social closeness to the recipients on 1 – 7 Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree / 7 = strongly agree) using a three-item social closeness measure (very close friends; relationship is not important (R); know each other very well; Cronbach's alpha = .90) (See appendix D). Participants exposed to the distant prime indicated that their social closeness to the

recipient was significantly lower ($M = 5.0$) than those in the close prime condition ($M = 5.7$, $F(1, 152) = 5.49$, $p < .02$).

Last, participants were told several pieces of personal and preference information (e.g., extracurricular activities, interests, aesthetic tastes) about the recipient, including that the recipient undertook “a long search for the apartment and was happy s/he found a historic apartment with lots of classic details that fit her/his tastes.” Thus, the scenario implied that the recipient had “classic” tastes. Participants then were told to imagine shopping for a gift for this individual at a local store, where the recipient had created a gift registry.

Dependent Measure

Participants were faced with a gift choice among three lamps (see appendix B), each of which represented a different aesthetic style: modern, classic and utilitarian. The utilitarian lamp was designated as the registry lamp. The choice set was designed to disentangle the motivations of the giver. Specifically, the registry lamp was moderately liked by the givers, but did not match recipients’ implied preference for classically designed products. Choosing this gift allowed givers to select an item they could be assured recipients would like, but which would not signal their close relationship by displaying their knowledge of recipients’ tastes. The classic lamp was the least liked by gift givers, but best matched recipients’ implied “classic” tastes; by choosing it, givers seemingly knowledgeable about recipients’ preferences could signal social closeness. In order to test whether givers diverged from the registry because they conflated their own preferences with those of the recipient, we also included a modern lamp, which was most preferred by gift givers, but did not satisfy recipients’ taste for classic design. Givers’ perceptions of the lamps were validated in a pre-test of 49 additional participants from the same subject pool (See appendix C).

Results

We used a logistic regression to test our hypothesis that givers differ in their propensity to choose from the registry when selecting a gift for a close (vs. distant) friend. We found the predicted difference in givers' choices as a function of the social closeness between giver and recipient to be significant $X^2(2, N = 153) = 29.66, p < .0001$. Supporting our hypothesis, close friends (36.36%) were less likely to choose the registry item than distant friends (60.53%), $X^2(2, N = 153) = 20.55, p < .0001$ ¹.

Next, we ran separate analyses for each social closeness condition to assess the differential giving motivations of close vs. distant friends. In the Close Friend condition, givers were equally likely to choose the classic lamp (48.05%) as the registry lamp (36.36%), $X^2(1, N = 153) = 1.23, p > .27$) with few opting for their own preferred gift of the modern lamp (14.29%), $X^2(1, N = 153) = 6.90, p < .009$). That is, close givers were equally inclined to make a gift choice of a classic lamp, which indicates their knowledge of the recipient's tastes, as to choose the registry gift explicitly selected by the recipient. Few close givers exhibited preference conflation for the modern lamp.

In contrast, in the Distant Friend condition, the predominant gift choice was the registry lamp (60.53%), with givers exhibiting significantly greater likelihood of choosing this lamp than diverging to the classic lamp (9.21%), $X^2(1, N = 153) = 21.53, p < .0001$), or the modern lamp (31.58%), $X^2(1, N = 153) = 6.3, p < .01$). When distant givers did diverge, they were more likely to use their own preferences for the modern lamp (31.58%) than choose the classic lamp (9.21%), $X^2(1, N = 153) = 6.68, p < .0001$). This data led us to believe that those in the distant

¹ Further, to investigate our relational signaling prediction, we also created a contrast code that pit the registry lamp against the classic lamp and found that close friends were more likely to reject the registry in favor of the classic lamp (48.05%) than distant friends (9.21%), $X^2(1, N = 153) = 20.55, p < .0001$).

friend condition were less motivated to choose a relationally signaling lamp that revealed their knowledge of the recipient.

Insert figure 2 about here

Discussion

Corroborating Study 1, we found that close (vs. distant) givers were more likely to diverge from the registry and, in pursuit of their relational goals, select a freely chosen gift. In fact, close friends were equally likely to choose a relationally signaling gift as to choose from the registry. Further, the data indicated that when close givers did diverge from the registry, they did not conflate their own preferences with recipients, but rather chose a gift that they inferred to be aligned with recipients' preferences. On the other hand, distant friends were shown to be strongly motivated to choose a gift from the registry, but when they did diverge, relied on their own preferences to guide them.

Thus, in the first two studies we found support for our prediction that despite endorsing their primary goal of choosing gifts that would be most liked by the recipient, close friends were more likely than distant friends to diverge to freely chosen gifts. In the following studies, we will investigate the underlying process mechanisms that drive close givers' to relationally signal via their gift choices findings. First, in Study 3A, we observe how receiving attribution influences close friends' choice of gifts that signal their relationships. Next, in study 3B, we examine whether close (vs. distant) givers perceive the gift options differently, such that close givers engage in motivated reasoning and distort their perceptions in favor of relationally signaling gifts when they receive attribution and are making a gift purchase decision.

STUDY 3A

In Study 3A, we focused only on close friends in order to observe how receiving attribution affected close givers' choice strategies. We manipulated whether givers received attribution from recipients for the gifts they chose and inferred that if close givers' motivation is genuinely to choose gifts they perceive to best match the preferences of recipients, their gift choices should be unaffected by whether the gifts are attributed to them or not. However, if, consistent with our prediction, close givers chose non-registry gifts as a way of fulfilling their goal to signal the relationship, they would only do so when they receive credit. By this logic, close givers who do *not* receive attribution are expected to behave more like distant friends and will be less likely to diverge from the registry, as they cannot achieve their relational-signaling goal when they give anonymously.

Design and Procedure

Eighty-three participants completed an experiment with a single-factor design, in which we varied whether givers disclosed their identities (reveal vs. anonymous) to a close friend who lived far away, for whom they had purchased a gift. Because we are particularly interested in the nature of relational signaling, we told all participants that they were choosing a gift for a close friend. However, we varied givers' ability to relationally signal by explaining to half of the participants that their identity would be revealed (vs. remain anonymous) to the recipient after the gift exchange. Specifically, participants were informed that they would use a "Secret Santa" website (Elfster.com) that automates the gifting process by assigning each recipient a Secret Santa, communicating recipients' gift preferences and delivering the gift chosen by the givers.

In the Reveal condition, participants were told that after the gifts they chose for the recipient were opened, Elfster.com would disclose their identity to the recipient. Our objective

was to make it explicit to givers that they would receive credit from the recipient for their choice. Conversely, participants in the Anonymous condition were told that Elfster.com would keep their identity secret. By providing this information to givers, we emphasized that they would *not* receive attribution for the gift from the recipient and, thus, there was no mechanism to signal relational intimacy. After reading about Elfster.com, all participants were given the same information about the gift recipient described in Study 2, as well as the same set of lamp choices.

Results

We performed a logistic regression to determine whether close givers differed in their propensity to choose from the registry as a function of giver-identity disclosure. We verified our prediction that close givers' likelihood to choose from the registry varied as a function of whether their identities were revealed. Specifically, we found that those whose identities were revealed were significantly more likely to diverge (45.24%) than those who remained anonymous (27.50%), $X^2(2, N = 83) = 7.2, p < .03$.

Next, we isolated the choice of the registry lamp versus the classic lamp and found that exposing givers' identities to the recipients significantly predicted their decision whether to choose the registry lamp or to reject it in favor of the relational-signaling classic lamp $X^2(1, N = 83) = 4.04, p < .04$. Specifically, close givers were significantly more likely to choose the classic lamp when their identity was revealed (40.48%) vs. remained anonymous (15.00%), $(1, N = 83) = 6.17, p < .01$.

We then looked at each of the giver identity-disclosure conditions in more detail. In the Reveal condition, we found that givers showed no difference in their likelihood to choose the registry lamp (54.76%) vs. the relationally signaling classic lamp (40.48%), $X^2(1, N = 83) t =$

.10, $p > .74$), indicating that close givers were at least as inclined to diverge from the registry to a gift that matched the recipients' perceived tastes as to choose a registry item that matched their explicit preferences. However, significantly fewer close givers (4.76%) chose their own preferred modern lamp over the other lamps, $X^2(1, N = 83) t = 32.40, p < .0001$). This pattern of results replicated our findings in Study 2 and confirmed that close givers were equally likely to choose a gift that signals their knowledge of recipients' tastes as to choose an item that recipients have selected and is likely a better match to their preferences.

Finally, we examined the Anonymous condition and found that close givers selected the registry lamp (72.00%) significantly more than the classic lamp (15.00%), $X^2(1, N = 83) = 14.85, p < .0001$ and the modern lamp (12.50%) $X^2(1, N = 83) = 6.40, p < .01$). This finding supported our prediction that when close givers do not receive credit for their choice, they are no longer motivated to seek a gift that reflects recipients' expressed tastes, as doing so will not enable the giver to signal the relationship to the recipient.

Insert figure 3 about here

Discussion

Close givers' divergence from the registry increased when their identity was revealed (vs. anonymous), demonstrating that their selection of a freely chosen gift was strategic, occurring only when the relationship would benefit from the choice. Conversely, close givers who remained anonymous had no incentive to relationally signal and, instead, deferred to the registry. In this context, where recipient preferences are explicitly provided, we again observed limited evidence of preference conflation.

In our pre-test of givers' gifting objectives, both close and distant gift givers maintained that when selecting a gift, their highest priority was to choose an item that the recipient will like

above their goal to choose a gift that signals their relationship. Yet, our first three studies revealed that when they receive attribution, close givers are equally, if not more likely, to reject the registry option in favor of a relationally signaling gift as to choose a registry item that presumably best matches the recipients' expressed preferences.

Although their choice to diverge from the registry suggested that close givers were less concerned with recipients' preferences than were distant givers, we contend that close givers are more conflicted when they make this choice. We found empirical evidence to support this contention in a separate study in which 75 participants were directed to the same procedure described in Study 2. After completing their gift choice, participants were asked to envision choosing between the registry and classic lamps and rate how conflicted, how difficult and how easy (reverse coded) it would be to choose between the items on 1 – 7 Likert scales (1 = not at all / 7 = very much) (See appendix D for specific items). The three measures were combined to form a decision-conflict index (Cronbach's alpha = .90). The data confirmed that close givers felt significantly higher decision conflict than did distant givers in deciding between these two gift options ($M_{\text{Close Givers}} = 4.03$ vs. $M_{\text{Distant Givers}} = 2.93$, $t(1) = 6.38$, $p < .01$)

STUDY 3B

In study 3B, we built on this finding and examined whether close givers' conflict between their dual gifting motivations led them to engage in motivated reasoning, whereby they distorted their perceptions of the gift options. Prior research has demonstrated that individuals' goals are likely to impact their judgments, insofar as their goals may cause them to see and interpret information in support of their specific motives (Balcetis and Dunning 2006; Dunning 2001; Kruglanski and Klar 1987; Kunda 1990; Zhang et al. 2010). We investigated whether close givers engaged in motivated reasoning in order to avoid making a difficult goal tradeoff. If close

givers' perceptions of the gift options were distorted such that relational-signaling (vs. registry) gifts were perceived as better matching recipients' preferences, this would satisfy both gift motivations. Thus, in this study we focused on givers' assessments of the gift options to fulfill the two gifting motivations: matching recipients' preferences and signaling their relationship.

Consumers are more likely to distort product attributes when they are facing a difficult tradeoff and are seeking a clear, dominant choice for purchase, rather than when they are simply assessing different options (Russo et al. 1998; Shrift et al. 2011). Building on this research, we examined how close and distant friends differentially perceived gift options, depending on whether they were tasked with purchasing (vs. browsing for) a gift.

We propose that when close givers are tasked with making a purchase, as in our first three studies, they are more encumbered with concerns about how the gift will be perceived by the recipient and, as such, are motivated to select an item that will be seen as a relational signal. Consequently, close givers will be faced with the conflict of choosing a relational-signaling gift vs. one that the recipient has requested. Specifically, we predict that close givers would distort their perceptions such that they would perceive the relational-signaling gift as a better match to recipients' preferences. By interpreting the signaling gift in this way, close givers may resolve their goal conflict without sacrificing their goal of choosing recipients' most liked items.

Conversely, we predicted that when close givers were simply browsing and assessing the gifts (vs. purchasing), they would not be encumbered by a gift-motive tradeoff and would be more objective about which gift would best match recipients' preferences. In this case, we expected close givers in browsing mode not to be biased by their signaling motive and to objectively perceive the registry item as the best match to recipients' preferences.

To provide further evidence of the strategic nature of close givers' distortion of the relational-signaling gift, we again varied gift attribution and social closeness. Consistent with Study 3A, we expected that only close givers in purchasing mode who received gift attribution would distort the gift options such that the relational-signaling gift would be seen as the best match to recipients' preferences. Close givers who gave anonymously and distant givers were less likely to have their signaling motive activated and, hence, were not expected to engage in motivated reasoning.

Design and Procedure

In this experiment, we instructed all 150 participants to think of either a distant or close friend and record his/her initials, after which participants answered the same social-closeness manipulation check questions as in prior studies. The average of these three social-closeness measures (Cronbach's Alpha = .84) confirmed that participants in the Close Friend conditions perceived their social closeness to the recipient as significantly higher ($M = 6.32$) than those in the Distant Friend condition ($M = 5.67$, $F(1, 149) = 15.84$, $p < .0001$).

The experimental design was composed of two within-subjects factors: 3 (lamp assessed: classic vs. modern vs. registry) and 2 (gift motivation measure: relational signaling vs. match to recipient preference) and three between-subjects factors: 2 (identity disclosed: reveal vs. anonymous) x 2 (shopping mode: browsing vs. purchasing) x 2 (social closeness: close vs. distant). The lamp stimuli were the same as those in Study 2. Participants assessed each of the three lamps on two measures, directly tapping the two gift motivations. Specifically, participants were instructed to look at each lamp and indicate the extent to which they agreed with two statements which were counter-balanced, assessing relational signaling ("Choosing this lamp as a

gift would indicate the relationship you have with your friend”) and match to recipients’ preferences (“Choosing this lamp as a gift would enable you to match the preferences of the recipient”) on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree/7=strongly agree).

The Gift-Attribution condition was similar to Study 3A, varying whether givers who exchanged gifts via Elfster.com revealed their identities (vs. remained anonymous). Social closeness to the gift recipient was manipulated by indicating to participants that they were purchasing the gift for a close (vs. distant) friend who lived far away. After reading about Elfster.com, all participants were given the same information about the gift recipient in Study 2, as well as the same set of lamp choices. The final key manipulation was the shopping mode instruction to participants prior to rating the two gifting motivations. In the Purchasing condition, which is analogous to prior studies, participants were instructed that they were, “going to a website to determine which gift to purchase.” Conversely, in the Browsing condition, participants were told they were browsing the Web for ideas about what to buy but, “are just looking and aren't ready to purchase.”

Results

We focused on the lamp contrast between the registry lamp and the classic lamp, which was consistent with recipients’ implied tastes. First, we found a four-way interaction between the key variables of Lamp Contrast X Identity Disclosure X Social Closeness X Shopping Mode on the assessment of a relational-signaling gift ($F(1, 149) = 4.99, p < .026$). However, the interaction using the same variables to predict the assessment of a preference-matching gift was non-significant ($F(1, 149) = 1.86, p < .17$). Next, in each Shopping Mode condition, we

examined the relevant three-way interaction between Lamp Contrast X Identity Disclosure X Social Closeness for both measures of relational signaling and match to recipient preferences.

Browsing mode: Consistent with our predictions, participants in the Browsing condition were more objective in their assessments of the gift options. When assessing the choice of a relationally signaling gift, we found a significant main effect of lamp such that participants perceived the registry lamp as a better relational signal ($M= 5.87$) than the classic lamp ($M =3.86$, $F(1, 149) = 60.82$, $p < .0001$). There were no two- or three-way interactions (p 's $> .20$) for assessment of relational signaling. We observed a similar pattern of results for participants' assessments of the gift that matches recipients' preferences. Specifically, we observed a significant main effect such that givers felt that the registry gift was a better match to recipients' preferences ($M= 5.75$) than the classic lamp ($M =4.20$, $F(1, 149) = 47.72$, $p < .0001$). Again, there were no two- or three-way interactions (p 's $> .20$) for assessment of match to recipient's preferences. These results indicated uniformly that participants who were simply browsing perceived the registry gift to be better as both a relational signal and as a match to recipients' preferences than the classic lamp.

Purchasing Mode: As predicted, we observed a markedly different pattern of results when participants assessed the gift options with the expectation of making a purchase, as they experienced the gift motivation conflict more acutely. First, when assessing the relationally signaling gift, we observed a significant three-way interaction between Lamp Contrast, Identity Disclosure and Social Closeness ($F(1, 149) = 8.33$, $p < .004$). Follow-up tests showed that when givers' identities were revealed, there was a significant two-way interaction between Lamp Contrast and Social Closeness ($F(1, 149) = 20.61$, $p < .0001$). The simple effects showed that close givers perceived the classic lamp ($M = 6.10$) as a better relational signal than the registry

lamp ($M = 4.76$), ($F(1, 149) = 6.74, p < .01$). In contrast, distant givers perceived the registry lamp ($M = 6.38$) as a better relational signal than the classic lamp ($M = 4.08$), ($F(1, 149) = 6.74, p < .01$). However, when givers' identities remained anonymous, results were consistent with the browsing condition such that participants perceived that the registry gift ($M = 5.55$) was a better relational signal than the classic lamp ($M = 4.00, F(1, 149) = 14.65, p < .0002$), with no interaction as a function of social closeness ($F(1, 149) = .00, p < .98$). Thus, the results showed that when assessing the gift in Purchase Mode, close givers who were to receive attribution for their gift choice perceived the classic lamp as a better relational signal than the registry lamp, whereas givers in all other conditions perceived the opposite, that the registry lamp was a better relational signal than the classic lamp.

Next, we examined whether close givers in Purchase Mode who received gift attribution similarly distorted their perception of the gift options' match to recipient preferences. Indeed, we observed a similar effect with a three-way interaction between Lamp Contrast, Identity Disclosure and Social Closeness ($F(1, 149) = 6.55, p < .01$). Follow-up tests showed that when givers' identities were revealed, there was a significant two-way interaction between Lamp Contrast and Social Closeness ($F(1, 149) = 29.5, p < .0001$). Simple effect tests showed that close givers perceived the classic lamp ($M = 5.90$) as a better match to recipients' preferences than the registry lamp ($M = 4.38$), ($F(1, 149) = 6.56, p < .01$). In contrast, distant givers whose identities would be revealed perceived the registry lamp ($M = 6.31$) as a better preference match than the classic lamp ($M = 3.69$), ($F(1, 149) = 6.74, p < .01$). However, when givers' identities were to remain anonymous, results were consistent with the Browsing condition such that participants perceived that the registry gift ($M = 5.12$) was a better match to preferences than the classic lamp ($M = 4.43, F(1, 149) = 7.30, p < .008$), with no interaction as a function of social

closeness ($F(1, 149) = .28, p < .59$). Thus, the results showed that when assessing the gift in Purchase Mode, close givers who received attribution perceived the classic lamp as a better match to recipients' preferences than the classic lamp; givers in all other conditions perceived the opposite, that the registry was a better match than the classic lamp to recipients' preferences.

Insert figure 4 about here

Discussion:

The results of this study corroborated our prediction that givers perceive gifts differently, depending on whether they were assessing gift options in browsing or purchase mode. Givers in the browsing condition perceived the registry item as the best relational signal and match to recipient preferences. Similarly, givers who were distant friends or did not receive gift attribution perceived the registry item as the best relationship signal and match to recipient preferences, regardless of shopping mode. In contrast, the data demonstrated how close givers justified their relational-signaling gift choices such that when faced with the typical situation, in which the gift they choose will send an important relational signal (in purchasing mode/with attribution), they appeared to see the gift most capable of sending this signal as the best match to recipients' preferences. In doing so, these givers resolved their goal conflict and felt secure in giving gifts that they perceived would fulfill both of their important motives. Furthermore, we identified the important role of attribution, which underscored that close givers' gift perceptions were motivated by a desire to send important interpersonal signals.

In the final study, we investigated several issues to test the boundaries of our findings. In our prior studies, we directly pitted givers' motivation to preference match vs. relationally signal by having the registry gift differ from the gift matching recipients' tastes. In contrast, Study 4 examined how gift givers chose from the registry (vs. diverged to a free choice gift) when the

selected registry item also was a good match to recipients' tastes. This test helped us clarify whether it was givers' desire to choose a gift that truly matched recipients' preferences, or if such divergence reflected givers' desire to choose a gift unaided by recipients' suggestions.

Secondly, in order to make the experiment more analogous to a real-world gift registry, we expanded the number of gift categories and registry options among which givers could choose. Third, we varied the extent to which the gift context was associated with a gift registry, comparing a housewarming context to a wedding context. As weddings are the most common registry context (42% of registry purchases, Gift Registries, Mintel 2013), the strong norms associated with choosing from a gift registry provided a tough test of our hypothesis, as diverging may pose a substantial social risk.

STUDY 4

Three distinct changes were made to the stimuli in Study 4 to make the choice situation more analogous to a real registry selection and to create a more conservative test of our hypotheses. First, the registry gifts were chosen to match (rather than be non-reflective of) the recipient's tastes, as well as align with givers' preferences. Specifically, participants were shown registry products that were pre-tested (see appendix E1 for pre-test) as having a 'simple' and 'clean' design and told that the recipient had 'simple and clean tastes' in all conditions. Secondly, there were three product categories available, rather than one, with one product in each category indicated as the registry item, resulting in three total registry options and nine total product choices. This made the experimental set-up more analogous to a typical registry, insofar as there were more options that matched recipients' preferences to choose among across multiple product categories. Further, the products themselves were from new product categories (i.e. picnic

baskets, blenders, wine buckets), which were pre-tested to be equally appropriate and desirable for the housewarming and wedding occasions in the experiment (see appendix E2 for pre-test).

Lastly, we varied the extent to which the gifting occasion had a strong (wedding) vs. moderate (housewarming) norm associated with purchasing a gift from a registry. Givers often manage their goal conflict by defaulting to the norms surrounding the gifting occasion (Wolfenbarger 1990; Lowes et al. 1971; Belk 1979) Because recipients guide givers toward the gifts they want by creating gift registries more typically for weddings than for housewarming parties, givers are likely to feel that choosing an item from the registry is more appropriate for a wedding than a housewarming. We confirmed this manipulation in a pre-test of 53 participants who rated a wedding ($M = 5.90$) as more strongly associated with a gift registry than a housewarming ($M = 4.45$; $F(1,52) = 35.52$, $p < .001$) on 1- 7 Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) (see appendix D for pre-test details). We expected that givers choosing wedding (vs. housewarming) gifts would be more likely to conform to the norms of the registry. Consistent with our central thesis, we predicted close givers would still be more likely than distant givers to diverge from the registry in favor freely chosen gifts in both occasion contexts.

In order to test this prediction, we recruited 155 participants to take part in a 2 (gift occasion: housewarming vs. marriage) X 2 (social closeness: close friend vs. distant friend) experiment, in which they read about choosing a gift for a friend for an upcoming occasion. First, we asked givers to think of a close (vs. distant) friend and record his/her initials. After thinking of a friend, participants (givers) read a scenario similar to the one in Study 2, except they were asked to imagine purchasing a gift for friend whose tastes are “simple and clean” and who has created a gift registry for her upcoming wedding (vs. housewarming party). After reading about the recipient’s preferences, participants were asked to make a gift choice and

brought to a page with the nine gifts (three of which were registry items) available. Finally, participants answered manipulation check questions identical to prior studies about their social closeness to the recipient (Cronbach's alpha = .84), which confirmed that participants who were asked to think of a close friend indicated their social closeness to the recipient was significantly higher ($M = 5.90$) than those who imagined a distant friend ($M = 3.78$, $F(1, 154) = 133.25$, $p < .0001$). Given that in this experimental design the registry options were pre-tested to align with recipients' purported preferences, this is a conservative test of our prediction that close friends would diverge from the registry.

Results:

First, we analyzed how individuals differentially chose from the registry when they were purchasing a gift for a wedding vs. for a housewarming. As expected, there was a main effect of gift occasion such that irrespective of their social distance from the recipient, givers were more likely to diverge from the registry when they were making a Housewarming (37.14%) vs. Wedding (13.09%) gift selection $X^2(1, N = 84) = 8.25$, $p < .004$. Furthermore, corroborating our hypotheses and prior study results, the data showed a main effect of social closeness, with close givers (35.71%) more likely than distant givers (17.14%) to diverge to a freely chosen gift $X^2(1, N = 70) = 4.57$, $p < .03$.

We replicated prior results that social closeness affected registry divergence regardless of the norm of the gifting occasion with a non-significant interaction between Gifting Occasion and Social Closeness $X^2(1, N=155) = .10$, $p < .75$. Specifically, in the moderate registry norm context of housewarming, significantly more close friends (48.57%) than distant friends (25.71%) were willing to diverge from the registry ($1, N=155$), $= 3.82$, $p < .05$). Even in the

Wedding conditions, in which strong normative expectations existed that compelled givers to select from the registry, close friends (20.51%) were marginally more likely than distant friends (6.67%) to diverge from the registry (1, N=155), $t = 3.21, p < .07$).

Insert figure 5 about here

Discussion

This study demonstrated that gifting norms play an important role in how givers make choices depending on the occasion for which they are purchasing. Although the norm to choose from a registry attenuated close friends' likelihood to diverge, it did not eliminate the effect of social closeness. That is, we still observed that givers diverged from the registry when selecting for close friends, even when the norms encouraged purchasing from the registry. Thus, we conclude that the desire to signal relationship closeness is so important that close givers are willing to take social risks to achieve this goal. Furthermore, this experiment revealed that even when participants have additional registry options aligned with recipients' stated preferences, we replicated the finding from prior studies that close givers are more likely than distant givers to diverge to a free-choice gift, irrespective of norms demanding they choose from the registry.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In five studies, we explored how close (vs. distant) gift givers managed their purported focal motivation to choose a gift that matched recipients' preferences against their desire to signal relational intimacy via the purchase. First, in Study 1, using gift registries created by individuals in close (vs. distant) relationships, we found that close (vs. distant) givers were more likely to diverge from the registry. Furthermore, we observed that the result of such a free choice was that close givers were more likely than distant givers to offer less-liked gifts to their most important friends. In Study 2, we examined givers' motivation to choose non-registry items and

showed that close (vs. distant) givers diverged from the registry in order to choose a gift that allowed them to fulfill their motive to relationally signal, rather than because they conflated their preferences with recipients. We showed close-giver divergence to be robust across the gifting occasions of birthday (Study 1), housewarming (Studies 2-4) and wedding (Study 4). In Study 3A, we ruled out the competing hypothesis that close givers selflessly opt for free-choice gifts by demonstrating that they were more likely to select freely chosen gifts only when they were certain they would receive attribution for the items from recipients. We establish in Study 2 post-test that close (vs. distant) givers were especially likely to grapple with their two central gifting goals, and, in Study 3B, we provided evidence that close friends engaged in motivated reasoning in order to manage these conflicting goals. Specifically, we found that when faced with purchasing (vs. browsing for) a gift, close givers who received attribution for the item they selected construed the relational signaling gifts as better matching recipients' preferences over explicitly designated registry items. Thus, close givers resolved their goal conflict by engaging in motivated reasoning, which enabled them to simultaneously achieve both gift motivations. Finally, in Study 4, we relaxed the constraints of our prior studies and showed that even when the registry gifts aligned with recipients' preferences, multiple registry options were available and the existing social norms of the gift occasion favored choosing from a gift registry, close givers remained more likely to diverge from the registry to a freely chosen gift than were distant givers. This lends further support to our contention that divergence is one way that givers signal that they have the ability and desire to predict recipients' preferences unaided. Further, our results showing that close (vs. distant) givers are more likely to reject preference-matching gifts in favor of relationally signaling ones were robust across gender in all studies.

We contribute to the literature on gifting in several ways. First, we identify givers' two central gifting goals and reveal how the social closeness between givers and recipients moderates these goals when they are in conflict. Further, we introduce the polarizing context of the gift registry as both a mechanism that enables givers to achieve their goal of matching the preferences of the recipient and, simultaneously, a barrier to their goal of signaling the intimacy between them. While prior literature discusses the importance givers place on choosing the right gift for a close friend (Belk 1996; Wooten 2000), we showed that givers are most successful in choosing gifts for their distant friends, as they do not let their personal agenda of relational signaling supersede their objective to buy a gift that is aligned with recipients' preferences. Finally, we identified how the underlying processes of motivated reasoning and distortion act in concert to change close givers' perceptions of gift options and ultimately drive them to diverge from gift registries to freely chosen gifts that they view as better matching recipients' tastes.

The results of the current studies indicate that the preference information that givers have about the recipients may influence what signal they are motivated to express with their gifts. Close others, who naturally have greater knowledge of recipients' tastes than do distant others, are inclined to exhibit their relational intimacy by choosing gifts that embody this knowledge. Study 1 supports this contention, as we found that close givers, with pre-existing relationships with recipients, were more likely to diverge than distant givers. However, it is not simply that givers *possess* the relevant information, but also that they are motivated to *use* this information to signal the relationship. Indeed, in Studies 2-4, all givers were informed of recipients' preferences, yet close givers continued to diverge significantly more often than distant givers and did so using different choice strategies than distant friends. Close givers rejected the registry gift in favor of items that embodied their perceptions of recipients' tastes and Study 3A shows that

givers only diverged when given attribution for the gift. On the other hand, the small percentage of distant givers in Study 2 who diverged from the registry chose gifts that they, the givers, personally preferred rather than those that reflected their knowledge of recipients' preferences. These findings underscore the fact that close givers diverge from prescribed gifts on a registry both because they have a more intimate understanding of their friends' preferences and because they are motivated to use this knowledge to choose a gift that serves as a relational signal.

Limitations and Extensions

We acknowledge that the studies presented may have potential limitations. Since givers were constrained to choose from a fixed set of potential gifts, they may have had less opportunity to choose a personally expressive gift and thus are less likely to exhibit conflation. Although, in Study 4, we expanded the product categories, in the majority of the studies the product category (lamps) is a low-involvement domain, in which participants were unlikely to have pre-established preferences; generalizing to other products would be worthwhile for future research.

We also acknowledge that relational signaling is a multifaceted construct and that close givers may employ other strategies besides registry divergence to imbue gifts with relational signals. For instance, close (vs. distant) givers are more likely to express relational closeness by expending additional resources (money, time, effort) on their gift choice. We tested additional search efforts in a follow-up study, adding an extra option to the Study 2 design whereby, after viewing the lamps, participants could elect to examine another product category (clocks). If participants searched further, three clocks were available that corresponded to the same gift motivations as the lamps. This study design allowed us to observe whether givers expended additional time and effort to consider an extra product in order to relationally signal.

Confirming our prediction, 84% of close givers looked at additional gift options, whereas only 63.00% of distant givers did so, $X^2(1, N = 156) = 8.16, p < .0043$) suggesting that by doing more “work,” close givers are satisfying their desire to relationally signal via the effort devoted to the choice. Furthermore, close friends were more likely to choose a relationally signaling gift (60.00%) than a registry gift (23.00%), $X^2(1, N = 156) = -4.11, p < .001$. Interestingly, after persisting in their search, more close givers chose the relationally signaling classic clock (41.25%) than chose the classic lamp (18.75%) (1, N=156), $= -2.77, p < .008$). Conversely, in the distant friend condition, givers were more likely to choose registry items (68.40%) than make a relationally signaling choice (11.84%) (1, N=156), $= 7.69, p < .0001$) across both choice sets. Thus, the results confirm that close (vs. distant) friends are more likely to engage in sending the two relational signals of choosing a gift that matches recipients’ inferred tastes and expending additional search effort, each of which drive divergence from the registry. Future research might investigate the conditions leading to greater reliance on one relational signal over the other.

The findings of the studies in this research also provide directions for future inquiry. Given the differences in givers’ intentions and recipients’ assessments of the gifts they received, it would be worth investigating how receiving a freely chosen gift impacts recipients’ self-perceptions and their perceptions of givers. Schwartz (1967) noted that the characteristics of the gift itself act as a powerful statement of the giver's perception of the recipient. He also suggested that acceptance of a particular gift, “constitutes an acknowledgment and acceptance of the identity that gift is seen to imply.” Given this contention, future research might explore whether receiving a less-liked or less identity-reflective gift may cause the recipient to question his/her own tastes or, alternatively, the closeness of the relationship with the giver.

Moreover, the question of how aware or conscious givers are of their goal ordering and

why they often diverge from recipients' expressed preferences would be worthy of future of investigation. To gain insight into close givers' decision to diverge from registries, we conducted a follow-up test with 33 participants in which we asked them to describe their motivations in a situation in which they were faced with the option of choosing from a close friend's gift registry, but instead opted for a non-registry gift. The data revealed that the majority of respondents (54.00%) stated that they were primarily motivated to find a "better" gift, with fewer expressing insight into relational signaling (15.00%). Further, when asked to predict recipients' liking for the gift they chose, compared to the registry items on a 7-point scale (1=much less /7=much more), we show that contrary to the results of Study 1, respondents believed that recipients liked the freely chosen gifts more than the gift registry items ($M=5.42$ vs. $M=4.00$, $F(1,32)=44.62$, $p < .0001$). Thus, close givers appear to lack insight into the role that relational signaling plays in their divergence and incorrectly believe that their gift is a better match to recipients' preferences.

Another interesting extension of this work might focus on how the nature of the relationship might impact givers' decisions. In this research, we focus on close and distant friends. However, gift giving strategies in the context of romantic, familial or professional relationships might vary significantly from those used in the context of friendship. For instance, in romantic relationships, the quality of the signal from both the recipient and the giver regarding a gift may be purposefully vague as each party negotiates the dynamics of the relationship (Belk and Coon 1993). Likewise, in the context of hierarchical relationships (e.g. boss and subordinate) expectations and obligations regarding what to purchase and how to present it, may be differentially conferred depending on the individual's role in the relationship.

Our findings also can provide insight into the relational signals people send to each other more generally. For instance, in contexts wherein consumers jointly consume symbolic products,

consumers may select certain items that signal the importance of their relationship at the cost of preferred alternatives. For instance, on a first date, an individual may select an expensive, intimidating restaurant in order to signal the importance of the couple's evolving relationship even though both individuals prefer the atmosphere and food of a cheaper neighborhood diner.

Gift giving is a unique domain of consumer choice, as givers and recipients have experience in both roles of the gifting dyad, both as giver and recipient, throughout their lives. Our research extends the work of Gino and Flynn (2011) by examining the moderating role of social closeness on recipients' dissatisfaction with non-registry gifts. We find in Study 1 that close friends were less happy than distant friends with non-registry gifts. However, despite their firsthand knowledge of the disappointment that can result from receiving a gift that does not reflect their expressed preferences, close givers persist in choosing gifts that fit their own agenda of relational signaling. Perhaps it is difficult to translate experiences as a disappointed recipient and correct these misguided choices in the role of giver. Compounding this problem, recipients rarely give diagnostic feedback about the true nature of their feelings about a disliked gift, as strong cultural norms prescribe that recipients express thanks and gratitude for any gift they receive, as articulated in the proverb, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," which expresses the culturally imbued sentiment that when given a present, a recipient should be grateful for his/her good fortune and avoid assessing its match with personal preferences. In short, the common message is that gifts should be received in the spirit they are given, as a symbol of friendship, rather than an object of imputed worth. However, this falsely positive feedback may propagate close givers' notions that ignoring recipients' expressed preferences results in better gifts.

This research has important implications for retail practice. For instance, in order to decrease receipt of these unappealing gifts, Amazon.com patented a mechanism that "converts"

unwanted gifts into items for which recipients have registered. As soon as a giver places an order for an item that is not on the gift registry, Amazon.com will send the recipient either a gift of the same value from his/her registry, or a gift certificate instead, thus preventing recipients from having to suffer through opening countless items they do not want.

Alternatively, our findings on relational signaling suggest several tactics that retailers could adopt to increase the likelihood of close givers purchasing registry items. First, retailers might “coach” registered recipients by informing them that their chances of receiving preferred products from their registries from their close friends would improve if the items carry overt relational signals. For example, retailers might suggest adding a personalized gift (e.g. a favorite book, products related to a favorite activity) to complement the functional items that may seem impersonal (e.g. housewares, kitchen products) to givers. Additionally, linking registry items to complementary products (items not on the registry) as joint bundles, could enable close friends to choose these items to signal that they have expended additional resources when making their selection. We would expect this merchandising strategy to increase both the likelihood of close givers purchasing registry items as well as the total purchase amount per giver.

Gift givers balance their goal to please recipients with a gift that matches recipients’ explicit preferences against their desire to signal relational closeness with gifts that express givers’ knowledge of the recipient. The findings of these studies imply that while gift registries are a growing venue from which to purchase, this growth may come at the cost of relational intimacy as close (vs. distant) givers are more likely to diverge to non-registry gifts. Moreover, the findings speak to the nature of relationships in general; that is, despite our best intentions to please those closest to us, we often behave in ways that ultimately satisfy our own interpersonal goals rather than those of our close relationship partners.

TABLES

TABLE 1: PILOT STUDY EXAMINING GIVERS' GIFTING PRIORITIES ON 1 – 7 LIKERT SCALE (1 = VERY UNIMPORTANT/ 7 = VERY IMPORTANT)

Gift Goal	Overall N=117	Close Friend N=59	Distant Friend N=58
a. Choose something that the recipient would like	6.24 ^{bcdefgh}	6.66 ^{bcdefgh}	5.83 ^{bcdefgh}
b. Choose something that acknowledges or expresses the relationship you have with the recipient	5.38 ^{acdefgh}	5.85 ^{acdefgh}	4.91 ^{adefh}
c. Choose something that reminds the recipient of you	4.86 ^{abefgh}	5.12 ^{abefgh}	4.60 ^{adefh}
d. Choose something that enables the recipient to have something they wouldn't normally have access to	4.47 ^{abefgh}	5.00 ^{abefgh}	3.93 ^{abcg}
e. Choose something makes up for a lost item	3.94 ^{abcd}	4.29 ^{abcdgh}	3.59 ^{abcg}
f. Choose something that fulfills a need of the recipient	3.87 ^{abcd}	4.12 ^{abcdg}	3.62 ^{abcg}
g. Choose something that fulfills a social obligation	3.87 ^{abcd}	3.12 ^{abcdefh}	4.62 ^{adefh}
h. Choose something that teaches the recipient	3.59 ^{abcd}	3.69 ^{abcdeg}	3.48 ^{abcg}

respective letter denotes significant difference at $p < .05$

FIGURES

FIGURE 1A: CHOICE SHARE OF NON-REGISTRY GIFTS WHEN CHOOSING FOR CLOSE (VS. DISTANT) FRIENDS (STUDY 1)

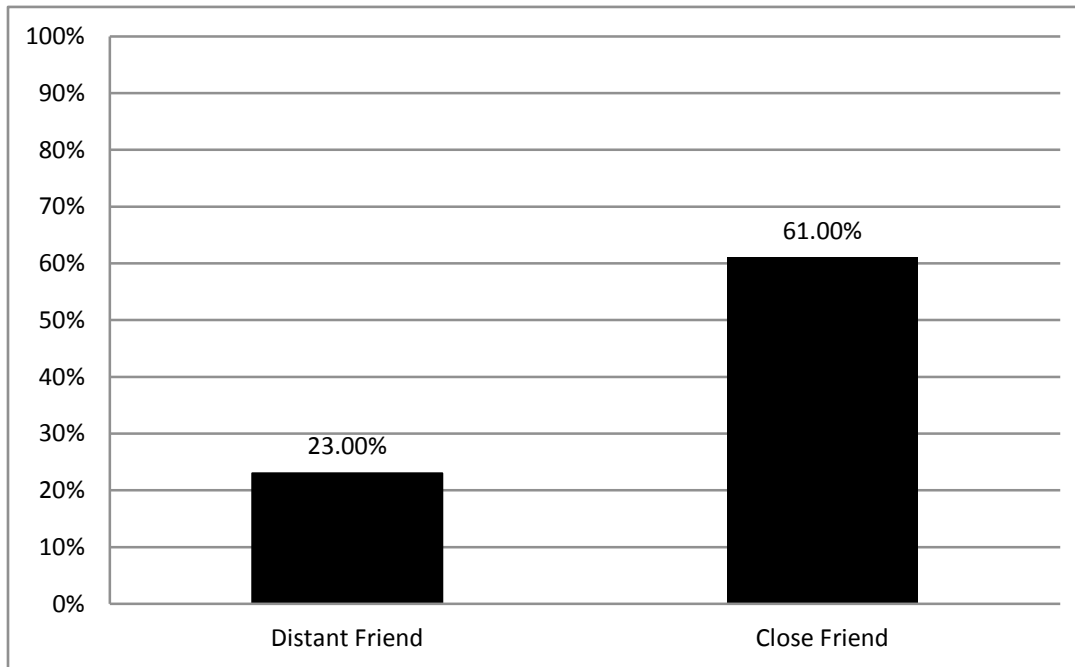


FIGURE 1B: RECIPIENTS' SATISFACTION WITH REGISTRY (VS. NON-REGISTRY) GIFT FROM CLOSE (VS. DISTANT) FRIEND (STUDY 1)

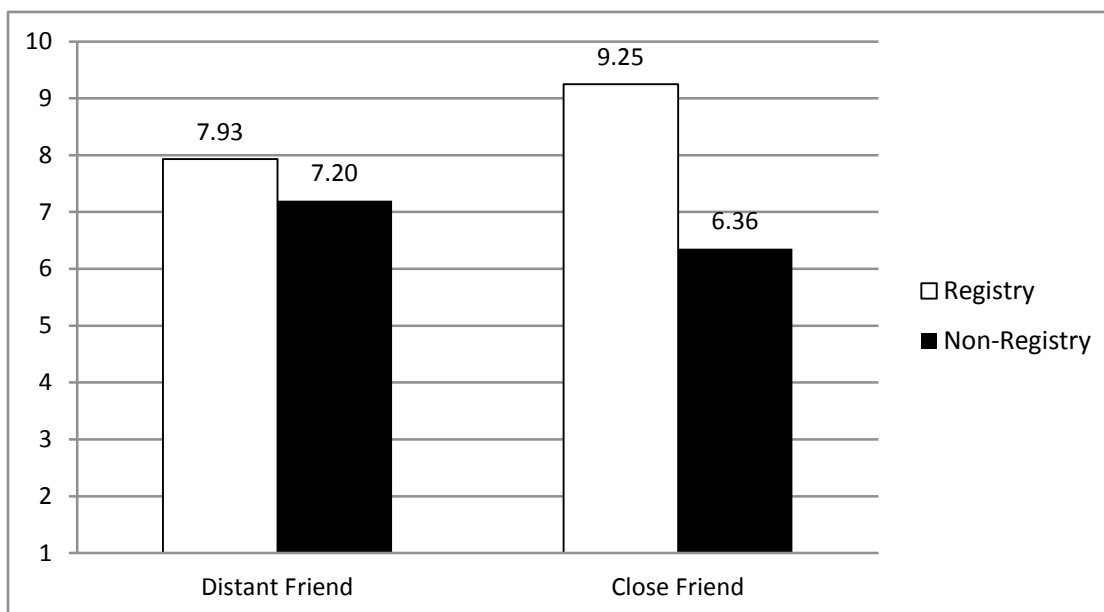


FIGURE 2: CLOSE (VS. DISTANT) FRIEND CONDITION: GIVERS' CHOICE OF REGISTRY GIFT VS. RELATIONALLY SIGNALING GIFT (STUDY 2)

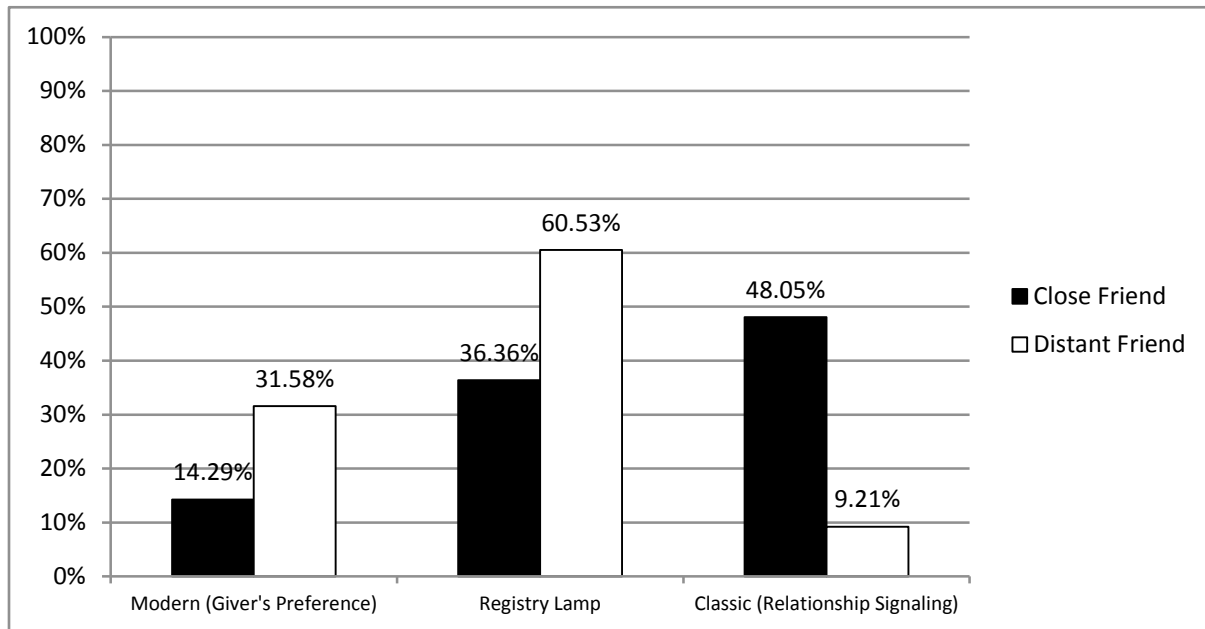


FIGURE 3: CHOICE SHARE OF GIFTS FOR CLOSE FRIEND WHEN GIVERS' IDENTITIES ARE REVEALED (VS ANONYMOUS) (STUDY 3A)

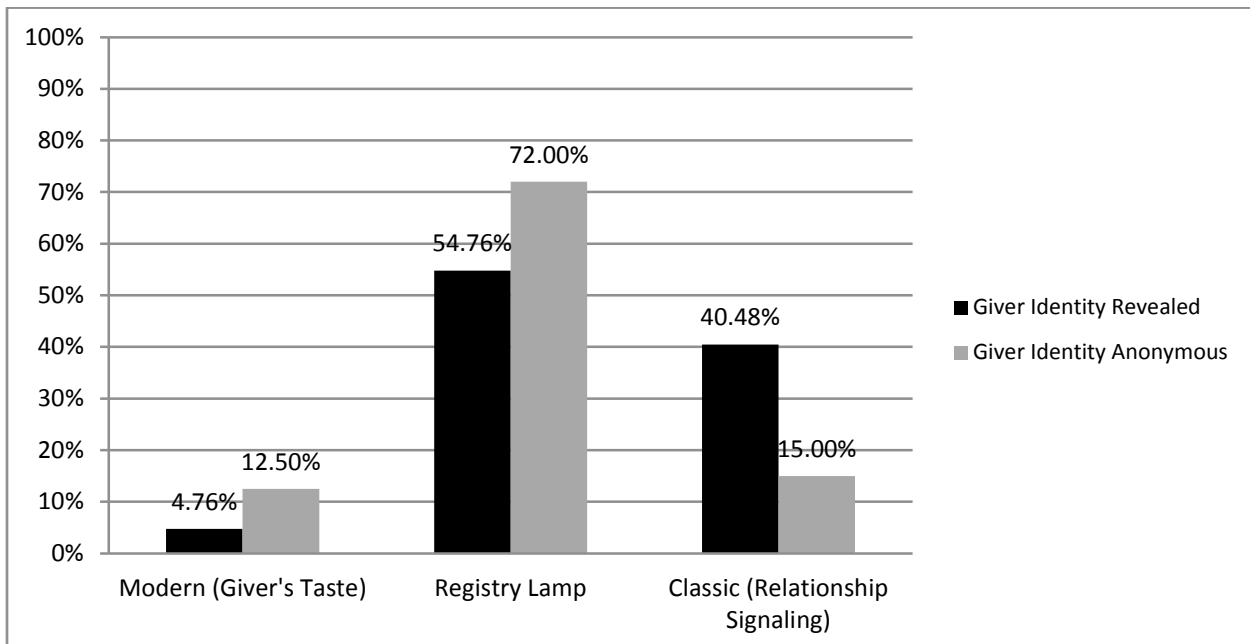


FIGURE 4: PERCEPTIONS OF GIFT AS A RELATIONAL SIGNAL VS. PREFERENCE MATCH AS A FUNCTION OF SOCIAL CLOSENESS, SHOPPING MOTIVE, AND GIVER IDENTITY (STUDY 3B)

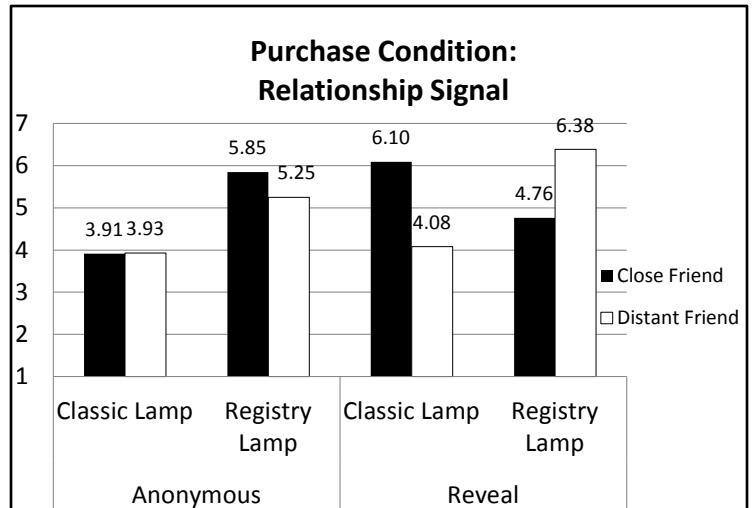
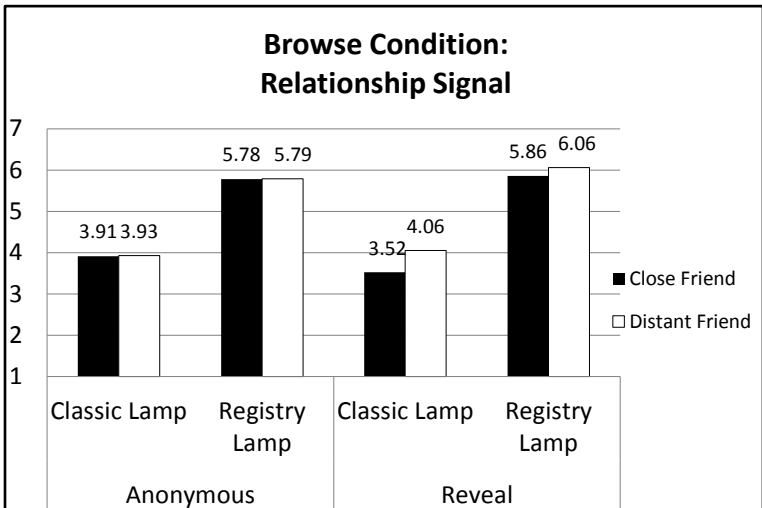
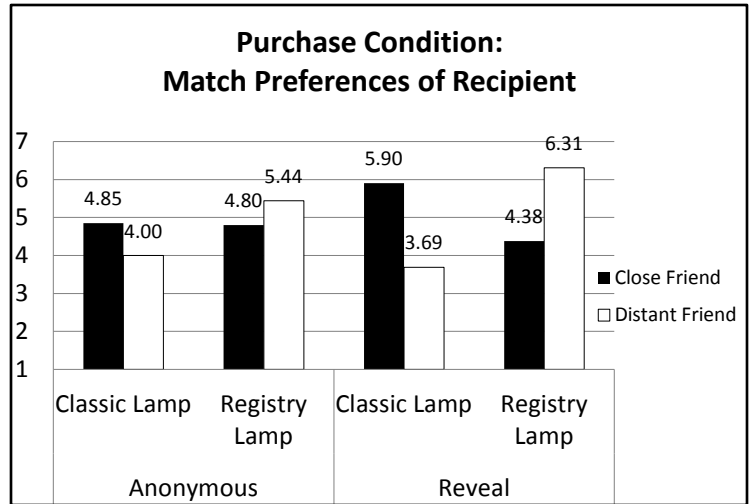
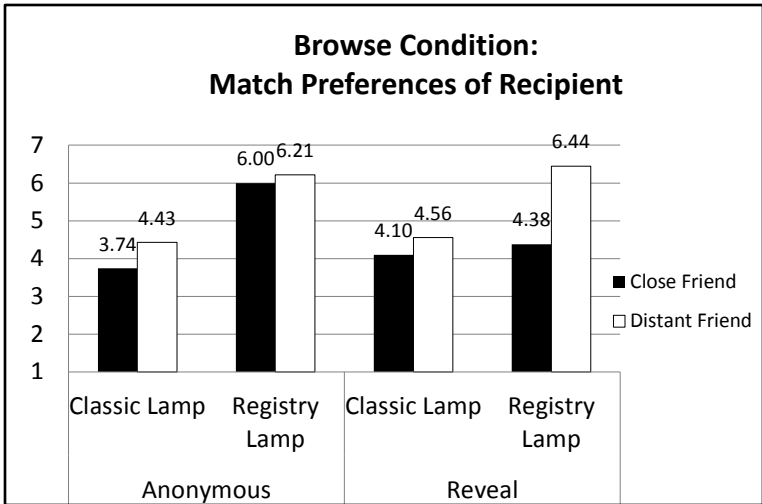
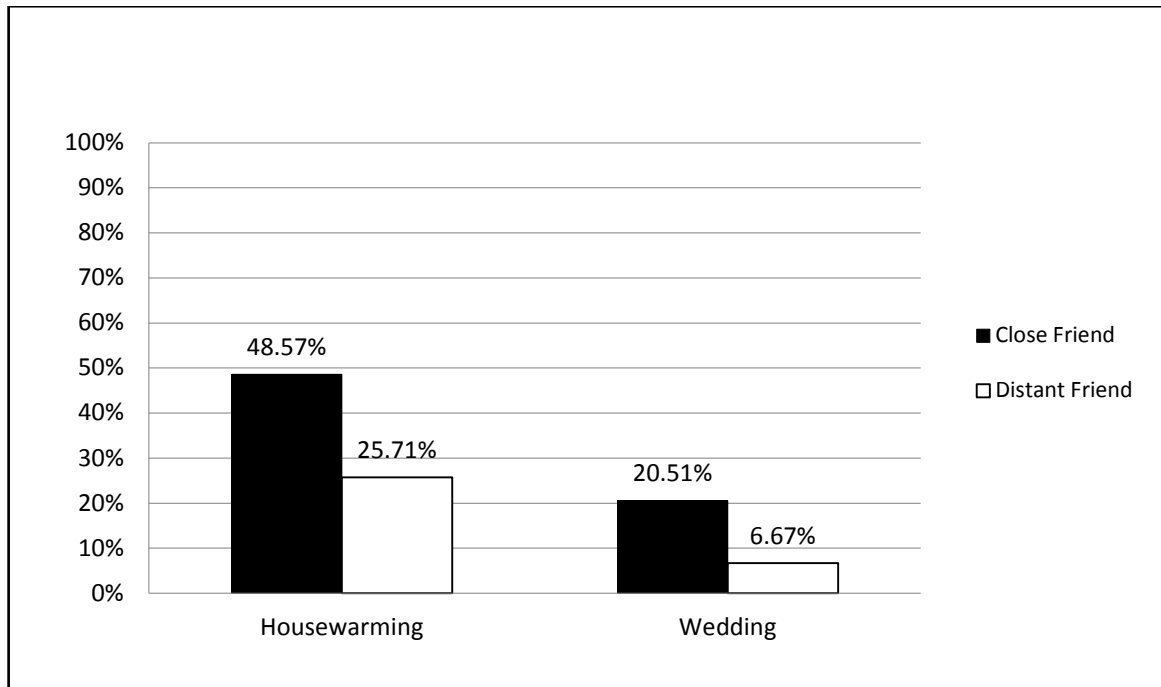


FIGURE 5: LIKELIHOOD TO MAKE A FREE CHOICE FOR A CLOSE (VS DISTANT) FRIEND WHEN THE NORM TO CHOOSE A REGISTRY GIFT IS PRESENT (VS. ABSENT) (STUDY 4)



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: GIVERS' AND RECIPIENTS' LAMP CHOICES (STUDY 1)



APPENDIX B: LAMPS' CORRESPONDANCE TO GIFT MOTIVATIONS (STUDIES 2 – 3B)



APPENDIX C: PRETEST OF GIVERS' PERCEPTIONS OF LAMP CHOICES

(STUDIES 2 – 3B)

LAMP	LAMP A Modern Lamp	LAMP B Registry Lamp	LAMP C Classic Lamp
Giver's liking for lamp ^a	5.23 ^{BC*}	3.54 ^{AC}	2.81 ^{AB}
Consistent with recipients' tastes ^b	2.00 ^{BC}	3.74 ^{AC}	4.78 ^{AB}
Giver's Inferred Motive based on pretest**	Gift is reflective of giver's preferences	Gift is reflective of recipient's expressed preferences	Gift signals relationship between giver and recipient

*respective letter denotes significant difference at $p < .05$

**Pretest Questions: ^aHow reflective is this gift of your own preferences?
^bHow reflective is this gift of the recipient's expressed preferences?

Pretest Scale: 1 – 7 Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree/ 7 = strongly agree).

 APPENDIX D: MEASURES OF CONSTRUCTS (STUDIES 2 - 4)

Manipulation Check of Social Closeness

Studies Construct	Items
2, 3B & 4 Social closeness	1. We are very close friends 2. Our relationship is not very important to me (reverse coded) 3. We know each other very well

Scale: 1 – 7 Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree/ 7 = strongly agree).

Manipulation Check of Gifting Conflict

Study Construct	Items
3B Conflict ($\alpha = .90$)	1. How conflicted will (would) you feel while making this choice? 2. How difficult will (would) it be to make this choice? 3. How easy will (would) it be to make this choice? (reverse coded)

Scale: 1 – 7 Likert scales (1 = not at all/ 7 = very much).

Pre-test of Gifting Occasion Norms

Participants endorsed statements about the gifting norms associated with weddings and housewarmings.

Study Construct	Items
4 Norms ($\alpha = .72$)	1. It is appropriate to purchase a gift from a gift registry 2. The recipient is more likely to expect to receive a gift from the gift registry for this occasion 3. Choosing a gift from a registry is likely to maintain the relationship between oneself and the gift recipient.

Scale: 1 – 7 Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree/ 7 = strongly agree).

Results: Participants thought that there was a significantly stronger norm to purchase from a gift registry for weddings than housewarmings ($M_{\text{Housewarming}} = 4.45$ vs. $M_{\text{Wedding}} = 5.9$, $F(1, 52) = 35.52$ $p < .0001$). Both the housewarming and wedding gift occasions have means above the scale median indicating that we are comparing a moderate (housewarming) norm to a strong (wedding) norm.

APPENDIX E1: PRETEST OF GIVERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRODUCTS IN ORDER TO DESIGNATE REGISTRY ITEM

(STUDY 4)

How much do you like this item?			
1 – 7 Likert scale (1 = not at all/ 7 = very much)			
	Registry Item (A)	(B)	(C)
Picnic Basket	5.36 ^{BC}	3.78	4.18 ^A
Wine Bucket	4.65 ^B	3.07 ^{AC}	4.21 ^B
Blender	4.97 ^C	4.55	4.28 ^A
How well does this gift match your friend's preferences?			
1 – 7 Likert scale (1 = not at all/ 7 = very much)			
	Registry Item (A)	(B)	(C)
Picnic Basket	5.47 ^{BC}	3.36 ^A	3.68 ^A
Wine Bucket	5.37 ^{BC}	3.07 ^{AC}	4.23 ^{AB}
Blender	4.89	4.34	4.39

respective letter denotes significant difference at $p < .05$

APPENDIX E2: PRETEST OF GIVERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GIFT CATEGORY CHOICES

(STUDY 4)

Product Category	Appropriate for Wedding (A)	Appropriate for Housewarming (B)
Picnic Basket	5.36	5.24
Wine Bucket	5.81	5.68
Blender	5.78	6.02

respective letter denotes significant difference at $p < .05$

Results: No differences between product categories as a function of gift occasion

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