

THE EFFECT OF LOVE MESSAGES ON GIFT BUDGETING

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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that when people give a gift they engage in 'love accounting', so that they will spend less on it if they include a written expression of love with it. This hypothesis was tested with college students ($N = 314$). It was found that participants who wrote a love message to accompany a Mother's Day gift budgeted less for the gift itself than control participants (Experiment 1), and this effect was replicated for a Christmas gift (Experiment 2). The amount of effort expended by the giver on preparing the love message did not account for the effect (Experiment 3). It is concluded that a gift and its accompanying love message are mentally computed as belonging to the same "love account", implying that consumers' excessive splurging on gifts might be controlled by writing a love message before gift shopping.

Keywords: Gift budgeting, Love Accounting, Expression of Love, Love Messages

The Effect of Love Messages on Gift Budgeting

In contemporary life, an expression of love is expected at many events and holidays such as Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and birthdays. These events have been scripted and normed by marketing campaigns, with the result that gifts are indispensable vehicles to convey affection to loved ones. Gifts have come to function as non-verbal expressions of love (Belk, 1979; Cheal, 1987; Khalil, 2004). Besides gifts, another means to demonstrate love is through written expressions such as loving messages on a greeting card (Close & Zinkham, 2006). Thus, both gifts and loving messages can convey the symbolic and sentimental meanings of love on gift-giving occasions.

While love may be limitless, the resources that convey the evidence of love, such as expenditures on gifts, are not. After all, gift giving is an economic activity in which limited resources are allocated to serve certain ends. Consequently, a consumer has to budget the amount of resources he will use in order to express his love via gift-giving. Most personal gifts are commodities

purchased in the marketplace (Belk, 1979; Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011), which account for roughly four per cent of household expenditure in western societies (Furnham & Argyle, 2007). Thus, gift budgeting is a task frequently undertaken by consumers in daily life.

Previous research has found that a gift's monetary value may be associated with the amount of love that the giver intends to deliver to the recipient. For example, consumers were reported to budget more for gifts to a beloved family member than to a colleague (Caplow, 1982; Joy, 2001). Hence, it could be possible that the more love a giver intends to express, the higher the budget on the gift will be. As love can be delivered through written expressions in addition to a gift, how will written expressions of love impact a giver's gift budgeting? For example, when a gift-giving occasion arises, a giver may write messages of affection to a loved one before shopping for a gift, or he may immediately go shopping for a gift. Analogous to Thaler's (1980) mental accounting concepts, a love message and a gift may belong to the same "love account" in his mind. Thus, is it possible that if he has already expressed love via written expression, the amount of love he needs to deliver through a gift may be less than in the latter scenario; thus, might he budget less on a gift to the loved one if he has first written a message of love? This love-as-investment idea depends on the assumption that love is a resource which in economic terms displays liquidity, so that it can be exchanged for other resources.

Meanwhile, literatures on gift personalization and customization (Moreau, Bonney & Herd, 2001) found that gift givers have a higher willingness to pay for a gift and higher commitment on time and effort to customize gifts for friends as they wish to give a thoughtful gift that is unique to their friend. Hence, it could be that writing a message of affection to a loved one changes the gift-giver's perspective, so he becomes more concerned about the thought and less about the material value. Hence, it could be possible that if the love message on the card is viewed as a way to personalize the gift, based on past research results, then it could be that he would budget more on a gift to the loved one if he has first written a message of love.

The current research, through three experiments, investigates whether written expressions of love can lower a giver's gift budget for a loved one. Note that gifts in the current research refer to commodities purchased in the marketplace, not home-made handcrafts.

Study 1: Mother's Day Gifts

One week before Mother's Day, fifty-five local college students whose parents live nearby were randomly assigned to either a written expression condition or a control condition in a disguised personality and mental imagery study. In both conditions, participants first answered filler personality questions (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) followed by a filler mental imagery task (Marks, 1973). Participants then carefully checked and evaluated an all-purpose flower themed

greeting card that was attached to the questionnaire in an envelope. Next, in the written expression condition, participants were instructed to write love messages to their mothers on the attached card; in the control condition, participants did not write anything on the card. In both conditions, participants were told that they could keep the card after the study. Next, participants answered a series of number-related “filler questions” which were masked as a distraction from the visualizing mindset induced by the card task. The measurement of gift budget was embedded in the “filler questions”. Specifically, participants were told to assume that for the coming Mother’s Day they would give their mom the card attached to the survey plus a sterling silver bracelet (our pilot study showed that jewelry is college students’ top gift choice for mother).

Participants then indicated how much they were willing to pay for the gift bracelet. Finally, participants reported their discretionary income and their closeness level with their mothers, which were used as control variables in the analysis.

As predicted, one-way ANOVA test revealed that participants in the written expression condition ($M = 42.14$, $SD = 19.17$) set significantly lower gift budgets than those in the control condition ($M = 54.44$, $SD = 20.63$), $F(1, 54) = 5.25$, $p = .026$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. The results didn’t change after controlling for participants’ income and level of closeness to their mothers. No significant gender difference was found in this study. Overall, we found that written love expression lowers a giver’s gift budget for a loved one. Following from this result, the next question asked was whether it is possible that the longer a written expression of love is, the lower the gift budget will be. We designed Study 2 to find the answer.

Study 2: Christmas Gifts for Mom I

Two weeks before Christmas, one hundred fifty-two local college students who would return home during the holidays were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a long written expression condition, a short written expression condition, or a control condition in a disguised personality and mental imagery study. Participants first answered a series of filler questions, as in Study 1. They were then asked to check and evaluate a blank Christmas greeting card that was attached to the questionnaire in an envelope. Next, in the long written expression condition, participants were instructed to write 80-word love messages to their mothers on the card; in the short written expression condition, participants wrote 20-word love messages; in the control condition, participants didn’t write anything. In all conditions, participants were told that they could keep the card after the study. Next, participants answered “filler questions” as in Study 1, including a question that measured gift budget. Specifically, participants were told to assume that for the coming Christmas they would give their mom the card plus a sterling silver bracelet. Participants then indicated their gift budget for the bracelet. At the end, participants reported

their discretionary income and their closeness level with their mothers.

One-way ANOVA test showed a significant treatment effect ($F(2, 150)=4.25, p=.016, \eta_p^2=.054$). Pairwise comparisons showed that participants in the short written expression condition ($M=51.98, SD=21.58$) set significantly lower budgets than those in the control condition ($M=63.44, SD=17.90, p=.004$); participants in the long written expression condition ($M=56.67, SD=19.51$) set marginally significantly lower budgets than those in the control condition ($p=.09$). The difference between the short and long expression conditions were not significant ($p=.23$).

The results didn't change after controlling for participants' income and level of closeness with their mothers. No significant gender difference was found in this study. Overall, Study 2 replicated the findings in Study 1, in that written expression lowers the gift budget. It also further showed that the length of written expression of love was not a linear predictor of gift budget.

One alternative explanation for the results in Studies 1 and 2 could be effort. In both studies, participants in the written expression conditions exerted some effort in preparing the card, while those in the control condition put in little effort. So it may be that exerting effort, or not, when preparing a card influences gift budgeting. Thus, we designed Study 3 to rule out the effect of effort.

Study 3: Christmas Gifts for Mom II

Two weeks before Christmas, one hundred and seven local college students who would return home during the holidays were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a preprinted message condition, a message condition, and a control condition in a disguised personality and mental imagery study. Participants first answered a series of filler questions as in Studies 1 and 2. They were then asked to check and evaluate the cover page of a Christmas greeting card that was attached to the questionnaire in an envelope. In the preprinted message condition, participants were asked to read the inner page of the card where a 120-word love poem addressed to mom was preprinted. In the message condition, participants received a blank card and were asked to write down a message on the inner page that can best express love to mom. In the control condition, participants received the same blank card and did nothing to the card. In all conditions, participants were told that they could keep the card after the study. Next, participants answered the same "filler questions", including one about gift budget, as those in study 2. Finally, participants reported their discretionary income and their closeness level with their mothers.

One-way ANOVA test with last year's Mother's day gift budget and closeness with mom as covariates revealed a significant treatment effect ($F(2, 99)=3.02, p=.05, \eta_p^2=.057$). Pairwise

comparisons showed that participants in the preprinted message condition ($M=56.22$, $SD=20.56$) set significantly lower budget than those in the control condition ($M=64.44$, $SD=18.51$, $p=.02$); participants in the message condition ($M=58.12$, $SD=18.03$) set marginally significantly lower budgets than those in the control condition ($p=.09$). Note that participants in the preprinted message and message conditions had all expressed love on the card. Although participants in these two conditions reported significantly different levels of perceived effort ($F(1, 67)=10.16$, $p=.002$, $\eta_p^2=.135$), the differences in gift budget were not significant ($p=.46$). Marginally significant gender difference was found in this study ($F(1, 100)=2.89$, $p=.092$, $\eta_p^2=.030$). The results didn't change after controlling for participants' income and level of closeness with their mothers. No significant gender difference was found in this study. Overall, Study 3 showed that it was written expression of love, not effort that lowers a giver's gift budget for a loved one.

DISCUSSION

The above three studies demonstrate that givers conduct "love accounting" when budgeting for gifts to a loved one. Specifically, a giver's written love expression to a loved one can lower his gift budget for the beloved person. This effect appears stronger among givers who make shorter written expressions of love. The results from Study 3 rule out the effect of givers' perceived effort in explaining this 'love accounting' behavior. Overall, the current research concurs with past research (e.g., Cheal, 1987) showing that gift giving to a loved one is a form of love communication; thus a gift is a means of objectifying love. More specifically, our results show that the love communicated through gifts and the love delivered through written expression belong to the same 'love account' that a giver sets for a loved one. Past research has observed that a gift's monetary value may be associated with its symbolic meaning of love (Caplow, 1982; Joy, 2001). Thus, once part of the 'love account' has been expended on written expression, the remaining balance can then be used to purchase a gift that costs relatively less.

Our results provide some new insights into understanding the psychology of gift giving. Past research has shown that gift budgeting is a function of personal or household income (Cheal, 1986), the giver-recipient relationship (Caplow, 1982; Saad & Gill, 2003), gift-giving occasions (Cheal, 1996; Saad & Gill, 2003), the giver's gender (Caplow, 1982), and the type of gift (Webley, Lea, & Portalska, 1983). The current research complements past research by showing a new factor that can influence a giver's gift budget. Moreover, past qualitative research has claimed that gifting to a loved one is spontaneous, affective and uncalculated (Belk & Coon, 1993). In contrast, our studies show that it can also be cognitive and calculated in certain scenarios.

The findings of the current research carry important implications for effective gift expenditure

management, especially during holiday seasons. It was shown that gift giving accounts for a very large portion of the expense of Christmas, which often leads to the annual credit card binge (Cheal, 1996). As a result, many consumers have large debts to pay off in the New Year. Consequently, gift giving is often seen as a unique kind of financial problem that has to be controlled. Based on our results, one way to curtail gift expenditure could be to prepare a gift card with love messages before heading to a shopping mall. Through 'love accounting', the savings on gift expenditures would occur in consumers' unconscious mind, making it effortless. So in the end, givers might spend less on gifts, yet transfer sufficient love to the loved one. After all, as Ruth (1996) notes, it is the feeling that counts in gift giving.

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