Social Comparison in Decisions for Others:

Considering Multiple Gift Recipients Leads to Over-Individuated and Less Liked Gifts

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This research examines how the social context in which a gift is selected influences gift choices. When people select gifts for multiple recipients, they tend to pass up gifts that would be better liked in favor of gifts that are uniquely suited to each recipient. This over-individuation arises because givers try to appear thoughtful and to convey an understanding of recipients' identities, and not simply because givers perceive recipients differently when they are considered together versus separately. Consistent with this, over-individuation is exacerbated when givers are more motivated to put thought into their gift selections (such as when selecting gifts for close friends). Over-individuation occurs despite the fact that givers rate maximizing recipient liking as their most important goal and persists even when givers know that recipients are unlikely to compare gifts. Focusing attention on recipient liking reduces over-individuation and can help givers to select better liked gifts.

People are often put in the difficult position of having to make decisions on behalf of others. Whether making plans for a date or grocery shopping for a household, people must not only consider others' preferences but must also make decisions for them without their input. Perhaps the most ubiquitous case in which this occurs is gift giving.

Indeed, gift giving can be a challenge: it can be hard to find an affordable item that a recipient is sure to love. Sometimes, this challenge is further compounded by having to choose gifts for multiple recipients at once, as when doing holiday shopping for a long list of recipients. Having multiple recipients in mind not only means that more gifts are needed, but it may also change how people select those gifts. This research examines how considering multiple recipients affects the type and quality of gifts that people choose.

We suggest that people who are selecting gifts for multiple recipients may not necessarily select gifts that are most appropriate for each person in an absolute sense (i.e., what gift might be most liked by each recipient), but rather may select gifts that seem appropriate for each person *relative* to the others (i.e., what gift might be uniquely suited for one recipient relative to other recipients). For example, consider someone giving magazine subscriptions to two friends. Both friends are avid sports fans, but one has a secondary interest in technology and the other occasionally travels. The giver might select a technology magazine for the first friend and a travel magazine for the second friend, even though both would actually have preferred a sports magazine, and even though the giver might have given a sports magazine to either friend if he was giving a gift to just one of them. Thus, gift givers may consider recipients in relation to each other, selecting gifts by deciding which recipient is the most avid reader, which is the biggest sports fan, or which has the best sense of humor. This can lead to over-individuation when giving gifts to multiple recipients, as givers may pass up gifts that would be better liked in favor of gifts

that are uniquely suited to particular recipients, even when there are no concerns about the recipients comparing gifts.

Before turning to the empirical work, we first briefly review the literature on how people make choices on behalf of others. We then consider two reasons why, when choosing gifts for multiple others, over-individuation may arise.

MAKING CHOICES FOR OTHERS

Previous work on judgment and decision making has traditionally focused on personal decisions, and as such, initially neglected how people make choices on behalf of other people and how such decisions might be influenced by the context in which they are made. More recently, however, research has begun to examine how people make choices on behalf of others and how those choices compare to choices made for the self (e.g., Beisswanger et al. 2003; Jonas, Schulz-Hardt, and Frey 2005; Kray 2000; Polman 2010; Polman and Emich 2011; Pronin, Olivola, and Kennedy 2008; Stone, Yates, and Caruthers 2002; Zikmund-Fisher et al. 2006).

One relevant theme that emerges from this recent work is that differences in perspective between decision makers and the "others" for whom they are deciding can lead decision makers to make choices that differ from what those others would have chosen for themselves and that are, at times, suboptimal. In the domain of gift giving, givers are much more aware of the inputs into their gifts than are recipients, and this perspective difference can lead givers to invest time and resources into gifts that fail to have the intended effect on recipients. For example, although givers believe that investing more thought or money into a gift will increase recipient appreciation, recipients are generally unaffected by the thought or money invested (Epley and Zhang 2011; Flynn and Adams 2009). Although recipients appreciate solicited gifts more than unsolicited gifts (Gino and Flynn 2010), givers assume that both solicited and unsolicited gifts

will be equally appreciated. Thus, when choosing a gift, givers may show an egocentric bias (Epley et al. 2004), focusing too much on information that is available to them but not to recipients and failing to sufficiently consider recipients' perspectives. In the current paper, we examine how givers may also focus on the other recipients for whom they are simultaneously shopping, information that is available to givers but that may be completely irrelevant to recipients.

OVER-INDIVIDUATION IN GIFT GIVING

We specifically suggest that considering multiple recipients may lead gift givers to select gifts that differentiate recipients from each other, rather than gifts that will be liked best. There are at least two reasons why this may occur. The first is that givers may perceive recipients differently when they are presented together versus separately: considering multiple recipients may highlight social comparisons and may change givers' views of who recipients are and what they will like. A very different reason is that, even if givers' views of recipients do not change when recipients are considered simultaneously, a multiple-recipient context may highlight the desire to convey an understanding of the recipients' unique identities and may thus change givers' views about which gifts are the most thoughtful. That is, the multiple-recipient case may prompt givers to use existing differences between recipients to select individuated gifts that acknowledge what makes each recipient special and that therefore seem more thoughtful. We suggest that this latter mechanism, the desire to appear thoughtful and to convey an understanding of recipients' identities, drives overindividuation in gift giving.

Perceptual Reasons for Differentiating Recipients

One reason why givers may give different gifts when considering recipients jointly, instead of in isolation, is that the multiple-recipient context may actually change how recipients

are perceived. For example, a moderately athletic friend may seem less athletic than before when considered with a marathon runner, but more athletic than before when considered with a couch potato. Consistent with this possibility, past research shows that considering alternatives together versus separately can highlight attributes that are easily comparable and lead to preference reversals (e.g., Bazerman, Loewenstein, and White 1992; Bazerman et al. 1994; Hsee 1996, 1998; Hsee and Zhang 2004; for a review, see Hsee et al. 1999). Indeed, people sometimes choose options that they end up enjoying less because they fail to recognize that their preferences when considering the alternatives together (e.g., in a store) may differ from their preferences when experiencing the chosen options independently (e.g., in their living room, Hsee and Zhang 2004). For example, participants who compared a 15-g chocolate to a 5-g chocolate overestimated the additional enjoyment they would get out of the 15-g chocolate, relative to participants who experienced only one of these rewards in isolation. Consequently, a majority of participants chose to participate in a negative task with the larger chocolate over a positive task with the smaller chocolate, apparently assuming that the pleasure from the extra chocolate would outweigh the displeasure from the task. However, participants who only experienced the negative task with the larger chocolate rated the total experience as worse than did those who only experienced the positive task with the smaller chocolate. Thus, comparisons made salient in the joint-evaluation case led to decisions that proved worse for people's isolated experiences.

Likewise, juxtaposing recipients may highlight differentiating features of each recipient, making certain gifts momentarily seem more appropriate than they seem in isolation: sports-related gifts for one's moderately athletic friend may seem more appropriate if the other recipient is the couch potato who makes her seem athletic, and may seem less appropriate if the other recipient is the marathon runner who makes her seem slothful. In sum, the context in which

givers select gifts (joint evaluation) differs from the context in which recipients experience gifts (separate evaluation), and this may distort givers' views of what the best liked gift might be.

Differentiating Recipients Seems More Thoughtful

Alternatively, over-individuation may arise because, although givers' views about people's tastes do not change in the multiple-recipient setting, their views of which gifts are most thoughtful may change. When givers must give a gift to one person, the gift that the recipient will like the best may seem like the most thoughtful one. However, when givers must select gifts for multiple people, other considerations may become salient that change which gifts seem most thoughtful. In particular, it may seem more thoughtful to give individuated gifts that convey an understanding of each recipient's unique identity than to give less personalized gifts, even if such gifts may be liked better overall. This seems especially likely to be an issue in situations where one gift may be best liked by multiple people—givers may (rightly or wrongly) feel that getting the same gift for multiple recipients is "taking the easy way out," and they may individuate their selections in an attempt to seem more thoughtful. Givers may lose sight of the fact that recipients would rather receive the item that they like best over another item that individuates them from a recipient who happens to simultaneously be on the giver's mind. Givers may also lose sight of the fact that individuation may not be necessary if recipients will not compare gifts or will not be aware that other recipients exist.

In support of this view, researchers have suggested that givers want to select gifts that acknowledge what makes a recipient special, in large part because doing so signals that they know and understand the tastes, preferences, and identity of the recipient (Belk 1966; Schwartz 1967). Gifts that successfully convey this understanding can strengthen the relationship between the giver and recipient (Mauss 1924), and gifts that do this unsuccessfully can offend the

recipient, embarrass the giver, and undermine the relationship (Sherry 1983; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1993; Wooten 2000). Indeed, evidence suggests that givers may, at times, gravitate toward distinctive gifts: for example, givers buying a gift for a friend who is both an avid sky diver and an avid tennis player are more likely to give a book on skydiving than on tennis because the former is more distinctive (Nelson and Miller 1995). Additionally, givers are willing to pay more for a customized product designed for someone else than for themselves, suggesting that they place special value on personalization in gift giving (Bonney, Herd, and Moreau 2010).

We suggest that considering multiple gift recipients simultaneously may highlight these individuation motives and may lead givers to focus on trying to seem thoughtful by differentiating recipients. Thus, givers who are shopping for multiple recipients may gravitate toward gifts that are uniquely suited for each recipient not because they perceive the recipients differently when they are presented together versus separately, but rather because they think it is more thoughtful to give different, individuated gifts to each person. Even if givers are aware that two recipients are likely to prefer the same particular gift over its alternatives, they may avoid selecting that same gift for both recipients because it seems impersonal or less thoughtful to do so, and may instead select different gifts that enable them to acknowledge what makes each recipient special. In contrast, in the single-recipient case, the most liked gift may seem like the most thoughtful gift, largely because the prospect of giving the same gift to multiple people is not made explicit. This account suggests that givers will be especially likely to differentiate gifts when the motivation to convey an understanding of recipients' unique identities is high, such as when selecting gifts for close friends versus casual acquaintances.

PILOT STUDY: WHAT ARE GIVERS' MOTIVES?

Although the process of giving to multiple recipients may highlight the motive to convey an understanding of each recipient's unique identity, it is interesting to consider whether givers think that doing so is more important, overall, than giving a gift that will be liked the best by the recipient. Thus, we conducted a pilot study ($N = 84$) via Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online forum where participants complete surveys in exchange for credit toward Amazon.com products. We asked participants to rate how important various considerations were when choosing gifts, on a scale from *1 = not at all important* to *7 = extremely important*. We manipulated between-subjects whether participants were asked to imagine choosing gifts for one or multiple recipients. As table 1 shows, collapsed across condition, givers rated "choosing a gift that the recipient will like the most" more important than any other consideration (all $p < .01$). The rated importance of these considerations did not vary based on whether givers imagined choosing gifts for a single recipient or multiple recipients (all $p > .05$).

Insert table 1 about here

Thus, even in a multiple-recipient context, people consider giving the most liked gift to be the most important criterion—certainly a more important criterion than giving a differentiated gift. However, when faced with the actual prospect of selecting gifts for multiple recipients, people may lose sight of this priority, especially if selecting the most liked gift would lead to selecting the same gift for more than one person. Givers in such a setting may feel a tension between giving the best liked gift and what seems like the most thoughtful gift, and this may lead some of them to select gifts that differentiate recipients.

Of course, there may be situations in which it truly is important to give gifts that are uniquely personalized to recipients. In particular, when recipients are likely to compare gifts, it may be important for a giver to distinguish recipients who vary in relationship type and closeness, to communicate to recipients how much they are valued, and to signal relational intimacy (Lowrey, Otnes, and Ruth 2004). In such contexts, giving identical gifts to multiple recipients may be perceived as impersonal and may undermine the degree to which the gift conveys the giver's special understanding of the recipient.

However, the current research focuses on situations in which it is clear to givers that the recipients are unlikely to compare gifts. In such cases, gifts that are superior in an absolute sense are likely to be better appreciated than gifts that are better on a relative dimension. This is true particularly because the gift that seems *relatively* better is inherently dependent on which other recipients happen to be simultaneously considered: whether a recipient seems like the smartest recipient, the funniest recipient, or the most athletic recipient will depend on the others to whom he or she is being compared. The gift that a person receives may thus be highly dependent on who else happens to be on the giver's mind, and givers who focus on selecting a gift that is uniquely appropriate for a particular recipient relative to others may end up underweighting other important aspects of a gift, such as how much the gift will be liked by the recipient.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Seven experiments explore how the social context in which a gift is selected affects gift selections. We hypothesize that, when people select gifts for multiple recipients, they may pass up gifts that would be better liked for gifts that differentiate recipients. We suggest that this over-individuation tendency is not the result of the recipients appearing to have different tastes when

they are considered jointly, but rather, is a consequence of givers wanting to appear thoughtful and to convey an understanding of recipients' unique identities in the multiple-recipient context.

Studies 1 through 3 will explore whether over-individuation emerges with multiple recipients. We predict that givers who pass up the best gift will recognize that their chosen gift is less likely to be liked by the recipient than is the best gift, a finding which would be inconsistent with a perceptual account and more consistent with participants wanting to seem thoughtful by giving gifts that fit unique aspects of recipients' preferences.

Studies 4 and 5 will further tease apart competing explanations for over-individuation. Study 4 will suggest that over-individuation does not happen simply because givers' views of recipients' tastes change when recipients are considered jointly (vs. separately), and study 5 will suggest that over-individuation *does* arise because participants want to appear thoughtful and to convey an understanding of each recipient's preferences. Consistent with this, study 6 will suggest that over-individuation is exacerbated when givers are more motivated to put thought into their gift selections. Finally, study 7 will explore how givers may be nudged to select gifts that are more likely to maximize recipient liking.

STUDY 1: SELECTING UNIQUE BUT LESS APPEALING BIRTHDAY CARDS

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that givers who are purchasing items for multiple recipients, instead of one, may pass up items that would be better liked in the service of selecting individuated items. In this study, givers selected a birthday card for one recipient (Rob or Pete) or two unacquainted recipients (Rob and Pete). In a profile picture, Rob was shown laughing, suggesting that he had a better sense of humor than Pete, who was simply shown smiling. Four cards were available; pretesting showed that one card was considered much funnier and was better liked than the other cards. We predicted that givers in the one-recipient conditions would

choose the funny card regardless of who the recipient was, but givers in the two-person condition would tend to get different cards for each friend and would get the funny card for Rob (who was shown laughing) but not for Pete (who was not shown laughing).

Method

Participants. Undergraduates (N = 67) at a large southeastern university participated in exchange for extra course credit.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: participants were asked to imagine that they had a friend named Rob, a friend named Pete, or two friends (Rob and Pete) whose birthdays were coming up, and that they had decided to mail their friend(s) a birthday card. In the two-recipient condition, the order in which Rob and Pete were presented was counterbalanced. The recipients' Facebook profiles were provided to convey that each had a sense of humor and to provide more information about the friends. Rob listed *Old School, 40-Year-Old Virgin,* and *Dodgeball* among his favorite movies, and Pete listed *The Hangover, Happy Gilmore,* and *Zoolander.* Rob was pictured laughing, to suggest that he had an especially good sense of humor. A pre-test on 45 undergraduates at the same university as the main participant pool confirmed that the majority (76%) perceived Rob as having a better sense of humor than Pete when asked to choose between the two ($\chi^2(1, N = 45) = 6.74, p = .009$).

There were four available birthday cards, including one that was pre-tested to be funnier and better liked than the other cards. This funny card had the message, "[Front] Happiness is like peeing in your pants. Everyone can see it, but only you can feel its warmth. [Inside] It's your birthday. Let your happiness show." The other cards were a sarcastic card with the message, "[Front] It could be worse, you could be dead. [Inside] happy birthday," a card with an image of

bubbles with the message, "[Front] celebrate. [Inside] the happiest of birthdays," and a card with an image of a fish and the message, "[Front] Happy birthday. [Inside] You're one of a kind."

In a pretest, 40 undergraduates at the same university were asked to rate how funny the cards were on a scale from *1 = not at all funny* to *7 = very funny*. Pretest participants rated the funny card as funnier ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.61$) than the sarcastic card ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.84$; $t(39) = 3.69$, $p = .001$), the bubble card ($M = 1.35$, $SD = .77$; $t(39) = 15.45$, $p < .001$), and the fish card ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 1.02$; $t(39) = 13.21$, $p < .001$). Eighty-three percent of participants rated the funny card as funnier than any of the other cards.

In another pretest, 42 undergraduates at the same university were asked to imagine receiving several birthday cards and to rate how much they liked each on a scale from *0 = not at all* to *5 = very much*. Pretest participants liked the funny card substantially more ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.49$) than the sarcastic card ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 1.64$; $t(41) = 5.63$, $p < .001$), the bubble card ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.17$; $t(41) = 6.38$, $p < .001$), and the fish card ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.44$; $t(41) = 6.34$, $p < .001$). Eighty-four percent of participants rated the funny card higher than the others. Thus, the funny card seems to have been preferred overwhelmingly over the others.

In the main experiment, participants were asked to select a birthday card for their friend(s). In the two-recipient condition, the instructions explicitly stated that participants could select different cards for each friend or the same card for both friends. To suggest that recipients were unlikely to compare cards, the instructions also stated that the friends lived in different cities from the participant and from each other. Finally, after selecting a card, participants were asked (on the same page) to predict how much their friend(s) would like that card on a scale ranging from *1 = not at all* to *6 = very much.*

Results

Rob (who was shown laughing) was just as likely to receive the funny card in the two-person condition (67%) as in the one-person condition (70%; $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = .38$, $p = .54$). Pete (who was not shown laughing) was much less likely to receive the funny card in the two-person condition (26%) than in the one-person condition (70%; $\chi^2(1, N = 47) = 9.03$, $p = .003$). Thus, the vast majority of participants gave Pete the funny card when they chose for him alone, but only a minority gave him this card when they chose for both him and Rob.

Despite this, participants recognized that both recipients would enjoy other cards less than the funny card. Participants who selected another card for Rob predicted that he would like the card less ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.01$) than did participants who selected the funny card ($M = 5.30$, $SD = .98$; $F(1, 43) = 3.95$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$). This effect was not qualified by an interaction with condition ($F(1, 43) = .03$, $p = .86$, $\eta^2 = .001$). Likewise, participants who selected another card for Pete predicted that he would like the card less ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.06$) than did participants who selected the funny card ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.09$; $F(1, 43) = 7.12$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .14$). Again, this effect was not qualified by an interaction with condition ($F(1, 43) = .71$, $p = .40$, $\eta^2 = .02$).

Discussion

Most givers in the one-person condition gave the card that was better liked and was considered funnier regardless of who the recipient was. However, in the two-person condition, most givers gave the funny card to the recipient who was laughing, and only a minority gave this card to the other recipient, suggesting that givers compared the recipients and may have wanted to give cards that acknowledged unique facets of each recipient. Givers did this despite recognizing that both recipients were more likely to enjoy the funny card than any of the other cards. This suggests that the effect did not arise because participants in the multiple-recipient

condition changed their views of what recipients liked, but rather that they nevertheless compared recipients in order to select cards that were uniquely appropriate for each individual.

STUDY 2: GIVING UNIQUE BUT LESS LIKED MOVIES

Study 2 examined whether the over-individuation phenomenon observed in study 1 emerges in a different context and whether it can even lead to gift selections that are less likely to please *both* recipients. In this study, givers selected a DVD for one recipient or two unacquainted recipients. Both recipients preferred animated movies most, but they had different second-most preferred genres. The available DVDs included movies from many genres, but included only one animated title (which could be given to either recipient or to both). We predicted that givers in the two-person condition would try to individuate the recipients with their gifts, and consequently, each recipient would be less likely to receive the animated DVD in the two-recipient condition than in the one-recipient condition.

Method

Participants. Undergraduates ($N = 133$) at a large southeastern university participated in exchange for extra course credit.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: participants were asked to imagine that they had a friend named Sarah, a friend named Steph, or two friends (Sarah or Steph) whose birthdays were coming up and that they had decided to mail their friend(s) a DVD as a gift. The friends' favorite movies were provided via their Facebook profiles. Both friends listed four animated movies among their favorites. Additionally, Sarah listed two thriller movies among her favorites, and Steph listed two science fiction movies. To suggest that recipients were unlikely to compare gifts, recipients' Facebook profiles specified that they attended different universities and lived in different cities.

The available DVDs included 25 movies categorized into eight genres. The set included one family/animated movie (*Up*), four thrillers, four sci-fi/fantasy movies, three action/adventure movies, five comedies, four dramas, one music/musical movie, and three romances. Participants were asked to select a DVD for their friend(s) and to then predict how much their friend(s) would like that DVD on a scale ranging from *1 = very little* to *7 = very much.*

Results

Each recipient was less likely to receive *Up* (the animated movie) in the two-person condition than in the one-person condition. Whereas 82% of participants in the one-person condition selected *Up* for Sarah, only 63% of those in the two-person condition did so ($\chi^2(1, N = 96) = 4.00$, $p < .05$). Similarly, 84% of participants in the one-person condition selected *Up* for Steph, but only 54% of those in the two-person condition did so ($\chi^2(1, N = 94) = 8.64$, $p = .003$).

Participants who did not select the animated movie tended to favor movies from recipients' secondary genres. For example, for Steph, who preferred science fiction movies, 66% of those getting something other than *Up* chose science fiction and none chose thrillers, whereas for Sarah, who preferred thrillers, 25% chose thrillers and 11% chose science fiction.

Participants recognized that both recipients would enjoy other movies less than *Up*. Participants who selected another movie for Sarah predicted that she would like the movie less ($M = 5.46$, $SD = .79$) than did participants who selected *Up* ($M = 6.40$, $SD = .65$; $F(1, 92) = 27.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$). This effect was not qualified by an interaction with condition ($F(1, 92) = .10$, $p = .75$, $\eta^2 = .001$). Likewise, participants who selected another movie for Steph predicted that she would like the movie less ($M = 5.50$, $SD = .88$) than did participants who selected *Up* ($M = 6.48$, $SD = .70$; $F(1, 90) = 21.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$). Again, this effect was not qualified by an interaction with condition ($F(1, 90) = .02$, $p = .89$, $\eta^2 < .001$).

Discussion

Givers were less likely to give a recipient a movie from a preferred genre when there were multiple recipients than when there was only one recipient. Givers did this despite recognizing that the recipients were more likely to enjoy a movie from their preferred genre than a movie from a different genre.

Despite the fact that we made efforts to suggest that recipients were unacquainted in studies 1 and 2, it is possible that givers nonetheless thought that the recipients might know each other and that they might compare gifts. In the next study, we explore whether over-individuation persists even when givers explicitly acknowledge that recipients are unacquainted.

STUDY 3: GIVING UNIQUE BUT LESS PREFERRED BOOKS

Study 3 examined whether over-individuation occurs even when givers explicitly recognize that recipients do not know each other. In this study, givers gave a book to one recipient (Elizabeth or Katherine) or two recipients (Elizabeth and Katherine). Givers were told that the recipients did not know each other nor did they have any friends in common. Both Elizabeth and Katherine were described as liking TV shows and movies featuring vampires, and the gift options included a novel about vampires (which could be given to either recipient or to both). We predicted that, even when givers explicitly recognized that the recipients did not know one another, givers in the two-person condition would try to individuate the recipients with their gifts. Consequently, each recipient would be less likely to receive the vampire novel in the two-recipient condition than in the one-recipient condition.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 211$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who had an Amazon Mechanical Turk approval

rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were permitted to participate. Thirty-six percent of participants were male, with three participants not specifying gender. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68, with a mean age of 35. Seventy-nine percent of participants were White, 12% were Asian, 3% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, and 4% did not specify their ethnicity. The surveys took approximately two minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with $0.15 credit toward Amazon.com products.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: participants were asked to imagine that they had a cousin named Elizabeth, a cousin named Katherine, or two cousins (Elizabeth and Katherine) whose birthdays were coming up and that they had decided to mail their cousin(s) a book as a gift. In the two-recipient condition, the order in which Elizabeth and Katherine were presented was counterbalanced. Participants were provided with descriptions of each cousin:

> Elizabeth is a freshman at the University of Colorado. She is a member of the swim team. Her favorite TV shows are True Blood and The Vampire Diaries. She recently started watching the BBC series, Being Human, about three twenty-somethings who happen to be a werewolf, a vampire, and a ghost.
>
> Katherine is a freshman at the University of Arizona. She is a member of Delta Gamma sorority. Her favorite TV shows are The Vampire Diaries and Supernatural, and she loves watching old episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer on DVD. She was a huge fan of the Harry Potter movies and also enjoys romance movies like Love Actually.

Participants in the two-person condition were told that one of the cousins was from their mother's side of the family, that the other was from their father's side of the family, and that they attended different universities. To make it explicitly clear that recipients were unlikely to

compare gifts, participants were told, "Because your cousins are from different sides of your family, they do not know each other nor do they have any friends in common." As a manipulation check, at the end of the survey, participants were asked whether the recipients knew each other.

Participants were told that they were considering four books that they knew neither of their cousins had read but that they thought each of them might enjoy: *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer (a romance about vampires), *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (a drama), *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks (a romance), and *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown (a thriller).

Participants were asked to select a book for each cousin. The instructions explicitly stated that participants could select different books for each cousin or the same book for both cousins. On the same page, participants were then asked to predict how much their cousins would like the books they received on a scale ranging from *1 = very little* to *7 = very much.*

Results

Most givers in the one-person condition gave the book that best appealed to the recipients' interests: *Twilight,* the romance about vampires. However, in the two-person condition, givers tended to individuate their gifts. Consequently, each recipient was less likely to receive *Twilight*. Whereas 92% of participants in the one-person condition selected *Twilight* for Elizabeth, only 71% of those in the two-person condition did so ($\chi^2(1, N = 144) = 10.45, p = .001$). Similarly, 81% of participants in the one-person condition selected *Twilight* for Katherine, but only 66% of those in the two-person condition did so ($\chi^2(1, N = 146) = 3.98, p < .05$). Recall that we included a manipulation check to examine whether participants believed that the recipients were truly unacquainted: 83% of participants correctly believed this to be true. The

over-individuation effects persisted even when we included only those participants who recognized that the recipients were unacquainted (both $p < .05$).

Participants recognized that both recipients would enjoy other books less than *Twilight*. Participants who selected another book for Elizabeth predicted that she would like the book less ($M = 5.11$, $SD = .99$) than did participants who selected *Twilight* ($M = 6.37$, $SD = .74$; $F(1, 140) = 38.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$). This effect was not qualified by an interaction with condition ($F(1, 140) = .002$, $p = .97$, $\eta^2 < .001$). Likewise, participants who selected another book for Katherine predicted that she would like the book less ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.07$) than did participants who selected *Twilight* ($M = 6.19$, $SD = .86$; $F(1, 142) = 25.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$). Again, this effect was not qualified by an interaction with condition ($F(1, 142) = .22$, $p = .64$, $\eta^2 = .002$).

Discussion

Even though givers thought that each recipient would like *Twilight* better than any other book, givers were less likely to give each recipient *Twilight* when there were multiple recipients than when there was only one recipient. Givers did this despite recognizing that the recipients did not know each other and were unlikely to compare gifts. We next examine why this over-individuation tendency emerges.

STUDY 4: ARE RECIPIENTS PERCEIVED DIFFERENTLY WHEN PRESENTED TOGETHER?

Study 4 more directly examined a perceptual account for why givers favor unique gifts over better liked gifts when faced with multiple recipients. That is, juxtaposing recipients may change a giver's view of those recipients and their tastes. For example, in study 2, perhaps Steph was less likely to receive an animated movie in the two-recipient case because her preference for

animated movies seemed less pronounced, and her preference for science fiction seemed more pronounced, when she was considered with Sarah.

In study 4, givers either chose a gift for one friend, chose a gift for two friends, or considered both friends but only choose a gift for one of them. If over-individuation emerges because givers perceive recipients differently when they are presented together versus separately, then givers who consider both friends but only choose a gift for one of them should behave like those who choose a gift for two friends: they should pass up better liked gifts in favor of individuated gifts because they are seeing two individuals simultaneously. Additionally, we manipulated whether participants *gave* an item or *predicted* which item the recipient(s) would choose for themselves. If givers perceive recipients differently when they are presented together versus separately, then predictions about what recipients would themselves choose should mimic gift selections, and should differ when two recipients are considered instead of one.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 168$) were recruited to fill out an online survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who had an Amazon Mechanical Turk approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were permitted to participate. Thirty-five percent of participants were male, with one participant not specifying gender. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 78, with a mean age of 36. Seventy-nine percent of participants were White, 8% were Black, 4% were Asian, 4% were Hispanic, and 5% were of another ethnicity. The surveys took about two minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with $0.15 credit toward Amazon.com products.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they had a cousin (Steph) or two cousins (Steph and Sarah). Participants were randomly assigned to choose a DVD for Steph

(*alone* condition), to consider both cousins but only choose a DVD for Steph (*alongside* condition), or to choose a DVD for both cousins (*both* condition). Additionally, we manipulated between-subjects whether participants *gave* a DVD or *predicted* which DVD the recipient(s) would choose for themselves, leading to a 3 (recipient presentation: alone, alongside, or both) x 2 (choice mode: give or predict) between-subjects design.

Participants were told to imagine that they do not see their cousin(s) very often, so they keep up with her [them] on Facebook. Participants were then told to examine their cousin's [cousins'] Facebook profile(s) and take note of things like her [their] hometown(s) and her [their] favorite movies. Participants in the *alone* condition were asked to consider Steph's profile. Then, they were told that Steph's birthday was coming up. Participants in the *alongside* and *both* conditions saw profiles of Steph and Sarah and were asked to consider both. Participants in the *alongside* condition were then told that Steph's birthday was coming up, and participants in the *both* condition were instead told that both Steph and Sarah's birthdays were coming up.

Next, participants in the *give* conditions were told that they had decided to get their cousin(s) a DVD as a gift [DVDs as gifts] and were asked which DVD(s) they would get for the recipient(s). Participants in the *both* condition were explicitly told that they could get the same DVD for both recipients or different DVDs for each. Participants in the *predict* condition were told that they had decided to get their cousin(s) a gift certificate for a DVD [gift certificates for DVDs] and were asked which DVD(s) they thought the recipient(s) would choose. Finally, on a separate page, participants were asked to predict how much their cousin(s) would like each of the DVDs on a scale ranging from *1 = very little* to *7 = very much.*

The cousins' profiles and favorite movies were the same as in study 2 with one notable change: Sarah's favorite movies were modified to include *only* animated movies, whereas Steph

mainly liked animated movies but also liked science fiction (as before). This simplified the paradigm and the predictions so that only Steph was predicted to be less likely to receive *Up* in the *both* condition (because she was the only recipient with an alternate genre preference). In addition, the number of available DVDs was reduced from 25 to 10. The set included one family/animated movie (*Up*), two sci-fi/fantasy movies, two thrillers, three comedies, one action/adventure movie, and one romance. To suggest that recipients were unlikely to compare gifts, participants who saw both cousins were told that one cousin was from their mother's side of the family and the other was from their father's side of the family.

Results

As shown in figure 1, when choosing which DVD to *give,* givers differed in how likely they were to choose *Up* for Steph based on condition ($\chi^2(2, N = 168) = 15.20, p < .001$). A contrast analysis (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1985) indicated that givers were less likely to give Steph *Up* when they selected gifts for both Steph and Sarah (42%) than when they considered Steph alone (86%) or considered both Steph and Sarah but then selected a gift for Steph only (82%; $z = 3.88, p < .001$).

However, when *predicting* which DVD the recipients would choose for themselves, givers predicted that Steph would choose *Up* for herself regardless of condition ($\chi^2(2, N = 168) = .42, p = .81$): 79% of participants predicted that Steph would choose *Up* when they predicted only Steph's choice, 75% of participants predicted that Steph would choose *Up* when they predicted both Steph and Sarah's choices, and 82% of participants predicted that Steph would choose *Up* when they considered both Steph and Sarah but predicted only Steph's choice.

Insert figure 1 about here

Givers recognized that Steph would enjoy other DVDs less than *Up*. Participants who selected another DVD for Steph predicted that she would like the DVD less ($M = 8.63$, $SD = 1.80$) than did participants who selected *Up* ($M = 9.57$, $SD = 1.01$; $F(1, 155) = 15.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$). Predicted liking was not affected by the *alone, alongside,* or *both* manipulation ($F(2, 155) = 1.08$, $p = .34$, $\eta^2 = .01$) by the *giving* or *predicting* manipulation ($F(1, 155) = .64$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2 = .004$), or by any interactions between these factors (all $p > .05$).

Discussion

Our findings suggest that over-individuation does not mainly arise because recipients appear to have different tastes when they are presented together instead of alone. Although givers *predicted* that the target recipient would choose a movie from her preferred genre regardless of condition, participants were less likely to *give* her a movie from that genre when they selected gifts for two people compared to when they considered her alone or considered two people but chose only for the target. These findings suggest that givers did not, in fact, perceive the recipients differently when they were presented together versus separately.

STUDY 5: DIFFERENTIATING GIFTS SEEMS MORE THOUGHTFUL

Whereas study 4 suggested that over-individuation does not arise for perceptual reasons, study 5 investigates why it *does* arise: why do givers who are selecting gifts for multiple recipients select more individuated (and less liked) gifts than they select for the same recipients in isolation? Study 5 examines whether this effect is driven by a desire to appear thoughtful, and specifically by a change in which gift seems most thoughtful between the single-recipient and the multiple-recipient context. That is, when there is just one recipient, the gift that the recipient will like the best may seem like the most thoughtful one. However, in the multiple-recipient case, it

may seem more thoughtful to give individuated gifts that convey an understanding of each recipient's unique identity than to give less specialized gifts, even if such gifts may be liked better overall. It may also feel impersonal or less thoughtful to give the same gift—or even two highly similar gifts—to two people. Givers may not consider that a recipient who is unaware of other recipients will only see the gift in isolation, and will not have the same context for evaluating the gift (and its ostensible thoughtfulness) that givers have.

Thus, there may be tension between the "best liked" and the "most thoughtful" gift in the multiple-recipient case that does not exist in the single-recipient case. (After all, in the latter case, there is no comparison recipient for whom the same gift might be appropriate.) Despite givers saying in the abstract that their highest priority is to maximize recipient liking, this tension may lead some givers to deviate from the most liked gift when there are multiple recipients.

Thus, in study 5, participants chose between the movies *Up* and *Star Trek* for a recipient who had a main interest in animation and a secondary interest in science fiction. Participants chose which movie would be more thoughtful, would be better suited to the recipient, and would convey a better understanding of the recipient. Half of each sample considered this choice in isolation, and the other half considered this choice in the context of having already chosen to give *Up* to another friend. We predicted that fewer participants would perceive *Up* to be more thoughtful, to be better suited to the recipient, and to convey a better understanding of the recipient when they were also giving *Up* to another recipient than when they were getting it only for the target recipient.

Method

Participants. Undergraduates ($N = 61$) at a large southeastern university participated in exchange for extra course credit.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they had a friend (Steph) or two friends (Steph and Sarah) whose birthdays were coming up and that they had decided to mail their friend(s) a DVD. The Facebook profiles, favorite movies, and available DVDs were the same as in study 4. To suggest that recipients were unlikely to compare gifts, participants in the two-person condition were explicitly told that their friends were unacquainted with each other.

Participants randomly assigned to the one-person condition considered giving Steph (whose favorite movies included five animated movies and two science fiction movies) either *Up* or *Star Trek*. Participants in the two-person condition considered giving either *Up* to Sarah and *Up* to Steph or giving *Up* to Sarah and *Star Trek* to Steph. Participants were asked to choose which gift(s) seemed more thoughtful, which was (were) better suited to the recipient(s), and which conveyed a better understanding of the recipient(s).

Results

In the one-person condition, all but one participant (97%) thought that *Up* would be a more thoughtful gift for Steph than *Star Trek*, 94% thought that it was better suited to Steph than *Star Trek*, and 97% thought that it conveyed a better understanding of Steph than *Star Trek*. However, in the two-person condition, a substantial proportion of participants (48%) thought that getting *Up* for Sarah and *Star Trek* for Steph would be more thoughtful than getting *Up* for both recipients, 40% thought that the different gifts were better suited to the recipients, and 48% thought that the different gifts conveyed a better understanding of the recipients. Thus, when participants were concurrently giving *Up* to Sarah (compared to when Sarah was not involved), significantly fewer participants thought that getting *Up* for Steph was more thoughtful ($\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 17.39, p < .001$), was better suited to her ($\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 10.90, p < .001$), or conveyed a better understanding of her ($\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 17.39, p < .001$).

Discussion

When only one recipient was considered, almost all givers thought that a gift from a recipient's preferred genre would be more thoughtful, better suited to the recipient, and better at conveying an understanding of the recipient than an item from a different genre. However, when givers were also giving that preferred item to another recipient, that very same gift seemed less thoughtful, less suited to the target recipient, and worse at conveying an understanding of the target recipient than it did before. The process of giving to multiple recipients can put choosing the best liked gift in tension with choosing the most thoughtful gift and can suggest that a more specialized gift might be more appropriate. Thus, some givers may select unique gifts in the multiple-recipient case because they perceive those gifts to be more thoughtful and better at conveying an understanding of the recipients.

STUDY 6: GIFTS FOR CLOSE FRIENDS OR CASUAL ACQUAINTANCES

Study 5 suggested that the desire to give a thoughtful gift might drive over-individuation in the case of multiple recipients. Study 6 extends this idea by manipulating how thoughtful givers are motivated to be, with the prediction that increasing this motivation will exacerbate the tendency for givers to favor unique gifts over better liked gifts.

Specifically, previous research suggests that givers may be especially motivated to convey an understanding of recipients' identities when selecting gifts for close friends instead of casual acquaintances (Ward and Broniarczyk 2011). Thus, in study 6, to manipulate the extent to which givers were motivated to be thoughtful and to convey such an understanding, we asked participants to imagine selecting gifts for two close friends or for two casual acquaintances. We predicted that givers would be more likely to select unique gifts over better liked gifts when they

selected gifts for two close friends, for whom they are more motivated to be thoughtful, than for two casual acquaintances.

Method

Participants. Participants (N = 157) completed an online survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who had an Amazon Mechanical Turk approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were permitted to participate. Thirty-seven percent of participants were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 70, with a mean age of 34. Eighty-six percent of participants were White, 8% were Asian, 4% were Black, 1% were of another ethnicity, and 1% did not specify their ethnicity. The surveys took about two minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with $0.15 credit toward Amazon.com products.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine participating in two separate gift exchanges with two separate sets of friends: friends from work and friends from their neighborhood (none of whom worked with them). They would be giving one gift to a friend from each set of friends. To manipulate participants' motivation to select gifts that were uniquely suited for each individual, participants were told that they would be selecting gifts for either two of their closest friends or two casual acquaintances, namely:

> *Close friends condition:* You happen to draw the names of two of your closest friends—Sarah and Steph—who you know very well and who mean a lot to you. You want to pick gifts that they'll like, so you feel like you should put a considerable amount of time and thought into your gift choices. Since you are very close with each of these people, you want to do your gift shopping as thoughtfully and carefully as possible.
>
> *Casual acquaintance condition:* You happen to draw the names of two casual acquaintances—Sarah and Steph—who you do not know very well and who do not mean

a whole lot to you. You want to pick gifts that they'll like, but you do not feel like you should put a whole lot of time or thought into your gift choices. Since you are not particularly close with either person, you want to do your gift shopping as quickly and easily as possible.

Participants were told that the spending limit for each of the gift exchanges was $20, so they decided to get DVDs as gifts. Participants were provided with the recipients' favorite movies and were asked to choose a DVD to give to each person. The recipients' favorite movies were the same as in study 4, except that this information was conveyed via a description rather than via Facebook profiles. Participants were explicitly told that they could get the same DVD for both recipients or different DVDs for each recipient.

Results

We predicted that givers would be more likely to individuate Steph and Sarah with their gift choices when Steph and Sarah were close friends of the giver (and givers were more motivated to put thought into the gifts) than when they were casual acquaintances of the giver. Recall that Sarah listed only animated movies among her favorites, whereas Steph listed mainly animated movies but also listed science-fiction movies. Because of this, we predicted that Sarah would receive the animated movie (*Up)* in most cases, and that, when givers individuated the recipients, they would do so by giving something other than *Up* to Steph.

Indeed, Steph was significantly less likely to receive *Up* in the close-friends condition, where over-individuation was predicted to be more likely, than in the casual-acquaintances condition (31% vs. 47%, respectively; $\chi^2(1, N = 157) = 3.97, p < .05$). Sarah was just as likely to receive *Up* in the close friends condition (89%) as in the casual acquaintances condition (88%;

$\chi^2(1, N = 157) = .007, p = .93$). Steph was thus more likely to get a specialized gift over a better liked gift when she was a close friend instead of a casual acquaintance.

Discussion

Study 5 suggested that the desire to give a thoughtful gift drives over-individuation. Study 6 extended this finding by showing that over-individuation is more likely to arise when givers are more motivated to put thought into their gift choices. Givers were more likely to pass up gifts that would be better liked in favor of gifts that were uniquely suited to particular recipients when they imagined selecting gifts for two close friends (for whom they should put a considerable amount of time and thought into their gift choices) compared to when they imagined selecting gifts for two casual acquaintances. Thus, the more motivated givers were to select gifts that acknowledge what makes each individual special, the less likely they were to select gifts that purely maximized recipient liking. These findings suggest that people may, paradoxically, get worse gifts for their closer friends, as their focus on giving individuated gifts may make them lose focus on getting the best liked gifts.

STUDY 7: HIGHLIGHTING RECIPIENT LIKING IMPROVES GIFT SELECTIONS

Study 7 explores how givers may be encouraged to select gifts that are more likely to maximize recipient liking. Although givers in our pilot study claimed that "choosing a gift that recipients will like best" was their most important consideration when selecting gifts, the results from studies 1 through 6 suggest that givers may often fail to prioritize this goal when they actually find themselves in the position of selecting gifts for multiple recipients. Focusing givers' attention on recipient liking may make this goal more salient to givers and encourage them to select gifts that recipients are more likely to enjoy. In study 7, givers selected gifts for two friends, but half first predicted which items their friends would choose for themselves. We

predicted that givers who first predicted recipients' choices would be less likely to over-individuate and more likely to select gifts that they believed would be better liked by recipients.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 73$) completed an online survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants who had an Amazon Mechanical Turk approval rate of 95% or higher and lived in the United States were permitted to participate. Twenty-nine percent of participants were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 67, with a mean age of 35. Eighty-one percent of participants were White, 8% were Black, 7% were Asian, and 4% were Hispanic. The surveys took about two minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with $0.15 credit toward Amazon.com products.

Procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they had two cousins. The cousins' Facebook profiles, the cousins' favorite movies, and the available movies were the same as in study 4. Participants were told that the holidays were coming up soon and were asked to choose a DVD to give to each cousin. Half of participants were first asked to predict which DVDs their cousins would pick for themselves.

Results

We predicted that participants would be more likely to select better liked gifts (and thus, less likely to over-individuate) when they were first asked to consider what the recipients would select for themselves. Recall that Sarah listed only animated movies among her favorites, whereas Steph listed mainly animated movies but also listed a few science-fiction movies. Because of this, we predicted that Sarah would receive the animated movie (*Up)* in most cases and that givers would personalize their gift selections by giving something other than *Up* to Steph *unless* they first stopped to consider what Steph would really like the most.

When participants predicted what the recipients would choose for themselves, they recognized that each would have a strong preference for *Up:* 79% predicted that Steph would choose *Up*, and 95% predicted that Sarah would choose *Up*.

More important, considering what recipients would choose for themselves reduced the incidence of over-individuation: Steph was significantly more likely to receive *Up* in the predict-first condition (76%) than in the control condition (54%; $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 3.93, p < .05$). Sarah was just as likely to receive *Up* in the predict-first condition (95%) as in the control condition (86%; $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 1.71, p = .19$). Thus, over-individuation was less likely to occur when participants first focused on the recipients' preferences.

Discussion

This study shows that focusing givers' attention on recipient liking, by prompting them to predict what gifts recipients would choose for themselves, can help givers to select gifts that are more likely to satisfy their goal of giving the best liked gifts. We found that givers who were selecting gifts for multiple recipients were less likely to give individuated gifts, and more likely to give DVDs from the recipients' preferred genres, when they predicted which gifts recipients would choose for themselves before making gift selections.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research shows that the social context in which a gift is selected affects gift choices. When gift givers select gifts for multiple recipients, they pass up gifts that would be better liked for gifts that fit unique aspects of recipients' preferences, even when it is unlikely that recipients will compare gifts and even when they themselves know that these gifts will be less well liked.

Our findings suggest that over-individuation does not arise simply because givers perceive the recipients differently when they are presented together versus separately. In Studies

1 through 4, givers who passed up superior gifts in favor of gifts that fit unique aspects of recipients' preferences recognized that recipients were less likely to enjoy the gifts they received. In Study 4, givers who considered two people but chose a gift only for a target recipient were more likely to choose a gift from the recipient's preferred category than those who selected gifts for both people. Additionally, givers *predicted* that the target recipient would choose an item from the preferred category regardless of whether they considered recipients together versus separately. Thus, although it is certainly possible that some cases of over-individuation arise because recipients seem different when considered jointly instead of separately, our findings point towards another cause for over-individuation.

Indeed, our findings suggest that over-individuation arises because givers want to seem thoughtful and to convey their understanding of recipients' unique identities, and because what seems most thoughtful differs between the multiple-recipient case and the single-recipient case. Study 5 showed that a gift that seemed especially thoughtful in isolation appeared much less so when another person would also receive that gift, suggesting that many givers think that it is more thoughtful to give individuated (vs. non-individuated) gifts. Consistent with this, in study 6, givers who selected gifts for multiple recipients were more likely to over-individuate when they imagined that they were selecting gifts for two close friends (for whom they wanted to be thoughtful) compared to when they imagined selecting gifts for two casual acquaintances.

Although gift givers in our pilot survey reported that getting a gift that would be best liked by the recipient was more important to them than getting a gift that was uniquely suited for the recipient, givers in our experiments typically made choices that reflected considerations other than the recipients' liking of the available gift options. In study 7, we found that focusing givers' attention on recipient liking can improve gift selections for multiple recipients.

On the surface, the tendency for people who are shopping for multiple recipients to pass up better liked gifts for unique gifts may seem akin to variety seeking, the tendency for people who are selecting multiple items for themselves to pass up better liked items for a more diverse set of items (for a review, see Kahn 1995). For example, people selecting a series of songs prefer to listen to a variety of songs rather than their favorite song repeatedly, even though they would get more pleasure out of the repeated experience (Kahn, Ratner, and Kahneman 1997). That said, the present phenomenon is distinct from variety seeking in several ways. Variety seeking typically refers to situations in which a single individual consumes multiple items (for an exception, see Ariely and Levav 2000), and the present situation is one in which multiple individuals each consume a single item. Variety seeking typically arises because of satiation with product attributes or uncertainty about the stability of one's future preferences (Kahn 1995), and these mechanisms apply when a person is consuming multiple items but not when multiple people are consuming a single item. In the case of variety seeking across group members—for example, when people order unique but less liked entrees when dining at a restaurant with a group—variety seeking occurs because people want to convey that they themselves are unique (Ariely and Levav 2000), whereas in this research, givers selected different items for multiple recipients not to individuate themselves, but rather, to differentiate recipients.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although givers in our experiments were only provided with the option of horizontally differentiating gifts (i.e., by choosing different items of equal value: e.g., *Up* or *Star Trek*), in many situations, givers also have the option of vertically differentiating gifts (i.e., by choosing similar items of differing values: standard or collectors' editions of *Up*). Vertical differentiation provides a means by which givers can distinguish between recipients without resorting to less

liked items, but it is likely to be utilized only under certain circumstances. We suggest that whether givers differentiate gifts horizontally or vertically depends on the relative closeness of the recipients: givers will tend to differentiate horizontally when recipients are equally close to the giver, and they will tend to differentiate vertically when one recipient is considerably closer to the giver than the other.

Our account suggests that givers are most likely to diversify gifts for multiple recipients when they are highly motivated to appear thoughtful and to convey an understanding of recipients' identities. Factors that increase or decrease this motivation should therefore moderate this effect. For example, givers may be less motivated to diversify gifts that are given anonymously (e.g., gifts from a "Secret Santa") since anonymous gifts do not provide givers with the opportunity to signal their special understanding of recipients' identities and are unlikely to affect the strength of the relationship between the giver and recipient. Similarly, there may also be times when givers have a goal to treat each recipient absolutely equally, for example so as not to show favoritism to one grandchild over another. In such cases, givers may prefer to give identical gifts to each recipient so that it is clear that each is equally valued.

The motivation to select gifts that are uniquely suited to recipients is likely to be rooted in social norms and may therefore be moderated by the cultural values and traditions surrounding gift giving. For example, givers may be more motivated to individuate gifts in Western cultures than Eastern cultures since Western values emphasize individualism and Eastern values emphasize conformity (for a review, see Bond 1996). Within a given culture, givers may be more motivated to individuate gifts associated with occasions celebrating specific individuals (e.g., birthdays) than those associated with more general holidays (e.g., Christmas). Furthermore, to the extent that the desire to differentiate recipients is rooted in the norms of gift giving, it

remains to be seen whether it extends beyond the realm of gift giving, for example, to advice giving.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Gift giving constitutes upwards of $66 billion in spending annually in the United States alone (Waldfogel 2009). And yet, Waldfogel (2009) estimates that recipients generally value gifts 10% to 33% less than the prices paid by givers, and approximately $12 billion is wasted on unwanted gifts each year in the United States and $25 billion worldwide. Thus, gift giving is an important aspect of consumer behavior to understand, and it seems like there is room for improvement when it comes to helping consumers to give better gifts.

Despite this, most of the existing work on gift giving is descriptive in nature, and there is currently little published experimental work on the factors that influence gift selection. This research contributes to the study of consumer behavior by being among the few to experimentally examine the mechanisms underlying gift giving and the implications for gift quality. More generally, this research contributes to the study of judgment and decision making by broadening the scope from individual decision making to choices made on behalf of others and from focusing primarily on cognitive mechanisms to also considering the crucial role that desires, motives, and norms play in social decision making.

This research has practical significance for gift givers and retailers alike by identifying when givers are most likely to make suboptimal gift decisions and by suggesting interventions for improving gift selections. Gift givers are most likely to select suboptimal gifts when they are purchasing gifts for multiple recipients and when they are highly motivated to convey an understanding of each recipient's unique identity. Retailers who wish to help gift givers select gifts that are less likely to be returned may consider encouraging givers to consider one recipient

at a time or providing givers with alternative means of satisfying their motivation to individuate gifts, such as customization. Additionally, as demonstrated in this research, encouraging gift givers to focus on how much recipients will like potential gifts can lead to gift selections that are more likely to maximize the happiness and appreciation of the intended recipients.

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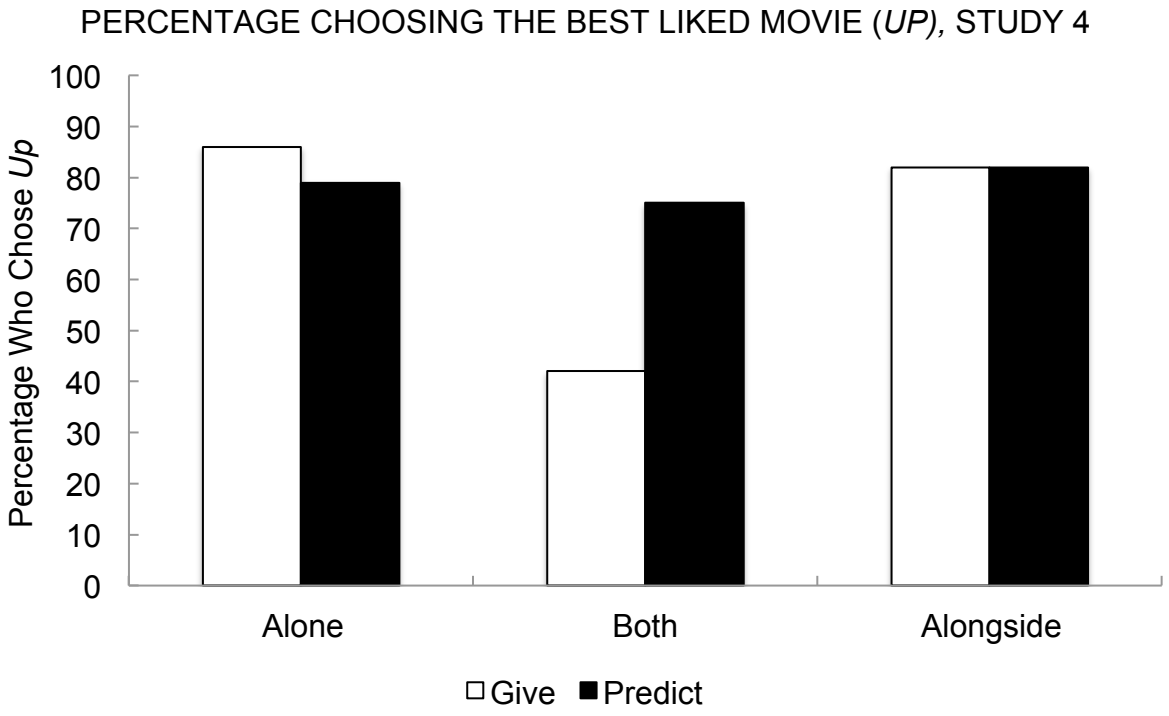
TABLE 1

RATED IMPORTANCE OF GOALS IN GIFT GIVING

Goal	*M* (*SD*)
Choosing a gift that the recipient will like the most	6.38 (.79)
Choosing a gift that seems thoughtful	6.11 (.88)
Choosing a gift that conveys how well I understand the recipient	5.99 (1.02)
Choosing a gift that is uniquely personalized to the recipient	5.56 (1.38)
Choosing a gift that the recipient would have chosen for themselves	5.50 (1.21)
Choosing a gift that the recipient will use often	5.43 (1.20)
Choosing a gift that costs the right amount	5.07 (1.52)
Choosing a gift that is different from what I have given to other people	4.61 (1.50)
Choosing a gift that I myself would like	3.48 (1.75)

FIGURE 1


PERCENTAGE CHOOSING THE BEST LIKED MOVIE (*UP*), STUDY 4
Percentage Who Chose *Up*
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Alone
Both
Alongside
Give
Predict