

# Experiential Gifts Foster Stronger Social Relationships than Material Gifts

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Interpersonal relationships are essential to well-being, and gifts are often given to cultivate these relationships. To inform gift givers of what to give and to gain insight into the connecting function of gifts, this research investigates what type of gift is better at strengthening relationships according to gift recipients—material gifts (objects for recipients to keep) or experiential gifts (events for recipients to live through). Experiments examining actual gift exchanges in real-life relationships reveal that experiential gifts produce greater improvements in relationship strength than material gifts, regardless of whether the gift giver and recipient consume the gift together. The relationship improvements that recipients derive from experiential gifts stem from the intensity of emotion that is evoked when they consume the gifts, rather than when the gifts are received. Giving experiential gifts is thus identified as a highly effective form of prosocial spending.

**Keywords:** gift giving, experiential purchases, material purchases, emotion, relationships

Each year is replete with occasions to give gifts. From birthdays to religious holidays, Valentine's Day to Father's Day, these occasions are fraught with the question: What to give?! Should you give your dad a designer tie or golf lessons? Would giving your spouse a watch or concert tickets spark greater affection? Would a set of wine glasses or a wine tasting better cement your friendship with your favorite colleague? And, ultimately, why

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would one of these gifts strengthen the relationship more than the other?

With the average American household spending almost 2% of its annual income on gifts (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013), and with gift-giving occasions serving as great opportunities (and liabilities) for relationship building, these are surprisingly consequential decisions. Indeed, interpersonal relationships are essential to well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Clark and Lemay 2010; Mogilner 2010; Reis, Collins, and Berscheid 2000), and gifts serve as a means to foster these important connections (Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008; Dunn et al. 2008b; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983). To help inform gift givers of what to give and to gain insight into the interpersonal benefits of gifts, this research adopts the gift recipients' perspective and experimentally investigates which type of gift is more effective at strengthening their relationship with their gift giver—material gifts (objects for the recipients to keep) or experiential gifts (events for the recipients to live through). And why?

## MATERIAL VERSUS EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS

Borrowing Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) definition of material and experiential purchases, we define material

gifts as objects to be kept in the recipient's possession (e.g., jewelry or electronic gadgets) and experiential gifts as an event that the recipient lives through (e.g., concert tickets or a photography lesson).

The research comparing material and experiential purchases to date has focused on the effects of making these purchases for oneself, finding that buying an experience is typically more personally beneficial than buying a material good (Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015). Compared to possessions, experiences lead to greater satisfaction (Carter and Gilovich 2010), less regret (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and greater happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), especially when the outcome of the experience is positive (Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009). The benefits of acquiring an experience over a possession stem from the fact that experiences are more likely to be shared with others (Caprariello and Reis 2013), contribute more to one's sense of self (Carter and Gilovich 2012), are more unique (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and are harder to compare against alternatives (Carter and Gilovich 2010). Although prior research offers guidance on whether to buy experiences or material goods to improve one's own well-being, the question of what to buy to strengthen one's relationships with others remains unanswered. Would giving something to do or something to keep forge a stronger social bond?

It turns out that people are more inclined to give material gifts. In a survey we conducted among 219 gift givers (66% female; ages 18–74,  $M = 34.68$ ), 78% reported having most recently given a gift that was material. This tendency is consistent with the argument that giving a gift that is durable will leave a lasting impression (Ariely 2011).

A pilot study we conducted around Father's Day, however, hints that this tendency to give material gifts might be misguided. Recipients of Father's Day gifts ( $N = 42$ ; ages 48–75;  $M = 55.05$ ) participated in a two-part survey: one completed the week before Father's Day and one the week after. Both before and after Father's Day, dads rated the strength of their relationship with their child (1 = feel extremely distant and disconnected, 9 = feel extremely close and connected); any change would reflect the impact of receiving the gift on the relationship. Dads also rated to what extent the gift they received was material (1 = not at all, 7 = completely) and experiential (1 = not at all, 7 = completely). A multiple regression analysis predicting change in relationship strength showed that gifts that were more experiential strengthened dads' relationships with their children ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(39) = 2.21$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = .71$ ), whereas the material nature of the gift did not ( $\beta = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(39) = -0.39$ ,  $p = .70$ ,  $d = .12$ ). It was not that experiential gifts were more likely to be given in initially stronger relationships, since the material and experiential gift ratings were unrelated to relationship strength before Father's Day ( $p$ 's  $> .43$ ). These results were corroborated by a second pilot study conducted

following Mother's Day among moms who had received a gift from their child ( $N = 99$ ; ages 38–64,  $M = 51.9$ ; 11 unspecified). In this study, moms first reported the relational impact of their gift on a subjective change scale (1 = felt more distant and less connected, 9 = felt closer and more connected), and then rated the experiential versus material nature of the gift on a bipolar scale (1 = purely material, 9 = purely experiential; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Like dads, moms who received gifts that were more experiential reported having a stronger relationship with their child as a result of receiving the gift ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(97) = 2.96$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = .60$ ). Although these results are correlational and based on small samples, they provide preliminary evidence to suggest that experiential gifts are more effective than material gifts at strengthening relationships between gift recipients and their gift givers.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ROLE OF EMOTION

Recent experimental research on gift giving has made great strides in understanding how recipients evaluate different types of gifts (Flynn and Adams 2009; Gino and Flynn 2011; Waldfogel 1993; Zhang and Epley 2012); however, less is known about how giver-recipient relationships are best cultivated through different types of gifts (Akcin and Human 2015). That is, much of the work on gift giving has focused on how much recipients appreciate, value, or like particular gifts, rather than the impact of these gifts on the relationship. For instance, prior gift-giving experiments have shown that despite gift givers' beliefs that expensive gifts will be more appreciated, recipients appreciate expensive and inexpensive gifts alike (Flynn and Adams 2009) and put a lower monetary value on a gift than its actual cost (Waldfogel 1993). And although gift givers think that unsolicited gifts convey greater thoughtfulness and serve as a stronger signal of relationship value, recipients prefer receiving cash or gifts that they had explicitly requested (Gino and Flynn 2011; Ward and Broniarczyk 2015). Additionally, when buying for multiple recipients, gift givers select overly individuated gifts in an attempt to be thoughtful and understanding of each unique recipient, but recipients unfortunately tend not to recognize the thought put into gifts they like (Zhang and Epley 2012), and gift givers' efforts to convey thoughtfulness can even result in selecting gifts that recipients like less (Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014). Even the most well-intentioned gifts can go awry, as givers also tend to mispredict how much recipients will appreciate socially responsible gifts, such as charitable donations given on their behalf (Cavanaugh, Gino, and Fitzsimons 2015). In light of these findings that gift givers are poor predictors of what recipients will like, it is fortunate that recipients

can regift their gifts without offending the giver (Adams, Flynn, and Norton 2012)!

Our research adopts a different approach to assess a gift's value. Namely, we measure the gift's influence on relationship strength from the recipient's perspective, rather than how much the recipient likes the gift. We looked to the literature on close relationships to define relationship strength. Although there is substantial variation among relationship types (i.e., friendships, romantic partners, and family members) with respect to what constitutes a strong relationship, there are principle indicators of relationship strength that span across personal relationships: the extent to which partners feel close to each other (Algoe et al. 2008; Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Dibble, Levine, and Park 2012; Kok et al. 2013; Kok and Fredrickson 2010) and connected to each other (Algoe et al. 2008; Dibble et al. 2012; Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross 2008), as well as how satisfied they are with their relationship (Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew 1998). Across our studies, we adopt these indicators of relationship strength to measure how much the gift changes the gift recipient's perception of the strength of his or her relationship with the gift giver from before to after receiving the gift.

This perspective on the success of a gift is similar to that taken in earlier qualitative research exploring how gift exchanges produce relationship change. A series of depth interviews and surveys offer rich insights into how the context, rituals, meaning, and emotions that surround a gift exchange can lead to different relational outcomes ranging from relationship strengthening to rare cases of relationship severing (Ruth et al. 1999; Ruth, Brunel, and Otnes 2004). For instance, Ruth et al. (1999) observed that gift exchanges that involve highly personalized rituals can imbue the gift with shared meaning and often lead to relationship strengthening. More recently, experimental work has identified that gifts reflecting the giver can promote relationship closeness (Aknin and Human 2015). The current work builds on these insights by specifically testing the relational impact of particular types of gifts—those that are material versus experiential. It further examines why experiential and material gifts may differ in their ability to forge a stronger relationship between gift recipients and givers.

A distinction between experiential and material purchases that has yet to be explored is how much emotion they evoke during consumption. Prior research has focused on the happiness elicited by experiences and material possessions (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Weidman and Dunn 2016), but it is important to note that experiences can stimulate a wide range of emotions (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014; Chan et al. 2014; Derbaix and Pham 1991; Halvena and Holbrook 1986; Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvar 2012; Mogilner, Kamvar, and Aaker 2011; Richins 1997). For instance, a safari adventure can elicit feelings of awe and fear; a rock concert can fuel

excitement; a spa package can promote calmness; and an opera may move one to tears. Given the diversity of discrete emotions that consuming both experiences and material goods can evoke, we focus our investigation on the overall intensity of emotion felt during gift consumption, and propose that the emotion felt by recipients when consuming an experiential gift will be more intense than when consuming a material gift.

Research on relationships highlights emotion as a key feature in relationship development and maintenance. Emotions expressed and experienced within the context of a relationship yield positive interpersonal effects (Clark and Finkel 2004; Graham et al. 2008; Kubacka et al. 2011; Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco 1998; Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006). For instance, disclosing one's emotions (vs. facts and information) makes people feel closer (Laurenceau et al. 1998), positive emotions such as gratitude promote relationship maintenance behaviors (Kubacka et al. 2011), and sharing negative emotions promotes bonding (Graham et al. 2008). The relationship-strengthening effect of emotions extends to situations in which the emotions are not shared. Prior research has shown that partners who write about their feelings within a relationship are more likely to stay together, even when they don't share what they wrote (Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006). More generally, greater emotional intensity has been found to reduce perceived psychological distance (Van Boven et al. 2010). Taking these findings together, we assert that a gift that evokes greater emotion should be more effective at strengthening relationships than a gift that elicits a weaker emotional response, and thus experiential gifts should foster stronger relationships than material gifts. Furthermore, in the case of gifts, the mere fact that the experience was given by the relationship partner psychologically places the experience and the resulting emotion within the context of the relationship. We therefore propose that the experiential gift need not be shared between the gift giver and recipient for it to evoke greater emotion and thereby improve the relationship.

Notably, the emotion evoked during the gift consumption is distinct from the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. In his theoretical model delineating the impact of gifts on relationships, Sherry (1983) highlights the importance of focusing beyond the gift exchange to the consumption of the gift, during which "the gift becomes the vehicle by which the relationship of the donor and the recipient is realigned" (165). Indeed, it is the emotion evoked while the recipient is consuming the gift that we propose drives the difference between experiential and material gifts on relationship change. Whereas material and experiential gifts are both likely to elicit emotion during a gift exchange (e.g., a recipient could feel grateful whether given a wallet or tickets to a comedy show), experiential gifts should elicit more intense emotion during gift consumption as the recipient lives through an event (e.g., a recipient may feel

mild enjoyment while using a wallet, yet will likely feel intensely amused and delighted while attending a comedy show; Weidman and Dunn 2016). Additionally, although Ruth et al. (1999, 2004) found that the valence of the emotion during a gift exchange mattered more than the intensity of emotion in predicting changes in the relationship (perhaps because the gift giver is likely the source and target of the emotions evoked during a gift exchange), we propose that it is the intensity of emotion evoked during gift consumption that is responsible for the greater power of experiential gifts to strengthen relationships.

Altogether, we predict that experiential gifts will improve relationships more than material gifts, and that this is driven by the greater emotional intensity evoked from consuming an experience rather than a possession. More formally, we predict:

**H1:** From the recipient's perspective, experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts, irrespective of whether the gift is consumed with the gift giver.

**H2:** Consuming experiential gifts evokes more intense emotion than consuming material gifts, and this greater emotionality drives the effect of gift type on change in relationship strength.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted experiments involving actual gift exchanges in the context of existing personal relationships. In study 1, gift givers were provided with \$15 to purchase either an experiential or material gift to give to someone they know; in study 2, gift givers were provided with a coffee mug, framed as experiential or not, to give to someone they know; and in studies 3 and 4, participants recalled experiential or material gifts they had received from someone they know. Across the studies, the experiential versus material nature of the gift was manipulated to test how gift type influenced relationship strength from the recipient's perspective. To examine the underlying role of emotion, study 3 measured and study 4 manipulated the emotion evoked during gift consumption. Together, these studies seek to contribute a better understanding of how the type of gift received can differentially affect relationships. Across all four studies, sample size was determined prior to each study with an effort to collect as many participants as resources would permit in the allotted timeframe, and all data exclusions and experimental conditions are reported.

### STUDY 1: A \$15 GIFT

Study 1 used a two-part design measuring gift recipients' reports of pre- and post-gift relationship strength to test our primary hypothesis that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts. Participants were recruited with a friend, and in each participant pair, one was randomly assigned to be the gift giver and the other to be

the gift recipient. Gift givers were provided with \$15 and instructed to purchase either an experiential gift or material gift for their friend, which they were not to consume with their friend. We specifically examined gifts that were not consumed together to counter the explanation that experiential gifts strengthen relationships solely because sharing in the experience involves the giver and recipient spending more time together (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014; Hershfield, Mogilner, and Barnea 2016; Mogilner and Aaker 2009).

### Method

Fifty-nine pairs of friends (118 participants; 57% female, 1% unspecified; ages 18–27;  $M = 20.63$ ) were recruited through a university laboratory to participate in a gift-giving study in exchange for \$10. Upon arriving to the laboratory, participants in each friend pair were randomly assigned to the role of gift giver or recipient. Gift givers were provided with an additional \$15 along with instructions for how to spend this money.

**Gift Type Manipulation.** Gift givers were randomly assigned to purchase either an experiential or material gift for their friend using definitions adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). Gift givers in the experiential gift condition were instructed, "Purchase a gift that is an experience . . . Experiential gifts are experiences intended for the recipient to do or live through." Gift givers in the material condition were instructed, "Purchase a gift that is a material good . . . Material gifts are tangible items for the recipient to have and keep for him/herself." All gift givers were further instructed to give a gift that their friend would consume without them and within the next week, to spend as close to the \$15 as possible on the gift, to give their friend the gift within the next three days, and not to tell their friend our instructions regarding the type of gift they were to purchase. Gift givers left the laboratory with the \$15 and a printout of the gift instructions corresponding to their assigned condition.

**Change in Relationship Strength.** To serve as the baseline measure of relationship strength, gift recipients rated their relationship with their friend on four items. The first measure was the inclusion of other in self (IOS) scale adapted from Aron et al. (1992). Prior research has effectively visually portrayed and measured the sense of interconnection central to relationship strength through the degree of overlap between two circles that represent each partner's self-concept (Aknin and Human 2015; Aron et al. 1991; Aron et al. 1992; Brown et al. 2009). We therefore presented gift recipients with a set of nine circle pairs, in which one of the circles was labeled "self" and the other circle was labeled "other." These pairs ranged in their degree of overlap to represent the strength of the recipient's relationship with the gift giver. Gift recipients were asked

to choose the set of circles that best described their relationship with their gift giver (see appendix A). Next, recipients were asked to rate their relationship with their friend on three Likert scales measuring closeness (1 = extremely distant, 9 = extremely close), connection (1 = extremely disconnected, 9 = extremely connected), and relationship strength (1 = extremely weak, 9 = extremely strong). The average of these four items served as our measure for pre-gift relationship strength ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

Recipients were then told that they would be receiving a gift from their friend within the next three days and a link to an online follow-up survey from us in one week. They were instructed to consume the gift they receive once within the next week (before completing the follow-up survey), and to not consume the gift with their friend. Recipients left the laboratory with a printout of their gift instructions.

One week later, gift recipients received an email inviting them to complete the online follow-up survey in exchange for a \$5 Amazon.com gift card. Forty-four gift recipients responded ( $n_{\text{experiential}} = 20$ ,  $n_{\text{material}} = 24$ ; 57% female; ages 18–25,  $M = 20.5$ ). After describing the gift they had received, recipients reported the strength of their relationship with their friend using the same four items as before. These responses were averaged to serve as the post-gift relationship strength measure ( $\alpha = .93$ ). The post-gift relationship strength score was subtracted from the pre-gift score for our measure of change in relationship strength. One extreme outlier was excluded from further analyses (greater than three standard deviations from the mean, studentized residual = 4.72, Cook's  $D = 0.59$ ).

**Thoughtfulness and Liking.** Because much of the experimental research on gift giving has focused on how much recipients like the gift and how thoughtful they perceive the gift to be (Flynn and Adams 2009; Gino and Flynn 2011), we also measured thoughtfulness and liking to assess whether material and experiential gifts differ on these dimensions. Recipients rated the thoughtfulness of their gift on four items adapted from Flynn and Adams (2009) and Gino and Flynn (2011): the extent to which the gift was thoughtful, considerate, took their needs into account, and took what they really wanted into account (1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent;  $\alpha = .86$ ). Recipients rated how much they liked the gift on three items: how much they liked the gift, how satisfied they were with the gift, and cost aside, how desirable the gift would be to an average other person (third item adapted from Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012; 1 = not at all, 7 = to a great extent;  $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Manipulation Checks.** As a check for whether gift givers had followed their instructions, we asked recipients to 1) rate to what extent the gift they received was material or experiential (1 = purely material, 5 = equally material and experiential, 9 = purely experiential), 2) report whether

they had shared in the consumption of their gift with their gift giver, and 3) estimate the price of the gift. Participants also reported how much time they had spent with their gift giver during the gift exchange and how much time they had spent consuming the gift.

## Results and Discussion

**Gifts Received.** Experiential gifts included a pass to a barre class and movie tickets. Material gifts included a shirt, a poster, and a wine aerator. The manipulation check confirmed that recipients in the experiential gift condition received gifts that were more experiential ( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ) than those in the material gift condition ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ;  $t(41) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = .71$ ). Also, the majority of recipients (86%) had not consumed their gift with their gift giver, there was no significant difference in estimated price between recipients of experiential gifts ( $M = \$14.01$ ,  $SD = 4.19$ ) and material gifts ( $M = \$13.10$ ,  $SD = 5.53$ ;  $t(41) = 0.59$ ,  $p = .56$ ,  $d = .18$ ), and there were no significant differences in how much time recipients had spent with their gift giver during the gift exchange ( $p > .99$ ) or how much time they had spent consuming their gift ( $p = .17$ ).

**Change in Relationship Strength.** The pre-gift relationship measures confirmed that there were no differences in baseline levels of relationship strength among participants in the experiential condition ( $M = 6.71$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) and material condition ( $M = 7.10$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ;  $t(41) = 0.95$ ,  $p = .35$ ,  $d = .29$ ). In support of our first hypothesis, the relationship change measure revealed that recipients of an experiential gift ( $M = 0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) showed a more positive change in relationship strength than recipients of a material gift ( $M = -0.54$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ;  $t(41) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = .61$ ).

Because some participants rated their pre-gift relationship using the extreme ends of the scales, we conducted a robustness check by trimming the data of any participants who reported a pre-gift relationship score greater than 8 ( $n = 11$ ) or less than 2 ( $n = 0$ ). Omitting these participants strengthened the effect of gift type on relationship change, with recipients of experiential gifts reporting greater relationship improvements than recipients of material gifts ( $t(32) = 2.41$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = .78$ ).

**Thoughtfulness and Liking.** Although experiential gifts were directionally perceived as more thoughtful and better liked, the effects were not significant (thoughtfulness:  $M_{\text{exp}} = 5.49$ ,  $SD = 2.32$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ;  $t(41) = 0.94$ ,  $p = .35$ ,  $d = .29$ ; liking:  $M_{\text{exp}} = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 0.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ;  $t(41) = 1.61$ ,  $p = .12$ ,  $d = .43$ ). Therefore, the ability of experiential gifts to strengthen relationships does not appear to be driven by perceived thoughtfulness or liking.

The results of study 1 showed that receiving an experiential gift improves the strength of recipients' relationships with their gift giver, compared to receiving a material gift. Study 2 tests whether highlighting the experiential aspect of a material gift can similarly improve relationship strength.

## STUDY 2: A COFFEE MUG GIFT

Across a variety of gifts that were individually selected by each gift giver, study 1 demonstrated the relationship-strengthening benefits of experiential gifts over material gifts. This next study provided an even more rigorous test for the connecting power of experiential gifts by holding the gift itself constant and varying only the experiential versus material framing of that gift. Indeed, many material gifts have experiential components. For example, a stereo is a material object that is kept in one's possession for years, yet it also provides the experience of listening to music. Similarly, a bottle of wine has a tangible, physical presence that can contribute to a collection, but it can also provide a very pleasurable multisensory experience when consumed with a perfectly paired cheese. Study 2 took advantage of the malleable distinction between material and experiential gifts and tested whether a material gift (a coffee mug) could be framed as more experiential (by highlighting the experience of drinking coffee) to further strengthen gift givers' and recipients' relationships.

### Method

**Gift Type Manipulation.** Two hundred gift givers were recruited through a university laboratory (57% female; ages 18–39,  $M = 20.6$ ) and provided with a gift-wrapped coffee mug to give as a gift to someone they know. Participants were randomly assigned to either give a mug that highlighted the experience of drinking coffee (with the words “my coffee time” inscribed on it) or give a mug identified as a material possession (with the words “my coffee mug” inscribed on it; see appendix B). A between-subjects pre-test validated the manipulation: participants ( $N = 68$ ; 56% female; ages 18–29,  $M = 20.94$ ) were presented with one of the two mugs and asked to rate the mug on a nine-point scale (1 = purely material, 9 = purely experiential). Participants rated the “my coffee time” mug as more experiential ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ) than the “my coffee mug” mug ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ;  $t(67) = 2.13$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = .50$ ). The mugs did not differ in rated desirability, positivity, or favorability ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $t(67) = 0.06$ ,  $p = .95$ ,  $d = .01$ ).

**Change in Relationship Strength.** A survey link was provided on a voucher that was inside the gift-wrapped coffee mug. The voucher was for \$5 at a local coffee shop, and it would become valid if the gift recipient completed a

brief online survey. Each mug condition had a separate survey link, allowing us to know the type of mug received. One hundred nine recipients completed the survey (64% female; ages 16–58,  $M = 21.5$ ;  $n_{\text{material}} = 64$ ;  $n_{\text{experiential}} = 45$ ). The survey asked gift recipients to rate how receiving the gift changed the strength of their relationship with the person who gave them the gift (1 = felt more disconnected, 9 = felt more connected), and how much they liked the gift (1 = hate it, 9 = love it).

### Results and Discussion

Recipients of the more experiential gift ( $M = 7.47$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) reported greater strengthening of their relationship with their gift giver than recipients of the more material gift ( $M = 6.92$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ;  $t(107) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = .37$ ). Again, this effect appears to be independent of how much recipients liked the gift, because recipients reported no difference in how much they liked their mug ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 7.33$ ,  $SD = 1.41$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 7.25$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ;  $t(107) = 0.29$ ,  $p = .77$ ,  $d = .06$ ).

Study 2 provided additional support for our main hypothesis (hypothesis 1) using a highly conservative and controlled test for the effect of gift type on change in relationship strength. Holding all features of the gift constant except for the extent to which the giving of an experience was highlighted, this study showed that receiving a more experiential gift is better at strengthening relationships than receiving a more material gift. Indeed, even a material gift (a coffee mug) could be made more connecting by reminding the recipient of the experience it offers (the time spent drinking coffee). Many gifts have both experiential and material elements, and these results demonstrate that gift givers can enjoy some of the relational benefit of experiential gifts by merely highlighting the experience the gift provides. The next study explored a mechanism for the effect, testing the underlying role of emotion from gift consumption.

## STUDY 3: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTION FROM GIFT CONSUMPTION

Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence for experiential gifts being more effective at strengthening relationships than material gifts. In this next study, we explored the underlying role of emotion. Participants in study 3 were asked to recall either an experiential or material gift they had received and then to rate how the gift impacted their relationship with the gift giver. To examine the mechanism, this study additionally measured the intensity of the emotion evoked from gift consumption separately from the emotion evoked from the gift exchange. Qualitative research observed that a gift exchange can be highly emotional, and the combination of negative and positive emotions felt during a gift exchange, as well as the

recipient's reaction to the emotions expressed by the gift giver, contribute to relationship change (Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth et al. 1999, 2004). We predict that while a gift exchange can be highly emotional for both material and experiential gifts, consuming an experiential gift will elicit a more intense emotional response than consuming a material gift (Weidman and Dunn 2016). For example, attending a theatre performance or going on a vacation is likely to be more emotional than wearing a new pair of boots or driving a car. Furthermore, it is this emotion evoked from consuming experiential gifts that we propose is responsible for their positive impact on relationship strength (hypothesis 2).

Though study 1 showed the more positive effect of receiving an experiential gift versus a material gift even when participants were instructed to *not* consume the gift together, this study further examined the role of sharing the gift through a 2 (gift type: material vs. experiential)  $\times$  2 (consumption: shared vs. nonshared) between-subjects design.

## Method

**Gift Type Manipulation.** Six hundred adults were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study in exchange for \$0.75. Participants were randomly assigned to recall a particular type of gift they had received: shared experiential gift, nonshared experiential gift, shared material gift, or nonshared material gift. Participants in the experiential gift conditions were instructed, "Please recall and describe an experiential gift that you have received at some point in your life from another person." Participants in the material gift conditions were instructed, "Please recall and describe a material gift that you have received at some point in your life from another person." Participants were provided with a definition of material or experiential gifts adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). Those in the shared consumption conditions were further instructed, "This should be [a material/an experiential] gift that you consumed with the person who gave it to you (i.e., you shared the gift with your gift giver)." Those in the nonshared consumption conditions were further instructed, "This should be [a material/an experiential] gift that you consumed on your own (i.e., you did not share the gift with your gift giver)."

Participants who could not recall a gift ( $n = 7$ ), did not complete the survey ( $n = 41$ ), or did not follow the gift recall instructions (i.e., described a gift they had given,  $n = 1$ ; described a gift received from multiple people,  $n = 15$ ; described a gift of cash,  $n = 1$ ; described multiple gifts,  $n = 1$ ) were eliminated from the analysis. This left 534 gift recipients in the analyzed dataset (59% female; ages 18–78,  $M = 33.1$ ).

**Change in Relationship Strength.** Using the measures from study 1, participants rated the strength of their relationship to the gift giver before and after receiving the gift. Participants first chose two pairs of overlapping circles: one to represent their relationship before receiving the gift and one to represent their relationship after receiving the gift (see appendix A; adapted from Aron et al. 1992). Participants also rated their relationship both before ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and after ( $\alpha = .91$ ) receiving the gift in terms of closeness (1 = extremely distant, 9 = extremely close), connection (1 = extremely disconnected, 9 = extremely connected), and relationship strength (1 = extremely weak, 9 = extremely strong). The difference between each of the before and after ratings on the four relationship measures was calculated, and these values were averaged to form an overall indicator of change in relationship strength.

**Emotion.** Recipients reported how emotional they felt from the gift exchange separately from how emotional they felt during gift consumption. They were specifically instructed, "Think about the emotions you felt from receiving the gift. Focus on the moment when you felt the most emotional from receiving the gift, and rate how intensely you felt that emotion" (1 = did not feel emotional at all from receiving the gift, 7 = felt extremely emotional from receiving the gift); and "Think about the emotions you felt from consuming the gift. Focus on the moment when you felt the most emotional from consuming the gift, and rate how intensely you felt that emotion" (1 = did not feel emotional at all from consuming the gift, 7 = felt extremely emotional from consuming the gift). We asked participants to focus on the moment they felt most emotional to remove the influence of hedonic adaptation that is more likely to have occurred for the more durable material gifts (Nicolao et al. 2009). To account for this difference in durability, we also asked participants to estimate the total amount of time they had spent consuming the gift.

To explore the specific emotions evoked by their gifts, we then asked participants to select one primary emotion from a list of 30 randomly ordered discrete emotions that they were feeling at the moment they felt most emotional (see appendix C). This list was followed by a text box, in case the emotion they felt was not provided. The listed emotions were drawn from the Positive and Negative Affective Schedule—Expanded Form (PANAS-X; Watson and Clark 1994), including the two general dimension scales (10 positive and 10 negative emotions), along with eight additional basic emotions (four positive and four negative). Given our interest in the social aspects of a gift exchange and consumption, we also added two emotions (embarrassed and grateful) that serve important social functions (Fischer and Manstead 2008; Tooby and Cosmides 2008).

**Thoughtfulness and Liking.** Thoughtfulness and liking of the gift were measured using the same items as in study 1. Perceived thoughtfulness was measured using four items ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and liking was measured using three items ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

**Other Features of the Gift.** To account for the likely variation among the gifts received, we asked recipients to estimate the price of the gift, to report when they had received the gift, and to indicate how they were related to their gift giver (spouse or significant other, child or grandchild, parent, another family member, close friend, acquaintance, colleague, or other).

Lastly, participants responded to manipulation checks by rating the extent to which the gift they received was material or experiential (1 = purely material, 5 = equally material and experiential, 9 = purely experiential), and by indicating whether they had consumed the gift with their gift giver (yes, no).

## Results

**Gifts Received.** Shared experiential gifts included vacations, meals, and tickets to concerts or sporting events. Nonshared experiential gifts included music or dance lessons, spa services, vacations, meals, and tickets for events that were not attended with the gift giver. Shared material gifts included coffee makers, game consoles, televisions, tablet computers, and cars; and nonshared material gifts included jewelry, clothing, computers, portable music players, and digital cameras. Manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the experiential gift conditions recalled gifts that were more experiential ( $M = 7.55$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ) than participants in the material gift conditions ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ;  $t(532) = 25.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.48$ ); and most participants in the shared gift conditions (93%) consumed their gifts with their gift giver (vs. 3% in the nonshared gift conditions;  $\chi^2(1) = 435.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Participants in the experiential gift conditions also consumed their gift over a shorter period of time ( $M = 3.41$  days,  $SE = 12.56$ ) than participants in the material gift conditions ( $M = 118.98$  days,  $SE = 12.24$ ;  $t(532) = 6.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .55$ ), consistent with the more durable nature of material gifts.

The estimated price of the gifts ranged from \$1 (a magnet) to \$19,000 (a car). The majority of gifts (60%) were received within the past year, but the oldest gift was received in 1969. Most gifts were received from a spouse or significant other (37%), parent (19%), another family member (16%), or a close friend (19%).

**Change in Relationship Strength.** A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA conducted on change in relationship strength revealed only a main effect of gift type, with experiential gifts ( $M = 0.66$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ) strengthening relationships more than material gifts ( $M = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ;  $F(1, 530) = 11.81$ ,

$p < .001$ ,  $d = .30$ ; see figure 1). Neither the shared consumption main effect ( $p = .50$ ) nor the gift type by shared consumption interaction ( $p = .81$ ) was significant, suggesting that the relationship-strengthening effect of receiving an experiential gift occurred regardless of whether recipients consumed the gift with their gift giver (see web appendix A for robustness check).

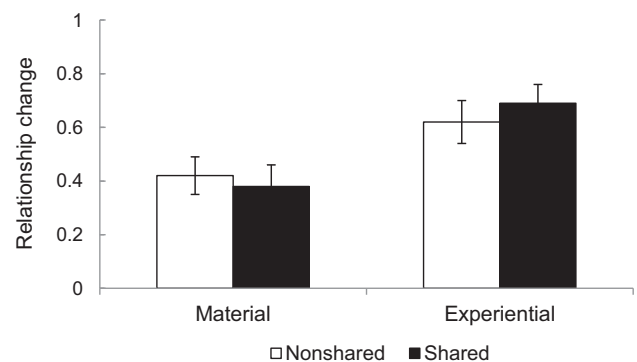
Given the wide range of gifts, we also conducted a  $2$  (gift type)  $\times 2$  (shared) ANCOVA on change in relationship strength, controlling for estimated price, date of receipt, and how the recipient was related to the gift giver (dummy coded). Results again showed that receiving an experiential gift strengthened relationships more than receiving a material gift ( $F(1, 520) = 6.83$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $d = .23$ ). Including the covariates did not affect the significance levels of the shared consumption main effect ( $p = .72$ ) or the interaction effect ( $p = .32$ ).

**Emotion from Consumption.** To examine the role of emotion, we first conducted a  $2$  (gift type)  $\times 2$  (shared) ANOVA on the extent to which consuming the gift made recipients feel emotional. The results revealed only a main effect of gift type, with experiential gifts ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ) evoking greater emotion than material gifts ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ;  $F(1, 530) = 11.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .29$ ). There was a nonsignificant effect of sharing ( $p = .14$ ) and a nonsignificant interaction effect ( $p = .50$ ).

These effects held when the covariates were included in the analysis. The results again revealed only a main effect of gift type, with experiential gifts evoking greater emotion than material gifts ( $F(1, 520) = 15.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .34$ ), and a nonsignificant effect of sharing ( $p = .92$ ) and interaction effect ( $p = .90$ ). Accounting for factors such as the type of relationship and the time that has passed since the gift exchange, these results suggest that consuming an experiential gift evokes greater emotion than consuming a material gift, regardless of whether recipients consume the gift with their gift giver. The vast majority of the specific

FIGURE 1

STUDY 3: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS OF EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) GIFTS





emotions participants felt most intensely while consuming the gift were positive (97.6%; see table 1).

We next conducted a mediation analysis to test our theory that the positive effect of receiving an experiential gift (vs. material gift) on relationship strength is driven by the greater emotion evoked during gift consumption. We entered recipients' ratings of how emotional consuming the gift was as the mediator, controlling for estimated price, date of receipt, and how the recipient was related to the gift giver. As our previous analyses showed, experiential gifts strengthened relationships more than material gifts ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(522) = 2.70$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $d = .23$ ). In addition, gifts that were more emotional were more effective at improving relationship strength ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t(522) = 33.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .49$ ). When both gift type and emotion were entered into the model predicting change in relationship strength, the effect of consumption emotion remained significant ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,

$t(521) = 5.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .46$ ), whereas the effect of gift type was no longer significant ( $\beta = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(521) = 1.80$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $d = .15$ ). Corroborating evidence was obtained in a bootstrap analysis, which generated a confidence interval of the indirect effect that did not cross zero (95% CI = [.03, .12]; Hayes 2012; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010; see figure 2). In sum, experiential gifts tend to be more emotional to consume, and gifts that are more emotional to consume lead recipients to have a stronger relationship with their gift giver, thus supporting our hypothesis that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts because they evoke greater emotional intensity during consumption (hypothesis 2).

Emotion from Gift Exchange. Having identified the significant role of the emotion evoked during gift consumption, we next examined the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA conducted on how emotional recipients felt upon receiving the gift showed a nonsignificant main effect of gift type. Material and experiential gifts did not differ in how emotional it was to receive the gift ( $p = .88$ ). The main effect of shared consumption ( $p > .99$ ) and the gift type  $\times$  shared interaction ( $p = .63$ ) were also not significant. Like the emotions evoked during gift consumption, the vast majority of the specific emotions participants felt most during the gift exchange were positive (96.8%; see table 1). These findings are consistent with our theorizing that experiential and material gifts are similarly emotional when received, and thus it is the emotion felt from gift consumption, rather than the gift exchange, that is responsible for the greater relationship-strengthening effect of experiential gifts.

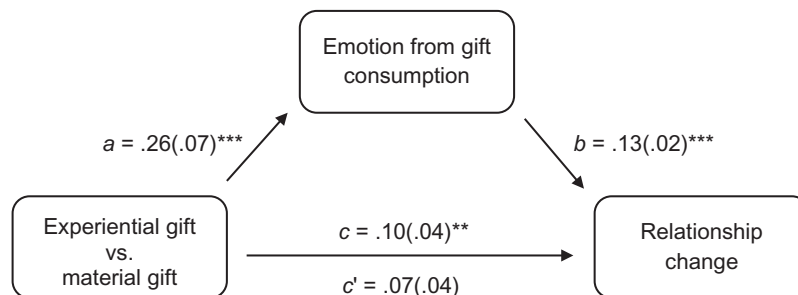
TABLE 1

STUDY 2: EMOTIONS FELT MOST INTENSELY DURING GIFT CONSUMPTION AND GIFT RECEIPT (FIVE MOST COMMONLY REPORTED)

Gift consumption		Gift receipt	
Emotion	% of participants	Emotion	% of participants
Happy	29.0%	Grateful	20.0%
Delighted/cheerful	15.9%	Delighted/cheerful	17.6%
Grateful	13.1%	Excited	17.4%
Excited	10.3%	Happy	13.7%
Enthusiastic	6.9%	Surprised	13.5%

FIGURE 2

STUDY 3: EXPERIENTIAL GIFTS WERE MORE EMOTIONAL TO CONSUME AND THEREFORE MORE CONNECTING



Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , two-tailed test. Parameter estimates are listed with standard errors in parentheses, with estimated price of gift, date of gift receipt, and how the recipient was related to the gift giver (dummy coded) as model covariates.

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**Thoughtfulness and Liking.** We again found no differences in thoughtfulness and liking across conditions. A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA predicting perceived thoughtfulness of the gift revealed no significant effects for gift type ( $p = .77$ ), shared consumption ( $p = .16$ ), or the interaction ( $p = .08$ ). Similarly, a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA predicting liking of the gift revealed no significant effects for gift type ( $p = .19$ ), shared consumption ( $p = .42$ ), or the interaction ( $p = .75$ ).

## Discussion

Examining a wide range of real-world gifts across a variety of relationships, this study provided robust evidence that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts, regardless of whether gift recipients and givers consume the gift together (hypothesis 1). Furthermore, the mechanism underlying this effect is the intensity of emotion evoked during gift consumption, which is distinct from the emotion evoked during the gift exchange. Specifically, consuming experiential gifts evokes greater emotion than consuming material gifts, and it is this emotional intensity that strengthens recipients' relationships with their gift givers (hypothesis 2).

Because the vast majority of participants in study 3 reported the emotion they felt most intensely while consuming their gift to be positive, there was not sufficient data to assess whether the effect of emotion on relationship strength would generalize to negative emotions felt during gift consumption. For example, would an intense feeling of sadness while watching a performance of *Madame Butterfly* or an intense feeling of fear while watching *Silence of the Lambs* strengthen the giver-recipient relationship? To explore the role of emotional valence, we conducted a similar study in which we asked participants ( $N = 523$ ; 46% female, three unspecified; ages 18–66,  $M = 32.0$ , one unspecified) to recall a significant material or experiential gift they had received. Participants rated how much their relationship with the gift giver had strengthened as a result of the gift, as well as how intensely they felt each of 30 discrete emotions while consuming their gift (15 positive emotions and 15 negative emotions; see appendix C). Ratings for all 30 emotions were averaged to create an index of overall emotion. In addition, the ratings for the positive and the negative emotions were averaged separately. The results showed that recipients of experiential (vs. material) gifts felt more emotional overall ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 3.29$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 3.02$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 510) = 20.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .39$ ), and this effect held for purely positive emotions ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 3.73$ ,  $SE = 0.06$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 3.52$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 510) = 12.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .30$ ), and purely negative emotions ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 2.22$ ,  $SE = 0.07$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 2.08$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ;  $F(1, 510) = 5.09$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $d = .20$ ). Furthermore, significant indirect effects were observed when we used the average of all 30 discrete emotions (95% CI = [.05, .15]), as well as just the 15 positive

emotions (95% CI = [.04, .14]), and just the 15 negative emotions (95% CI = [.003, .08]) as mediators for the effect of gift type on change in relationship strength. This offers preliminary evidence suggesting that strong negative emotions evoked through gift consumption can also strengthen giver-recipient relationships.

## STUDY 4: THE MODERATING ROLE OF EMOTION FROM GIFT CONSUMPTION

Building on the mediation evidence from study 3, study 4 sought further evidence for the underlying role of emotion from gift consumption through a test of moderation. This study followed a  $2$  (gift type: material vs. experiential)  $\times 2$  (emotion: control vs. emotion) between-subjects design. Participants were asked to recall either an experiential gift or material gift they had received, and half were more specifically instructed to recall a gift that had evoked intense emotion during consumption.

Additionally, this study design allowed us to identify a boundary condition for the benefit of receiving experiential gifts over material gifts. Although we argue that consuming experiential gifts tends to evoke greater emotion than consuming material gifts, there surely are some material gifts that elicit a great deal of emotion when consumed. For example, wearing one's engagement ring hopefully makes one feel incredibly loved and loving, and looking at a photograph that captures a meaningful moment should stir emotion. Because we argue that experiential gifts strengthen giver-recipient relationships by eliciting more intense emotion during consumption, material gifts that evoke intense emotion should similarly strengthen relationships.

## Method

One thousand forty-two participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in this study in exchange for \$0.50. Participants who did not complete the survey ( $n = 26$ ) or wrote that they could not follow the instructions or could not think of a gift ( $n = 21$ ) were eliminated from the analysis. This left 995 participants in the analyzed dataset (45% female, two unspecified; ages 18–77,  $M = 33.2$ ).

**Gift Manipulations.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions comprising the  $2$  (gift type: material vs. experiential)  $\times 2$  (emotion: control vs. emotion) design. Participants in the control conditions were asked to "Please recall and describe [a material/an experiential] gift you've received." Participants in the emotion conditions were asked to "Please recall and describe [a material/an experiential] gift you've received that makes or made you feel emotional while consuming it." Participants were provided with the definition of material or

experiential gifts from studies 1 and 3. All participants were also instructed that the gift should be one they received from someone they know and one they did not consume with the gift giver.

**Change in Relationship Strength.** This study used yet another measure for change in relationship strength, which was adapted from the Relationship Satisfaction Level index of [Rusbult et al.'s \(1998\)](#) Investment Model Scale. Participants rated their agreement (1 = don't agree at all, 5 = somewhat agree, 9 = agree completely) with five statements ( $\alpha = .95$ ): "I feel more satisfied with our relationship as a result of the gift"; "Our relationship is closer to ideal as a result of the gift"; "Our relationship is much better than others' relationships as a result of the gift"; "Our relationship makes me very happy as a result of the gift"; and "Our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs for intimacy, companionship, etc. as a result of the gift."

**Thoughtfulness and Liking.** Thoughtfulness and liking of the gift were measured using the same items as in studies 1 and 3. Again, perceived thoughtfulness of the gift was measured using four items ( $\alpha = .78$ ), and liking was measured using three items ( $\alpha = .56$ ).

**Other Features of the Gift.** To account for the variation among the gifts received, we asked recipients to estimate the price of the gift, to report when they had received the gift, and to indicate how they were related to their gift giver (spouse or significant other, child or grandchild, parent, another family member, close friend, acquaintance, colleague, or other) and for what occasion they had received the gift (birthday, wedding, anniversary, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, graduation, for no special occasion, or other).

Lastly, participants responded to manipulation checks by rating the extent to which the gift they received was material or experiential (1 = purely material, 5 = equally material and experiential, 9 = purely experiential), and how emotional they had felt while consuming the gift (1 = did not feel emotional at all from consuming the gift, 9 = felt extremely emotional from consuming the gift).

## Results

**Gifts Received.** As in study 3, the experiential gifts recalled included vacation, meals, and tickets to performances and events. The recalled material gifts included clothing, electronics, musical instruments, and jewelry.

A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA conducted on the material-experiential manipulation check confirmed a main effect of gift type ( $F(1, 991) = 1157.74, p < .001, d = 1.45$ ), along with a main effect of emotion condition ( $F(1, 991) = 11.72, p < .001, d = .15$ ) and an interaction ( $F(1, 991) = 34.88, p < .001, d = .25$ ). The experiential gifts were rated as more experiential than the material gifts in the control

conditions ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 7.72, SE = .13$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 2.42, SE = .13; t(991) = 28.85, p < .001, d = 1.70$ ) and emotion conditions ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 7.39, SE = .13$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 3.66, SE = .14; t(991) = 19.48, p < .001, d = 1.19$ ).

A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA conducted on the emotion manipulation check confirmed a main effect of emotion condition ( $F(1, 991) = 105.91, p < .001, d = .62$ ), as well as a main effect of gift type ( $F(1, 991) = 11.83, p < .001, d = .21$ ), and an interaction ( $F(1, 991) = 12.84, p < .001, d = .22$ ). The recalled emotional gifts were rated as more emotional than the control gifts in the experiential conditions ( $M_{\text{emot}} = 5.63, SE = .09$  vs.  $M_{\text{cont}} = 5.02, SE = .09; t(991) = 4.84, p < .001, d = .40$ ) and material conditions ( $M_{\text{emot}} = 5.64, SE = .10$  vs.  $M_{\text{cont}} = 4.38, SE = .09; t(991) = 9.62, p < .001, d = .83$ ). Consistent with our theorizing that experiential gifts tend to evoke more intense emotion during consumption than material gifts, these results show that in the control conditions, experiential gifts were more emotional than the material gifts ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 5.02, SE = .09$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 4.38, SE = .09; t(991) = 5.07, p < .001, d = .42$ ).

Employing yet another approach to check the emotion manipulation, we conducted a textual analysis on participants' written description of their gift using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; [Pennebaker, Booth, and Francis 2007](#)), which is an effective measure of the amount of emotion expressed ([Kahn et al. 2007](#)). The LIWC enumerated the percentage of emotion words written by each participant. This additional check confirmed that, overall, participants in the emotion conditions expressed greater emotion when writing about their gift, and that within the control conditions, participants in the experiential condition also expressed greater emotion when writing about their gift. Specifically, participants in the experiential emotion ( $M = 6.89, SE = 0.31$ ), material emotion ( $M = 6.42, SE = 0.33$ ), and experiential control ( $M = 5.08, SE = 0.31$ ) conditions each wrote a significantly higher percentage of emotion words than did participants in the material control condition ( $M = 3.83, SE = 0.31; p's < .005$ ). Again, this is consistent with our theorizing that experiential gifts tend to evoke greater emotion than material gifts.

The estimated price of the gifts ranged from \$0 (e.g., a handed-down shirt) to \$25,000 (a wedding ring). Fifty percent of gifts were received within the past year, and the oldest gift was received in 1960. Most gifts were received from a spouse or significant other (32%), parent (24%), another family member (17%), or a close friend (18%), and were received for a birthday (34%), Christmas (25%), or no special occasion (26%). Wedding and anniversary gifts combined constituted less than 6% of the gifts.

**Change in Relationship Strength.** A 2 (gift type)  $\times$  2 (emotion) ANOVA conducted on change in relationship strength revealed a main effect of gift type ( $F(1, 991) = 21.33, p < .001, d = .29$ ), a main effect of emotion ( $F(1, 991) = 17.81, p < .001, d = .26$ ), and the predicted

interaction ( $F(1, 991) = 10.62, p = .001, d = .21$ ). Consistent with our previous findings, in the control conditions, experiential gifts ( $M = 5.78, SE = 0.13$ ) resulted in greater improvements in relationship strength than material gifts ( $M = 4.71, SE = 0.13; t(991) = 5.69, p < .001, d = .49$ ). Furthermore, in support of our proposed underlying role of emotion, material gifts that evoked intense emotion during consumption ( $M = 5.73, SE = 0.15$ ) resulted in similar improvements in relationship strength as experiential gifts that evoked emotion ( $M = 5.92, SE = 0.13; t(991) = 0.94, p = .35, d = .08$ ; figure 3). Controlling for the estimated price of the gift, date of receipt, how the recipient was related to the gift giver (dummy coded), and the gift occasion (dummy coded) did not affect the significance of the main effect of gift type ( $F(1, 972) = 15.72, p < .001,$

$d = .26$ ), emotion ( $F(1, 972) = 15.20, p < .001, d = .24$ ), or their interaction ( $F(1, 972) = 10.10, p = .002, d = .20$ ).

We observed that many of the emotional material gifts were pieces of jewelry commemorating a meaningful life event (e.g., engagement or wedding, birth of a child, graduation) or passed down as heirlooms. Others included photographs and religious items (e.g., bible, rosary). Though the predicted effects of gift type and emotion on change in relationship held when we controlled for gift occasion and other features of the gifts (i.e., price, date of receipt, and relationship to the gift giver), it is still possible that the emotion manipulation elicited gifts in participants' minds that differed in ways other than their material or experiential distinction. To assess this, we asked two research assistants who were blind to study conditions and hypotheses to categorize the gifts participants had received. First, the research assistants jointly determined purchase categories that encompassed the full range of gifts (e.g., travel; food and drink; clothing, shoes, and accessories). The research assistants then independently assigned each gift to one of the 10 purchase categories (84% agreement, and disagreements were resolved through discussion). An examination of the coded gifts revealed some differences among the material gifts between the control and emotion conditions (see table 2). For example, jewelry was more likely to be mentioned as an emotional material gift, and though electronics were also frequently mentioned as an emotional material gift, they were more likely to be mentioned in the control condition. More importantly, however, the purchase category of the gifts received did not affect the primary outcome of relationship change. Controlling for purchase category (dummy coded), a 2 (gift type)  $\times$  2 (emotion) ANCOVA conducted on change in relationship strength still revealed a main effect of gift type ( $F(1, 959) = 3.89, p < .05, d = .20$ ), a main effect of emotion

FIGURE 3

STUDY 4: RELATIONSHIPS IMPROVED MORE AMONG RECIPIENTS WHO RECEIVED EXPERIENTIAL (VS. MATERIAL) GIFTS OR GIFTS THAT WERE EMOTIONAL TO CONSUME

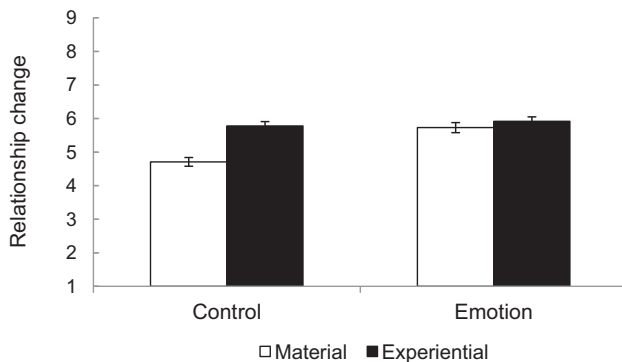


TABLE 2

STUDY 4: PERCENTAGE OF GIFTS RECEIVED (BY CONDITION) AND MEAN CHANGE IN RELATIONSHIP STRENGTH IN EACH PURCHASE CATEGORY

	Material		Experiential		Mean change in relationship strength
	Control ( <i>n</i> = 259)	Emotion ( <i>n</i> = 220)	Control ( <i>n</i> = 258)	Emotion ( <i>n</i> = 258)	
Travel	0%	0.9%	24.4%*	16.3%*	6.18
Recreation and leisure	1.5%	2.7%	21.3%	16.7%	6.10
Food and drink	0%*	2.3%*	19.4%	19.4%	5.67
Beauty and wellness	2.7%	2.3%	8.1%	6.2%	5.60
Arts, music, and literature	5.8%	9.6%	20.9%	25.2%	5.58
Jewelry	10.8%*	19.6%*	0%	1.6%	5.54
Electronics and technology	36.7%*	19.6%*	0%*	4.3%*	5.27
Home and garden	8.1%	13.2%	0%	0.8%	5.21
Other	7.0%*	12.7%*	3.9%	5.4%	5.19
Clothing, shoes, and accessories	27.4%*	17.3%*	1.2%	4.3%	4.86

Note: Within each material or experiential gift condition, \* represents a statistical difference between the control and emotion conditions for each purchase category at  $p < .05$ .

( $F(1, 959) = 19.39, p < .001, d = .28$ ), and the predicted interaction ( $F(1, 959) = 8.42, p = .004, d = .18$ ); the effect of purchase category was not significant ( $F(1, 959) = 1.43, p = .17, d = .22$ ), and none of the individual purchase categories significantly predicted the change in relationship strength. This suggests that the specific purchases generated in each condition cannot explain the effect of consumption emotion on relationship strength for experiential versus material gifts. Moreover, an examination of the average change in relationship strength across the various purchase categories reflects a pattern consistent with the primary hypothesis: recipients of gifts in more experiential categories reported greater improvements in relationship strength than those who received gifts in more material categories (see [table 2](#)).

**Thoughtfulness and Liking.** A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA predicting thoughtfulness revealed only a main effect of emotion, with emotional gifts ( $M = 6.23, SE = .04$ ) being considered more thoughtful than control gifts ( $M = 6.12, SE = 0.04; F(1, 991) = 3.85, p = .05, d = .12$ ). The effects of gift type and the interaction were not significant ( $p$ 's  $> .16$ ). A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA predicting liking revealed a main effect for gift type, with experiential gifts ( $M = 6.18, SE = .04$ ) being better liked than material gifts ( $M = 6.04, SE = 0.04; F(1, 991) = 6.31, p = .01, d = .16$ ). The effects of the emotion manipulation and the interaction were not significant ( $p$ 's  $> .50$ ). When thoughtfulness and liking were included as covariates in the analysis of change in relationship strength, the results held: we still observed a main effect of gift type ( $F(1, 989) = 19.71, p < .001, d = .27$ ), of emotion ( $F(1, 989) = 15.68, p < .001, d = .24$ ), and their interaction ( $F(1, 989) = 10.20, p < .001, d = .19$ ). Again, this suggests that perceived thoughtfulness and liking of the gift are not responsible for the greater ability of experiential gifts to strengthen relationships.

## Discussion

Using yet another measure of change in relationship strength, the control conditions in study 4 replicated the beneficial effect of receiving experiential gifts over material gifts observed in the previous studies. This effect was robust even when we controlled for many other features of the gift. Moreover, this study used a test of moderation to provide additional evidence for the underlying role of consumption emotion and to identify an important boundary condition for the effect: material gifts that made recipients feel emotional while consuming them were as effective at strengthening the relationship as experiential gifts.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Consumers spend a lot of money on others (Americans spend approximately \$130 billion on gifts per year; [Unity](#)

[Marketing 2015](#)), and spending money on others has been proven to increase one's own happiness ([Dunn, Aknin, and Norton 2008a](#)). The current research explores the more far-reaching effect on relationships *between* people, finding that not all prosocial expenditures are equally beneficial. Despite gift givers' tendencies to give material possessions, our findings show that material gifts are less effective than experiential gifts at strengthening relationships between gift givers and their recipients.

This research provides guidance for gift givers on what to give and offers insight into the relational function of gifts. Taking the recipients' perspective to assess the success of gifts, we conducted experiments involving a variety of real-life gift exchanges and ways of measuring relationship change, and we consistently found that experiential gifts strengthen relationships more than material gifts (studies 1–4). This effect also emerged when the very same gift was framed as being relatively more experiential (study 2). A driving factor underlying this effect is the greater level of emotion elicited when recipients consume experiential gifts versus material gifts, which we identified through tests of mediation (study 3) and moderation (study 4). Even though there was no difference in the intensity of emotion recipients felt upon receiving experiential and material gifts, recipients felt more emotional when consuming experiential (vs. material) gifts, which served to strengthen their relationship with the gift giver. From this, we learn that gift givers seeking to foster closer relationships with their recipients are likely to achieve greater success by giving experiential gifts, rather than material gifts.

## Theoretical Contributions

To build on the now-established body of work that has demonstrated that purchasing experiences (vs. material goods) for oneself positively affects one's personal well-being ([Carter and Gilovich 2010; Gilovich et al. 2015; Nicolao et al. 2009; Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003](#)), research has begun investigating factors that precede experiential and material purchasing ([Dai, Chan, and Mogilner 2016; Kumar and Gilovich 2016; Kumar, Killingsworth, and Gilovich 2014; Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis 2015](#)). Findings suggest that the benefit of acquiring experiences for the purchaser can be largely explained by the typically more social nature of experiences ([Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014; Caprariello and Reis 2013](#)). Our findings further contribute to this burgeoning stream of research by being the first to show the interpersonal consequences of experiential versus material purchases. In addition, we identify a novel advantage of experiential purchases: consuming an experience evokes greater emotion than consuming a material possession.

Our finding that the emotion felt during gift consumption is responsible for strengthening relationships is consistent with past work on interpersonal relationships that

AQ2

has highlighted the importance of emotion in close relationships (Aron et al. 2000; Bazzini et al. 2007; Clark and Finkel 2004; Laurenceau et al. 1998; Nummenmaa et al. 2012; Peters and Kashima 2007; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007; Slatcher and Pennebaker 2006). Our research builds on this literature by showing that the gift of an emotional experience can strengthen relationships, even when relationship partners do not consume the gift together.

Our research also contributes to gift-giving research by testing how different types of gifts impact relationships and by examining the emotion evoked from gift consumption. The bulk of the existing experimental work examining recipients' responses to gifts has focused on identifying gifts that are better liked and appreciated (Flynn and Adams 2009; Gino and Flynn 2011), rather than on understanding how gifts can change the relationship between the gift giver and recipient (Aknin and Human 2015). Although our findings indicate that the extent to which the recipient likes the gift is positively related to change in relationship strength, liking does not appear to drive our effect, as we did not find consistent differences in how much recipients liked experiential and material gifts. Instead, the gift's emotionality is what seems to make experiential gifts better than material gifts at strengthening relationships. By examining emotions evoked during gift consumption, our research also complements qualitative work examining the emotion that arises during the gift exchange (Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth et al. 1999, 2004). By studying the emotion evoked from gift consumption and testing its impact on relationships, our research thus provides new insights into gift giving.

AQ3

### Future Research and Marketing Implications

Although experiences tend to be more emotional, our research shows that emotionally evocative material gifts can also strengthen relationships. Future work should explore how possessions become associated with emotion, and what types of possessions are most meaningful. For example, recent research has found that items associated with loved ones and special events carry sentimental value (Yang and Galak 2015). Therefore, would material gifts that commemorate experiences be more prone to evoke emotion so as to effectively strengthen relationships? Gift giving is a ripe context for such investigations into meaningful possessions, in light of the underlying role of emotion and the focus on interpersonal relationships.

Future research should also delve further into the pathways through which the emotions evoked from gifts can affect relationships. Our findings showed that emotional gifts that were not jointly consumed by the gift giver and recipient were equally effective at strengthening relationships. In these instances, is the recipient linking these consumption emotions to the relationship (e.g., vicariously sharing the

gift consumption with the giver and thereby feeling closer), or is the process more indirect (e.g., feeling closer to a giver who has emotionally enriched the recipient's life)? A related question is whether there are particular emotions that are more connecting than others. For instance, are gifts given out of gratitude versus guilt differentially connecting (Chan, Mogilner, and Van Boven 2016)? And what are the circumstances in which negative emotions are connecting? For example, to deepen our understanding of how experiential gifts can affect relationships, future research should contrast the effects of negative emotions that are intentional (e.g., fear from watching a scary movie) versus unintentional (e.g., frustration due to bad service at a restaurant), or the effects of negative emotions directed at the experience (e.g., sadness over a tragic play) versus at the relationship partner (e.g., anger because the partner arrived late for the show). Prior work has shown that the benefits of purchasing experiences over material goods for oneself are attenuated and sometimes reversed when the purchase outcome is negative (Nicolao et al. 2009); therefore, it is quite possible that the effects of unintended negative consumption emotions due to failed experiential gifts could be particularly detrimental for relationships.

When examining the effect of gifts on relationships, one must also consider how to measure relationship change. Both study 1 and the Father's Day pilot study measured relationship strength at two time periods—before and after receiving the gift—to directly assess the gift's impact on the relationship. In subsequent studies, participants retrospectively evaluated how a gift had affected their relationship with the giver. Though the latter approach allowed us to more feasibly manipulate gift type for actual gifts received in real relationships for real gift occasions, it also increased the possibility of participants reporting their lay beliefs about gifts, rather than their true reactions. This concern is alleviated, however, because the predicted pattern of results was consistent across studies that used the two-stage approach and the retrospective approach. In addition, the retrospective studies showed effects that lay theory would be unlikely to predict: experiential gifts improve relationships even when not consumed with the gift giver. Furthermore, the use of between-subject designs lessened the potential for demand effects. Still, future research on gift giving should strive to employ longitudinal designs that measure relationship strength both before and after gift exchanges to establish the role gifts play in ongoing relationships.

Longitudinal designs could also be used to conduct a longer-term examination of the effects of gifts on relationships to further contribute to the gift-giving literature. Across our studies, we focused on the short-term effects of receiving a single gift. However, a gift could have a longer-lasting effect on a relationship (Algoe et al. 2008), and might influence future gift-giving interactions. Further, although we did not observe a significant effect of sharing

in the consumption of the gift, it may be that the benefits of sharing in experiential gift consumption could emerge later on as those cherished shared memories gain greater interpersonal value. More generally, this research direction would substantiate the relationship-strengthening effects of gifts over time and more broadly inform the impact of gift giving on relationships. Across our studies, we examined the effects of different *types* of gifts on relationships—contingent upon a gift being given. However, the act of gift giving in itself has social value (Ward and Chan 2015), and it would be worthwhile to examine its role in maintaining relationships over time, compared to relationships in which no gifts are given.

The current research emphasizes the interpersonal benefits of experiential gifts. Future work could explore potential intrapersonal benefits of giving experiences. Engaging in relationship maintenance behaviors has been found to increase individual well-being when these efforts are successful in improving relationship quality, but to decrease well-being when these efforts are unsuccessful (Baker et al. 2012), and research has documented how personal happiness can be gained from prosocial spending (Dunn et al. 2008a; Hershfield et al. 2016). Because giving experiential gifts is more effective at strengthening relationships, gift givers might derive greater hedonic benefits from giving an experience than a material good. Furthermore, gift givers might reap personal benefits from sharing in the experience with the recipient since giving one's own time can lead to greater feelings of interpersonal connection and self-efficacy (Mogilner, Chance, and Norton 2012).

Future research could also examine whether the relational benefits observed in this research extend to consumer-brand relationships. For example, rather than promoting merchandise rewards, the Starwood Hotels & Resorts Starwood Preferred Guest loyalty program encourages its members to redeem their Starpoints for “incredible experiences” and “unforgettable events.” We see that retailers, such as Sephora, Nordstrom, and Saks Fifth Avenue, give private parties and events for their loyal

customers in addition to more material gifts, such as free cosmetic items. Follow-up work should test whether experiential rewards are more effective at strengthening consumer-brand connections than material rewards.

Finally, companies that sell experiences, such as those in the travel or entertainment industry, should create opportunities for consumers to easily purchase experiences to give as gifts. For example, Travelers Joy is a service that enables engaged couples to build an experiential gift registry for their honeymoon, so that family and friends can give part of their honeymoon (e.g., a surf lesson, dinner, adventure tour) as a wedding gift. Given that gift recipients prefer receiving gifts from their registry over individually selected gifts (Gino and Flynn 2011), our research implies that such experiential gift registries will benefit gift givers, recipients, and the companies that provide experiences.

## Conclusion

Consumers frequently struggle with the challenge of choosing what to give. Most gift-giving occasions are therefore accompanied by a flurry of advice columns and top 10 lists of gift ideas, as media and marketers try to help consumers make choices that will improve their relationships. This research offers simple guidance: to make your friend, spouse, or family member feel closer to you, give an experience.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author supervised the collection of data for studies 1 and 2 by research assistants at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Behavioral Lab in summer 2013 and winter 2011, respectively. The first author managed the data collection for studies 3 and 4 on Amazon's Mechanical Turk in summer 2013 and fall 2015, respectively. The data were analyzed by the first author in collaboration with the second author.

AQ4

**APPENDIX A**  
**STUDIES 1 AND 3: INCLUSION OF OTHER**  
**SCALE ADAPTED FROM Aron et al. (1992)**

	Relationship before receiving gift	Relationship after receiving gift
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**APPENDIX B**  
**STUDY 2: COFFEE MUGS GIVEN AS**  
**GIFTS**

AQ5



Material gift



Experiential gift

**APPENDIX C**  
**STUDY 3: 30 DISCRETE EMOTIONS**  
**MEASURED**

PANAS-X General Dimension Scales

Positive affect: active, alert, attentive, determined, enthusiastic, excited, inspired, interested, proud, strong

Negative affect: afraid, scared, nervous, jittery, irritable, hostile, guilty, ashamed, upset, distressed

Other positive: happy, delighted/cheerful, calm, surprised, grateful

Other negative: sad, lonely, angry, disgusted, embarrassed

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