



## Warm Glow of Gifts: Effects of Product Warmth, Channel, and Friendship Distance

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**Introduction** Gift giving custom is an integral part of everyday life found in all societies. Many gifts, particularly between friends, are altruistic in its nature and the current study focuses on this gift giving, “a noneconomic, spontaneous, and altruistic activity that is meant to communicate personal feelings” (Komter & Vollebergh, 1997). With increased online and mobile shopping activities, sending gifts electronically has become very common. The current study is designed to test the effects of gifting products with different warmth on happiness and relationship strength in different gifting contexts (i.e., two different digital channels and friendship distances).

**Literature Review and Hypotheses** According to affect theory of social exchange, individual emotions evoked from social exchanges influence strength of relationship ties when the feelings are attributed to the relational unit (Lawler, 2001). Gift giving is a common social exchange practice between friends, and can evoke emotions that can strengthen friendship. This study is particularly interested in perception of warmth in gifting. Warmth is one of two dimensions of human social cognition (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006), and Williams and Bargh (2008) showed physical experience of warmth activated feeling of interpersonal warmth and influenced judgment of evaluation of personality of others. Some products (e.g., textile products) are perceived warmer than others (e.g., metallic objects) because of its function and touch. Because apparel products are warmer and gifts between friends are meant to convey warm feelings, it is posited that warm gifts are likely to be more effective and elicit more warm feeling (H1a), and consequently make the receiver perceive stronger future friendship with the giver (H1b) and happier (H1c). However, the intimacy and strength of the current relationship can change the nature of gift exchanges (Belk, 1976) and the same gift can be interpreted differently by the context. We propose that the channel (mobile vs. online) and friendship distance will influence perception of the same gift. Studies report text messages are primarily used to build, advance, and maintain personal relationships (Pettigrew, 2009). As mobile phones are used constantly, and are the primary device to contact close friends, it is likely that text messages are perceived as more personal than emails on PC (H2). Also, gift literature demonstrated non-gift factors such as presentation of the gift and relationship between the giver and receiver can influence the experience (Larsen & Watson, 2001). Therefore, the gift product warmth effect on friendship perception will be qualified by the communication channel (H3) and friendship distance (H4).

**Methods** A 3(Gift warmth: soft socks/stainless steel water bottle/ \$10giftcard) x 2(Channel: text message/email) x 2(Friendship distance: close/distant) between-subject online experiment was conducted. Female adults living in the US (N=215) were recruited from Amazon mTurk. Participants were asked to think of a friend who they consider not too close or too distant. After answering a few questions about the friend (gender of the friend, friendship distance, and length of friendship), they read a scenario. A gift was sent either as a mobile text message or an email from a well-known national retailer, and it was from the friend they just thought of. After reading the scenario and viewing the images of the gift details, they answered a questionnaire that contained instruments for perception of mobile text messages and emails, product warmth,

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happiness, future friendship strength, and control variables (loneliness, age, temperature, friend personality).

**Results and Discussion** Manipulation of product warmth was successful ( $p < .05$ ). As proposed (H2), mobile text messages are considered more personal than email messages ( $p < .001$ ). H1 was partially supported. Participants who received the warm (vs. cold) gift reported more warm feeling (H1a:  $p < .05$ ) and happiness (H1c:  $p < .05$ ). Receivers of the giftcard reported an equal level of warm feeling and happiness as the receivers of the warm gift condition. However, product warmth did not affect future friendship strength perception (H1b). This non-significant result can be explained by the complex interaction effects among product warmth, friendship distance, and channel. Gift warmth and channel interaction was significant for receivers' future friendship strength perception ( $p < .05$ ) (H3). Gift warmth enhanced the receiver's perception of future friendship when the warm gift was given through mobile text messages (vs. emails). No channel effect was found when either the cold gift or the giftcard was given. Therefore, soft and warm apparel gifts are more effective in communicating feeling and enhancing friendship strength when it is delivered via mobile text messages (the personal channel). Such effect was not present when other gifts were given. Consistent with H4, a three-way interaction emerged ( $p < .05$ ). For close friends, the cold gift significantly lowered friendship perception when delivered via mobile text messages. No difference was observed for the giftcard or the warm gift. On the other hand, for distant friends, the warm gift enhanced the friendship strength perception when delivered via mobile text messages than emails. The channel had no effect for the gift card and the cold gift.

**Implication** Our results collectively showed that some products are inherently better matched to communicate feelings as a gift due to their warmth. Apparel and textiles products with soft and fuzzy feeling are ideal to communicate warmth and the effect can be amplified when the gifts are delivered through more personal communication channels (i.e., mobile text messages) rather than less personal channels (i.e., personal computer emails), and this effect is most prominent when the current friendship is not as close. The study contributes to the gift literature.

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