

The Gifts We Keep on Giving: Documenting and Destigmatizing the Regifting Taboo

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Abstract

Five studies examined whether the practice of regifting—a social taboo—is as offensive to the original givers as potential regifters assume. Participants who imagined regifting a gift (receivers) thought that the original giver would be more offended than participants who imagined that their gifts were regifted (givers) reported feeling. Specifically, receivers viewed regifting as similar in offensiveness to throwing gifts away, yet givers clearly preferred the former. This asymmetry in emotional reactions to regifting was driven by an asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement. Givers believed that the act of gift giving passed title to the gift on to receivers, so that receivers were free to decide what to do with the gift; in contrast, receivers believed that givers retained some say in how their gifts were used. Finally, an intervention designed to destigmatize regifting by introducing a different normative standard (i.e., National Regifting Day) corrected the asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement and increased regifting.

Keywords

social interaction, role taking, interpersonal relationships

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People often receive gifts they will not use, gifts of things they already have, or gifts they do not like. Some researchers refer to this problem as “deadweight loss” because receivers would not spend as much on the gifts as the givers did in purchasing them (Waldfoegel, 1993), and the receivers are left with unwanted presents that linger in a closet before eventually being thrown away. One seemingly sensible means of restoring some of this lost value is for receivers to pass unwanted gifts along to other people who might appreciate them more. However, the notion of regifting evokes both positive and negative reactions: Although some people regard regifting as resourceful and thrifty, many consider it to be rude and distasteful. We posit that resistance to regifting is partly due to an asymmetry in beliefs about the practice that depend on one’s role in a gift exchange: giver or receiver. In particular, we suggest receivers may overestimate givers’ negative emotional reactions to regifting and therefore are loath to regift.

In a classic ethnographic study of regifting, Malinowski (1922) described the dynamics of the Kula Ring, a ritual performed by residents of the Massim archipelago in Papua, New Guinea. Kula participants traveled by canoe to a nearby island, bearing gifts of shell jewelry that were then transported to another island and presented as gifts, and so on. To Kula Ring members, keeping gifts destroyed the value created by the act

of giving, whereas regifting ensured that the value of a gift would be maintained (Hyde, 1979). Historical accounts such as these suggest that regifting was uncontroversial—and even normative—in some cultures. In contemporary society, however, criticism against the practice has emerged, such that the act of regifting is now frowned upon, if not explicitly discouraged. In short, regifting is considered a social taboo.

We investigated whether the taboo of regifting may be somewhat one-sided, so that receivers overestimate how offensive regifting is to the initial giver. Gift giving, like other forms of social exchange, is a highly ritualized process, governed by role-specific expectations that are rooted in each party’s own egocentric view (Teigen, Olsen, & Solas, 2005; Zhang & Epley, 2009). For givers and receivers, views of the exchange may be a matter of timing: Different features of the exchange are more or less salient before, during, and following an act of giving. For givers, on the one hand, the acts of selecting and offering a gift are more salient than the manner in which the gift is utilized after the exchange has taken place

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(Mauss, 1925). Receivers' obligations, on the other hand, become salient after receipt of gifts; for example, they are bound to express gratitude as an acknowledgement of the givers' sacrifice (Schwartz, 1967).

We suggest that this contrast in temporal focus in givers' and receivers' role-specific expectations leads to an asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement: whether receivers are free to do what they please with gifts, or whether givers' intentions for gifts must be honored. Because givers' obligations have been satisfied once their gifts have been received, they are less likely to be concerned with how the receivers choose to use their gifts: The givers' actions in deciding to give, selecting gifts, and delivering them remain intact regardless of what the receivers choose to do with the gifts. Receivers, in contrast, may feel that givers' concerns about gifts linger past the act of giving—after all, receivers are often not even made aware of gifts until the exchanges take place. As a result, receivers may believe that givers will feel entitled to determine the fate of their gifts, whereas givers disagree. We suggest that this asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement underlies the asymmetry in emotional reactions to regifting: Because receivers erroneously believe that givers want their original intentions for their gifts to be honored, receivers believe that givers will be more offended by their decision to regift than givers actually are.

What could strengthen receivers' feelings of entitlement to do with a gift as they see fit? Given that regifting is a normative taboo, information that destigmatizes the practice—making it seem more permissible and prevalent—should embolden receivers to regift. Holidays, for example, are crucial institutions for coordinating the gift-exchange process by clarifying which gift-giving practices are considered normative (Camerer, 1988). In fact, several cultures have developed holidays specifically intended to reframe regifting as a socially acceptable practice: the annual *vrijmarkt* in The Netherlands and National Regifting Day in the United States. Noting these examples, we suggest that providing information that regifting is normatively acceptable and common—by increasing awareness of a regifting holiday—should increase receivers' feelings of entitlement, decrease their perception of the offense that givers will feel if their gifts are regifted, and increase regifting.

Overview of the Studies

In a series of studies, we examined the psychology of regifting in both hypothetical scenarios and actual regifting among friends. We explored whether receivers' beliefs about regifting would lead them to throw a gift in the trash rather than regift it. We assessed whether there is an asymmetry in beliefs about offensiveness and whether it is mediated by a similar asymmetry in perceptions of entitlement. Finally, we examined how introducing a different normative standard for regifting—a National Regifting Day—might help receivers to feel more entitled, leading them to rate regifting as less offensive and to increase their actual regifting.

Study 1: Regifting Gift Cards

In Study 1, we investigated beliefs about the offensiveness of regifting from the perspective of both giver and receiver by asking participants to imagine either giving gift cards or receiving and then regifting them. We hypothesized that receivers would think regifting was more offensive to the giver than givers would report feeling.

Method

Participants. Fifty-five participants (36 women, 19 men; mean age = 31.6 years) completed the study online for a chance to win a \$25.00 gift certificate that could be used at Amazon.com.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to the role of giver or regifter and asked to read a scenario about a \$50.00 amazon.com gift card. Givers were told to imagine that they had given the gift card to a friend for his birthday and that, when asked, the friend said he had regifted the card to his sibling. Regifters were told to imagine that they had received the gift card as a birthday gift from a friend and that, when asked, they had told the giver they had regifted the card to their own sibling.

Givers responded to eight items assessing the extent to which they would feel offended (“annoyed,” “irritated,” “disgusted,” “upset,” “offended,” “insulted,” “awkward,” and “uncomfortable”) if the receiver regifted the gift card. They responded on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Regifters rated how much they thought the giver would be offended, using the same items and scales. We created a composite measure of perceived offensiveness ($\alpha = .94$).

Results and discussion

Regifters thought the giver would be more offended if they regifted the gift card ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.11$) than givers reported feeling ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(54) = 3.15$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.85$. This finding provides initial evidence that beliefs about regifting are contingent on one's role in the exchange: Regifters overestimated the extent to which givers would feel offended by regifting.

Study 2: Regift or Destroy?

Study 1 showed that regifters believe that regifting is more offensive than givers believe. But just how negatively do regifters view regifting? One reaction to receiving a bad gift is to give that gift away, but doing this leads receivers to worry about destroying social value by offending givers; another reaction is to simply throw a gift away, thereby destroying its material value. In Study 2, we explored whether regifters believe that the potential decrease in social value that comes from regifting is so extreme that they think regifting and

destroying a gift's material value by throwing it in the trash are similarly offensive to givers. We expected givers to view destroying their gift as worse than giving it to someone else.

Method

Participants. One hundred seventy-eight participants (117 women, 61 men; mean age = 49.0 years) completed this study online for a chance to win a \$25.00 gift certificate for making a purchase from an online retailer.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions of a 2 (role: giver or receiver) $\times$ 2 (receiver's decision: regift or throw away) between-subjects design. They read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they had recently given or received a wristwatch as a graduation gift. Givers were asked to imagine that the receiver had either regifted the watch to a friend or thrown it in the trash; receivers were asked to imagine that they had regifted the watch to a friend or had thrown it in the trash. Participants then responded to the same measures of offensiveness as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .94$).

Results and discussion

We observed a main effect of role, such that receivers believed regifting or throwing a gift away would offend givers more than givers actually felt they would be offended, $F(1, 172) = 14.55, p < .001, d = 0.57$. We also observed a main effect of the receiver's decision, such that throwing the gift away was rated as more offensive than regifting it, $F(1, 172) = 9.62, p < .001, d = 0.48$. Most important, we observed the predicted interaction between role and receiver's decision, $F(1, 172) = 4.09, p = .045$ (Fig. 1). Givers were less offended when they learned the receiver regifted the wristwatch ($M = 2.60, SD = 1.07$) than when they learned the receiver threw it away ($M = 3.39$,

$SD = 1.16$), $t(87) = 3.37, p < .001, d = 0.72$; receivers, in contrast, thought the giver would be equally offended whether they regifted the watch ($M = 3.50, SD = 0.79$) or threw it in the trash ($M = 3.66, SD = 1.03$), $t(85) = 0.84, p = .41, d = 0.17$. Thus, although givers clearly viewed throwing their gift away as more offensive than regifting it, receivers believed that regifting a gift was as offensive as destroying it.

Study 3: Regifting With Friends

In Study 3, we extended our investigation in several ways. First, we moved from scenario-based studies to a study in which groups of real-world friends gave gifts to one another. Second, we tested our proposed mechanism for the asymmetry in perceptions of offensiveness: beliefs about entitlement. Specifically, we assessed whether receivers fail to recognize that givers believe they pass title to their gifts on to receivers with the act of giving, and whether this discrepancy in beliefs about entitlement leads receivers to feel that regifting is more offensive than givers believe it is. Finally, we examined a situation in which regifting is most likely to occur—receiving a particularly bad gift—predicting that even after receiving such a gift, receivers would overestimate givers' offense at regifting.

Method

Participants. Thirty-three students (17 women, 16 men; mean age = 21.0 years) at a West Coast university participated in triads in exchange for \$10.00.

Procedure. Participants were required to sign up for the study with two of their friends. One member of each triad was randomly assigned to the role of giver and escorted from a waiting area to another room. On a table there were three items that a pretest had identified as bad gifts: a magazine for retired people, a DVD about the life of Mandy Moore, and a weight-loss cookbook.¹ The giver was asked to select one of these items, wrap it with gift paper, and give it to one of his or her friends, who thus became the initial receiver.

Next, the giver was asked to go back to the waiting room. The initial receiver—now a regifter—was told to wrap the item in different paper and give it as a gift to the third friend, the final receiver. In front of the initial giver, the initial receiver entered the waiting room with the newly wrapped gift, informed the final receiver that he or she had chosen to regift the gift, and gave the gift to the final receiver.

In the second room, givers and regifters completed the perceived-offensiveness measures from the previous studies ($\alpha = .92$). We used four items to measure perceptions of entitlement. For regifters, the items were phrased as follows: "The gift giver feels that I am entitled to do whatever I want with the gift"; "The gift giver feels that I should use the gift as it was intended" (reverse-coded); "The gift giver feels that I should do whatever I want with this gift"; and "It doesn't matter what the gift giver wants me to do with this gift." For givers, these

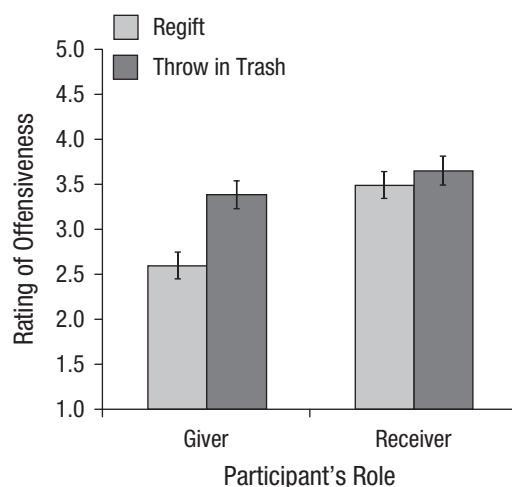


Fig. 1. Results from Study 2: mean rating of offensiveness as a function of the participant's role (giver or receiver) and what the receiver did with the gift. Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

items were reworded to reflect their own perspective (e.g., “The gift recipient is entitled to do whatever he/she wants with the gift”). Both givers and regifters rated the four items on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We created a composite measure of beliefs about entitlement ($\alpha = .70$); higher numbers correspond to beliefs that initial receivers should feel more entitled.

Results and discussion

Perceived offensiveness. Regifters ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.14$) again thought that givers would be more offended by regifting than givers reported feeling ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.56$), $t(20) = 2.99$, $p = .007$, $d = 1.34$.

Entitlement. As expected, givers and regifters differed in their perceptions of entitlement, with givers ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.14$) believing that regifters were more entitled to do what they wished with the gift than regifters thought givers would believe ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(20) = 3.25$, $p = .004$, $d = 1.38$.

Mediation. We conducted a mediation analysis to test whether the effect of role on offensiveness was mediated by entitlement. The effect of role on offensiveness was significantly reduced (from $\beta = 0.56$, $p = .007$, to $\beta = 0.21$, $p = .29$) when entitlement was included in the equation, and entitlement significantly predicted offensiveness, $\beta = -0.71$, $p < .001$ (Fig. 2). The 95% bias-corrected confidence interval for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero ([0.18, 1.68]), and this finding suggests a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007).

Thus, even among friends, and even when the gift involved is bad, regifters believe that givers would be more offended by regifting than givers actually would be. We demonstrated that an asymmetry in beliefs about who has title to such a gift

mediates the effect of role on perceived offensiveness; because receivers feel that givers should have a greater say in what happens to a gift than givers feel they should, receivers believe that regifting is more offensive than givers believe.

Studies 4a and 4b: National Regifting Day

Is it possible to make receivers more comfortable with regifting? The results of Study 3 suggest that interventions that encourage receivers to feel more entitled to do what they wish with a gift—to feel less that their normative obligation is to honor the wishes of the giver—might liberate them to regift. In Studies 4a and 4b, therefore, we attempted to enhance receivers’ feelings of entitlement by offering a normative standard that legitimized regifting, a social institution that encouraged the practice of regifting: National Regifting Day.

Although one might expect the frequency of regifting to increase if regifting were supported by a social institution, it is critical for our theoretical account that such an increase would be driven by changes in receivers’ beliefs about entitlement. Thus, in Studies 4a and 4b, we examined whether awareness of National Regifting Day would make receivers feel that regifting is less offensive, by correcting their beliefs about the extent to which givers continue to have title to their gifts, and would therefore increase actual regifting behavior.

Study 4a: National Regifting Day increases regifting

In Study 4a, we explored whether telling participants that it was National Regifting Day would increase actual regifting behavior. We hypothesized that people would be more likely to regift on National Regifting Day.

Method. Seventy-one students at a West Coast university (38 women, 33 men; mean age = 21.8 years) participated in this study in exchange for \$8.00.

Participants were asked to bring a gift they had recently received to the lab. Upon arrival, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: Either they were told that it was National Regifting Day or they were not told anything about the day. Then, all participants were asked whether they wanted to regift their gift to a friend of their choosing. If they chose to give away their gift, we gave them a box for it, asked them to wrap the gift in wrapping paper and ribbon, obtained the new receiver’s address, and shipped the gift to the new receiver. Participants who chose not to give away their gift kept it.

Results and discussion. As predicted, participants were more likely to give away their gift if they were informed that it was National Regifting Day than if they were not so informed, $\chi^2(1, N = 71) = 4.89$, $p < .02$. Although 30% of participants who thought they would be regifting on National Regifting Day chose to give away their gift, only 9% of participants who were not told it was National Regifting Day did so.

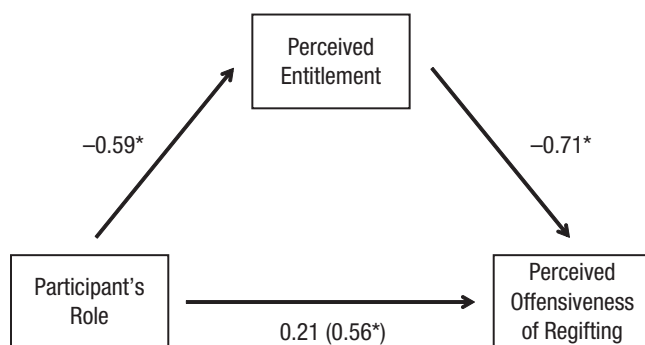


Fig. 2. Results from Study 3: mediation model showing the effect of the participant’s role (giver or regifter) on the perceived offensiveness of regifting as mediated by the participant’s belief that the regifter was entitled to give the gift away. Standardized regression coefficients are shown. Along the lower path, the value in parentheses indicates the unmediated effect of participant’s role on beliefs about offensiveness. Asterisks indicate significant paths ($p < .01$).

Study 4b: National Regifting Day increases receivers' feelings of entitlement

National Regifting Day can therefore increase receivers' willingness to regift their gifts. But is this increased willingness driven by a decrease in the asymmetry between givers' and receivers' perceptions of the gift exchange, as our account suggests? In Study 4b, we used a scenario-based paradigm to explore whether learning about National Regifting Day would cause receivers to feel more entitled to give away their gift—so that their beliefs would match those of givers—and, if so, whether this increase in perceived entitlement would increase the accuracy of receivers' perception of how offended givers are by the act of regifting.

Method. One hundred eighteen English-speaking students (68 women, 49 men, 1 person who did not report his or her gender; mean age = 34.2 years) at a West Coast university completed this study in exchange for a \$3.00 gift card for making a purchase from an online retailer.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the giver condition, participants were asked to imagine that they had given a friend an iPod Shuffle as a birthday gift. They were then told to imagine that the receiver had regifted the gift to a friend. In the receiver and receiver/regifting-day conditions, participants imagined that they had received an iPod Shuffle as a birthday gift and had regifted it to another friend. Participants in the giver and receiver conditions completed the same measures of entitlement ($\alpha = .79$) and offensiveness ($\alpha = .96$) as in Study 3; National Regifting Day was not mentioned in the materials given to these participants. Participants in the receiver/regifting-day condition reported what their feeling of entitlement would be and estimated what the giver's perception of offense would be if the receivers were to regift the iPod Shuffle on National Regifting Day.

Results and discussion. An omnibus analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect of condition on perceived offensiveness, $F(2, 113) = 7.27, p < .001$. As in the previous studies, participants in the receiver condition ($M = 3.01, SD = 1.18$) thought that givers would be more offended than givers reported they would be ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.00$), $t(77) = 3.64, p < .001$. Participants in the receiver/regifting-day condition, however, believed that givers would be less offended ($M = 2.39, SD = 0.98$) than did participants in the receiver condition, $t(72) = 2.45, p = .02$, and their estimates of givers' perceived offense did not differ from givers' reports, $t(77) = 1.23, p = .22$.

An omnibus ANOVA also revealed a significant effect of condition on entitlement, $F(2, 114) = 12.89, p < .001$. Mirroring our results for perceived offensiveness, the results for entitlement indicated that participants in the receiver condition ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.13$) felt less entitled than givers felt they should ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.28$), $t(77) = 4.87, p < .001$;

participants in the receiver/regifting-day condition ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.09$) felt more entitled than did receivers who had not been informed about National Regifting Day, $t(78) = 2.93, p = .004$, although they still felt less entitled than givers thought they should, $t(73) = 2.14, p = .04$.

We conducted mediation analyses comparing the giver and receiver/regifting-day conditions with the receiver condition by recoding the condition variable into two dummy-coded variables: one that coded for the giver condition and one that coded for the receiver/regifting-day condition. When entitlement was included in the equation, the effect of role on perceived offensiveness was significantly reduced (giver condition: from $\beta = -0.39, p = .001$, to $\beta = -0.04, p = .63$; receiver/regifting-day condition: from $\beta = -0.26, p = .01$, to $\beta = -0.12, p = .16$). Furthermore, entitlement significantly predicted perceived offensiveness across all conditions, $\beta = -0.67, p < .001$. The 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (giver condition: $[-1.16, -0.40]$; receiver/regifting-day condition: $[-0.63, -0.01]$), and this finding suggests a significant indirect effect.

As in Study 3, an asymmetry between givers' and receivers' beliefs about entitlement accounted for the asymmetry between givers' and receivers' beliefs about how offensive givers would find regifting. Most important, increasing receivers' feelings of entitlement—by instituting a different normative standard that destigmatized regifting—corrected their perceptions so that their beliefs about entitlement and offensiveness more closely mirrored those of givers.

General Discussion

Despite the intuitive appeal of dealing with unwanted gifts by regifting them to other people who might enjoy them more, our results suggest that this solution may not appeal to all parties to the exchange. Across different types of gifts and gift-giving occasions, receivers believed that regifting would be more offensive to givers than givers reported feeling. Indeed, receivers thought that regifting was as bad as throwing a gift in the trash, whereas givers saw the latter as more offensive. These effects were mediated by beliefs about entitlement: Although receivers felt that givers were entitled to have a say in what happened to their gifts, givers felt that receivers were entitled to do whatever they liked with a gift. In short, the taboo against regifting was felt more strongly by receivers than by givers. An intervention designed to destigmatize this regifting taboo—informing participants of a national holiday devoted to the practice—increased receivers' feelings of entitlement and decreased their overestimation of givers' feelings of offense at regifting, thereby increasing receivers' willingness to regift what they had received.

Two factors central to the regifting process are worthy of further investigation: the relationship between the giver and receiver, and the type of gift given. These variables are related, as the types of gifts given to close friends often differ from those given to acquaintances. In our studies,

asymmetries in beliefs about regifting emerged even when givers and receivers were friends (Study 3). Nevertheless, given that gift giving is frequently used to acknowledge and strengthen relationships, future research should explore the role of relationship closeness in reactions to regifting. However, the direction of the impact is not clear. For example, receivers might fear that close friends are more likely than acquaintances to be offended by regifting, but it is also possible that receivers feel better about regifting gifts from close friends because they assume that people who care about them would want them to use their gifts in any way they choose. In addition, the impact of relationship closeness on regifting may depend critically on the type of gift in question. In our studies, asymmetries in beliefs about regifting arose with both “good” (gift cards) and “bad” (Mandy Moore DVDs) gifts, but gifts vary on other key dimensions, such as concreteness (e.g., “concrete” goods and services vs. “symbolic” gifts that convey love and status; Foa & Foa, 1974, 1980). Whereas regifting concrete resources (gift cards and DVDs) may be tolerable to givers, regifting symbolic gifts—for example, a handcrafted scarf—may be more likely to offend givers because such regifting sends a stronger signal that receivers do not value their relationship with the givers. When symbolic gifts are given to close rather than more distant friends—so that the gifts symbolize a social bond (Mauss, 1925)—regifting may have even more negative consequences.

On a practical level, our results suggest a simple solution to increase regifting. Givers should encourage receivers to use gifts freely, perhaps even telling receivers that regifting the gifts would not be offensive—or at least, would be less offensive than the potential regifters might have expected.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. In the pretest, which was conducted with a separate sample, participants ($N = 29$) had indicated how much they would like receiving each of 22 gifts from a friend, using 11-point scales ranging from 1 (*very much dislike*) to 11 (*very much like*); these 3 items had received the lowest ratings ($M_s = 2.17, 2.28$, and 3.41).

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