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Research Article

The Role of Explicitness in Gift Exchange Based on People's Appreciation: The Mediating Role of Relationship's Depth

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Abstract

Background: This study investigated the impact of explicitness in gift exchange on perceived appreciation, with a particular focus on the mediating role of relationship depth.

Objectives: Recognizing gift exchange as a crucial interpersonal process influenced by communicative clarity and relational context, this research sought to clarify the emotional dynamics underlying close relationships.

Methods: Using a descriptive-correlational design, the study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analyze data collected from a sample of 629 married individuals in Iran, aged 20–60 years. Participants evaluated their level of appreciation across four scenarios that varied according to the explicitness of the gift (explicit vs. non-explicit) and their role (gift giver vs. gift recipient). The Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI) was used to assess relationship depth, and the data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS version 24.

Results: The findings revealed that both explicit and non-explicit gift-giving conditions significantly predicted levels of appreciation. However, relationship depth did not mediate the association between explicitness and appreciation, regardless of whether participants evaluated the scenarios as gift givers or gift recipients. Further analyses indicated that participants reported higher levels of appreciation in close-friend relationships than in romantic-partner relationships. In addition, within both relationship types, participants reported significantly greater appreciation in relationships with higher levels of depth than in those with lower levels of depth. These findings suggest that although communicative explicitness is a significant predictor of appreciation, relationship depth does not function as a mediator in this relationship. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the importance of the relational context, indicating that both relationship type and relationship depth are associated with variations in perceived appreciation.

Conclusion: These results contribute to a better understanding of the social and emotional mechanisms underlying gift exchange and suggest that future studies should further investigate the moderating role of relational characteristics.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Appreciation is a fundamental cognitive-emotional construct that significantly influences the development and stability of interpersonal relationships. In the literature, gift giving is conceptualized not merely as a material transaction but as a symbolic communicative act that reflects relationship maintenance, intimacy, and the perceived value of the recipient. A major challenge in this area is the mismatch between the giver's intentions and the recipient's satisfaction, which often arises from differences in perceptions of a gift's meaning and usefulness. Previous research has shown that gift-giving failures are relatively common, as reflected by the high rate of returned purchased gifts, suggesting a discrepancy between what givers assume recipients want and what recipients actually value. One important strategy for reducing this mismatch is the degree of explicitness in gift exchange—that is, whether a gift is requested (explicit) or unrequested (implicit). The present study examined how communicative explicitness influences perceived appreciation while considering the role of relationship depth. Specifically, it investigated whether relationship depth mediates the association between explicitness and appreciation in different relational contexts, including romantic partners and close friends. Understanding these mechanisms may provide a clearer understanding of social signaling and emotional processes in close relationships. The present study aimed to examine the effect of communicative explicitness in gift giving on perceived appreciation while considering the mediating role of relationship depth across two relational contexts.

Method

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to examine the determinants of appreciation in gift-exchange contexts. The study included a sample of 629 volunteers aged 21 to 50 years who evaluated four hypothetical scenarios. The scenarios systematically manipulated two factors: the type of gift (explicit/requested vs. implicit/unrequested) and the participant's role (gift giver vs. gift recipient). Participants were asked to rate their level of appreciation in each scenario. Relationship depth was assessed using the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI) developed by Pierce and Sarason (1991). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the proposed conceptual model. In addition, appreciation scores were analyzed using a mixed-factorial design to compare mean differences across participant roles and relationship types. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 16 and AMOS version 24, and all statistical tests were conducted to evaluate the significance of the main and interaction effects.

Results

The statistical analysis yielded significant findings regarding the determinants of appreciation. The main effect of the role factor—comparing the giver's and receiver's perspectives—on the level of appreciation was statistically significant ($F(1, 2512) = 364.583$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .127$). Furthermore, the main effect of the type of relationship (romantic partner vs. close friend) on appreciation was confirmed ($F(1, 2512) = 11.956$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .005$). Notably, a significant interaction effect was observed between the relational role and the type of relationship ($F(1, 2512) = 49.19$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .019$). Mean comparisons revealed that individuals consistently reported higher levels of appreciation

when assuming the role of the gift-giver compared to the gift-receiver. Regarding relationship type, the data indicated a nuanced pattern: among gift-givers, appreciation was higher when interacting with a close friend than with a romantic partner. Conversely, among gift-receivers, appreciation scores were higher when the gift originated from a romantic partner. Finally, an analysis of relationship depth showed that, within both close-friend and romantic-partner cohorts, higher perceived relationship depth was positively associated with increased levels of appreciation, confirming that deeper emotional bonds facilitate greater satisfaction in the exchange process.

Discussion

The findings underscore that communicative explicitness is a significant correlate of appreciation in gift exchange, suggesting that transparency in preferences enhances relational satisfaction. Interestingly, while the study hypothesized a mediating role for relationship depth, the results indicate a more complex association in which relationship depth functions primarily as a facilitator rather than a mediator in the structural model. The results suggest that individuals in deeper relationships prioritize functional alignment, preferring requested, explicit gifts that signal the giver's attentiveness to their specific needs. This study challenges the pervasive cultural myth that "surprising" someone with an unrequested, expensive gift is the optimal way to generate gratitude. Instead, our findings align with psychological theories of need satisfaction; appreciation is significantly elevated when the gift matches the recipient's self-expressed needs. The distinct role of the romantic partner suggests that the stakes of gift-giving are higher in romantic contexts, where the gift serves as a strong signal of relationship investment. Practically, these results imply that, in counseling and relationship education, promoting explicit communication regarding needs and desires can foster greater gratitude and reduce the relational friction often caused by ill-conceived gifts. Future research should explore whether these dynamics hold cross-culturally or whether they are specific to the Iranian context of high-context communication. Ultimately, this study provides an empirical foundation for viewing gift-giving as an active tool for emotional regulation and relationship reinforcement.

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