

Dissertation Title

Social Norms in Gift Giving: A Comprehensive Theory for Giver-Recipient Discrepancies in Gift Selection.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this research, I introduce a novel framework for understanding and predicting asymmetries in gift giving (i.e., disparities between the types of gifts givers give and the ones recipients prefer to receive). This framework is centered around descriptive and injunctive norms and is capable of both accounting for previously documented giver-recipient asymmetries and predicting novel ones. Specifically, I demonstrate that gift giving asymmetries are most likely to occur when one of the gifts being considered is less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative than the other, with givers over-giving the more descriptively normative gift; that gift giving asymmetries are unlikely to occur either when one of the gifts being considered is less descriptively and injunctively normative than the other, or neither gift being considered is less descriptively nor injunctively normative than the other; that the reason givers over-give descriptively normative gifts in the first case is because they feel more uncomfortable than recipients when a descriptively non-normative gift is given; and that the reason gift choice asymmetries do not transpire in the latter two cases is because of the absence of any such discomfort disparities.

Social norms can account for, predict, and shape consumer behavior, which are arguably the three most vital qualities for an area of study in consumer behavior to possess. Accordingly, experimental consumer behavior researchers have studied the intersection of social norms and several notable facets of consumer behavior, including environmentally friendly consumption (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008), impulse buying behavior (Rook and Fisher 1995), the law of demand (Ariely, Gneezy, and Haruvy 2017), volunteerism (Fisher and Ackerman 1998), and default effects (Huh, Vosgerau, and Morewedge 2014), among others. However, one domain in which social norms have gone unexplored by experimental consumer behavior researchers is gift giving. Particularly absent is a systematic investigation of the role social norms play in asymmetries between what givers give and what their recipients prefer to receive. To this end, in the present work, we develop a comprehensive, social norms-based framework for understanding and predicting giver-recipient asymmetries in gift preference.

## **FRAMEWORK AND PREDICTIONS**

Though the subject of social norms is one of the most well-studied areas of social psychology, the term “social norm” is often misused in academic writing (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Shaffer 1983). Specifically, the term is often delineated as if it only applies to one specific concept, when it truly can describe two very different ideas. The first idea it may describe is a descriptive social norm, which is the choice/behavior one believes is relatively typical or normal in a given situation (Cialdini et al. 1990). For example, if a consumer believes a sandwich is a more common order than a bowl of soup at a particular restaurant, then ordering a sandwich at the restaurant is perceived as more descriptively normative than ordering a bowl of soup. The second idea the term may describe is an injunctive social norm, which is the choice/behavior one believes is more socially approved (in a moral sense) in a given situation

(Cialdini et al. 1990). For example, if a consumer believes most other people think one *should* or *ought to* recycle an empty plastic bottle rather than dispose of it some other way (e.g., a trash can, littering, etc.), then recycling the empty bottle is perceived as more injunctively normative than disposing of it in another fashion. Said otherwise, a descriptive norm relates to what is commonplace, while an injunctive norm relates to what is socially acceptable and principled.

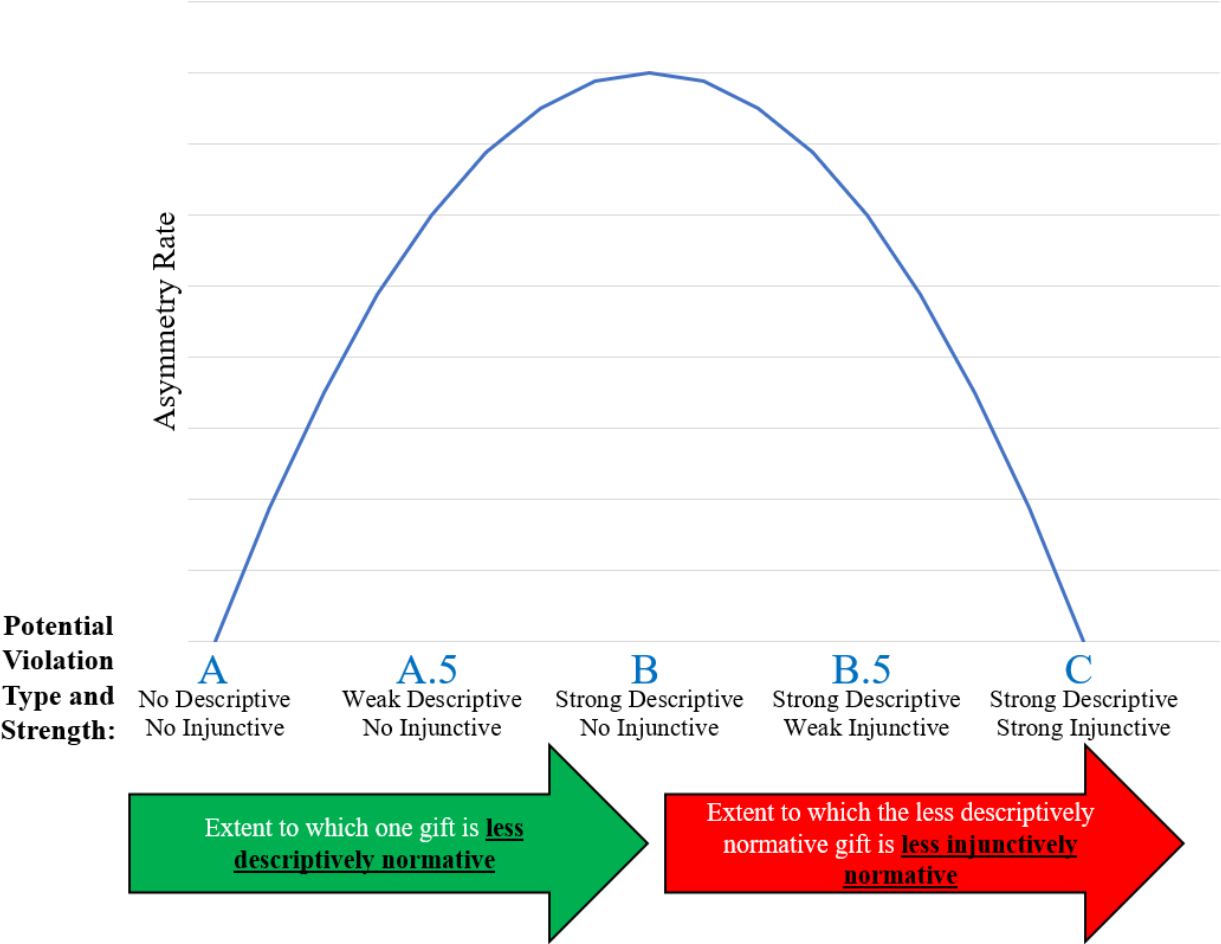
We propose that these two concepts can be used to categorize most gift giving decisions along a continuum comprised of two subcontinua (see bottom of figure 1). The first subcontinuum represents the extent to which one of the gifts is perceived as less descriptively normative than the other, while the second subcontinuum represents the extent to which the less descriptively normative gift is also perceived as less injunctively normative. More specifically, some gift giving decisions (point A) are characterized by neither gift being perceived as less descriptively nor injunctively normative than the other. Consider, for instance, a consumer deciding whether to give a green or blue tie as a birthday gift. It is likely that neither option is perceived as a less typical birthday gift nor as a less socially approved birthday gift, and thus neither is (likely) perceived as less descriptively nor injunctively normative. Other gift giving decisions (point B) are characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as considerably less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative than the other. For example, when a consumer is deciding whether to give a Starbucks or gas gift card as a birthday gift, the gas gift card is likely perceived as a far less typical birthday gift compared to the Starbucks gift card, and thus the gas gift card is (likely) perceived as substantially less descriptively normative. However, society likely would not condemn the decision to give either gift, and thus neither gift is (likely) perceived as less injunctively normative. Other gift giving decisions (point C) are characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as far less descriptively *and* injunctively normative than the

other. As an example, consider a husband deciding whether to give his wife a new watch or a book about dieting. The book is likely perceived as both the far less typical birthday gift and the far less socially acceptable birthday gift, and thus the book is (likely) perceived as considerably less descriptively and injunctively normative.

Three aspects of this framework warrant further clarification. First, note that the two subcontinua are indeed continuous. That is, some gift giving decisions (point A.5) are characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as *slightly* less descriptively normative but not less injunctively normative, and other gift giving decisions (point B.5) are characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as *considerably* less descriptively normative but only *slightly* less injunctively normative. Second, while a decision can be characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as less descriptively normative but not less injunctively normative (i.e., a decision along the first subcontinuum), the converse is not true. That is, a decision cannot be characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as less injunctively normative but not less descriptively normative. This axiom stems from the conclusion of a simple thought exercise in which one attempts to generate a gift giving decision wherein one gift is less socially acceptable, but not less typical, than the other; very few, if any, of such decisions exist. In contrast, one can easily formulate several gift giving decisions characterized by a gift that is less typical, but not less socially acceptable, than the other. Indeed, in our studies, we find consistent support for this axiom (see study 1, study 3's pre-test, and study 5's pre-test). Third, when we state a gift is perceived as less descriptively or injunctively normative than another, we mean that it is perceived as a less typical gift or a less socially approved gift *in general*; not necessarily that it is the less typical gift or less socially approved gift in situations where those two gifts are the only gifts being considered (though the gift that is less normative in an absolute sense may often also

be less normative for a specific decision). For instance, consider the prior Starbucks and gas gift cards example. When we state that the gas gift card is perceived as a less descriptively normative birthday gift, we mean that it is perceived as a less common birthday gift in general; not necessarily that it is perceived as the less common choice when the birthday gift decision is between a Starbucks and gas gift card (though this may indeed be the case).

FIGURE 1: CONTINUUM OF GIFT GIVING DECISIONS AND PREDICTED ASYMMETRY RATE



While this framework is useful for categorizing gift giving decisions, we suggest its true value lies in its ability to predict the types of gift giving decisions most likely to be accompanied by asymmetries between what givers give and what recipients prefer to receive. Indeed, the

ability of this framework to both account for previously documented gift giving asymmetries, and predict novel ones, is central to the intent of this paper. To that end, we hypothesize that the ‘gift giving asymmetry rate’ (i.e., the difference in the percentage of givers giving a particular gift when deciding between two gifts and the percentage of recipients preferring to receive that gift) follows an inverse U-shaped pattern along the two subcontinua (see top of figure 1). More specifically, when the decision is characterized by neither gift being perceived as less descriptively nor injunctively normative (point A), we predict the asymmetry rate will be low. However, as the extent to which one of the gifts is perceived as less descriptively normative increases (i.e., moving along the first subcontinuum), we predict the asymmetry rate will increase; specifically, givers will over-give the gift that is viewed as more descriptively normative. Thus, when one of the gifts is perceived as far less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative (point B), the asymmetry rate will be the largest, as givers will heavily over-give the more descriptively normative gift. However, as the decision moves away from being characterized by one of the gifts being viewed as only far less descriptively normative (point B) towards being characterized by one of the gifts being viewed as both far less descriptively and injunctively normative (point C), we predict the asymmetry rate will decrease; specifically, both givers and recipients will favor the more (descriptively and injunctively) normative gift. Thus, when one of the gifts is perceived as far less descriptively and injunctively normative (point C), the asymmetry rate will be quite low.

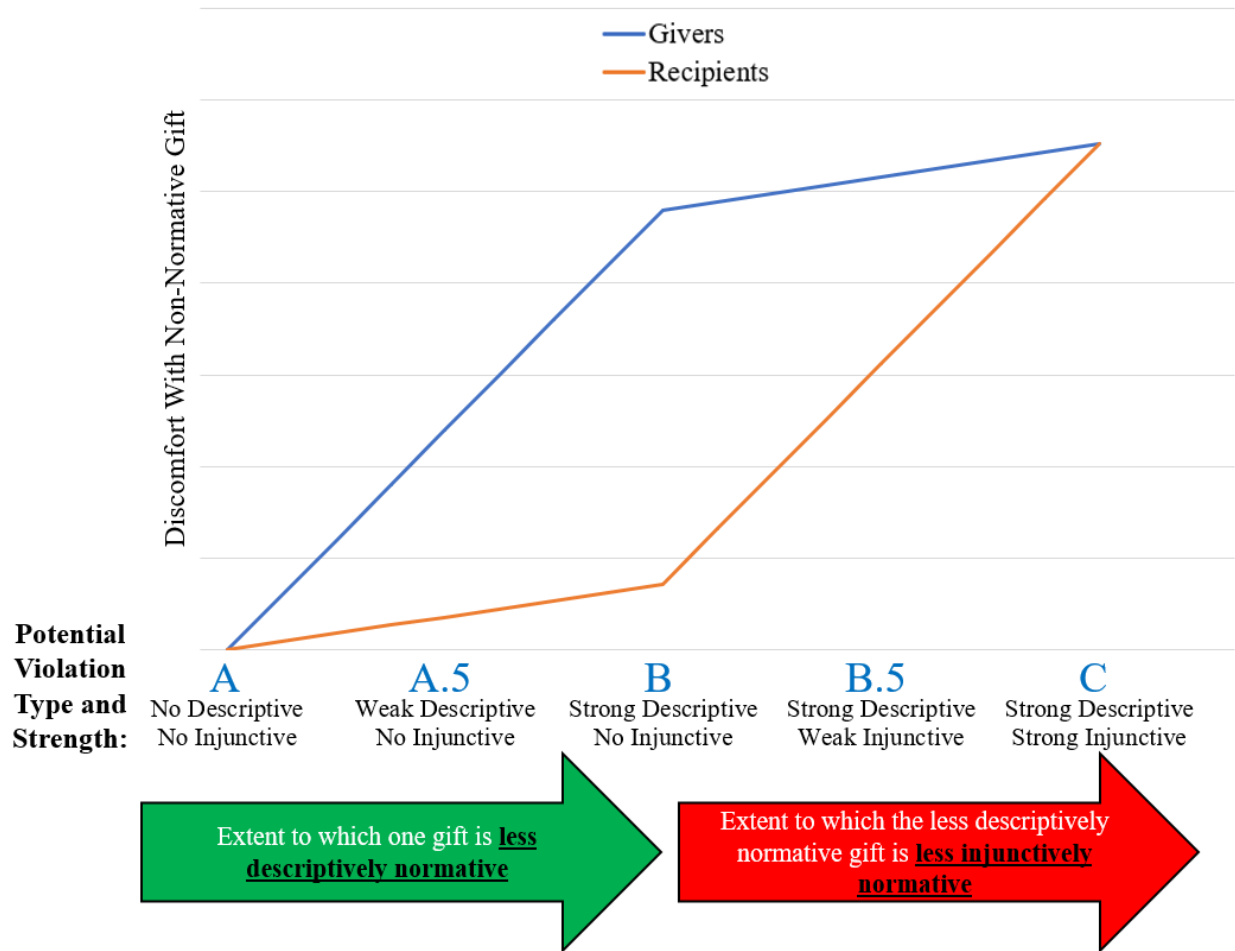
This inverse U-shaped asymmetry rate prediction stems from our hypothesis that givers and recipients experience varying levels of (social) discomfort when norms of different strength and/or type are violated (see figure 2; Asch 1951; Devine et al. 1991; Helweg-Larsen and LoMonaco 2008; Matz and Wood 2005; Monteith, Devine, and Zuwerink 1993; Ruth, Otnes,

and Brunel 1999; Tripathi et al. 2018; van Kleef et al. 2015; Wooten 2000), and that these feelings of discomfort play a role in givers' decisions and recipients' preferences (along with, though often independent of, their evaluation of the utility each gift will provide the recipient). We define discomfort as a feeling of uneasiness and/or awkwardness experienced when a gift is given, and our specific discomfort predictions are as follows: When the decision is characterized by neither gift being perceived as less descriptively nor injunctively normative (point A), neither givers nor recipients will feel uncomfortable if either gift is given. However, as the extent to which one of the gifts is perceived as less descriptively normative increases, givers will rapidly feel more uncomfortable giving the less descriptively normative gift, while recipients' discomfort with receiving the less descriptively normative gift will only minimally increase (if at all). That is, as the extent to which one of the gifts is perceived as less descriptively normative increases, the discrepancy between givers and recipients in how uncomfortable they would feel if the less descriptively normative gift is given also increases. Thus, when one gift is viewed as far less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative (point B), there will be the largest discrepancy between givers and recipients in terms of the discomfort experienced if the descriptively non-normative gift is given. However, as the decision moves away from being characterized by one of the gifts being viewed as only far less descriptively normative (point B) towards being characterized by one of the gifts being viewed as both far less descriptively and injunctively normative (point C), givers' discomfort with giving the (descriptively and injunctively) non-normative gift will only slowly increase, while recipients' discomfort with receiving the non-normative gift will rapidly increase. That is, as the extent to which the less descriptively normative gift is also perceived as less injunctively normative increases, the discrepancy between givers and recipients in how uncomfortable they would feel if the non-



normative gift is given decreases. Thus, when one gift is viewed as far less descriptively and injunctively normative (point C), there will be little to no discrepancy between givers and recipients in terms of the discomfort experienced if the non-normative gift is given.

FIGURE 2: PREDICTED LEVELS OF DISCOMFORT WITH THE NON-NORMATIVE GIFT ALONG THE GIFT DECISION CONTINUUM



While the sections above outlined our core predictions (i.e., the inverse U-shaped asymmetry rate and the differing levels of discomfort), they did not discuss any of the theorizing behind these predictions. Thus, below we detail the theorizing driving these predictions.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

*Predictions Near Point B.* As we predict the largest giver-recipient asymmetries to occur when the decision is characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as far less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative (point B), we feel it is apt to start with such decisions. As mentioned above, for these types of decisions, we predict givers will over-give the gift that is more descriptively normative (see figure 1). A brief review of the recent experimental work in gift giving lends support to this prediction: This research has shown that givers over-give gifts that are hedonic (vs. utilitarian; Williams and Rosenzweig 2019), desirable (vs. feasible; Baskin et al. 2014), specific (vs. general; Steffel, Williams, and LeBoeuf 2019), matched to the recipient's preferences (vs. sentimentally valuable; Givi and Galak 2017; Givi and Williams 2019), material (vs. experiential; Goodman and Lim 2018), complete (vs. incomplete; Kupor, Flynn, and Norton 2017), immediate (vs. delayed; Yang and Urminsky 2018), and of high quality (vs. of high quantity; Teigen, Olsen, and Solås 2005). In all these cases, the type of gift that givers over-give is arguably also more descriptively normative. Indeed, in many of these manuscripts, pilot studies and/or author rhetoric argue that the over-given gift type is also the more typical gift type (Baskin et al. 2014; Givi and Williams 2019; Goodman and Lim 2018; Teigen et al. 2005). We suggest the reason givers over-give such gifts, and the reason we predict givers in our studies who are making similar types of decisions will over-give descriptively normative gifts, is because givers feel more uncomfortable giving descriptively non-normative gifts than recipients do receiving them (see figure 2).

There are several reasons why we predict givers will feel uncomfortable giving the descriptively non-normative gift when considering such a decision. First, gift giving decisions are inherently characterized by uncertainty; givers must make educated guesses regarding their recipients' preferences (Givi and Galak 2017). By choosing the gift that is more descriptively

normative, givers can help quell this uncertainty, and thus the discomfort stemming from it, as such a gift represents behavior that is relatively typical in a gift giving context. Said otherwise, givers may believe that since such an option is a more common gift in general, that it tends to make for (at the very least) a satisfactory gift, otherwise it would not be as common as it is. Indeed, one of the primary reasons consumers follow descriptive norms is because they provide information about behavior that is likely to be adequate (Cialdini et al. 1990). In contrast, by choosing the non-normative gift, givers will be going against the grain by choosing something that is not commonly given, and thus even if the gift is perceived as potentially superior from a utility-maximizing perspective, giving it may augment feelings of uncertainty, and hence discomfort. In sum, although the descriptively normative (non-normative) gift may sometimes be viewed as inferior (superior) from a utility-maximizing viewpoint, it also contains less (more) uncertainty regarding how much utility it will provide the recipient, and thus will lead to lower (higher) feelings of discomfort. Second, several studies have demonstrated that in contexts outside of gift giving, people feel uncomfortable behaving in manners that violate descriptive norms even when those descriptive norms clearly do *not* provide information about adequate behavior. That is, independent of the discomfort stemming from the uncertainty that manifests when one behaves in a non-typical manner, behaving in a non-typical manner is uncomfortable in and of itself, and this sometimes leads people to behave in descriptively normative (but suboptimal) manners. For example, in the classic Asch experiments, participants opted to provide clearly inaccurate estimates (during visual perception tasks) that followed the norm estimates established by confederates, largely because violating the norm would have led them to feel anxious (Asch 1951). Indeed, one of the three main sub-groups of those who followed the descriptive norm were those who did so simply because they did not want to behave in a

descriptively non-normative manner (i.e., not because the descriptive norm altered their accuracy beliefs). In another study, participants who were led to believe they held opinions that differed from (mirrored) those held by most of the other members of a group experienced greater (lower) levels of discomfort, even though opinions, by definition, can be neither correct nor incorrect (Matz and Wood 2005). Thus, this prior work suggests that even when the descriptively normative gift is *known* to provide the recipient with *less* utility than the descriptively non-normative gift, givers may still feel quite uncomfortable giving the descriptively non-normative gift simply because they are doing something atypical.<sup>1</sup> Lastly, some qualitative research has corroborated the findings of the aforementioned research and documented the personal anecdotes of consumers who felt uneasy giving descriptively non-normative gifts (Wooten 2000). For example, when recollecting past gifts, one participant discussed feeling “nervous and anxious” about giving the non-typical birthday gift of a pet fish (Wooten 2000, 91), while another recalled a time she felt uneasy when she was obligated to give a wedding gift but knew nothing about wedding gift traditions (i.e., what types of items are descriptively normative wedding gifts; Wooten 2000, 92).

In contrast, there are multiple reasons why we predict recipients will feel relatively comfortable receiving either a descriptively normative or descriptively non-normative gift. For one, unlike givers, recipients are not making uncertain decisions; rather, they know for certain how much utility they will extract from each of the gifts under consideration. Therefore, recipients do not have to concern themselves with feelings of discomfort that stem from uncertainty. Also, whereas givers may feel uncomfortable giving a descriptively non-normative because they are engaging in behavior that is not typical, recipients receiving a descriptively

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<sup>1</sup> We will show that, indeed, givers over-give descriptively normative gifts even when they very clearly do not provide recipients with the most utility (studies 3 and 4).

non-normative gift are not (as they are not the ones who chose the gift). From the recipient's perspective, simply accepting the gift (regardless of what it is) is the descriptively normative recipient behavior, and thus they should feel relatively comfortable receiving both descriptively normative and descriptively non-normative gifts.

*Predictions Near Point C.* Next, we turn to our predictions when the decision is characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as far less descriptively and injunctively normative (point C). As mentioned earlier, for such decisions, we expect the asymmetry rate will be minimal, as we expect both givers and recipients will favor the more (descriptively and injunctively) normative gift (see figure 1). This prediction follows from our hypothesis that, for such decisions, both givers and recipients will experience similar levels of discomfort if the non-normative gift is given (see figure 2). Our theorizing from earlier suggests that givers will already feel quite uncomfortable with the prospect of giving the non-normative gift simply because it is descriptively non-normative. When added to this is the fact that the gift is also socially unacceptable, their discomfort with the prospect of giving it should increase (though only moderately, as they will already feel quite uncomfortable since the gift is descriptively non-normative). Indeed, doing something that society deems inappropriate or unprincipled leads consumers to feel considerably uncomfortable (for a review, see van Kleef et al. 2015). For example, participants who imagined responding in injunctively non-normative manners to situations involving racial minorities and homosexual individuals reported high feelings of discomfort (Devine et al. 1991; Monteith et al. 1993). As for recipients, we postulate that they will also feel quite uncomfortable receiving the gift that is descriptively and injunctively non-normative. Past work has shown that observing and/or being affected by an injunctive norm violation leads consumers to experience a wide range of uncomfortable feelings (van Kleef et al.

2015), ranging from feeling anxious (Tripathi et al. 2018) to feeling upset (Helweg-Larsen and LoMonaco 2008). For example, in one study, such feelings arose when concert-goers imagined being cut in line by another person while waiting to attend the concert (Helweg-Larsen and LoMonaco 2008), while in another they occurred when participants imagined someone mocked an important religious figure (Tripathi et al. 2018). Also, although consumers' reactions to receiving injunctively non-normative gifts have not yet been examined via an experimental approach, some qualitative research suggests consumers do feel considerably uneasy when on the receiving end of such gifts (Ruth et al. 1999). For example, one participant recalled a time she felt uncomfortable receiving sex lubricant as a Secret Santa gift (Ruth et al. 1999, 393), while another discussed feeling upset when she received a used frying pan as a gift from her co-workers (Ruth et al. 1999, 395).

*Predictions Near Point A.* Lastly, we turn to our predictions when the decision is characterized by neither gift being perceived as less descriptively nor injunctively normative (point A). As mentioned before, for such decisions, we expect the asymmetry rate will be low (see figure 1). This prediction stems from our hypothesis that, for such decisions, neither givers nor recipients will feel uncomfortable if either gift is given (see figure 2). That is, since neither gift is descriptively nor injunctively non-normative, none of the theorizing centered around discomfort discussed earlier holds. Thus, both parties should feel relatively comfortable regardless of what gift is given, thereby causing the asymmetry rate to be minimal.

## **THE PRESENT RESEARCH**

In what follows, we present a series of studies aimed at testing our focal hypotheses. As we predict the largest giver-recipient asymmetries to occur when the decision is characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as far less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative

than the other, we begin by focusing on such decisions. Specifically, we first demonstrate that most of the asymmetries documented in the extant gift giving literature can be characterized as givers over-giving more descriptively (but not more injunctively) normative gifts (study 1). Next, we provide initial evidence in support of a discomfort mechanism for these asymmetries via a moderation approach (study 2). Specifically, we show that when consumers are making these types of decisions for others in a *non-gift* context (where a social discomfort concern is eliminated), they are more likely to give items that would be considered descriptively non-normative gifts. We then examine a novel gift giving decision that is characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative than the other, and show that, as our framework predicts, givers deviate in favor of the more descriptively normative gift when making this decision (study 3) because they would feel more uncomfortable giving the descriptively non-normative gift than their recipients would receiving it (study 4). We then investigate decisions along other areas of the gift decision continuum. Specifically, we show that the asymmetry rate is low both when neither gift is perceived as less descriptively nor injunctively normative, and when one gift is perceived as less descriptively and injunctively normative, but that it is high when one gift is perceived as only less descriptively normative (study 5). Finally, we demonstrate that the aforementioned pattern of results is driven by a discomfort mechanism (study 6).

In all studies, target sample size was determined prior to beginning data collection (and was selected to be at least as large as the sample sizes employed in earlier gift giving research), all manipulations and dependent measures are reported, and all participants who passed the attention checks and whose IP addresses did not appear multiple times in the data file (indicating

multiple attempts at study completion by the same person) are included in the analyses. Data and materials can be downloaded here: masked for review, but available upon request.

## STUDY 1

Study 1 serves as an initial test of our hypothesis that gift giving asymmetries typically occur when the decision is characterized by one of the gifts being perceived as far less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative than the other. Specifically, in this study, participants are presented with a series of gift giving tradeoffs previously investigated in the gift giving literature (e.g., desirable vs. feasible, material vs. experiential, etc.), and some indicate the typicality of one of the gift types in each tradeoff (i.e., answer a question about descriptive gift giving norms), while others indicate how much society disapproves of one of the gift types in each tradeoff (i.e., answer a question about injunctive gift giving norms).<sup>2</sup> We predict that the types of gifts past research has shown givers favor relative to recipients will be considered more descriptively normative than the types of gifts past research has shown recipients favor relative to givers, but that the two types of gifts in each tradeoff will be viewed as similar in terms of how injunctively normative they are.

### Method

*Participants.* 397 participants (55% female;  $M_{\text{Age}} = 34.6$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 11.8$ ) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), completed the study in exchange for \$.20. Of these, 41 were excluded for failing an attention check question (no participants were excluded for a repeated IP address), leaving usable data from 356 participants.

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<sup>2</sup> In all studies, when we measure injunctive gift giving norms, we measure the extent to which society *disapproves* (as opposed to approves) of a gift. We do so in order to be consistent with the literature, which often discusses injunctive norms in terms of disapproval.



*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (*Norm Rating: Descriptive, Injunctive*). All participants were presented with eight tradeoffs (randomized order) previously examined in the gift giving literature: hedonic versus utilitarian (Williams and Rosenzweig 2019); desirable versus feasible (Baskin et al. 2014); specific versus general (Steffel et al. 2019); preference-matching versus sentimentally valuable (Givi and Galak 2017); material versus experiential (Goodman and Lim 2018); complete versus incomplete (Kupor et al. 2017); immediate versus delayed (Yang and Urminsky 2018); and quality versus quantity (Teigen et al. 2005). For each tradeoff, participants were presented with a definition and an example of each type of gift (e.g., a definition and an example of a hedonic gift and a definition and an example of a utilitarian gift), with the order in which the two types were listed randomized for each tradeoff. Participants then evaluated the first type of gift listed in that tradeoff. In the *Descriptive* condition, participants responded to the following question: “To what extent does a gift that is [gift type inserted here] represent a typical gift?” (*1 = Not at all, 7 = To a great extent*). In the *Injunctive* condition, participants responded to the following question: “To what extent would society disapprove of a gift that is [gift type inserted here]?” (*1 = Would not disapprove at all, 7 = Would greatly disapprove*). At the end of the study, participants answered attention check questions (a question about the task they completed and a question instructing them to select a particular response option on a multiple choice question) and demographic questions (age and gender). In all studies, participants answer attention check and demographic questions, so for brevity, this will not be discussed again (see the online materials for all of such questions).

## Results and Discussion

Table 1 displays the results. For each tradeoff, the gift type listed first is the type past research has shown givers favor relative to recipients (i.e., these types of gifts are over-given by givers), while the gift type listed second is the type past research has shown recipients favor relative to givers (i.e., these types of gifts are under-given by givers). As the table shows, in the *Descriptive* condition, the results unfolded as predicted for seven out of the eight tradeoffs. That is, in seven out of the eight tradeoffs, the type of gift past research has shown givers favor relative to recipients was considered more descriptively normative than the type of gift past research has shown recipients favor relative to givers. In the *Injunctive* condition, the results unfolded as predicted for five out of the eight tradeoffs. That is, in five out of the eight tradeoffs, the two gift types were considered equally injunctively non-normative. Thus, for a majority (12/16, or 75%) of the comparisons, the results unfolded exactly as predicted by our framework.

In sum, this study demonstrates that, consistent with the predictions of our framework, the kinds of gifts past research has shown givers favor relative to recipients are almost always more descriptively normative than the kinds of gifts past research has shown recipients favor relative to givers. However, in most of these tradeoffs, the two gift types are equally injunctively normative. Next, we look to provide initial evidence in support of our discomfort account for these previously documented gift giving asymmetries.

Table 1 – Study 1 results.

Tradeoff	<i>Descriptive</i> mean rating for gift type listed <b>first</b> in ‘Tradeoff’ column	<i>Descriptive</i> mean rating for gift type listed <b>second</b> in ‘Tradeoff’ column	Significance of difference between <i>Descriptive</i> conditions	<i>Injunctive</i> mean rating for gift type listed <b>first</b> in ‘Tradeoff’ column	<i>Injunctive</i> mean rating for gift type listed <b>second</b> in ‘Tradeoff’ column	Significance of difference between <i>Injunctive</i> conditions
Hedonic vs. Utilitarian	4.87	4.23	$p = .002$	2.68	2.90	$p = .358$
Desirable vs. Feasible	4.41	4.76	$p = .094$	2.85	3.01	$p = .460$
Specific vs. General	4.96	4.54	$p = .056$	2.22	2.83	$p = .006$
Preference-Matching vs. Sentimentally Valuable	5.02	4.43	$p = .005$	2.43	2.36	$p = .770$
Material vs. Experiential	5.50	3.78	$p < .001$	2.36	2.53	$p = .459$
Complete vs. Incomplete	4.90	3.16	$p < .001$	2.99	3.72	$p = .001$
Immediate vs. Delayed	5.08	3.93	$p < .001$	2.69	3.04	$p = .140$
Quality vs. Quantity	4.94	4.07	$p < .001$	2.28	3.81	$p < .001$

<sup>a</sup> For each tradeoff, the gift type listed first is the type previous work has shown givers favor relative to recipients, while the gift type listed second is the type previous work has shown recipients favor relative to givers. *Descriptive* ratings: 1 = Not typical at all, 7 = Typical to a great extent. *Injunctive* ratings: 1 = Society would not disapprove at all, 7 = Society would greatly disapprove.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 serves to test our proposed mechanistic explanation for why the asymmetries documented in previous gift giving research arise: because givers feel relatively uncomfortable giving descriptively non-normative gifts (while recipients do not feel uncomfortable receiving them). To that end, in study 2, all participants choose between descriptively normative and descriptively non-normative gifts for a friend. However, only some participants do so in a gift giving context; others choose between these items for a friend to receive as compensation for completing an MTurk HIT. In the compensation context, participants should not perceive either

item as less descriptively normative than the other (since the vast majority of MTurk HIT compensation comes in the form of cash, rather than as a specific type of item), and thus they should feel relatively comfortable selecting either item. Said otherwise, since the gift giving context is removed and neither item is less descriptively normative in terms of being compensation for an MTurk HIT, any feelings of discomfort stemming from choosing an item that would be a descriptively non-normative gift are eliminated. Therefore, our theorizing predicts participants making decisions in this context should be more likely to choose items that would be descriptively non-normative gifts compared to participants making decisions in the gift giving context, who should feel relatively uncomfortable choosing these items.

## Method

*Participants.* 201 MTurk participants (63% female;  $M_{\text{Age}} = 34.0$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 11.1$ ) completed the study in exchange for \$.20. Of these, 26 were excluded for failing an attention check question (no participants were excluded for a repeated IP address), leaving usable data from 175 participants.

*Procedure.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (Decision Context: *Reward*, *Gift*). In the *Reward* condition, participants made seven hypothetical decisions (randomized order) between two items for a friend to receive as part of their compensation for completing an MTurk HIT. In the *Gift* condition, participants made the same seven decisions, except they imagined they were choosing between the items to give to a friend as a birthday gift. Participants were instructed to imagine that the seven decisions were independent of one another and to not let one decision influence another. As is shown in table 2, the two items in each decision corresponded to one of the tradeoffs previously examined by the

gift giving literature.<sup>3</sup> For each decision, the item listed first in table 2 is the one that study 1's results suggests is a more descriptively normative gift (i.e., it falls under the gift type listed first in the 'tradeoff' column of table 2, which is the gift type participants in study 1 stated was more descriptively normative), while the item listed second is the one that study 1's results suggests is a less descriptively normative gift (i.e., it falls under the gift type listed second in the 'tradeoff' column of table 2, which is the gift type participants in study 1 stated was less descriptively normative). The only exception to this is in the desirable versus feasible tradeoff: In study 1, participants stated the two gift types were equally descriptively normative, but for the purposes of this study we treat the desirable gift as the more descriptively normative gift, since it is the type of gift that givers in previous research over-gave (Baskin et al. 2014). For each decision, participants made their choice using a six-point scale. The results were coded as follows: *1 = Definitely the item that would be a descriptively normative gift, 6 = Definitely the item that would be a descriptively non-normative gift.*

## Results and Discussion

Table 2 displays the results. As the table shows, for six out of the seven decisions, there was either a significant, marginally significant, or directional effect in the expected direction. Pooling across all the decisions, we find that, consistent with the predictions of our framework, on average, participants in the *Reward* condition were much more likely to choose the items that would be descriptively non-normative gifts, compared to participants in the *Gift* condition ( $M_{Reward} = 3.65, SD_{Reward} = .68$  vs.  $M_{Gift} = 2.89, SD_{Gift} = .73; F(1, 173) = 50.58, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .23$ ).

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<sup>3</sup> The preference-matching versus sentimentally valuable tradeoff was not included in this study because items received from researchers as part of study compensation are not viewed as sentimentally valuable (Yang and Galak 2015).

These results provide initial evidence in support of our discomfort account for why givers over-give descriptively normative gifts when choosing between descriptively normative and descriptively non-normative gifts. That is, consistent with this theoretical account, when participants made such decisions for someone else in a *non-gift* context, and thus any feelings of discomfort stemming from choosing an item that would be a descriptively non-normative gift were minimized, they were more likely to choose such items compared to participants making the same decisions in a gift giving context, who would have felt uncomfortable giving these items. Next, we look to demonstrate that our framework can predict novel giver-recipient asymmetries.

Table 2 – Study 2 results.

Tradeoff	Items	<u>Reward</u> mean response	<u>Gift</u> mean response	Significance of difference between conditions
Hedonic vs. Utilitarian	\$25 gift certificate to an ice cream parlor near the friend's home vs. \$25 gift certificate to a grocery store near the friend's home.	4.96	3.02	$p < .001$
Desirable vs. Feasible	\$50 gift certificate to a fancy restaurant 30 minutes away from the friend's home vs. \$50 gift certificate to an average restaurant 5 minutes away from the friend's home.	3.67	3.02	$p = .030$
Specific vs. General	\$25 gift card to the friend's favorite store (with the assumption that they knew what store that was) vs. \$25 Visa gift card.	4.33	2.88	$p < .001$
Material vs. Experiential	\$25 pair of headphones vs. \$25 gift certificate to the movies.	4.87	4.65	$p = .406$
Complete vs. Incomplete	\$50 dinner plate set (with the assumption that they knew the friend liked this set) vs. \$50 deposit towards a \$100 dinner plate set (with the same assumption).	3.40	2.75	$p = .042$
Immediate vs. Delayed	\$25 gift card to Starbucks that could be used immediately vs. \$50 seasonal Starbucks gift card that could be used starting the first day of Spring (two months away). In the <i>Gift</i> context, this could be purchased for \$25.	1.86	1.92	$p = .754$
Quality vs. Quantity	Single bottle of fancy wine vs. Two bottles of average wine.	2.49	2.01	$p = .056$

<sup>a</sup> For each tradeoff, the item listed first is the item that would be a more descriptively normative gift (according to study 1's results), while the item listed second is the item that would be a less descriptively normative gift (according study 1's results). 1 = Definitely would choose the item listed first, 7 = Definitely would choose the item listed second.

### STUDY 3

Study 1 demonstrated that our framework can account for many of the giver-recipient asymmetries documented in the gift giving literature. Study 3 looks to demonstrate that our framework can also predict novel gift giving asymmetries, yet to be explored in the literature. Specifically, in this study, we examine the decision between a nicely presented, but lower-quality, gift (a cheaper, lower-quality, Bluetooth speaker that comes wrapped and with a card), and a shoddily presented, but higher-quality, gift (a more expensive, higher-quality, Bluetooth speaker that comes unwrapped with no card). As consumers have budgets that they cannot exceed when gift giving, they must always decide how much money to allocate to gift presentation versus the gift itself, and thus decisions like this one are likely made quite often. We presume (and will test via a pre-test) that the higher-quality, but poorly presented, gift, is less descriptively normative than the lower-quality, but nicely presented, gift, but that neither option is less injunctively normative, and thus we predict that givers will over-give the lower-quality gift. Note that if this prediction proves correct, this would mean that givers sometimes forego descriptively non-normative gifts that they *know* will maximize the recipient's utility (as a higher-quality gift very clearly provides a recipient with more utility than a lower-quality one).

## Method

*Participants.* 358 MTurk participants (56% female;  $M_{\text{Age}} = 33.1$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 10.6$ ) completed the pre-test in exchange for \$.20. Of these, 41 were excluded for failing an attention check question (no participants were excluded for a repeated IP address), leaving usable data from 317 participants. 200 MTurk participants (68% female;  $M_{\text{Age}} = 37.5$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 12.0$ ) completed the main study in exchange for \$.15. Of these, four were excluded because their IP address appeared more than once in the data and three were excluded for failing an attention check question, leaving usable data from 193 participants.



*Procedure.* The pre-test was a 2 (Gift: *Wrapped Lower Quality Speaker, Unwrapped Higher Quality Speaker*)  $\times$  2 (Norm Rating: *Descriptive, Injunctive*) between-subjects design. Participants read a vignette from the perspective of an outside observer (i.e., the vignette was written in third person, and participants did not take on the role of giver nor recipient). In the vignette, a giver was on his/her way to a friend's birthday party and planned to stop at a store to get a gift. The vignette explained that the giver had budgeted \$50 for the gift and previously decided to get the friend a Bluetooth speaker since s/he did not have one. The vignette then explained that once the giver arrived at the store, s/he contemplated a particular gift option. In the *Wrapped Lower Quality Speaker* condition, the gift option was as follows: purchasing a \$40 speaker that online reviews rated as 7/10 stars and using the remaining \$10 to purchase a gift box (to put the speaker inside of) and greeting card (so s/he could write his/her friend a "Happy Birthday" message). In the *Unwrapped Higher Quality Speaker* condition, the gift option was as follows: purchasing a \$50 speaker that online reviews rated as 9/10 stars (and thus not purchasing a gift box or greeting card). Only one of the options was discussed in each vignette (i.e., the other option was not mentioned), and after reading the vignette, participants evaluated that option. In the *Descriptive* condition, participants responded to the following question: "To what extent does this option represent the typical birthday gift given from one friend to another?" (*1 = Not at all, 7 = To a great extent*). Participants in the *Injunctive* condition responded to the following question: "To what extent would society disapprove of this option as a birthday gift given from one friend to another?" (*1 = Would not disapprove at all, 7 = Would greatly disapprove*).

The main study employed two between-subjects conditions (Role: *Giver, Recipient*). Participants read a vignette that was similar to the vignettes from the pre-test, except that both

gift options were mentioned (the giver was undecided on which option to give), and the vignette was written from either the giver's or the recipient's perspective. After reading the vignette, participants in the *Giver* condition indicated which option they would give to their friend, while participants in the *Recipient* condition indicated which option they would prefer to receive from their friend.

## Results and Discussion

We first examine the pre-test results. These results confirm that the higher-quality Bluetooth speaker that came unwrapped with no card was less descriptively normative than the lower-quality Bluetooth speaker that came wrapped and with a card ( $M_{Unwrapped} = 4.80$ ,  $SD_{Unwrapped} = 1.50$  vs.  $M_{Wrapped} = 5.17$ ,  $SD_{Wrapped} = 1.23$ ;  $F(1, 157) = 2.78$ ,  $p = .097$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ), but that the two gifts were equally injunctively non-normative ( $M_{Unwrapped} = 2.53$ ,  $SD_{Unwrapped} = 1.72$  vs.  $M_{Wrapped} = 2.18$ ,  $SD_{Wrapped} = 1.75$ ;  $F(1, 156) = 1.55$ ,  $p = .216$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ).

Next, we examine the results of the main study. As predicted, participants in the *Giver* condition gave the lower-quality Bluetooth speaker that came wrapped and with a card more often than participants in the *Recipient* condition preferred to receive it (*Giver*: 34% vs. *Recipient*: 20%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 193) = 4.83$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\phi = .16$ ).

This study demonstrates that, in addition to being able to account for previously documented giver-recipient asymmetries, our framework can also predict the occurrence of novel asymmetries. Specifically, this study examined a novel decision wherein one of the gifts was less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative than the other, and showed that, as our framework predicts, givers over-gave the more descriptively normative gift. Moreover, this study also demonstrated that givers are willing to forego gifts that they know will maximize the recipient's utility when such gifts are less descriptively normative than the other gifts under

consideration. That is, givers over-gave the lower-quality speaker simply because the way the gifts would be presented led the higher-quality speaker to be less descriptively normative, but clearly a higher-quality speaker provides a recipient with more utility than a lower-quality one. Next, we look to demonstrate that the asymmetry in this study occurred because givers would have felt more uncomfortable than recipients if the descriptively non-normative gift was given.

#### **STUDY 4**

Study 4 serves two primary purposes. First, the study looks to replicate the asymmetry documented in study 3. Second, the study aims to demonstrate that the reason the asymmetry in study 3 occurred is because givers would have felt more uncomfortable than recipients if the descriptively non-normative gift (i.e., the unwrapped, higher-quality, Bluetooth speaker with no card) was given, which is what our framework predicts. Thus, in this study, we assess feelings of discomfort in order to examine whether this (predicted) disparity exists and plays a role in the asymmetry.

#### **Method**

*Participants.* 199 MTurk participants (57% female;  $M_{Age} = 36.5$ ,  $SD_{Age} = 10.9$ ) completed the study in exchange for \$.20. Of these, 13 were excluded for failing an attention check question (no participants were excluded for a repeated IP address), leaving usable data from 186 participants.

*Procedure.* Study 4 followed the same design and procedure as study 3, except that after choosing between the two gifts, participants responded to the following question: “To what extent was your choice on the previous screen based on the fact that you would have felt uncomfortable (giving / receiving) a non-typical gift?” ( $1 = Not\ at\ all$ ,  $7 = To\ a\ great$

*extent*). Participants also explained their gift choice, but we did not conduct any formal analyses on these open-ended responses (though they are included in the online data files).

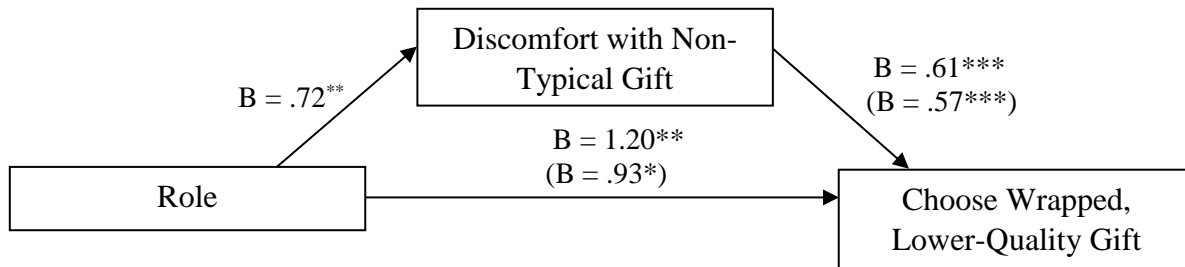
## Results and Discussion

We first examine the gift choice results. Replicating the asymmetry documented in study 3, participants in the *Giver* condition gave the lower-quality Bluetooth speaker that came wrapped and with a card more often than participants in the *Recipient* condition preferred to receive it (*Giver*: 32% vs. *Recipient*: 12%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 186) = 10.20, p = .001, \phi = .23$ ).

Next, we examine the discomfort results. As predicted, participants in the *Giver* condition would have felt more uncomfortable giving a non-typical gift than participants in the *Recipient* condition would have felt receiving a non-typical gift ( $M_{Giver} = 2.63, SD_{Giver} = 1.66$  vs.  $M_{Recipient} = 1.91, SD_{Recipient} = 1.43$ ;  $F(1, 184) = 9.94, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ). To examine whether the disparity in discomfort mediated the difference in the percentage of participants choosing the lower-quality Bluetooth speaker that came wrapped and with a card, we followed the method of Preacher and Leonardelli (2019) for mediation with a dichotomous dependent variable. The Sobel test was significant ( $z = 2.64, p = .008$ ; see figure 3 for mediation analysis), indicating that the differing expectations of discomfort were largely responsible for the asymmetry in gift preference.

In sum, this study both replicates the findings of study 3 and demonstrates that the reason givers in both studies over-gave the descriptively normative gift is because they would have felt more uncomfortable than recipients if the descriptively non-normative gift was given. Next, we turn our attention to the predictions our framework makes at other points on the gift decision continuum, aside from decisions wherein one gift is less descriptively (but not less injunctively) normative than the other.

FIGURE 3: STUDY 4 – MEDIATION ANALYSIS



Note: Role coded as: 1 = *Giver*, 0 = *Recipient*. Values in parenthesis indicate results when Role and Discomfort are both included in the regression.  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ ,  $***p < .001$ .

## STUDY 5

Having examined the types of gift giving decisions for which our framework predicts asymmetries, we now turn our attention to the types of decisions for which our framework does not predict asymmetries. Specifically, in study 5, we first pre-test several gift pairs, and then select three for the main study that fall along different portions of the gift decision continuum: 1) A pair in which neither gift is less descriptively nor injunctively normative (i.e., a point A decision); 2) A pair in which one gift is less descriptively normative but neither gift is less injunctively normative (i.e., a point B decision); and 3) A pair in which one gift is both less descriptively and injunctively normative (i.e., a point C decision). We predict that neither the first nor third pair will be accompanied by an asymmetry, but that there will be an asymmetry for the second pair, as givers will over-give the more descriptively normative gift.

### Method

*Participants.* 152 MTurk participants (57% female;  $M_{Age} = 35.1$ ,  $SD_{Age} = 10.2$ ) completed the pre-test in exchange for \$.20. Of these, 15 were excluded for failing an attention check question (no participants were excluded for a repeated IP address), leaving usable data from 137 participants. 601 MTurk participants (58% female;  $M_{Age} = 36.7$ ,  $SD_{Age} = 11.8$ ) completed the main study in exchange for \$.20. Of these, four were excluded because their IP

address appeared more than once in the data and 56 were excluded for failing an attention check question, leaving usable data from 542 participants (after accounting for overlap between these two exclusion criteria).

*Procedure.* In the pre-test, participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions (*Norm Rating: Descriptive, Injunctive*). Participants were presented with 15 short scenarios (from the perspective of an outside observer) in which a giver was choosing between two gifts to give to a friend as a birthday gift. For each scenario, participants in the *Descriptive* condition responded to the following question, on a three-point scale: “Which of these gifts better represents the typical birthday gift exchanged between friends?” The results were coded as follows: *1 = The gift listed first is more typical, 2 = The two gifts are equally typical, 3 = The gift listed second is more typical.* Participants in the *Injunctive* condition responded to the following question, on a three-point scale: “Which of these gifts would society disapprove of more as a birthday gift given from one friend to another?” The results were coded as follows: *1 = The gift listed first would be more approved, 2 = The two gifts would be equally approved, 3 = The gift listed second would be more approved.* We used the results of this pre-test to select pairs of gifts for the main study. Specifically, as can be seen in table 3, we selected one pair (*Norm Violation – None* in the main study) in which neither gift is less descriptively nor injunctively normative (a t-shirt with the logo of the recipient’s favorite band vs. a t-shirt with the logo of the recipient’s favorite sports team), one pair (*Norm Violation – Descriptive* in the main study) in which one of the gifts is less descriptively normative but neither gift is less injunctively normative (a \$25 gift card to the movies vs. a \$25 gas gift card; the latter being only less descriptively normative), and one pair (*Norm Violation – Descriptive and Injunctive* in the main study) in which one of the gifts is both less descriptively and injunctively normative (a \$60

six-month long Netflix subscription, which the recipient had thought about purchasing him/herself vs. a \$60 three-month long membership on the Weightwatchers app, which the recipient had thought about purchasing him/herself; the latter being less descriptively and injunctively normative).

The main study was a 2 (Role: *Giver, Recipient*)  $\times$  3 (Norm Violation: *None, Descriptive, Descriptive and Injunctive*) between-subjects design. In the *Giver* conditions, participants were presented with one of the three pairs of gifts selected from the pre-test and indicated which gift they would give to a friend as a birthday gift. In the *Recipient* conditions, participants were presented with one of the same pairs and indicated which gift they would prefer to receive from a friend as a birthday gift.

## Results and Discussion

The results unfolded as predicted. In the *Norm Violation – None* condition, in which neither gift was less descriptively nor injunctively normative, the *Giver* and *Recipient* conditions did not differ in their choices (% Choosing the band t-shirt: *Giver*: 58% vs. *Recipient*: 56%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 198) = .07$ ). In the *Norm Violation – Descriptive* condition, in which one gift (the gas gift card) was only less descriptively normative than the other (the movies gift card), participants in the *Giver* condition gave the descriptively normative gift more often than participants in the *Recipient* condition preferred to receive it (% Choosing the gift card to the movies: *Giver*: 68% vs. *Recipient*: 45%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 176) = 9.59, p = .002, \phi = .22$ ). In the *Norm Violation – Descriptive and Injunctive* condition, in which one gift (the Weightwatchers membership) was both less descriptively and injunctively normative than the other (the Netflix subscription), the *Giver* and *Recipient* conditions did not differ in their choices (% Choosing the Netflix subscription: *Giver*: 77% vs. *Recipient*: 79%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 168) = .10$ ).

This study demonstrates the full ability of our framework to predict the occurrence and nonoccurrence of gift giving asymmetries. Indeed, exactly as is predicted by our framework, givers did not over-give either gift when neither gift was less descriptively nor injunctively normative, nor did they over-give either gift when one of the gifts was *both* less descriptively and injunctively normative. However, when one of the gifts was *only* less descriptively normative, givers over-gave the more descriptively normative gift. Thus, our framework correctly predicted the pattern of results for several different kinds of gift giving decisions. Next, we look to provide evidence supporting a discomfort account for this pattern of results.

Table 3 – Study 5 pre-test results.

Gift Pair	<u>Descriptive</u>			<u>Injunctive</u>		
	% Indicating gift listed <u>first</u> is more typical	% Indicating gifts are <u>equally</u> typical	% Indicating gift listed <u>second</u> is more typical	% Indicating gift listed <u>first</u> is more socially approved	% Indicating gifts are <u>equally</u> socially approved	% Indicating gift listed <u>second</u> is more socially approved
T-shirt with a logo of the recipient's favorite band vs. T-shirt with a logo of the recipient's favorite sports team	9%	<b>77%</b>	14%	5%	<b>82%</b>	13%
\$25 gift card to the movies vs. \$25 gas gift card	<b>66%</b>	26%	9%	33%	<b>57%</b>	10%
\$60 six-month long Netflix subscription vs. \$60 three-month long membership on the Weightwatchers app	<b>76%</b>	21%	3%	<b>58%</b>	24%	18%

<sup>a</sup> The bold percentage indicates the majority response to each dependent variable for each gift pair.

## STUDY 6



Study 6 looks to replicate the findings of study 5 while simultaneously ruling in our (social) discomfort account for its results. More specifically, in study 6, participants are presented with one of the decisions from study 5, indicate how uncomfortable they would feel giving/receiving each gift, and choose between the two gifts. We predict the only time givers will feel more uncomfortable than recipients with the prospect of giving/receiving a particular gift is when participants in the *Norm Violation – Descriptive* condition are considering the descriptively non-normative gift (the gas gift card). Further, we predict that this difference will mediate the previously documented gift choice discrepancy in this condition.

## Method

*Participants.* 605 MTurk participants (56% female;  $M_{Age} = 37.3$ ,  $SD_{Age} = 12.2$ ) completed the study in exchange for \$.20. Of these, two were excluded because their IP address appeared more than once in the data and 56 were excluded for failing an attention check question, leaving usable data from 549 participants (after accounting for overlap between these two exclusion criteria).

*Procedure.* Study 6 followed the same design and procedure as study 5, except that prior to choosing between the two gifts, participants responded to the following question for each gift under consideration (counterbalanced order): “How uncomfortable would you feel (giving / receiving) the [gift inserted here]?” ( $1 = \text{Not uncomfortable at all}$ ,  $7 = \text{Very uncomfortable}$ ).

## Results and Discussion

We first examine the gift choice results. The same pattern of results from study 5 transpired: In the *Norm Violation – None* condition, the *Giver* and *Recipient* conditions did not differ in their choices (% Choosing the band t-shirt: *Giver*: 48% vs. *Recipient*: 58%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 191) = 1.83$ .  $p = .176$ ,  $\phi = .10$ ). In the *Norm Violation – Descriptive* condition, participants in the

*Giver* condition gave the descriptively normative gift more often than participants in the *Recipient* condition preferred to receive it (% Choosing the gift card to the movies: *Giver*: 82% vs. *Recipient*: 56%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 12.52, p < .001, \phi = .28$ ). In the *Norm Violation – Descriptive and Injunctive* condition, the *Giver* and *Recipient* conditions did not differ in their choices (% Choosing the Netflix subscription: *Giver*: 86% vs. *Recipient*: 91%;  $\chi^2(1, N = 196) = 1.35, p = .245, \phi = .08$ ).

Next, we examine the discomfort results, which are displayed in table 4 and figure 4. As the table and figure show, the pattern of results mirrored the discomfort predictions outlined in figure 2. Critically, the only time there was a (significant) difference between givers and recipients with the prospect of giving/receiving a particular gift was when participants in the *Norm Violation – Descriptive* condition considered the descriptively non-normative gift (the gas gift card). To examine whether this disparity in discomfort mediated the difference in the percentage of participants choosing the descriptively normative gift (the gift card to the movies), we followed the method of Preacher and Leonardelli (2019) for mediation with a dichotomous dependent variable. The Sobel test was significant ( $z = 3.16, p = .002$ ; see figure 5 for mediation analysis), indicating that the differing expectations of discomfort were largely responsible for the asymmetry in gift choice.

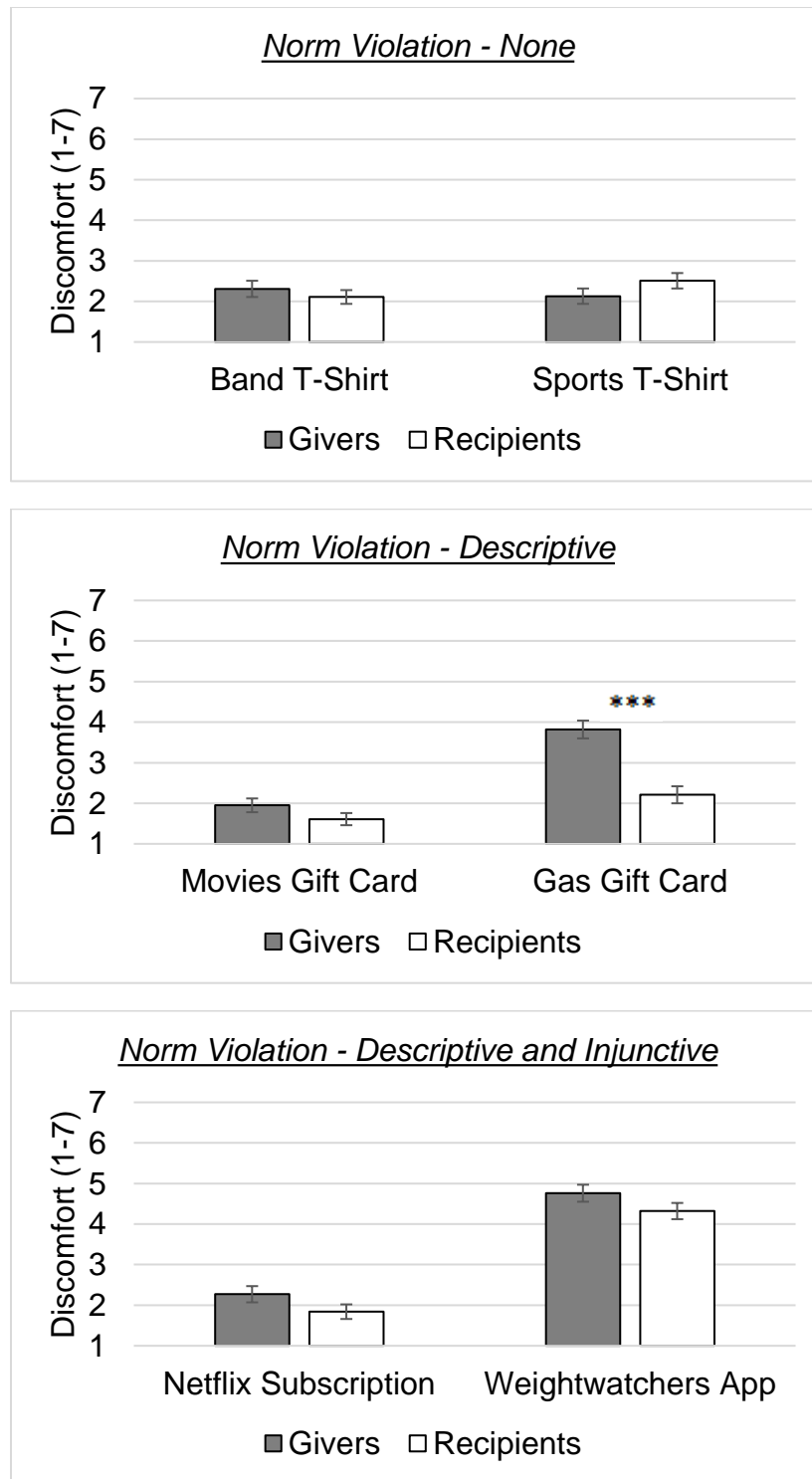
In sum, this study speaks to the legitimacy and validity of our framework. More specifically, this study demonstrates the full capability of our framework to not only predict the occurrence and nonoccurrence of gift giving asymmetries, but also to explain why they sometimes occur and sometimes do not: because of disparities and non-disparities in discomfort with giving/receiving certain kinds of gifts.

Table 4 – Study 6 discomfort results.

Gift	<i>Giver</i> mean response	<i>Recipient</i> mean response	Significance of difference between conditions
T-shirt with a logo of the recipient's favorite band	2.31	2.11	$p = .450$
T-shirt with a logo of the recipient's favorite sports team	2.13	2.51	$p = .162$
\$25 gift card to the movies	1.95	1.61	$p = .134$
\$25 gas gift card	3.82	2.21	$p < .001$
\$60 six-month long Netflix subscription	2.27	1.84	$p = .108$
\$60 three-month long membership on the Weightwatchers app	4.76	4.32	$p = .123$

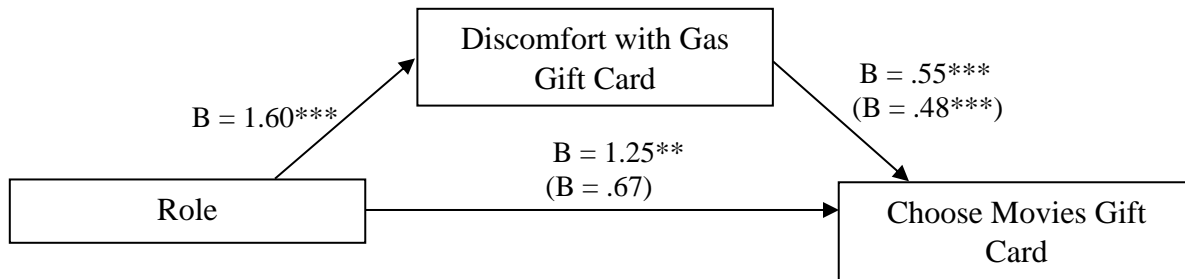
<sup>a</sup> 1 = Would not feel uncomfortable at all, 7 = Would feel very uncomfortable.

FIGURE 4: STUDY 6 – DISCOMFORT RESULTS



Note: Error bars represent standard errors of the mean. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

FIGURE 5: STUDY 6 – MEDIATION ANALYSIS



Note: Role coded as: 1 = *Giver*, 0 = *Recipient*. Values in parenthesis indicate results when Role and Discomfort are both included in the regression. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across six studies, we tested the predictions of a novel framework for understanding and studying asymmetries in gift giving. Consistent with the predictions made by this framework, we found that giver-recipient asymmetries occur when the gift decision is characterized by one gift being viewed as less descriptively normative (but not less injunctively normative) than the other, with givers over-giving the more descriptively normative gift (studies 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6); that givers over-give descriptively normative gifts largely because they feel more uncomfortable than recipients when a descriptively non-normative gift is given (studies 2, 4, and 6); and that when the decision is characterized by neither gift being viewed as less descriptively nor injunctively normative, or one gift being viewed as less descriptively and injunctively normative, givers make correct decisions, because of the absence of discomfort disparities between them and their recipients (studies 5 and 6).

### Theoretical Contributions

Our work contributes to numerous literatures, with the most direct contribution being to the recent experimental gift giving literature (see Galak, Givi and Williams 2016 for a review). We demonstrate that all gift giving decisions can be categorized based on a novel, all-encompassing, dimension: the extent to which each gift is normative versus non-normative.

Moreover, study 1 demonstrated that, although earlier papers in this literature seemed to be examining unique tradeoffs (e.g., material vs. experiential, preference-matching vs. sentimentally valuable, etc.), they were actually studying very similar tradeoffs when one evaluates gifts through this normative versus non-normative lens. While formulating and introducing this framework is a contribution by itself, we feel that the true value of our work lies in this framework's ability to predict the occurrence and nonoccurrence of gift giving asymmetries. Indeed, this framework proved capable of accounting for previously documented asymmetries (study 1), accurately predicting novel ones (studies 3-4), and correctly forecasting when others would not occur (studies 5-6). Our work offers a unique contribution to the experimental gift giving literature in that the focus of our work is not on a singular type of gift giving decision (with theory being of secondary interest); rather, our theorizing/framework is the primary motivation behind our research (with any single type of gift giving decision being of secondary interest). A final contribution to this literature is our proposed mechanism for why gift giving asymmetries sometimes occur: givers sometimes feel more uncomfortable than recipients with the prospect of giving/receiving a gift, whereas other times they do not. While several mechanisms have been proposed for giver-recipient asymmetries, this discomfort mechanism has not; yet, we find that it plays a major role in such asymmetries. Moreover, we find that givers allow a discomfort consideration to sometimes override their desire to give recipients the gift that will maximize their utility. That is, in studies 3 and 4, givers over-gave a lower-quality (vs. higher-quality) speaker because of a discomfort consideration, and clearly a higher-quality speaker provides a recipient with more utility. Thus, our work demonstrates a novel reason why givers sometimes *knowingly* give suboptimal gifts (as other work in this literature has also shown they do sometimes; Givi and Galak 2019a, 2019b; Steffel and LeBoeuf 2014).

Aside from the experimental gift giving literature, our work also adds to the qualitative and economics gift giving literatures. While the qualitative literature has studied the intersection of norms and gift giving, it has done so from a motivation viewpoint (e.g., Goodwin, Smith, and Spiggle 1990; Sherry 1983; Wolfenbarger and Yale 1993). That is, this literature has documented how a giver's motivation for giving a gift may either come from their desire to comply with societal norms or from some other desire; not how the extent to which a potential gift is descriptively or injunctively normative speaks to givers' and recipients' preferences. Thus, our work adds to this literature by studying a novel intersection of norms and gift giving. Regarding the economics gift giving literature, past work in this area has demonstrated that the custom of gift giving is intrinsically inefficient, as it is impossible for givers to always give the best gift possible (Waldfogel 1993). Our work introduces a new factor that contributes to this deadweight loss: the asymmetric amount of discomfort the two parties sometimes experience when a gift is given/received.

Our research also adds to the experimental research on social norms. While past experimental work has studied the intersection of social norms and several important areas of consumer behavior (see the introduction), we examine the role norms play in an area in which they are yet to be experimentally investigated: gift giving. Not only is this a novel context for the studying of norms, but also it is a somewhat unique context for studying norms since it is possible for a descriptive gift giving norm violation to occur without an injunctive norm violation, but it is not possible for the opposite to transpire (see bottom of figure 1). In most other contexts, both a descriptive norm violation without an injunctive norm violation, and an injunctive norm violation without a descriptive norm violation, are possible. While much of the research on social norms has centered around how norm violations often result in unfavorable

outcomes, such as when an injunctive norm violator is viewed negatively by others, or when a person feels uncomfortable after violating a norm (for a review, see van Kleef et al. 2015), some recent work has shed light on the positive implications of norm violations. For example, norm violators are sometimes seen as more powerful (van Kleef et al. 2011) and of higher status (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014). Our work adds to these findings by showing that descriptive norm violations in gift giving can be beneficial because they often result in gift recipients receiving the gifts they prefer.

#### Future Research

Future work could build on our findings in numerous ways. For instance, it would be interesting to investigate whether our framework's predictions hold in other self-other decision making contexts (outside of gift giving) that are characterized by strong norms. As an example, imagine a consumer is ordering a drink for a friend who is late to a restaurant, and is deciding whether to order the friend a bottle of mineral water or a bottle of carbonated water. In the United States, carbonated water is a much less descriptively normative drink at a restaurant, and thus consumers making such a decision might choose the mineral water far more often than their friends would prefer. Another interesting path for future research is to explore some of the other predictions made by our framework that we did not investigate (for tractability purposes). For example, different cultures have different gift giving norms, and thus future work could explore whether the same gift giving decision made in different cultures results in completely different outcomes (from a giver-recipient asymmetry perspective). Similarly, there are different gift giving norms for different giver-recipient relationships (e.g., the norms when giving to one's best friend are different from the norms when giving to one's boss), and thus future research could



examine whether the same gift giving decision made for different kinds of recipients has different outcomes.

### Practical Implications

Although our findings suggest that consumers often give gifts that their recipients would rather not receive, they also suggest easy strategies for consumers to employ in order to make better choices. One such strategy is for consumers to not choose a gift based on the extent to which it is normative, but instead on how much they themselves would value it if they were the one receiving the gift. While a consumer may feel somewhat uncomfortable giving a descriptively non-normative gift, it may very-well be the gift they themselves would prefer to receive. Another strategy is to think of the decision simply as a choice for someone else, rather than as a gift. The results of study 2 suggest that refraining from viewing the decision as a gift giving decision may lead givers to make better choices. For consumers receiving gifts, our findings shed light on the types of gifts that givers do not give as often as recipients prefer (i.e., descriptively non-normative gifts). Thus, a consumer who knows they will soon be receiving a gift from a giver, and who really likes an item that would be considered a descriptively non-normative gift, would be wise to make this quite clear to the giver before s/he shops for a gift. Doing so could make the giver feel more comfortable with giving that gift and thus increase the likelihood that the recipient receives what is truly desired. Finally, the results of studies 3 and 4 suggest that consumers are currently spending too much on the presentation component of their gifts. Indeed, consumers annually spend over \$3 billion on gift wrapping (Williams 2014)! Moving forward, consumers should consider spending less on gift presentation and more on the gift itself.

### Limitations

Our work does have some limitations. For instance, as we used Amazon's Mechanical Turk across all studies, one might wonder about the generalizability of our findings to the population at large. Though, MTurk samples are typically diverse (or at least more diverse than the typical college sample; Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011), which lessens this potential concern. Another limitation is that not all 16 of the predictions made by our framework manifested in study 1; only 12 did. Ideally, all 16 of the predictions would have transpired.

### Conclusion

In summary, our work introduces a novel framework for understanding and predicting asymmetries in gift giving, offers numerous theoretical contributions, provides future research with many interesting paths, and has several practical implications. We hope our work helps givers make better choices in the future and leads to more satisfied recipients.

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