



Give a piece of you: Gifts that reflect givers promote closeness



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HIGHLIGHTS

- People prefer giving gifts that reflect a receiver's interests and passions.
- People prefer receiving gifts that reflect their own interests and passions.
- Gifts that reflect the giver promote greater closeness for givers and receivers.
- Giving gifts that reflect the giver may be an underutilized way to boost closeness.

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ABSTRACT

Gift giving is an ancient, ubiquitous and familiar behavior often thought to build and foster social connections, but what types of gifts are most effective in increasing closeness between the giver and the recipient? In six studies we explore both the perceptions and relational outcomes of gifts that reflect the giver (*giver-centric gifts*) and gifts that reflect the recipient (*recipient-centric gifts*). Across studies, we find a strong and consistent preference for giving and receiving recipient-centric gifts. Surprisingly, however, in the gift-giving contexts examined in these studies, both givers and receivers report greater feelings of closeness to their gift partner when the gift reflects the giver.

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1. Introduction

It's that time of year again – Valentine's Day, which means that you need to decide whether to give your partner tickets to the Motown music reunion tour (a gift that perfectly captures your knowledge of his deep-seated love for soul sounds and funky, pop beats) or tickets to see the new play you have been gushing about for weeks (a gift that reveals your passions and interests). This seemingly simple spending decision reflects a familiar conundrum: What types of gifts should we provide when trying to foster connection with those we care about? This question can have costly consequences too. The average American spends hundreds of dollars annually on gifts for other people (Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2012), meaning hundreds of dollars are wasted if gifts are underappreciated or underutilized (Waldfoegel, 1993).

Although gift giving can be traced back through the centuries (Morris, 1986), this behavior has received relatively little attention from psychology (Dunn, Huntsinger, Lun, & Sinclair, 2008). Neighboring fields, such as anthropology, sociology and marketing posit that gift

giving is motivated by social exchange, reciprocity, and self-expression (Betteridge, 1985; Homans, 1961; Sherry, 1983). Psychology, in contrast, has focused more on what gifts may communicate and what motivations drive gift-giving behavior, such as the desire to build or strengthen relationships (e.g., Belk, 1979). Indeed, social ties have been described as a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which may help explain why spending money on others leads to emotional rewards for the giver (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008, 2014). But what types of gifts bring givers and recipients closer together – gifts that reflect the gift giver or those that reflect the gift recipient?

Although no research appears to have directly compared whether gifts that reflect the giver (*giver-centric gifts*) or gifts that reflect the recipient (*recipient-centric gifts*) are more effective in fostering closeness, past research by Zhang and Epley (2012) has explored when the “thought” behind a gift is appreciated by both parties. Findings suggest that gift receivers are unlikely to recognize or appreciate the effort invested in thoughtful (vs. thoughtless) gifts unless triggered by contextual cues, but givers feel closer to recipients after giving thoughtful gifts. Given that many gifts offered to increase relationship closeness are presumably thoughtful in nature, our investigation focuses on another critical but unstudied distinction: What kinds of gifts bring givers and receivers closer together – those that reflect the giver or those that reflect the recipient?

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Intuitively, it may seem that gifts that reflect the recipient would be most beneficial – indeed, the gift is, after all, intended for the recipient, and should therefore ideally be of interest or use to the recipient. This may be best achieved by giving a gift that reflects the recipient's interests or passions. Furthermore, research on self-verification theory suggests that giving gifts that reflect the recipient would be beneficial for social relationships. People enjoy receiving information that is consistent with their own self-views, or self-verifying (Swann, 1987; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). In romantic relationships, receiving self-verifying information is associated with greater intimacy (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994) and promotes relationship satisfaction (Lackebauer, Campbell, Rubin, Fletcher, & Troister, 2010). Similarly, in close relationships, receiving partner-verifying information – information that confirms one's expectations about the close other – is also associated with greater intimacy (Swann et al., 1994), suggesting that the gift giver may also enjoy giving a gift that accurately reflects the recipient's self. Indeed, people tend to prefer individuals whom they more accurately perceive and who perceive them more accurately (Human, Sandstrom, Biesanz, & Dunn, 2013), and greater accuracy in romantic relationships is associated with higher relationship quality and outcomes (Neff & Karney, 2005; Luo & Snider, 2009). Thus, if givers are able to give gifts that reflect the recipient, thereby fostering self- and partner-verification, it is possible that the giver and receiver may come to feel closer to one another.

It is important to note, however, that giving a recipient-centric gift may only carry these benefits if the gift does indeed accurately reflect the recipient, which may not always be an easy task. Indeed, close others do tend to agree with one another regarding each other's personality traits, but agreement is far from perfect (e.g., Funder & Colvin, 1997; Vazire, 2010). As such, there is plenty of room for error when attempting to select a gift that reflects a close other. In contrast, it may be much easier to select a gift that accurately reflects the giver's self, as self-information, particularly regarding one's inner thoughts and feelings, tends to be more readily accessible to individuals (Robins & John, 1997; Vazire, 2010).

Interestingly, giving a giver-centric gift may not only be somewhat easier but it may also carry its own positive relationship consequences and increase feelings of closeness. This may be because acts of self-disclosure are inherently rewarding (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012) and can have positive relational consequences (Jourard, 1964). Thus, gifts allowing the giver to engage in self-disclosure could be beneficial for the giver. Moreover, self-disclosure promotes intimacy in romantic relationships (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998) and liking in a reciprocal manner, such that people prefer those they disclose to and those who disclose to them (for review see Collins & Miller, 1994). As such, gifts that reflect the giver may promote closeness for the receiver too. Thus, giving a gift that discloses something personal about the giver could promote closeness on behalf of both givers and receivers.

Overall, then, giving gifts that reflect the recipient may intuitively seem highly beneficial to relationships. Yet the difficulties that may come along with effectively selecting recipient-centric gifts (ones that accurately reflect recipient's unique interests and passions) may make this strategy less beneficial than predicted. Further, this emphasis on recipient-centric gifts may lead people to overlook the benefits of giver-centric gifts, which could be highly beneficial for relationship development by facilitating self-disclosure.

2. Overview

In six studies we explore both the perceptions and relational outcomes of gifts that reflect the giver (*giver-centric gifts*) and gifts that reflect the recipient (*recipient-centric gifts*). Given that individuals often lack insight into what decisions will be most rewarding psychologically and affectively (Ariely, 2008; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Wilson & Dunn, 2004), including decisions related to spending (Dunn, Aknin, et al., 2008; Dunn, Huntsinger, et al., 2008), it is important to examine and

compare both perceptions and actual outcomes. In Studies 1 and 2, we focus on perceptions of these gifts, examining what types of gifts people believe that they and others prefer. In Studies 3 and 4, we investigate whether givers report greater gains in relationship closeness after reflecting upon a time they gave a giver- (vs. recipient-) centric gift. In Study 5, we examine how close givers feel to recipients after offering a giver- or receiver-centric gift in the present. Finally, in Study 6, we explore the relational impact of giver- vs. recipient- centric gifts for both parties. Given the firm customs surrounding gift giving as a recipient focused act, we hypothesized that most people would report a preference for giving and receiving recipient-centric gifts. However, in light of the research outlined above – indicating that giver-centric gifts would be associated with relational benefits for givers and receivers – we hypothesized that giver-centric gifts might promote greater relational closeness than recipient-centric gifts.

3. Study 1: nationally representative survey

3.1. Participants and procedure

As part of a larger survey, a nationally representative sample of five-hundred twenty eight Americans ($M_{age} = 47.2$, $SD = 13.8$, 63.4% female) were asked about their intuitions regarding gift giving¹. Specifically, participants were asked, “in general as a gift giver, would you rather give a gift that reflects your true self or your knowledge of the recipient.” Similarly, participants were asked “in general as a gift receiver, would you rather receive a gift that reflects your interests and passions or the giver's interests and passions.” Participants were asked to select one of the two options for each question.² Responses favoring gifts that reflected the recipient were coded as *recipient-centric gifts* while responses favoring gifts that reflect the giver were coded as *giver-centric gifts*. Sample size was determined beforehand based on budget restrictions and power analyses to investigate an unrelated research question (achieved power for chi-square analyses = .91 using $\phi = .35$ at <http://statpages.org/postpowr.html>).

3.2. Results and discussion

Responses revealed a strong preference for recipient-centric gifts. When asked what type of gift they prefer giving, a significant majority ($n = 356$) stated that they generally prefer to give gifts that reflect their knowledge of the recipient, $X^2(1) = 64.12$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .35$, over gifts that reflect their true self ($n = 172$). Similarly, when asked what type of gift they prefer receiving, a significant majority ($n = 418$) stated that they generally prefer receiving gifts that reflect their own interests and passions, $X^2(1) = 179.67$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .58$, over gifts that reflect the interests and passions of the giver ($n = 110$).

4. Study 2: Valentine's Day gifts

Study 1 reveals that most people prefer to give and receive gifts that reflect the receiver. But do gift-giving preferences remain recipient-centric during real, high-stakes gift exchanges? To find out, we surveyed gift giving intuitions and behavior around Valentine's Day. We predicted that most participants would report a preference for recipient-centric gifts and that this preference would be reflected in actual giving behavior.

¹ Study 1 contained several questions about social mobility and well-being for an unrelated investigation. Studies 2–6 included several filler items such as questions probing participants' feelings of alertness, self esteem, and monthly spending estimates; these variables did not influence the effects reported here.

² As required by the ethics board, all questions in Studies 1–6 were voluntary and participants were able to opt out of answering any item(s) they choose. As such, responses and analyses presented in Studies 1–6 reflects all the data provided by participants. Any and all exclusions are noted in text when applicable.

4.1. Participants and procedure

Forty individuals ($M_{age} = 21.3$, $SD = 3.00$, 50% female) who stated that they would be giving a gift on Valentine's Day were recruited on a university campus two days before the holiday. This sample size reflects the maximum number of participants we could recruit given time restrictions (achieved power for chi-square = .91 using phi = .58 at <http://statpages.org/postpowr.html>).

Participants completed a questionnaire that asked about their most recent gift giving and receiving experiences as well as their intuitions about gift giving in general. Specifically, participants were asked to respond to the following items: (1) "Thinking back to the last gift you gave, what did the gift reveal? Your true self (e.g., your interests, passions) or your knowledge of the recipient (e.g., the recipient's interests, passions)", (2) "Thinking back to the last gift you received, what did the gift reveal? The giver's knowledge of you (e.g., your interests, passions) or the giver's true self (e.g., the giver's interests, passions)", (3) "As a gift giver, would you rather give a gift that reflects: Your true self or your knowledge of the recipient", and (4) "As a gift receiver, would you rather receive a gift that reflects: Your interests and passions or the giver's interests and passions". As in Study 1, participants were asked to select one of the two options for each question and responses favoring gifts that reflected the recipient were coded as *recipient-centric gifts* while responses favoring gifts that reflect the giver were coded as *giver-centric gifts*. Finally, participants indicated whether we could contact them after Valentine's Day with another survey.

Participants who agreed to complete a follow-up survey were contacted by phone 1–2 days after Valentine's Day. Follow-up phone calls were made by research assistants that had not spoken with participants and who were not aware of their Valentine's Day gift giving behaviors. Participants were asked to classify whether their Valentine's Day gift reflected either their true self (e.g., their own interests and passions), their knowledge of the recipient (e.g., the recipient's interests and passions), or both.

4.2. Results and discussion

Consistent with the results of Study 1, pre-Valentine's Day survey responses revealed a strong preference for recipient-centric gifts. When asked about the last gift they gave, a significant majority of participants ($n = 30$) stated that their gift revealed their knowledge of the recipient, $X^2(1) = 11.31$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .53$, rather than their true self ($n = 9$). In addition, a significant majority reported that they generally prefer to give gifts that reflect their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 36$), $X^2(1) = 27.92$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .84$, rather than gifts that reflect their own true self ($n = 3$). Similarly, when asked about the last gift they received, participants stated that the gift reflected the giver's knowledge of them ($n = 31$), $X^2(1) = 15.16$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .62$, as opposed to the giver's true self ($n = 7$) and a general preference for receiving gifts that reflect their own interests and passions ($n = 32$), $X^2(1) = 17.79$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .68$, rather than the giver's interests and passions ($n = 6$).

The preference for giving recipient-centric gifts was visible in Valentine's Day giving behaviors. Of the eighteen participants who responded to the post-Valentine's Day survey ($M_{age} = 21.6$, $SD = 3.1$, 56% female), fifteen stated that their gifts reflected the recipient's interests and passions, two stated that the gifts reflected their own true self, and one stated that his/her gift reflected both his/her own and the recipient's interests and passions, $X^2(2) = 20.33$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .75$.

5. Study 3: recollections

Study 2 replicates a preference for recipient-centric gifts. Consistent with reports from a large, nationally representative sample, most participants reported a strong preference for giving and receiving recipient-centric gifts, both in general as well as when reflecting upon their most recent gift giving and receiving experience. Moreover, actual gift

giving behavior on Valentine's Day reflected these intuitions. The question remains, however, as to which type of gift – giver- or recipient-centric – brings people closest together. To find out, in Studies 3 and 4 we randomly assigned participants to recall giving a giver- or recipient-centric gift and assessed change in perceived closeness with the recipient.

5.1. Participants

Three-hundred and three individuals ($M_{age} = 31.8$, $SD = 11.1$, 51% female) completed an online survey through Amazon's Mechanical Turk system in exchange for a small monetary payment. Sample size was determined beforehand based on power analyses and budget restrictions (achieved power = .93 calculated using G*Power; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

5.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two online questionnaires asking them to recall and describe the last time they gave a gift that either revealed their true self (*giver-centric gift*) or their knowledge of the recipient (*recipient-centric gift*). Specifically, participants were told to "think back to and describe – in as much detail as possible – the last time you bought a gift for someone else that revealed your true self (your knowledge of the recipient). That is, please describe a time you bought a gift for someone that showed your true character, interests, or passions (your knowledge of the recipient's character, interests, or passions). Your description should explain what you bought and why the item reflected your true self (the recipient)." To assess the relationship consequences of giver and recipient centric gifts, we asked participants to report their feelings of closeness toward the gift recipient before and after gift giving using the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale assesses feelings of closeness with another person using a one-item pictorial measure by asking respondents to select an image of two circles that represent their closeness with an identified target on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from close but separate (two side-by-side circles, rated as 1 on scale) to almost completely overlapping circles (rated as 7 on scale). Closeness is defined here, as it is by Aron et al. (1992), as a feeling of interconnectedness with another person. Afterward, we assessed the broader concept of relationship satisfaction by asking participants to report their satisfaction with the relationship on a 7-point Likert scale (1 – *not at all satisfied* to 7 – *very satisfied*) and their current emotion on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).³ Finally, we asked participants about their most recent gift giving and receiving experiences, as well as their intuitions about gift giving in general using the same four items as Study 2.

5.3. Results and discussion

As observed in Studies 1 and 2, participants reported a strong preference for recipient-centric gifts. When asked about the last gift they gave, a significant majority of participants stated that their gift revealed their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 211$), $X^2(1) = 53.64$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .43$, as opposed to their true self ($n = 85$) and that they generally prefer to give gifts that reflect their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 238$), $X^2(1) = 112.67$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .62$, rather than their true self ($n = 56$). Similarly, when asked about the last gift they received, participants stated that the gift reflected the giver's knowledge of them ($n = 207$), X^2

³ As a proxy for relationship satisfaction, participants also reported the extent to which they discussed ten topics with the gift recipient (e.g., personal habits, what makes them proud, etc.). As expected and consistent with relationship satisfaction reports, the extent to which participants reported discussing the ten topics did not differ by condition (average ratings for each condition $M_{giver-centric} = 2.42$, $SD = 1.34$; $M_{recipient-centric} = 2.32$, $SD = 1.34$, $F(1, 179) = .30$, $p = .588$, $d = .07$).

(1) = 46.09, $p < .001$, $\phi = .39$, rather than the giver's true self ($n = 90$). Participants also reported a general preference for receiving gifts that reflect their own interests and passions ($n = 242$), $X^2(1) = 117.74$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .63$, rather than the giver's interest and passions ($n = 55$).

We next explored whether participants assigned to recall giving a giver-centric gift reported experiencing greater gains in relationship closeness than participants assigned to recall giving a recipient-centric gift. To do so, we calculated a change in closeness score from before to after giving, such that higher scores represent greater gains in closeness. Analyzing the change in closeness reported by gift givers with a one-way ANOVA, we found that givers offering giver-centric gifts ($n = 162$) reported greater gains of closeness ($M = 0.61$, $SD = .91$) than givers offering recipient-centric gifts ($n = 141$, $M = 0.27$, $SD = .68$), $F(1, 290) = 11.99$, $p < .005$, $d = .41$.⁴

Importantly, adding positive affect ratings as a covariate to the analysis left the main effect of condition unchanged, $F(1, 262) = 10.83$, $p < .005$, $d = .42$, helping to rule out the alternative explanation that participants recalling giver-centric gifts felt happier and thus reported higher feelings of closeness to their gift recipient. Interestingly, gift type did not significantly influence the more stable construct of relationship satisfaction. Givers who recalled offering giver-centric gifts did not report higher levels of relationship satisfaction ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.24$) than givers who recalled offering recipient-centric-gifts ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 1.21$), $F(1, 296) = .55$, $p = .458$, $d = .09$.

6. Study 4

Study 3 provides a look at real spending preferences and outcomes with a large sample and experimental design. As with Studies 1 and 2, our results suggest that people have strong preferences for giving and receiving recipient-centric gifts. However, giving gifts that reflect givers was associated with greater gains in relationship closeness with the recipient. In attempt to replicate the closeness benefits of giver-centric gifts for givers, we conducted an additional experiment (Study 4) in which participants were again asked to recall giving a giver- or recipient-centric gift and then report their perceived closeness with the recipient. To extend upon Study 3, we also expanded the giver-centric gift options in an effort to explore what components of giver-centric gifts may be most relevant to perceived closeness. For example, does a giver-centric gift promote perceived closeness because one has shared a piece of their true self or because they have shared something that they enjoy? Alternatively, perhaps giver-centric gifts promote closeness because they are more likely to enhance how much time you spend with the recipient. In Study 4, we examined how recalling giving each of these potentially giver-centric gifts versus recalling giving a recipient-centric gift predicted gains in perceived closeness with the recipient. In addition, it is possible that relationship duration or type may moderate the relational benefits of giving giver- or recipient-centric gifts, such that giver-centric gifts are especially advantageous among new or longstanding relationships, or for some relationship types over others (romantic relationships vs. friendships). We explored this possibility by asking participants how long they have known the recipient and by coding relationship type from the gift giving descriptions, where possible.

6.1. Participants

Four-hundred thirty-four individuals ($M_{age} = 30.3$, $SD = 10.2$, 39% female) completed an online survey through Amazon's Mechanical Turk system in exchange for a small monetary payment. Sample size

⁴ These results remain unchanged when post-giving reports of closeness are compared with pre-giving closeness entered as a covariate, $F(1, 289) = 11.09$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Neither gender, $F(1, 286) = 1.11$, $p = .293$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$ nor age, $F(1, 214) = 0.74$, $p = .387$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$ moderated the effect of giver-centric gifts on relationship closeness in Study 3.

was determined beforehand based on power analyses and budget restrictions (achieved power = .87 calculated using G*Power; Faul et al., 2007).

6.2. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four online questionnaires asking them to "Please think back to and describe – in as much detail as possible – the last time you bought a gift for someone else that... (a) shared a piece of your true self with the recipient, (b) involved giving something you enjoy to the recipient, (c) encouraged you to spend time with the recipient, or (d) revealed your knowledge of the recipient." To encourage a detailed account, participants were told that their description should explain what they bought and why this met the criterion. To assess the relationship consequences of these gift types, we asked participants to report their feelings of closeness toward the gift recipient before and after gift giving using the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992), allowing us to calculate the same change in relationship closeness score used in Study 3. Afterward, participants reported their current happiness on a one-item measure ("how happy are you feeling right now? 1 – very slightly or not at all to 5 – extremely") and relationship satisfaction using the same 7-point Likert scale used in Study 3. In addition, participants were asked how long they had known the gift recipient on a 9-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1–6 months to 20+ years. Finally, we asked participants about their most recent gift giving and receiving experiences, as well as their intuitions about gift giving in general using the same items as Study 2.

6.3. Results and discussion

6.3.1. Example gift descriptions

Most participants in all four conditions were able to provide detailed descriptions of their gift giving experience. For instance, a participant assigned to recall giving a gift that shared a piece of themselves with the recipient described an occasion in which they gave a book of their "absolute favorite" poems to a dear friend because the content "speaks to me and of me." Meanwhile, a participant assigned to recall giving something they enjoy to a recipient described a time they gave a CD from a band they enjoy to a friend hoping they would like it too. A participant assigned to recall giving a gift that encouraged time spent with the recipient described buying a case of California craft beer for their friend in New York and delivering the gift in person so they could spend hours reminiscing about shared experiences. Finally, a participant assigned to recall giving a recipient-centric gift described an occasion in which they gave their colleague the Big Lebowski because she frequently talks about and quotes the movie.

6.3.2. Gift preferences

Once again, we found that participants reported a strong preference for recipient-centric gifts. When asked about the last gift they gave, a significant majority of participants stated that their gift revealed their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 304$), $X^2(1) = 78.80$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .43$, rather than their own true self ($n = 121$), and that they generally prefer to give gifts that reflect their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 352$), $X^2(1) = 183.16$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .66$, as opposed to gifts that reflect their own true self ($n = 73$). Similarly, when asked about the last gift they received, participants stated that the gift reflected the giver's knowledge of them ($n = 267$), $X^2(1) = 29.13$, $\phi = .26$, $p < .001$, rather than the giver's true self ($n = 156$). Participants also reported a general preference for receiving gifts that reflect their own interests and passions ($n = 349$), $X^2(1) = 177.07$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .65$, as opposed to gifts that reflect the giver's interests and passions ($n = 75$).

6.3.3. Perceived closeness

Next, we explored what types of gifts led to the greatest gains in perceived closeness. Submitting the change in closeness scores to a

between-subjects ANOVA we detected a significant main effect of condition, $F(3, 416) = 4.25, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Exploring this further, we used Least Significant Differences (LSD) post-hoc comparisons to examine what types of gifts led to the greatest gains in relationship closeness. Analyses revealed that gifts involving the giver sharing a piece of their true self with recipient ($n = 166, p < .005, d = .39$), the giver giving something they enjoy ($n = 84, p = .058, d = .28$), or gifts encouraging time spent with the receiver ($n = 81, p < .005, d = .43$) all led to greater gains in relationship closeness than giving a gift that revealed knowledge of the recipient ($n = 89$). Thus, giving a recipient-centric gift was associated with the smallest gains in perceived closeness, akin to Study 3. Once again, adding happiness as a covariate to the analysis left the main effect of condition unchanged, $F(3, 414) = 4.05, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, suggesting that recalling an instance of offering a giver-centric gift does not lead to greater feelings of closeness with the recipient than recalling giving a recipient-centric gift simply because of higher levels of happiness. Of course, given that happiness was assessed with a one-item measure, this result should be interpreted with caution.

Relationship duration did not moderate the relational benefits of various gift types. When relationship duration was added as another between-subjects variable, the interaction was non-significant, $F(24, 384) = 1.22, p = .220$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$ and the main effect of condition was weakened but remained marginal, $F(3, 384) = 2.61, p = .051$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

To determine whether relationship type moderated the relational benefits of giver-centric gifts, we coded the target of each gift (when possible) from each spending description. Of the four-hundred thirty-four participants, a spending target could be identified in three-hundred twenty-six descriptions. Targets were coded with the following values: romantic partner (1), friend (2), family (3), and colleague (4).⁵ Across conditions, friends were the most frequent spending target ($n = 145, 44.5\%$), followed by family ($n = 97, 29.8\%$), romantic partners ($n = 79, 24.2\%$) and colleagues ($n = 5, 1.2\%$). When change in relationship closeness ratings were analyzed with a 4 (recall condition) \times 4 (relationship type) ANOVA there was a marginal interaction, $F(8, 310) = 1.84, p = .07$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$, indicating that giver-centric gifts led to larger gains in perceived relational closeness than recipient-centric gifts in relationships typically considered close in nature and relatively smaller gains in relationships typically considered more distant in nature. For instance, post-hoc LSD comparisons revealed that within romantic relationships gifts sharing a piece of the giver led to greater gains in relationship closeness than recipient-centric gifts, $p < .005, d = .76$. Similarly, within romantic relationships, gifts that offer time with the recipient, $p < .03, d = .69$, or something the giver enjoys, $p = .15, d = .45$, led to greater gains in relationship closeness than recipient-centric gifts as well. However, we refrain from inferring too much from these findings for at least two reasons. First, relationship type may not be a true proxy of relationship strength (i.e., people may feel high or low levels of relational closeness with family members). Second, some gift targets, namely colleagues, are only represented with a small sample size ($n = 5$). Nonetheless, the data reveal a general trend indicating that the relational benefits of giver-centric gifts are greatest among relationship types that are typically close in nature.

Once again, gift type did not significantly influence relationship satisfaction. An ANOVA examining ratings of relationship satisfaction revealed no significant differences across the four conditions, $F(3, 416) = 1.47, p = .223$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

7. Study 5: Mother's Day cards

Study 4 provides a closer look at the outcomes of various giver- and recipient-centric gifts with another large sample and experimental

⁵ Gift target could not be identified in a number of cases, such as when the participant identified the recipient by their initials and not by their relationship status.

design. Once again, people report a strong preference for giving and receiving recipient-centric gifts yet giving gifts that reflect givers leads to the greatest perceived relational benefits. Furthermore, in this study we saw that each of the different components of giver-centric gifts that we examined, whether they shared a piece of one's true self, something one enjoys, or promoted spending time with the recipient, all had similar, positive relational benefits. However, our examination thus far has only demonstrated the benefits of giver-centric gifts in a recollection type design. Therefore we next explored whether giving giver-centric gifts leads to greater feelings of perceived closeness than recipient-centric gifts in the present.

7.1. Participants

Seventy-eight individuals ($M_{age} = 35.3, SD = 16.6, 54\%$ female) recruited in malls and public spaces around Greater Vancouver the week preceding Mother's Day participated in this study in exchange for a full sized chocolate bar. Sample size was determined by the number of people we could recruit in the week leading up to the holiday (achieved power = .59 calculated using G*Power; Faul et al., 2007).

7.2. Procedure

After completing an initial questionnaire with filler items (e.g., how alert are you right now?), participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they were asked to buy a card for their mother for Mother's Day. Specifically, participants were asked to browse through a nearby card store or a selection of cards present and select a card for their mother. Participants in the giver-centric gift condition ($n = 38$) were asked to pick a card that "reveals your true self. That is, please select a card that reveals your true preferences, character, interests, or passions." Participants in the recipient-centric gift condition ($n = 40$) were asked to pick a card that "reveals your knowledge of the recipient. That is, please select a card that reveals your knowledge of your mom's preferences, character, interests, or passions." Cards were paid for in advance by the research team.

After selecting a card, participants were asked to explain their selection and invited to include a personal message, if desired. Finally, participants rated how close they felt to their mother (or the intended recipient of the card) using the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992) and indicated whether we could contact them after Mother's Day with a brief survey.

Participants who agreed to complete a follow-up survey were contacted by phone 1–2 days after Mother's Day. Phone calls were made by research assistants who had not spoken with participants during the initial round of data collection. Participants were asked to identify who they had given the card to and how close they felt to the recipient on a 7-point Likert scale designed to mimic the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992) with anchors labeled 1 – not at all close to 7 – very close as well as their relationship satisfaction using the same scale as Studies 3 and 4. Given that we wanted to minimize participant burden in this field study, we did not ask participants to report their intuitions on gift giving behavior.

7.3. Results and discussion

As predicted, participants assigned to give a card to their mother that reflected their own interests and passions reported higher feelings of closeness immediately after selecting the card ($M = 5.95, SD = 1.41$) than participants assigned to give a card that reflected their mother's interests and passions ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.86$), $t(76) = 2.19, p < .04, d = .50$. This difference weakened to a non-significant level after Mother's Day among the twenty-four participants we were able to contact with our follow-up survey ($M_{giver-centric} = 6.57, SD = .76, n = 14; M_{recipient-centric} = 5.30, SD = 1.89, n = 10$), $t(11.08) = 2.02, p = .069, d = .88$. Gift type did not significantly influence relationship satisfaction; participants offering

giver-centric cards did not report significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction ($M = 6.43$, $SD = .76$) than givers offering recipient-centric cards ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.84$), $F(1, 22) = 2.91$, $p = .10$, $d = .66$. These findings suggest that giver-centric gifts lead to greater feelings of perceived closeness in the present than recipient-centric gifts. Importantly, however, the larger and more stable construct of relationship closeness does not appear to vary as a function of giver- and recipient-centric giving.

8. Study 6: iTunes

Thus far our examination has explored the relationship benefits givers feel after offering giver-centric gifts, but do recipients experience greater feelings of closeness as well? We explored this question in Study 6 by conducting a lab experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to give a low-cost gift – an iTunes song – to a recipient that either reflected their own interests or the interests of the recipient. Afterward, we asked recipients to report their feelings of closeness to the gift giver so that we could examine the relational consequences of receiving these types of gifts. We also asked recipients to indicate how much they liked and enjoyed their gift so we could probe whether more positive evaluations of the gift were necessary to experience the benefits of giver-centric gifts. In addition, recipients reported how well the gift reflected the self, so we could begin to explore whether recipient-centric gifts are more beneficial if they do accurately reflect the recipient.

8.1. Participants

One-hundred twenty-two university students ($M_{age} = 20.1$, $SD = 4.4$, 61% female) participated in this study in exchange for course credit or a chocolate bar. Four participants indicated that they did not follow their assigned spending directions and were excluded from analyses. An additional participant was excluded due to technical difficulties with the gift giving paradigm⁶, leaving a final sample of one-hundred seventeen participants ($M_{age} = 20.2$, $SD = 4.5$, 61% female). Sample size was determined based on power analyses (achieved power = .70 calculated using G*Power; Faul et al., 2007).

8.2. Procedure

8.2.1. Gift givers

Participants were seated at a computer and told that they would be taking part in a study on gift giving behaviors. After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and learned that they would have the opportunity to purchase an iTunes song as a gift for a friend, family member or romantic partner that either reflected their true self or their knowledge of the recipient. Specifically, participants were asked to browse the iTunes library, select a song, and send it as a gift to a recipient by email. Participants in the giver-centric gift condition ($n = 58$) were asked to pick a song that “reveals *your true self*. That is, please select a song that reveals your true character, interests, or passions.” Participants in the recipient-centric gift condition ($n = 59$) were asked to pick a song that “reveals *your knowledge of the recipient*. That is, please select a song that reveals your knowledge of the recipient’s character, interests, or passions.” Participants were able to include a personal message to the recipient if desired.

After the gift was sent, participants were asked to rate how close they felt to the recipient using the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992), how much they enjoyed giving the gift (“how much did you enjoy giving this gift?” 1 – not at all to 10 – extremely), and their relationship

satisfaction using the same 7-point Likert scale (1 – not at all satisfied to 7 – very satisfied). Finally, participants were asked about their most recent gift giving and receiving experiences, as well as their intuitions about gift giving in general using the same four items in Studies 2–4.

8.2.2. Gift recipients

During the first wave of data collection, participants were recruited independently and all served as gift givers. When gift givers left the lab, an email was sent to their gift recipient asking them to complete a brief online survey. If the recipient agreed, they followed a link to a questionnaire asking them to indicate (a) whether they received an iTunes song as a gift (yes or no), (b) from whom, (c) their perceived closeness to the sender on the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992), (d) how much they liked and enjoyed receiving the gift (how much did you like/enjoy receiving this gift? 1 – not at all to 10 – extremely), (e) their relationship satisfaction (1 – not at all satisfied to 7 – very satisfied), and (f) to what extent the gift reflected their true self (1 – not at all to 10 – extremely).

During the second wave of data collection, participants were recruited in pairs to enhance recipient participation. After recruitment, gift roles (giver vs. recipient) were randomly assigned. Recipients were seated at their own computer, facing away from the giver, and were asked to wear noise-canceling headphones to ensure they did not hear the gift giving manipulation. All recipients responded to the same survey, indicating (a) whether they received an iTunes song as a gift, (b) from whom, (c) their perceived closeness to the sender on the IOS scale (Aron et al., 1992), (d) how much they liked and enjoyed receiving the gift (how much did you like/enjoy receiving this gift? 1 – not at all to 10 – extremely), (e) their relationship satisfaction (1 – not at all satisfied to 7 – very satisfied), and (f) to what extent the gift reflected their true self (1 – not at all to 10 – extremely). Both the sender and recipient were aware that the iTunes song was a gift.

8.3. Results and discussion

Consistent with earlier results, participants expressed a strong preference for recipient-centric gift giving. Again, we found that when participants were asked about the last gift they gave, a significant majority stated that their gift revealed their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 87$), $\chi^2(1) = 29.00$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .50$, rather than their own true self ($n = 29$) and that they generally prefer to give gifts that reflect their knowledge of the recipient ($n = 107$), $\chi^2(1) = 82.79$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .84$, as opposed to their own true self ($n = 9$). Similarly, when asked about the last gift they received, participants stated that the gift reflected the giver’s knowledge of them ($n = 93$), $\chi^2(1) = 43.84$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .62$, rather than the giver’s true self ($n = 22$). Participants also reported a general preference for receiving gifts that reflect their own interests and passions ($n = 102$), $\chi^2(1) = 66.76$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .76$, than gifts that reflect the giver’s interests and passions ($n = 14$).

Givers also reported how close they felt to the recipient after sending the gift. In contrast to the above studies, givers offering giver-centric gifts did not report significantly higher feelings of closeness ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.60$) than givers offering recipient-centric gifts ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.43$), $t(114) = 0.37$, $p = .714$, $d = .07$. It is possible that the relational benefits of offering giver-centric gifts were not significant because givers felt that offering such a low cost item (\$2.29 or less) in a lab context would have little impact. In addition, giver- and recipient-centric gifts were equally enjoyable to give ($M_{giver-centric} = 7.42$, $SD = 2.16$; $M_{recipient-centric} = 7.60$, $SD = 2.33$), $t(114) = .45$, $p = .652$, $d = .08$. Finally, consistent with previous findings, relationship satisfaction did not differ across conditions; givers offering giver-centric gifts did not report significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.02$) than givers who recalled offering recipient-centric-gifts ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(114) = .09$, $p = .928$, $d = .01$.

⁶ The iTunes program showed significant delay in sending the selected song to the gift recipient and appeared to send a different song than selected by the giver. This was detected by mismatching artist and song title information reported by both parties. Inclusion of this one gift giver and recipient pair does not alter the conclusions reported in Study 6.

8.3.1. Recipient responses

To investigate the relational impact of receiving giver vs. recipient centric gifts, we examined responses from the seventy recipients ($M_{age} = 21.13$, $SD = 4.92$, 66% female) who completed our online questionnaire outside the lab (wave 1; $n = 18$) or in the lab (wave 2; $n = 52$).⁷ Specifically, we compared reports of self-other overlap reported by recipients receiving giver ($n = 34$) vs. recipient ($n = 36$) focused gifts. Analyses revealed a main effect of condition, $t(68) = 2.49$, $p < .02$, $d = .60$, whereby receivers given a gift reflecting the giver's interests and passions felt closer to the giver ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.52$) than receivers given a gift reflecting the giver's knowledge of the receiver's interests and passions ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.83$).⁸ Importantly, positive evaluations of the gift, as captured by recipient reports of liking and enjoyment, did not explain closeness ratings. When ratings of liking were added to the above analysis, the main effect of condition remained significant, $F(1, 68) = 8.65$, $p < .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. Similarly, when ratings of enjoyment in receiving the gift were added to the key analysis, the main effect of condition also remained significant, $F(1, 68) = 8.48$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$. These findings suggest that the benefits of giver-centric (vs. recipient-centric) gifts emerge above and beyond perceptions of the gift itself. Interestingly in this study gift type also influenced relationship satisfaction; recipients who received giver-centric gifts reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction ($M = 6.03$, $SD = .92$) than recipients who received recipient centric-gifts ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(59.61) = 2.30$, $p < .03$, $d = .32$.

One reason giver-centric gifts may increase closeness more than recipient-centric gifts is because selecting a gift that accurately reflects the recipient's true self may be more difficult for the giver and may at times reveal a lack of knowledge that could be detrimental to relationship closeness. Interestingly, however, recipients given recipient-centric gifts reported that their gifts were relatively accurate in reflecting their true selves, as demonstrated by the average self reflection ratings ($M = 6.81$, $SD = 2.83$) falling above the mid-point of the scale, $t(35) = 3.83$, $p < .005$, $d = .64$. In contrast, recipients given giver-centric gifts reported that their gifts did not especially capture their true selves, as demonstrated by the average self reflection ratings ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 2.95$) not differing from the mid-point of the scale, $t(33) = 1.80$, $p = .08$, $d = .31$. Thus, it seems that givers were reasonably able to select gifts that reflected a recipient's true self when asked to do so and the potential difficulty in offering such gifts does not fully explain the relational benefits of giving giver-centric gifts. Nevertheless, for recipients receiving recipient-centric gifts, there was a positive relationship between the extent to which gifts revealed their true selves and their reported relationship closeness, $r(36) = .44$, $p < .01$. This finding suggests that recipient-centric gifts possibly lead to increased feelings of closeness when givers offer gifts that accurately capture the recipient, even if feelings of relational closeness are generally higher when receiving giver-centric gifts.

Together these findings suggest that although people may strongly endorse a preference for gifts that reflect the interests and passions of the recipient, giving giver-centric gifts – those that reflect the interests

and passions of the giver – appear to also have positive relational outcomes for recipients.

9. General discussion

When giving a gift, people frequently try to find a gift that reflects the recipient's interests and passions. Indeed, our studies show an overwhelming preference for giving and receiving a gift that reflects the recipient. Despite these preferences, giving a gift that reflects the giver's true self actually led both givers and receivers to feel closer to one another. Looking at both relatively high-stakes and everyday expenditures, we find that offering giver-centric gifts are associated with greater feelings of self-other overlap with the recipient. Furthermore, these relational benefits are experienced by recipients as well: recipients gifted an iTunes song reported higher feelings of closeness with the giver and greater relationship satisfaction after receiving a song that reflected the sender rather than themselves. Together, these results suggest that giving giver-centric gifts may be an underutilized resource for fostering social connections.

It may seem surprising that people prefer to give and receive recipient-centric (vs. giver-centric) gifts but report greater feelings of relational closeness after giving and receiving giver-centric (vs. recipient-centric) gifts. One reason this may be the case is that givers feel uncomfortable or guilty when offering giver-centric gifts and therefore justify their action by reporting greater feelings of relational closeness to the receiver. While this type of demand characteristic response is possible, we argue that it is unlikely given the between-subjects design of Studies 3–6; participants were assigned to recall or engage in only one of the two types of gift giving (giver or recipient-centric) before reporting their feelings of closeness with the recipient. As such, it would be difficult for participants engaging in giver-centric gift giving to intentionally inflate their perceived closeness ratings above those of participants engaging in recipient-centric gift giving because they were not made aware of the alternative condition, let alone the scores reported in that condition. Further, the finding that recipients also reported greater relational closeness after receiving a giver-centric gift suggests that these effects are unlikely to be driven by such a demand characteristic alone – the recipient would have no reason to feel guilty about receiving a giver-centric gift. Instead, we argue that the incongruence between peoples' predictions and outcomes of gift-giving is consistent with a larger literature demonstrating that people sometimes lack self knowledge and insight into the most effective or rewarding judgments (e.g., Ariely, 2008; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Wilson & Dunn, 2004).

These data have both practical and theoretical implications. On a practical level, these findings suggest that people may be well advised to offer more self-reflective gifts if building stronger social connections is the underlying goal. Theoretically, these data are consistent with early views on gift giving, which identify gift giving as an act of self-expression and bonding (Betteridge, 1985). Further, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that giving a giver-centric gift may serve as an act of self-disclosure, which tends to foster closeness and liking for both the discloser and the recipient of the disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994).

In contrast, these findings are less consistent with the idea that giving a recipient-centric gift could foster closeness through self- and partner-verification, allowing the giver to demonstrate their knowledge of the recipient's interests and passions. However, there was some evidence suggesting that recipient-centric gifts can foster relationship closeness when the gift does more accurately reflect the recipient. Specifically, in Study 6, the more a recipient-centric gift was perceived as accurately reflecting the recipient's true self, the more strongly did that gift promote relational closeness. Thus, one reason recipient-centric gifts may have weaker relational benefits compared with giver-centric gifts is that they may be difficult to execute successfully. As such, should a giver be able to select a gift that accurately reflects the recipient, recipient-centric gifts could be quite beneficial. This

⁷ To examine whether data collection wave influenced the self-other overlap ratings of giver (vs. recipient) centric gifts, we submitted IOS ratings to a 2 (Gift type: giver vs. recipient centric) \times 2 (Data collection wave: 1 vs. 2) ANOVA. Although the main effect of data collection wave was significant, $F(1,66) = 8.77$, $p < .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$, indicating that recipients in wave 1 felt closer to their gift givers than recipients in wave 2, the Gift Type \times Data Collection Wave interaction was not significant, $F(1, 66) = .08$, $p = .774$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. This suggests that relative relational benefits of giver-centric gifts did not vary across data collection waves and testing contexts.

⁸ Once again, we examined whether gender or age moderated the effect of gift type on relationship closeness. Age did not moderate the effect of gift type, $F(7, 48) = 1.05$, $p = .411$ partial $\eta^2 = .13$. Interestingly, however, recipient gender did interact with gift type in Study 6 to predict closeness ratings, $F(1, 65) = 4.87$, $p < .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$; the interaction reveals that men reported the largest differences in closeness as a function of gift type, while women reported relatively high levels of closeness regardless of gift type. However, given that we only observe this interaction in Study 6, we caution against drawing large conclusions.

possibility may suggest one practical route through which accurate perceptions of close others come to promote positive relationship outcomes (e.g., Neff & Karney, 2005; Luo & Snider, 2009).

The present work also begins to shed light on whether the relational benefits of giver-centric gifts may depend on type of the relationship between a giver and recipient (e.g., Joy, 2001; Otnes, Lowrey, & Kim, 1993; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999). In particular, our findings suggest that the benefits of giver-centric gifts emerge across various relationship contexts. From romantic partners to parents, giver-centric gifts lead to greater gains in relationship closeness than recipient-centric gifts. Importantly, however, this strategy may be most advantageous when relationships have already been established. Across most of our studies, perceived closeness was rated as relatively high before a gift was exchanged, suggesting that prior levels of relationship closeness may be an important boundary condition for the relational benefits of giver-centric gifts to materialize. Furthermore, coding of gift-giving descriptions in Study 4 provided initial evidence that these effects may be stronger for closer relationships, such as romantic relationships. Further examination of the generalizability of these findings across relationship contexts is warranted in future research.

It is important to note that differences in gift characteristics, such as monetary value and experiential vs. material nature, are unlikely to explain the benefits of giver-centric gifts because these dimensions were held constant in several studies and giver-centric gifts led to higher levels of perceived closeness in each context. For instance, all participants in Study 5 were required to select a giver- or recipient-centric paper card to give in honor of Mother's Day. Similarly, all participants in Study 6 were required to send an iTunes song valued at less than \$2.50 to a recipient by email. In both studies, the cost and material/experiential nature of the gift were held constant, yet giver-centric gifts led to higher levels of perceived closeness. Thus, while giver- and recipient-centric gifts may differ in cost and experiential/materialistic qualities, these differences do not appear to account for the benefits of giver-centric gifts.

It is possible that offering recipient-centric gifts may lead to lower levels of relationship closeness for givers when they feel they are offering an item they themselves do not like. This explanation is supported by some of the data in Study 4, mainly that givers report high levels of relational closeness after giving something they enjoy to the recipient. Importantly, however, other forms of giver-centric gift giving (i.e., giving something that shares a piece of you and giving something that encourages time spent with the recipient) also lead to higher levels of relational closeness. Thus, our data are somewhat consistent with this explanation but (dis)liking the gift one is offering does not appear to fully explain the relational benefits of giver-centric gifts.

It is also noteworthy that some of our studies had low statistical power (e.g., Study 2) and used brief measures of potential confounds (e.g., 1-item measure of happiness used in Study 4). While recognizing that these limitations are not ideal, we are reassured that results converge across multiple studies. Nonetheless, future work attempting to replicate and build upon these initial findings may wish to address these limitations by recruiting larger samples and using longer, validated measures.

These results add to the growing body of research examining the positive consequences of prosocial behavior. While previous work has investigated *whether* engaging in generous behavior has positive emotional and relational consequences (Dunn, Aknin, et al., 2008), this research explores what *types* of giving have the greatest impact. Future research could extend this investigation in various ways. For instance, although we examined a range of different gifts (e.g., cards, songs) in these studies, most of the gifts were relatively low-cost, making it unclear whether these findings would apply to more financially costly gifts. In addition, although we looked at the relational consequences of one isolated gift, it is possible that offering repeated giver-centric gifts may backfire because it could signal self-obsession or narcissism. Indeed, long-term investigations may reveal a pattern akin to the early

fondness of people high in narcissism, which later sours (Paulhus, 1998). Further, our findings appear to be limited to perceptions of relationship closeness, which we measured with the IOS scale across studies. Perhaps not surprisingly, the broader and more stable construct of relationship satisfaction was generally not influenced by gift type, at least for givers. In contrast, receiving giver-centric gifts was associated with greater relationship satisfaction for recipients in Study 6, suggesting giver-centric gifts may have broader relational outcomes for recipients. However, this finding needs to be replicated and future work would benefit from examining the impact of giver- and recipient-centric gifts on other measures and constructs, such as intimacy.

Overall, the present results suggest that, contrary to most peoples' intuitions, giver-centric gifts can have stronger relational benefits than recipient-centric gifts. Note, however, that giving recipient-centric gifts are not necessarily detrimental to relationships and may in fact be quite beneficial when they do successfully reflect the recipient. Yet in light of the benefits of giver-centric gifts, giving a gift that reflects the self appears to be an effective and underutilized strategy for fostering social connection. Thus, next Valentine's Day, you may want to give a pair of tickets to your favorite play if you want to feel closer to your partner, and to have your partner feel closer to you.

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