



Don't tell me you are sorry with a gift: The negative consequences of apology gifts

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gift giving
Apology
Product evaluation
Relationships
Motives

ABSTRACT

While products are regularly presented as gifts to apologize, little is known about the effect of an apology context on product evaluations and relationships. Past research suggests that recipients positively evaluate gifts. Instead, our five studies reveal that, when recipients receive an apology gift, they evaluate the gift and the giver-recipient relationship more negatively compared to regular products, to receiving regular gifts, or towards verbal apologies. This occurs because apology gifts remind the recipient of transgressions, and signal misunderstandings of recipients' emotions. These findings highlight the importance of the gift-giving context when promoting products as gifts.

1. Introduction

The majority of US consumers spend at least \$1000 per year, or as much as 4% of their household budget, on buying products as gifts, generating an industry of more than \$200 billion in the US alone (Givi & Galak, 2019; Statista, 2021). Presenting products as gifts can positively affect product attitudes (Howard, 1992; Rixom et al., 2020), and products given as gifts are often evaluated positively by both givers and recipients (Gino & Flynn, 2011; Paolacci et al., 2015; Park & Yi, 2022). Gifts can positively affect giver-recipient relationships (Aknin & Human, 2015; Ruth et al., 1999), and can provide recipients with long-lasting positive emotions such as love and happiness (Belk & Coon, 1993; Yang & Galak, 2015). Indeed, gift-giving is perceived to be inherently positive (Givi & Galak, 2019).

Given that an extensive part of the gift industry consists of products purchased as a way to apologize, and that multiple products such as flowers, jewelry, or chocolates have been developed with apology labels, it is reasonable to surmise that the positive effects of gift-giving on product evaluations and on relationships would also hold for products given as an apology. We propose and empirically present, however, that when products are given as gifts to apologize, this can negatively influence product evaluations and giver-recipient relationships. We posit that, due to the specific context in which apology gifts are usually given, namely after transgressions where givers have hurt recipients, apology gifts act more as transgression reminders. Consequently, consumers

evaluate apology gifts as less positive compared to 'regular' gifts or products. When recipients receive apology gifts following transgressions, they prefer to decline or regift the gifts, and the receipt of apology gifts can negatively affect their relationship evaluation. Finally, we reveal that this effect occurs because apology gifts act as transgression reminders, and because apology gifts insinuate that givers misunderstand recipients' emotions. On a theoretical level, these findings reveal that the context in which products are promoted and received, and the potential emotional aspects related to such, may affect consumer responses to such products. This is in line with the recent notion that emotions are essential in advancing our understanding of retail and consumer interactions (Souiden et al., 2019). Moreover, on a practical level, the findings suggest that retailers should carefully promote their products as gifts, as the gift-giving setting may have relevant consequences for product evaluations.

2. Conceptual background

Gifts are goods or services that are voluntarily provided from one person to another person or to a group (Belk, 1979). Most gifts are presented during special occasions, such as birthdays or weddings (Givi & Galak, 2021), or for specific reasons, such as to reciprocate friendly acts, or to apologize for transgressions (Belk & Coon, 1993). In interpersonal transgressions, transgressors have hurt someone and thereby threatened or damaged the victim's self-image and the interpersonal

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relationship (Fincham et al., 2004). Transgressions tend to generate stress, feelings of inferiority, anger, and anxiety in victims (Kirchhoff et al., 2012; Miller, 2001; Witvliet et al., 2020). Providing an apology for transgressions can alleviate victims' stress and negative emotions (Anderson et al., 2006; Leunissen et al., 2013). An apology is an acknowledgement of the hurt caused, and may include expressions of guilt (Lazare, 2004) and assuming responsibility for the transgression (Kirchhoff et al., 2012). Victims who receive apologies hold more favorable impressions of transgressors and are less likely to retaliate than victims who do not receive apologies (Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Moreover, apologies are positively associated with forgiveness (Exline et al., 2007; Honora et al., 2022; Kaleta & Mroz, 2021), which enables improvement of the damaged relationship (McCullough et al., 1998).

Apologies need to be perceived as credible to be successful in generating forgiveness (Exline et al., 2007; Skarlicki et al., 2004). They can be made credible by incurring sufficient costs in generating the apology (Ohtsubo et al., 2018; Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009). Victims receiving costly apologies are more likely to perceive apologies as sincere and to forgive transgressors (Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009). From the transgressor's perspective, gift giving is an economically costly act (Belk & Coon, 1993). Therefore, transgressors may perceive an apology gift as a costly apology, and may expect positive responses from recipients (Ohtsubo et al., 2018; Ohtsubo & Yagi, 2015).

We argue, however, that recipients do not respond to apology gifts positively. Our pilot study examined whether givers' anticipation of and recipients' actual appreciations of apology gifts align. 301 MTurkers ($M_{age} = 34.48$, $SD_{age} = 11.62$, 49.5% male) remembered situations in which they either had angered a friend/relative (Giver condition) or were angry with a friend/relative (Recipient condition). They then imagined giving/receiving an iPod as an apology gift, and indicated how much they expected recipients to appreciate the gift (Giver condition) or how much they appreciated the gift (Recipient condition, 5 items; Paolacci et al., 2015). The findings revealed that givers expected apology gifts to be more appreciated ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 2.09$) than recipients actually did ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 2.13$, $t(297) = 2.40$, $p = .02$). This difference did not exist when givers spontaneously gifted the same iPod ($M_{givers} = 5.74$, $SD_{givers} = 1.46$; $M_{recipients} = 6.09$, $SD_{recipients} = 1.22$, $t(297) = 1.25$, $p = .21$). Thus, recipients are less appreciative of apology gifts than givers would expect.

Instead of perceiving apology gifts as costly, we propose that recipients perceive apology gifts as transgression reminders. Transgressions are stressful, self-threats for victims (Fincham et al., 2004), leading to strong and negative emotions (Kaleta & Mroz, 2021). Receiving gifts as apologies for such negative, emotional events connects the gift to the transgression. Objects can represent memories of special occasions or experiences (Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Love & Sheldon, 1998), and apologies in retail contexts after a restriction can emphasize the boundaries of the restriction (Luo et al., 2021). Similarly, apology gifts will represent transgressions during which recipients experienced negative emotions and self-threat. Consumers tend to negatively evaluate and avoid sources that generate negative emotions or self-threats (Park, 2010). Therefore, recipients will negatively evaluate apology gifts, and rather avoid or regift them.

Victims' responses to apologies may also depend on the degree to which apologies provide repair (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003). Research on self-gift giving examines that, when gifts are bought for oneself to overcome negative situations or disappointments (Mick & DeMoss, 1990; Mick & Faure, 1998; Weiner, 1985), such "therapeutic" self-gifts are unable to compensate for these negative experiences (Clarke & Mortimer, 2013; Luomala & Laaksonen, 1999), and can even increase negative emotions (Heath et al., 2015). Similarly, apology gifts may compensate recipients' negative emotions. Moreover, by giving an apology gift, givers may signal the belief that an object can repair recipients' negative emotions. This may generate the perception that givers misunderstand recipients' emotions, thereby negatively influencing giver-recipient relationships.

The present research presents five studies examining the effects of apology gifts on product evaluation (Studies 1a and 1b), gift acceptance (Study 2), gift appreciation (Studies 3 and 5), regift intentions (Study 3), and on relationships (Study 4). Study 5 tests the mediating role of apology gifts acting as transgression reminders, being unable to compensate recipients' negative emotions, and signaling givers misunderstanding recipients' emotions. It also examines a potential alternative mediator, namely reciprocity, and a potential moderator: materialism.

3. Studies 1a and 1b: effects of apology labels

We first assessed the effect of apology labels on product evaluations independent from transgressions. We selected two products regularly given as gifts, flowers (Study 1a) and chocolates (Study 1b), and examined whether apology labels on products would negatively affect product evaluations compared to products with a gift label, and to those without.

3.1. Study 1a

3.1.1. Method

Three hundred British inhabitants ($M_{age} = 34.64$, $SD_{age} = 12.10$, 70% female) were recruited on Prolific to participate for monetary compensation. They were randomly assigned to one of the three Gift conditions (Apology, Gift, or Control). Participants imagined receiving a bouquet of flowers, and evaluated the displayed product. The flowers included the label - "I'm sorry" (Apology condition), the label "for you" (Gift condition), or no label (Control condition). Participants evaluated the flowers on four items (very negative - very positive, dislike very much - like very much, very unpleasant - very pleasant, unattractive - very attractive, 7-points, $\alpha = 0.92$; Perkins & Forehand, 2012). This measure has been frequently applied to measure (brand) evaluations and attitude, and has been empirically related to implicit attitude measures (Perkins & Forehand, 2012). Participants then indicated the degree to which the product was meant to be given as a present, and as an apology (both (1) not at all - (7) completely).

3.1.2. Results

One-way ANOVAs with contrast analyses showed that participants perceived flowers with an apology label less meant to be given as a present to someone ($M = 4.87$, $F(2, 297) = 16.26$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.10$, Table 1) and more meant to be given as an apology to someone ($M = 6.23$, $F(2, 297) = 60.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.29$) compared to flowers with a

Table 1

Perceptions of products and product evaluations as a function of gift condition in studies 1a and 1b.

Study	Dependent measure	Gift condition		
		Apology <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Gift <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Control <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Study 1a	Perceived as a present	4.87 (2.16) ^a	6.05 (1.13) ^b	5.85 (1.21) ^b
	Perceived as an apology	6.23 (1.26) ^a	4.32 (1.69) ^b	4.21 (1.39) ^b
	Product evaluation	5.56 (1.12) ^a	5.91 (1.09) ^b	5.91 (1.07) ^b
Study 1b	Perceived as a present	5.61 (1.72) ^a	6.38 (1.03) ^b	6.29 (1.28) ^b
	Perceived as an apology	6.16 (1.46) ^a	3.52 (1.64) ^b	4.10 (1.59) ^b
	Product evaluation	5.11 (1.38) ^a	5.54 (1.27) ^b	5.65 (1.25) ^b

Note. There are significant differences between means with different superscripts with all $ts(297) > 2.12$, all $ps < .035$.

gift label ($M = 6.05$, $t(297) = 5.34$, $p < .001$ and $M = 4.32$, $t(297) = 9.28$, $p < .001$, respectively), and compared to flowers without a label ($M = 5.85$, $t(297) = 4.43$, $p < .001$ and $M = 4.21$, $t(297) = 9.78$, $p < .001$, respectively). An ANOVA on product evaluation (controlling for gender, $F(2, 296) = 3.29$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.02$) revealed that flowers with an apology label were evaluated less positively ($M = 5.58$) than flowers with a gift label ($M = 5.91$, $t(297) = 2.13$, $p = .03$), or than flowers without a label ($M = 5.91$, $t(297) = 2.12$, $p = .04$). There were no differences between the Gift and the Control conditions (all t s < 0.90 , p s $> .37$).

3.2. Study 1b

3.2.1. Method

In study 1b, 300 Prolific participants ($M_{age} = 35.22$, $SD_{age} = 13.66$, 64% female) followed the same procedure as in Study 1a. This time, the participants evaluated a box of chocolates including the label “an apology gift” (Apology condition), the label “a special gift” (Gift condition), or no label (Control condition).

3.2.2. Results

Chocolates including the apology label were less likely presented as a gift ($M = 5.61$, $F(2, 297) = 10.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.07$, Table 1), and more likely presented as an apology to someone ($M = 6.16$, $F(2, 297) = 78.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$) than chocolates including a gift label ($M = 6.38$ and $M = 3.52$, respectively, $t(297) > 4.14$, p s $< .001$), and than chocolates without a label ($M = 6.29$ and $M = 4.10$, respectively, $t(297) > 3.66$, p s $< .001$). There was a negative effect of an apology label on product evaluations ($F(2, 296) = 3.98$, $p = .02$, $d = 0.03$). Chocolates with an apology label were evaluated less positively ($M = 5.11$) than chocolates with a gift label ($M = 5.54$, $t(297) = 2.36$, $p = .02$), and than chocolates without a label ($M = 5.65$, $t(297) = 2.92$, $p < .01$; control vs. gift condition $t(297) < 1$).

4. Study 2: effects of apology gifts on gift acceptance

Studies 1a and 1b demonstrated that apology labels can negatively affect product evaluations independent of a transgression. They thereby do not include the interpersonal dynamics of a transgression. Study 2 investigated recipients' responses to apology gifts following a transgression. We examined whether recipients would accept receiving an apology gift after having been hurt.

4.1. Method

One hundred fourteen European university students ($M_{age} = 20.12$, $SD_{age} = 1.45$, 50.9% male) participated for course credits and were randomly assigned to the Apology or the Gift condition. They were informed of their participation in three research parts. The first part consisted of answering questions for 10 min on a filler task. The experimenter would monitor the progress of the participants from a central computer room and would commence ‘Part 2’ from there. In the Gift condition, the experimenter successfully set up ‘Part 2’ when participants had completed ‘Part 1’. During the Apology condition, the experimenter ‘accidentally’ rebooted participants' computers when participants had almost completed ‘Part 1’. The experimenter then explained the accident, and said that participants had to redo ‘Part 1’ as their data was not saved. A pretest of this manipulation (*In the described situation, I would experience ...*, 1 = not at all, 7 = very strongly) showed that this manipulation induced more anger-related feelings (i.e., angry, irritated, annoyed, furious; $\alpha = 0.91$) ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.36$) compared to participants in the Gift condition ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.19$, $t(79) = 8.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.78$).

All participants then continued with ‘Part 2’ of the experiment, and were informed that ‘Part 2’ measured people's impressions of creative products. The experimenter provided a mind teaser game as an exemplar

product (Appendix A). In the Gift condition, the experimenter mentioned that participants could keep the game as a thank you gift for their loyal participation in the research lab. In the Apology condition, participants could keep the game as an apology gift for the computer mistake that the experimenter made earlier on. To ensure that participants paid attention to the product, they answered filler questions concerning the mind teaser game. After finishing ‘Part 2’, the experimenter provided filler task ‘Part 3’. The experimenter thereby casually mentioned that, once they had finished ‘Part 3’, participants could either take the gift or leave it in the cubicle when they did not want to keep it. Participants' decisions to either keep or reject the gift formed our dependent variable, gift acceptance.

4.2. Results

Logistic regression with gender as control variable showed that participants in the Apology condition accepted the gift less often compared to participants in the Gift condition (Wald(1) = 13.61, $p < .001$, $d = 0.21$). Less than half of the participants receiving the apology gift accepted the gift (44%) compared to the majority of the participants receiving the spontaneous gift (78%).

5. Study 3: effects of apology gifts on appreciation and regift intentions

Study 2 revealed that recipients are less likely to accept apology gifts than spontaneous gifts. Of course, there may be multiple reasons why recipients rejected the gift. For example, recipients may have felt bad about themselves, they may have appreciated the gift less, or they may have considered the gift as too few or too much compensation. To explore whether recipients would appreciate apology gifts, and whether they would regift apology gifts, Study 3 was conducted. To examine whether the effects are specific to apology gifts, and cannot be subscribed to the effects of negative experiences/feelings in general, we included a sadness condition.

5.1. Method

Two hundred and ninety four students from a European university ($M_{age} = 20.5$, $SD_{age} = 1.44$, 37.1% male) participated for course credits and were randomly assigned to the Apology-gift, Sadness-gift, or Neutral-gift condition. All participants read a scenario where they planned to visit the movies with their friend Alex. In the Apology- and Sadness-gift conditions, the participants waited for more than an hour without Alex showing up. In the Apology-gift condition, participants discovered that Alex was alternately having drinks with colleagues, evoking angry feelings. In the Sadness-gift condition, Alex was hospitalized due to an accident, evoking sad feelings. In the Neutral-gift condition, participants and Alex enjoyed the evening together. All three scenarios ended with Alex gifting them a DVD the next time they met. This was either to apologize for forgetting the appointment (Apology-gift condition), a gesture because Alex could not make it last time (Sadness-gift condition), or a spontaneous gift (Neutral-gift condition). The participants indicated their gift appreciation on five items (1 = not at all - 7 = very strongly, $\alpha = 0.93$; Paolacci et al., 2015), and their tendency to regift the gift (two items: “Would you consider using Alex's DVD as a regift for somebody else?”, 1 = certainly not - 7 = definitely; “How likely is it that you will dispose of Alex's gift within five years after having received it?”, 1 = very unlikely - 7 = very likely, $\rho = 0.37$, $p < .001$).

5.2. Results

One-way ANOVAs controlling for gender showed an effect of condition on Gift appreciation ($F(2, 290) = 93.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$; Table 2) and on Regift intentions ($F(2, 290) = 6.15$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.04$).

Table 2

Gift appreciation and regift intention as a function of gift condition in study 3.

Dependent measure	Gift condition		
	Apology gift <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Sadness gift <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Neutral gift <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Gift appreciation	3.91 (1.22) ^a	5.59 (1.06) ^b	5.88 (1.07) ^b
Regift intention	3.85 (1.47) ^a	3.44 (1.34) ^b	3.21 (1.47) ^b

Note. There are significant differences between means with different superscripts with all $t(291) > 2.02$, all $p < .044$.

Apology gifts were appreciated less ($M = 3.91$) than sadness gifts ($M = 5.59$, $t(291) = 10.42$, $p < .001$) and than neutral gifts ($M = 5.88$, $t(291) = 12.39$, $p < .001$). Apology gifts were more likely to be regifted ($M = 3.85$) than sadness gifts ($M = 3.44$, $t(291) = 2.02$, $p = .04$) and than neutral gifts ($M = 3.21$, $t(291) = 3.18$, $p < .01$). There were no differences between sadness gifts and neutral gifts ($t(291) = 1.80$, $p = .08$ and $t(291) = 1.12$, $p = .26$, respectively).

6. Study 4: effects of apology gifts on relationships

Study 3 showed that recipients appreciate apology gifts less than spontaneous gifts and less than gifts received after sad events, and that recipients have a higher tendency to regift apology gifts. However, it is possible that apology gifts positively affect recipients' emotions or giver-recipient relationships. Also, transgressors can provide apologies differently to improve their relationships (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009). Therefore, Study 4 examined whether giving apology gifts simultaneously with spoken apologies would reduce recipients' negative emotions and improve recipients' relationship evaluations more than solely providing spoken apologies.

6.1. Method

Two hundred ninety-seven MTurk workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.70$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.67$, 49.5% male) participated for \$0.60 and were randomly assigned to the Apology-gift, Spoken-apology, No-apology, or Control condition. In an autobiographical recall-induction task, they described a previous experience in which they were angry with a friend/relative (all three apology conditions), or a normal weekday during which they saw at least one friend/relative (Control condition) (De Hooge, 2014). One respondent reported an extreme case of repeated sexual abuse and was removed from the data. Participants then reported the extent to which they experienced anger, gratitude, guilt, pride, sadness, satisfaction, and relief during this event/weekday (1 = not at all, 7 = very strongly).

Participants in the Apology-gift and Spoken-apology conditions next read that, shortly after the event, the friend/relative wanted to apologize. In the Apology-gift condition, the apology was accompanied by a gift: a DVD of a recently released film. The participants in these conditions indicated for the previously reported emotions to what extent they would experience these following the apology. Finally, all participants rated their relationship (How much do you appreciate your relationship with X [after the apology/gift], how much do you like X [after the apology/gift]; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\rho = 0.93$, $p < .001$).

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Emotions

One-way ANOVAs controlling for gender revealed effects of condition on anger ($F(3, 291) = 263.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$; Table 3) and on sadness reported after the described event ($F(3, 291) = 39.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.29$). Participants in the three Apology conditions reported more anger ($5.99 < M < 6.09$) and sadness ($4.04 < M < 4.47$) than participants in the Control condition ($M_{\text{anger}} = 1.55$, $M_{\text{sadness}} = 1.69$; $t(292) > 7.68$, $p < .001$). The three Apology conditions did not differ on anger (t

Table 3

Experienced emotions and relationship evaluation as a function of apology condition in study 4.

Dependent measure	Apology condition			
	Apology Gift <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Spoken Apology <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	No Apology <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Control <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Emotions after event				
Anger	6.09 (1.04) ^a	6.00 (1.33) ^a	5.99 (0.97) ^a	1.55 (1.16) ^b
Guilt	2.06 (1.53) ^a	1.97 (1.54) ^a	1.88 (1.27) ^a	1.55 (1.15) ^a
Sadness	4.72 (1.93) ^a	4.04 (1.89) ^a	4.47 (1.93) ^a	1.69 (1.36) ^b
Gratitude	1.62 (1.32) ^a	1.47 (1.16) ^a	1.55 (1.26) ^a	4.29 (2.20) ^b
Pride	1.66 (1.28) ^a	1.83 (1.58) ^a	1.87 (1.50) ^a	3.97 (2.17) ^b
Relief	1.53 (1.15) ^a	1.82 (1.49) ^a	1.63 (1.30) ^a	3.22 (2.01) ^b
Satisfaction	1.52 (1.15) ^a	1.78 (1.43) ^a	1.57 (1.20) ^a	4.97 (1.78) ^b
Emotions after apology				
Anger	4.06 (2.14) ^{ab}	3.51 (1.92) ^{ab}	–	–
Guilt	1.85 (1.38) ^a	2.16 (1.60) ^a	–	–
Sadness	3.18 (2.12) ^a	2.72 (1.90) ^a	–	–
Gratitude	2.72 (1.83) ^a	3.36 (2.07) ^b	–	–
Pride	2.11 (1.56) ^a	2.53 (1.94) ^a	–	–
Relief	2.32 (1.69) ^a	3.64 (2.15) ^b	–	–
Satisfaction	2.22 (1.57) ^a	3.22 (1.85) ^b	–	–
Relationship evaluation	3.58 (1.92) ^a	4.41 (1.87) ^b	4.77 (2.03) ^b	6.39 (1.06) ^c

Note. There are significant differences between means with different superscripts in the rows with all $t(292) > 5.53$, all $p < .001$ for emotions after event, $t(292) > 2.02$, all $p < .05$ for emotions after apology, and $t(292) > 2.90$, all $p < .01$ for relationship evaluation. Means with superscript *ab* differ marginally significantly from each other with $t(292) = 1.69$, $p = .09$.

($292 < 1$) or on any other emotion ($t(292) < 1.15$, $p > .25$, with the exception of sadness for Apology-gift vs. Spoken-apology, $t(292) = 2.35$, $p = .02$).

6.2.2. Emotional responses and relationship evaluation

Independent samples T-tests comparing the emotions after receiving an apology gift versus a spoken apology showed that apology gifts were marginally less successful in reducing anger feelings ($t(153) = 1.69$, $p = .09$), equally successful in reducing sadness feelings ($t(153) = 1.40$, $p = .16$), and less successful in generating positive emotions ($t(153) > 2.02$, $p < .05$) compared to spoken apologies. A one-way ANOVA comparing all conditions on Relationship evaluation and controlling for gender ($F(3, 291) = 30.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.24$) showed that participants receiving an apology gift ($M = 3.58$) evaluated the relationship lower than all other conditions ($4.41 < M < 6.39$; $t(292) > 2.90$, $p < .01$).¹

¹ One may argue that the manipulation method used may have led to large variances in anger levels. Even though the standard deviations suggest otherwise ($SD = 1.11$ for all anger conditions in Study 4 on a 1–7 scale), we reran the ANOVA on Relationship evaluation, controlling for gender and reported anger. The findings showed again a main effect of condition on Relationship evaluation ($F(3, 290) = 6.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.06$).

7. Study 5: potential mediators

Study 4 demonstrated that apology gifts deny additional benefits for recipients' emotions or for relationship evaluations compared to spoken apologies. Yet, none of the studies thus far have examined the underlying process of why apology gifts negatively affect consumer evaluations. Study 5 explored recipients' tendencies to view apology gifts as transgression reminders, as inadequate compensations for transgressions, and as signals that givers have misunderstood recipients' emotions, as three potential mediators of the effect of apology gifts on gift appreciation. It is also possible that recipients view the apology gift as an deliberate act by the giver to evoke reciprocity in recipients. That is, the gift may be perceived as a manipulative attempt generating a felt obligation to repay the act, for example by forgiving the giver (e.g., Gouldner, 1960; Tang et al., 2020). Therefore, we also measured reciprocity as a potential alternative mediator. Finally, it might be possible that the effects of apology gifts depend on individual aspects of consumers. For example, materialistic recipients may be more likely to appreciate apology gifts than non-materialistic consumers. We therefore also included materialism as a potential moderator.

7.1. Method

Four hundred Prolific workers ($M_{age} = 39.71$, $SD_{age} = 14.18$, 66% female) participated for £1.50 and were randomly assigned to the Apology or Control condition. In an autobiographical recall-induction task, participants described previous experiences in which a friend/relative had hurt them (Apology condition), or 2 h of a regular afternoon during which they had seen at least one friend/relative (Control condition) (De Hooge, 2014). They answered a manipulation check (e.g., "To what degree did X hurt you", "cause you pain", six items, 1 = not at all – 7 = a lot, $\alpha = 0.95$). Next, they imagined receiving the flowers from Study 1A as an apology gift (Apology condition) or as a spontaneous gift (Control condition) and indicated their gift appreciation on the items from Study 3 ($\alpha = 0.98$). We measured how the flowers would act as a reminder (four items, e.g., "These flowers will remind me of something negative", $\alpha = 0.96$), could compensate for the transgression (afternoon) (three items, e.g., "These flowers compensate for the described event/weekday", $\alpha = 0.93$), the degree to which the flowers signalled givers misunderstanding recipients' emotions (three items after deletion of one unreliable item, e.g., "A material gift, such as the flowers, shows me that the giver misunderstands my feelings", $\alpha = 0.89$), and the degree to which the flowers initiated an obliged reciprocity (four items, e.g., "accepting the flowers oblige me to repay the favour", derived from Tang et al. (2020), $\alpha = 0.91$; see Appendix B for all process items). Materialism was measured with the 18-item scale of Richins & Dawson (1992).

Table 4

Emotion manipulation checks, gift appreciation, and process measures as a function of gift condition in study 5.

Dependent measure	Gift condition	
	Apology gift M (SD)	Control M (SD)
Emotion manipulation check	5.90 (0.79) ^a	2.13 (0.73) ^b
Gift appreciation	4.18 (2.20) ^a	6.22 (1.41) ^b
Process measures		
Reminder of transgression	4.69 (1.78) ^a	1.77 (0.94) ^b
Compensation of transgression	2.91 (1.86) ^a	3.09 (1.72) ^a
Giver misunderstood emotions	4.19 (1.72) ^a	1.61 (1.02) ^b
Felt obligation of reciprocity	1.92 (1.27) ^a	2.71 (1.49) ^b

Note. There are significant differences between means with different superscripts with all $t(398) > 5.70$, all $ps < .001$.

7.2. Results

The manipulation check (controlling for gender) showed participants in the apology condition reporting more hurt feelings ($M = 5.90$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 2.13$, $F(1, 397) = 2429.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.86$, Table 4). Apology gifts were appreciated less ($M = 4.18$) than normal gifts ($M = 6.22$, $F(1, 397) = 148.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.27$)². Apology gifts were perceived as stronger (negative) reminders ($F(1, 397) = 438.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$), and as stronger signals that givers misunderstood recipients' emotions than normal gifts ($F(1, 397) = 358.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$). Apology gifts were not perceived as being less able to compensate transgressions (afternoons) ($F(1, 397) = 1.46$, $p = .23$), and they generated less obligations of reciprocity than spontaneous gifts ($F(1, 397) = 31.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.07$). Process analysis (Hayes, 2018, Model 1) for a moderation of the effects of apology gifts on the mediators and on gift appreciation showed that materialism did not moderate any of the effects (all $ts < 0.61$, all $ps > .54$).

To examine mediation of the effect of apology gifts on gift appreciation, we ran Parallel mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018, Model 4) with reminder, compensation, misunderstanding, and reciprocity as mediators (95% CI; 5000 resamples; see Fig. 1). The analysis showed indirect effects of condition on gift appreciation running through reminder (-1.87 ; $CI_{95\%} [-2.32, -1.47]$) and misunderstanding (-0.53 ; $CI_{95\%} [-0.84, -0.25]$). Compensation (-0.05 ; $CI_{95\%} [-0.16, 0.05]$) and reciprocity (-0.07 ; $CI_{95\%} [-0.15, 0.01]$) did not mediate the effect of condition. Condition also directly affected gift appreciation ($c' = 0.50$, $p = .01$).

8. General discussion

Usually, presenting product as gifts may positively affect product evaluations (Baumann & Hamin, 2014; Park & Yi, 2022). We demonstrate, however, that presenting products as apology gifts can negatively affect product evaluations and giver-recipient relationships. Moreover, products received as apology gifts are less accepted, and more often regifted. These negative effects occur because products given as apology gifts can act as transgression reminders, and can signal that givers misunderstand recipients' emotions. Together, these findings suggest that giving a gift to apologize, or presenting products as gifts, may not be so beneficial after all.

8.1. Implications

Our findings reveal that the gift-giving setting in which products are presented as gifts are relevant to bear in mind. Recently, some authors have suggested that it can be valuable to include emotional aspects in retail and consumer research (Souiden et al., 2019). The current findings suggest that negative emotions or experiences, which may be unrelated to products, may still affect the product evaluation process. It may be possible that other emotional experiences that are unrelated to products, such as pride experiences after consumers have achieved something or sadness after consumers have lost something valuable, may affect their responses to products. Similarly, other gift-giving contexts or product-labels that relate to emotional experiences, such as get-well-soon gifts, farewell gifts, or consolation prizes, may also exert effects on product evaluations. Uncovering the effects of emotional experiences, gift-giving contexts, and product labels would help build a more nuanced understanding of the effects of emotional experiences on product evaluations.

The present findings also provide new insights for consumer research on gift-giving. Research has shown that emotions may affect the selection of gifts (De Hooge, 2014), and that emotions may be generated during gift receipt (Gupta et al., 2020; Ruth et al., 1999). The current research extends these findings by showing that emotional experiences prior to the gift-giving act may affect recipient responses to gifts. Moreover, while most research suggests that gift-giving has positive

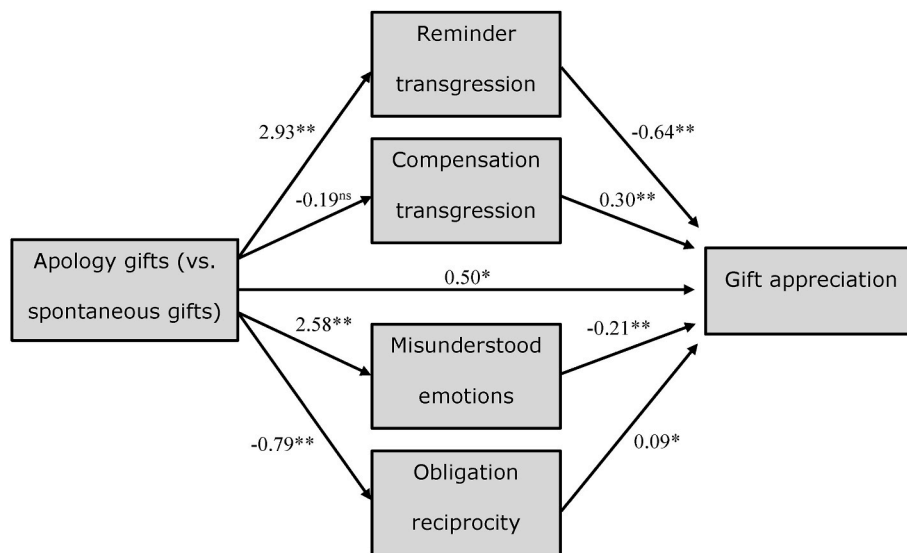


Fig. 1. Parallel Mediation Analysis of the effect of Gift Condition on Gift Appreciation in Study 5

Note. Parallel mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018, Model 4) run with 95%CI, 5000 resamples. Reminder transgression (−1.87; CI_{95%} [−2.32, −1.47]) and Misunderstood emotions (−0.53; CI_{95%} [−0.84, −0.25]) mediated the effect of apology gifts on gift appreciation; compensation transgression (−0.005; CI_{95%} [−0.16, 0.05]) and obligation reciprocity (−0.07; CI_{95%} [−0.15, 0.01]) did not. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$.

consequences for both product evaluations and relationships, we are one of the first to suggest that some gift-giving settings may negatively impact product evaluations and relationships. It may thus be valuable to examine whether the dynamics of other emotional gift-giving settings also negatively affect product evaluations.

The current research also adds to existing apology research. In general, apologies are perceived positively, both in interpersonal settings and in retail or service contexts (e.g., Exline et al., 2007; Honora et al., 2022; Kaleta & Mroz, 2021). Yet, apologies may have negative consequences. Recent research has shown that, in retail contexts where retailers have restricted customers, providing an apology for the restriction may generate more negative responses from customers (Luo et al., 2021). In a similar vein, we show that, although the intention may be positive, giving a gift as an apology may negatively affect customer responses. Future research proposes that retail and consumer contexts apologies may have positive versus negative effects on consumer responses.

8.2. Limitations and future research

As current studies provide evidence supporting that apology gifts can have negative consequences, there are still limitations. Gift-giving usually occurs in a complex, dynamic setting, in which the giver-recipient relationship, the gift-giving reason, and the product type presented all interact. Our research aims to examine a varied sample of gift-giving situations, which develops an idea of how apology gifts affect product evaluations and relationships. Yet, as a consequence, every study contains specific weaknesses. For example, one may wonder whether DVDs are ever actually regifted. Also, none of the studies may fully capture the interactions between giver identities, recipient identities, giver-recipient relationships, the gift-giving reason, and gift aspects. Therefore, the current studies may not capture the full scope of how apology

gifts influence consumer responses.

Moreover, the current research did not provide a full mediation explanation for the effect, nor a clear overview of the relevance of individual characteristics of consumers. Our results reveal that apology gifts act as negative reminders, and as signals that givers misunderstand recipients' emotions. The findings also show that an inadequate compensation for the hurt caused, and an obligation to reciprocate the gift do not explain the effects of apology gifts on product evaluations. We have learned that materialism does not moderate the effects of apology gifts, but other individual characteristics may matter. Additionally, our studies focused on transgressions including some emotional damage, but apology gifts may support transgressions with mostly material damage, or those which concern more experiential gifts. These could all form fruitful paths for future research.

8.3. Conclusion

Together, our findings shed light on how presenting products in a gift-giving context or with a special motive, such as to apologize for transgressions, can have negative consequences for product evaluations and for relationships. Apparently, presumably good intentions, such as making a costly apology, can tarnish recipients' views of products and relationships. Similarly, retailers' good intentions to support apology gift giving, may negatively affect consumer responses towards their products. It may thus be wise for givers to find alternative apologizing tactics, and for retailers to rethink promoting their products as apology gifts.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A

The gift product used in Study 2.



Appendix B

Items and Factor Loadings of the Process measures in Study 5.

Item	Factor Loadings			
	Reminder transgression	Compensation transgression	Misunderstood emotions	Obligation of Reciprocity
Every time I see these flowers, I will think of something positive (Rec)	.82	-.15	-.04	-.01
Every time I see these flowers, I will think of something negative	.96	.07	.01	.01
These flowers will remind me of something positive (Rec)	.86	-.09	-.04	-.01
These flowers will remind me of something negative	.97	.08	.01	-.01
These flowers make up for the described event	-.06	.83	.01	.03
These flowers compensate for the described event	.07	.97	-.02	.01
These flowers recompense for the described event	.04	.92	-.06	-.01
Receiving the flowers feels like my feelings are being bought off	.22	-.03	.72	-.03
Accepting the flowers feels like replacing something emotional with something material (the flowers)	-.06	.07	.93	.01
A material gift, such as the flowers, shows me that X misunderstands my feelings	-.01	-.06	.80	.01
The flowers show that my feelings are understood (Rec) (not included in any factor)	.17	-.41	-.16	-.01
I feel committed to repay the favour of receiving the flowers	-.05	.01	.12	.78
Accepting the flowers oblige me to repay the favour	.10	-.01	-.03	.90
These flowers are a kindness that I have to return	-.10	-.02	.02	.85
I view these flowers as a favour that I have to repay	.03	.03	-.11	.87
Reliability (α)	.96	.93	.89	.91

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