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Experiential gifts and the construal of meaningful consumption episodes

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The examination of the affective consequences of the consumption of experiential and material gifts has increased in recent years, yet the attention paid to gratitude has been limited. Consequently, in five experiments, we tested the influence of type of gift, experiential versus material, on gratitude and social connection by increasing the construal of meaningful memories coming from the consumption of experiential gifts. In experiment 1, participants were randomly assigned to either an experiential gift consumption or material gift consumption condition and completed questionnaires assessing gratitude and social connection. Results showed that experiential gifts elicited greater gratitude, which then had a positive relationship with social connection. In experiment 2, participants were randomly assigned to the same conditions as study 1 and completed questions about the meaningfulness of the consumption memory and gratitude. Results showed that the consumption of experiential gifts elicited greater construal of meaningful memories, which then had a positive relationship with gratitude. In experiments 3 and 4, we manipulated the meaningfulness of gifts, special versus ordinary, and assessed the meaningfulness of the consumption memory and gratitude, with the addition of social connection in study 4. Results showed that special gifts were construed as more meaningful memories, which then had a positive relationship with gratitude. In addition, we also found a positive relationship between gratitude and social connection in study 4. Study 5 showed that the mediation effect of the construal of meaningful memories on the relationship between type of gift and gratitude was not moderated by whether the gift was special or ordinary.

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Introduction

As suggested by consumer behavior scholars, gift exchange represents a popular social dynamic with important affective and social consequences (Ward and Chan, 2015). Recently, researchers have paid more attention to the implications of experiential versus material gifts in terms of affective outcomes from the perspective of gift recipients. Yet, limited attention has been paid to the role of gratitude as a function of the type of gift. We posit that experiential gifts might elicit greater gratitude than material gifts because they are construed as meaningful consumption memories for consumers who are asked to recall the consumption of either type of gift. This construal leads to greater gratitude and social connection. We test these possibilities in five experiments. To reach our research goals, we first discuss the social dynamic of gift giving and the nature of consumption and recalled consumption, followed by a discussion of the distinction between experiential and material purchases and gifts. Last, we discuss gratitude and social connection as two important outcomes.

The social dynamic of gift giving. Gift giving represents a popular social dynamic in which the gift giver and gift recipient seek common, complementary goals (Ward and Chan, 2015). The nature of some of these goals is affective and relational. Gift givers care about giving gifts that would send positive signals to the recipient, including the perceived importance of the relationship. Gift givers and recipients experience a wide variety of emotions that either trigger the act of gift giving or come as a result of receiving gifts (de Hooge, 2014). Consequently, relational and affective outcomes are generated as a result of gift exchange.

Our investigation focuses on the recipients' recalled consumption of a gift and the likely outcomes resulting from this recollection in the form of gratitude and social connection with gift givers, consistent with the relational and affective goals shared by gift givers and recipients. We posit that recalled consumption of gifts is subjective and could vary as a function of the type of gift: experiential versus material. As suggested by scholars conducting research on the dynamics of gifts, the importance of gift exchange does not come from the item or experience individuals get, but from the symbolic meaning construed by the giver and the recipient (Ward and Chan, 2015). Within this construal of meaning and from the recipients' perspective, we posit that consumers would construe the consumption of experiential gifts as more important memories than the consumption of material gifts because they represent more important and precious memories. This subjective construal would lead to different affective and relational outcomes (Puente-Díaz and Cavazos-Arroyo, 2021), including experiencing greater gratitude and social connection with the gift giver.

The construal of the consumption of an experiential gift as a more significant memory could lead to the perception of higher investment from the gift giver, eliciting greater gratitude and social connection, as shown in previous studies on investment and gratitude in relationships (Joel et al., 2013). Before positing our hypotheses, it is important to discuss the assumptions and principles that would guide our research efforts.

Consumption and recalled consumption. The following assumptions and principles would guide our research efforts. Consumption is goal-driven (Campbell and Warren, 2015). Consumption plays an important role in the lives of people. Recently, business scholars have suggested looking at marketing from a lens of consumption of past episodes or as the accumulation of meaningful memories (Ratnayake et al., 2010; Zauber- man et al., 2009). In addition, a recent meta-analysis on type of

purchase, experiential versus material, also showed the importance of paying closer attention to memory dynamics (Weingarten and Goodman, 2021). Hence, one of the consumers' goals could be to have meaningful consumption episodes that would form part of their autobiographical memory (Belk, 1988), involving the consumption of material objects and experiences. These memories could come from consumers buying their material and experiential purchases or from receiving material or experiential gifts.

From conceptual approaches of situated cognition in consumer psychology (Schwarz et al., 2021), we suggest that recalled consumption of gifts involves the reconstruction of important memories, which is a subjective process (Zauberman et al., 2009). Within this subjective process of recalled consumption, consumers make judgments about the meaningfulness and relevance of a given episode in their lives (Brockmeier, 2015), as part of their autobiographical memory (Wang, 2016). From research on the self and social perception, we posit that consumption episodes are ambiguous with many possible interpretations, yet consistent with the proposition that self-knowledge influences the construal of stimuli (Sedikides et al., 2021), the consumption of experiential gifts would be construed as more important consumption memories than material gifts because experiential gifts are a better representation of the self (Gilovich and Gallo, 2019). In addition, consumers make greater judgments of meaningfulness when they can do things that allow them to express who they truly are (Baumeister et al., 2013) and the consumption of experiential gifts represents a better opportunity. Hence, the ambiguity of consumption moments allows consumers to extract and construe more meaning from the consumption of experiential gifts than from the consumption of material gifts with important social and affective consequences.

Experiential and material gifts. Regarding the affective advantage of experiential over material purchases, a recent meta-analysis showed a happiness advantage with an observed medium effect size (Weingarten and Goodman, 2021). In addition, one study on the consumption of gifts obtained additional support for the advantage of experiential gifts over material gifts (Chan and Mogilner, 2016). This study showed that experiential gifts elicited more intense emotional reactions, which then led to a stronger social connection with the gift giver. The main reason for the experiential advantage is explained by the fact that experiential purchases and gifts are more important to the self. This proposition has received strong empirical support.

For example, one empirical study showed that when developing life narratives, consumers were more likely to include experiential than material purchases (Carter and Gilovich, 2012). Another piece of evidence comes from the signaling function of consumption (Gal, 2015). Specifically, consumption is capable of addressing several needs including the need for self-expression (Gal, 2015). Empirical research showed that consumers chose experiential purchases over their material counterparts when they wished to express their true selves (Bronner and de Hoog, 2018). In addition, doing things that expressed who consumers truly were led to perceive greater meaning in life (Baumeister et al., 2013). A third piece of evidence came from one study showing that consumers perceived experiential purchases as more unique and were willing to accept price increases because they did not want to miss these opportunities (Bastos, 2019). Several recent empirical studies have provided additional support for the significance of experiential purchases for the self. For example, one study showed that individuals were more likely to post experiential purchases on social media because they

represented a more important part of the self than material purchases (Duan and Dholakia, 2018), another one showed that experiential purchases led to more identity expression opportunities (Guevarra and Howell, 2015), a third one showed that experiential purchases generated higher levels of word of mouth (Gallo et al., 2019), and the last one showed that experiences had a higher conversational value because they communicated positive attributes of the self (Bastos and Brucks, 2017). One last study examined the influence of type of purchase on eudaimonia, finding support for the advantage of experiential purchases over their material counterparts (Pchelina and Howell, 2014). Even though the concept of eudaimonia could include a construal of meaningfulness, these authors conceptualized eudaimonia as developing new skills and friendships and feeling alive, which is different from the construal of a meaningful memory or moment. Based on these empirical findings, we posit that experiential purchases represent more important consumption episodes and memories. In addition, this positive effect extends to the recollection of the consumption of gifts. Consequently, we test the following hypothesis:

H1: When asked to recall the consumption of experiential gifts, participants would construe these episodes as more significant and meaningful consumption memories than when asked to recall the consumption of material gifts.

If we are correct about the differences in construal as a function of type of gift, then gift recipients would experience a wide variety of social and affective benefits from recalling the consumption of experiential gifts including greater social connection and gratitude. Thus far, researchers have paid attention to the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2013). However, these authors emphasized that the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences did not have a value judgment, but involved only the frequency of the experiences. Conversely, our distinction does have a value judgment, based on the recalled meaningfulness of the consumption of experiential and material gifts.

Gratitude and social connection. Gratitude is conceptualized as a social emotion in which individuals see themselves as the beneficiary of a positive outcome and the recognition that the positive outcome comes from someone else (Emmons, 2004). Gift exchange often leads to feeling grateful for the gift giver (Ward and Chan, 2015). Yet, we claim that if gift recipients construe the consumption of experiential gifts as more meaningful memories than the consumption of material gifts, then the recall of experiential gifts should lead to greater gratitude. Gift recipients would not only acknowledge that they have received a gift, but also the opportunity to have a meaningful memory in their lives. Consumer scholars have posited that consumers want to have meaningful memories and protect them (Zauberman et al., 2009). One previous study only examined affective reactions without specifying which emotion was more likely to vary as a function of type of gift (Chan and Mogilner, 2016). Consequently, we test the following hypotheses:

H2: Experiential gifts would lead to higher gratitude than material gifts.

H3: The advantage of experiential gifts in terms of gratitude would be mediated by the construal of the consumption of experiential gifts as more meaningful memories than the construal of material gifts.

As suggested by scholars researching gift exchange, gift giving has social motives and consequences (Ward and Chan, 2015). For example, one study found that experiential gifts fostered stronger relationships because they generated more intense emotions (Chan and Mogilner, 2016). We seek to extend this line of

research by suggesting that gratitude is responsible for feeling a greater social connection with gift givers. When recalling the consumption of experiential gifts, consumers might acknowledge the meaningfulness of the memory and feel thankful, and grateful, strengthening the perceived social connection with the gift giver. Consequently, we posit the following hypothesis:

H4: There would be a positive relationship between gratitude and social connection.

H4a: There would be a positive indirect effect of experiential gifts on social connection by increasing the construal of the meaningfulness of the consumption of experiential gifts and by experiencing greater gratitude.

In sum, the purpose of the present investigation is twofold. First, we examine the influence of experiential versus material gifts on the construal of the meaningfulness of recalled consumption episodes. Second, we test how differences in construal correlate with gratitude and social connection.

Overview of studies

To test the different components of our hypotheses, we conducted five experiments. We first conducted an experiment in which type of gift was manipulated and examined its influence on gratitude and social connection. In experiment two, we manipulated type of gift and examined the construal of both consumption episodes and their relationship with gratitude. In experiment three, we manipulated the proposed mediator, special versus ordinary memory of gift consumption, and assessed its influence on the construal of these consumption episodes and gratitude. Experiment four tested the full model by manipulating the proposed mediator and adding the outcome of social connection as a function of gratitude. Last, experiment five manipulated type of gift and the meaningfulness of gifts to test the moderating influence of how special the gift was on the mediation effect of the construal of meaningful memories on the relationship between type of gift and gratitude.

Method of study 1

Participants. We used the results from a recent meta-analysis to calculate the sample size needed for our experiments (Weingarten and Goodman, 2021). We conducted a power analysis with G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the number of participants needed for a power of 0.95 with an effect size of 0.26¹ and two groups. Results showed that we needed a sample size of at least 196 participants. Consequently, participants were 199 (65% women; ages 18–39 years, $M = 26.37$ years and $SD = 5.19$) college students from two private universities in Mexico.

Procedure. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions: experiential or material gift condition. We followed the recommendations set by Chan and Mogilner (2016) and asked participants to focus on the consumption of either type of gift.

Experiential condition: for this activity, we would like you to think about an experiential gift that you received with a price of around 1000 pesos (50 US dollars). An experiential gift implies that a person spent money with the primary intention of you having an experience—an event or a series of events that you have had and lived. We would like you to please focus on the consumption of this gift and not on the gift exchange. Please describe in the space provided below said gift consumption.

Material condition: for this activity, we would like you to think about a material gift that you received with a price of around 1000 pesos (50 US dollars). A material gift implies that a person spent money with the primary intention of you having a material possession—a material product that you have obtained and kept

in your possession. We would like you to please focus on the consumption of this gift and not on the gift exchange. Please describe in the space provided below said gift consumption.

Measures. Gratitude and social connection. We assessed all items by using the following prompt: Remembering the consumption of this experiential (material) gift makes me feel? On a scale from “I do not feel like that at all” (1) to “I completely feel like that” (10). The items for gratitude were: grateful, thankful, and appreciative ($\alpha = 0.71$), taken from the relevant literature (Frias et al., 2011). For social connection, the items were: close to the person that gave me the gift, connected with the person that gave me the gift, with the sensation that I have a strong relationship with the person that gave me the gift ($\alpha = 0.93$; Chan and Mogilner, 2016).

Results of study 1

Mediation model. To test our mediation model, we followed the guidelines set by Hayes (2018). A bootstrap test (PROCESS, model 4, Hayes, 2018) showed that there was a significant effect of the experimental condition on feelings of gratitude, $b = 0.73$, $p = 0.003$. The relationship between gratitude and social connection, while controlling for the experimental condition, was also significant, $b = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$. Conversely, the influence of the experimental condition was not significant, $b = 0.12$, $p = 0.63$. Last, the indirect effect of the experimental condition on social connection was significant, 0.49, CI = 0.16, 0.88 (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Hence, our results showed that bringing to mind an experiential gift and focusing on the consumption of this

gift led indirectly to higher levels of social connection by inducing greater gratitude (See Supplementary material for full results).

Brief discussion

Our results showed initial evidence for the idea that experiential gifts led to higher social connection by increasing gratitude, providing support for hypotheses 2 and 4. These results were consistent with previous studies showing a positive relationship between experiential gifts and social connection (Chan and Mogilner, 2016). Yet our results showed that gratitude was the key emotion responsible for the increase in social connection. In our next experiment, we wanted to test whether the construal of the consumption of experiential gifts as more meaningful memories, as compared to material gifts, was responsible for the positive influence on gratitude.

Method of study 2

Participants. We had the same goal of trying to collect data from at least 196 participants. Consequently, participants were 225 (70% women; 93% were in the 18–25 age bracket) college students from two private universities in Mexico.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the same two conditions as in study 1.

Measures. Gratitude and meaningful memories. We assessed all items by using the following prompt: Remembering the consumption of this experiential (material) gift makes me feel? On a scale from “I do not feel like that at all” (1) to “I completely feel like that” (10). The gratitude items were the same as in study 1 ($\alpha = 0.75$). For significant memories, the items were: with the sensation that my life has had special moments, with the sensation that my life has had unique moments, with the sensation that I have special memories in my life, with the sensation that I have valuable memories ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Results of study 2

Mediation model. To test our mediation model, we followed the guidelines set by Hayes (2018). A bootstrap test (PROCESS, model 4, Hayes, 2018) showed that there was a significant effect of the experimental condition on the construal of significant memories, $b = 0.82$, $p = 0.001$. The relationship between the construal of significant memories and gratitude, while controlling for the experimental condition, was also significant, $b = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$. Conversely, the influence of the experimental condition was not significant, $b = 0.12$, $p = 0.42$. Last, the indirect effect of the experimental condition on gratitude was significant, 0.38, CI = 0.16, 0.61 (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Hence, our results showed that bringing to mind an experiential gift and focusing on the consumption of this gift led indirectly to higher levels of gratitude by inducing a construal of greater meaningfulness of these consumption memories (see Supplementary material for full results).

Brief discussion

Our results showed evidence for the idea that experiential gifts were construed as more meaningful memories, which was positively related to greater gratitude, providing initial support for hypotheses 1 and 3. One limitation is that we measured both the mediator and the outcome variable. In the next study, we manipulated the proposed mediator, the construal of meaningful memories, as recommended by methodology scholars (Spencer et al., 2005), and assessed gratitude.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of studies 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

	Study 1							
	Experiential gift		Material gift					
	M	SD	M	SD				
Gratitude	8.85	1.34	8.13	1.97				
Social connection	9.02	1.80	8.40	2.24				
	Study 2							
	Experiential gift		Material gift					
	M	SD	M	SD				
Gratitude	9.19	1.25	8.70	1.45				
Construal of meaningful memories	9.12	1.67	8.29	2.03				
	Study 3							
	Special gift		Ordinary gift					
	M	SD	M	SD				
Gratitude	9.12	1.36	8.48	1.93				
Construal of meaningful memories	8.95	1.56	8.35	2.13				
	Study 4							
	Special gift		Ordinary gift					
	M	SD	M	SD				
Gratitude	8.88	1.42	8.53	1.42				
Construal of meaningful memories	8.70	1.99	7.76	2.55				
Social connection	8.38	2.24	8.69	1.67				
	Study 5							
	Special exp. gift		Ordinary exp. gift		Special mat. gift		Ordinary mat. gift	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Gratitude	9.33	1.10	8.98	1.67	9.16	1.45	9.16	1.03
Construal of meaningful memories	9.36	1.09	8.81	1.91	9.06	1.51	9.02	1.31

Method of study 3

Participants. We had the same goal of trying to collect data from at least 196 participants. Consequently, participants were 201 (68% women; 91% were in the 18–25 age bracket) college students from two private universities in Mexico.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a special gift that presented a meaningful moment and memory or an ordinary gift that represented an ordinary moment and memory.

Meaningful moment and memory condition: for this activity, we would like to think about a special gift that you received with a price higher than 1000 pesos (50 US dollars). A special gift implies that a person spent money with the primary intention of you having a unique and significant moment in your life. We would like you to focus on the consumption of the gift and not on the moment of gift exchange. Please describe in the space below said consumption of the special gift.

Ordinary moment and memory condition: for this activity, we would like to think about an ordinary gift that you received with a price higher than 1000 pesos (50 US dollars). An ordinary gift implies that this person spent money with the primary intention of you having a common moment in your life. We would like you to focus on the consumption of the gift and not on the moment of gift exchange. Please describe in the space below said consumption of the ordinary gift.

Measures. The same items as in study 2 were used to assess gratitude ($\alpha = 0.82$) and meaningful memories ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Results of study 3

Mediation model. To test our mediation model, we followed the same guidelines set by Hayes (2018), as in studies 1 and 2. A bootstrap test (PROCESS, model 4, Hayes, 2018) showed that there was a significant effect of the experimental condition on the construal of meaningful memories, $b = 0.59$, $p = 0.025$. The relationship between the construal of meaningful memories and gratitude, while controlling for the experimental condition, was also significant, $b = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$. Conversely, the influence of the experimental condition was not significant, $b = 0.27$, $p = 0.11$. Last, the indirect effect of the experimental condition on gratitude was significant, 0.38 , $CI = 0.05, 0.72$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Hence, our results showed that bringing to mind a special, significant gift and focusing on the consumption of this gift led indirectly to higher levels of gratitude by inducing a construal of greater meaningfulness.

Brief discussion

In this experiment, we manipulated the proposed mediator, gifts that represented meaningful moments and memories versus gifts that represented ordinary moments and memories, and obtained additional support for the finding that this construal was related to greater gratitude, providing additional support for hypotheses 2 and 3. In our next experiment, we again manipulated the proposed mediator, as the key mechanism responsible for inducing gratitude, and added the examination of social connection as an outcome of gratitude. Consequently, we tested a sequential model. In addition, it was brought to our attention² that when recalling special gifts, participants might bring to mind experiential gifts more often than material gifts, weakening our proposition that it is the construal of experiential gifts as more meaningful than material gifts, the mechanism responsible for the affective and social benefits. Consequently, we coded the verbal responses from the experimental and the control conditions to rule out this possibility.

Method of study 4

Participants. We had the same goal of trying to collect data from at least 196 participants. Consequently, participants were 200 (70% women; 65% were in the 18–25 age bracket) college students from two private universities in Mexico.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the same two conditions as study 3: meaningful versus ordinary moment and memory conditions.

Measures. We used the same items as previous studies to assess gratitude ($\alpha = 0.61$), meaningful memories ($\alpha = 0.95$), and social connection with gift givers ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Results of study 4

Sequential model. To test our sequential model, we once again followed the guidelines set by Hayes (PROCESS, model 6, Hayes, 2018). A bootstrap test showed a significant effect of the experimental condition on the construal of meaningful memories, $b = 0.94$, $p = 0.004$. The relationship between the construal of meaningful memories and gratitude, while controlling for the experimental condition, was also significant, $b = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$. Conversely, the influence of the experimental condition was not significant, $b = 0.04$, $p = 0.83$. The relationship between gratitude and social connection was significant, $b = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$, while controlling for the influence of the experimental condition and construal of meaningful memories. Last, the indirect effect of the experimental condition on social connection, through its influence on the construal of significant memories and gratitude, was significant, 0.22 , $CI = 0.07, 0.40$. Hence, our results showed that bringing to mind a gift that represented a special memory versus a gift that represented an ordinary memory led indirectly to higher social connection by increasing the construal of meaningful memories and gratitude (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics for all studies).

Coding of verbal responses. We used the following three categories to code all gifts reported in both conditions: 0 = material gifts, 1 = experiential gifts, and 2 = gifts that could be classified as experiential or material. Results for the special gift condition showed that 72% of the participants recalled a material gift, 17% an experiential gift, and 11% recalled a gift that could be considered as experiential or material. Similarly, results for the ordinary gift condition showed that 77% of the participants recalled a material gift, 13% an experiential gift, and 10% recalled a gift that could be classified as experiential or material. By showing no difference in the type of gift recalled, we showed that we were not confounding type of gift, experiential versus material, with meaningfulness, special versus ordinary. The higher frequency of material gifts reported in both conditions was consistent with previous studies (Chan and Mogilner, 2016).

Brief discussion

Our results showed additional support for our proposition that the construal of some gifts as more meaningful memories had a positive relationship with gratitude. In addition, and consistent with study 1, greater gratitude was positively related to higher social connection with the gift giver, providing support for hypotheses 1, 3, 4, and 4a. Even though we were able to observe that meaningfulness was not the same as experiential gifts, we wanted to conduct one last experiment manipulating type of gift, experiential versus material, and whether the gift represented something special or ordinary. This new design allowed us to test a model of moderated mediation, testing whether the mediation effect of meaningful memories on the relationship between type

of gift and gratitude was moderated by whether the gift was special versus ordinary.

Method of study 5

Participants. As in study 1, we conducted a power analysis with G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the number of participants needed for a power of 0.95 with an effect size of 0.26, two independent variables, and four groups. Results showed that we needed a sample size of at least 279 participants. Consequently, participants were 362 (65% women; mean age = 25.17) older adults recruited from different social media platforms.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions: special experiential gift, ordinary experiential gift, special material gift, and ordinary material gift. The specific instructions for each condition were taken from the previous four studies to generate four independent experimental cells. In condition one, participants were asked to recall special experiential gifts, whereas, in condition two, participants were asked to recall ordinary experiential gifts and so on for the remaining two conditions.

Measures. The same items as in previous studies were used to assess gratitude ($\alpha = 0.88$) and meaningful memories ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Results of study 5

We conceptualized our 2 × 2 (experiential and material and special and ordinary) experiment as a case of moderated mediation. Specifically, we wanted to examine if the positive influence of experiential gifts on gratitude by increasing the construal of meaningful memories is moderated by whether the gift was special or ordinary. We once again followed the guidelines set by Hayes (PROCESS, model 59, Hayes, 2018). Regarding the mediator, the construal of meaningful memories, a bootstrap test showed a non-significant effect of the interaction between the experimental manipulation of material versus experiential gifts and the experimental manipulation of special versus ordinary gifts, $b = 0.50$, $p = 0.10$. Regarding the outcome variable, gratitude, results showed a non-significant effect of the interaction between the experimental manipulation of material versus experiential gifts and the experimental manipulation of special versus ordinary gifts, $b = -0.03$, $p = 0.84$. Similarly, the effect of the interaction between the mediator, the construal of meaningful memories, and the experimental manipulation of special versus ordinary gifts was not significant, $b = 0.08$, $p = 0.15$. Given the results, there was no evidence for the moderating effect of special versus ordinary gifts on the advantage of experiential gifts in terms of gratitude by increasing the construal of meaningfulness.

Even though we did not find evidence for moderated mediation, some comparisons could shed complementary light on our results, comparing conditions that had not been tested in our four previous studies. For example, does the meaningfulness of the type of gift matter equally for experiential and material gifts in terms of the construal of meaningful memories? To test this possibility, we needed to examine four cells: special experiential gifts versus ordinary and special material gifts versus ordinary.

Results for a one-way analysis of variance comparing special material with ordinary material gifts showed a non-significant effect $F(1, 176) < 1$. Specifically, recalling a special material gift did not lead to a greater construal of meaningfulness of consumption memories, $M_{spemat} = 9.06$, $SD = 1.51$ than recalling an ordinary material gift, $M_{ordimat} = 9.02$, $SD = 1.31$. Conversely, recalling a special experiential gift led to a greater construal of meaningfulness of consumption memories, $F(1, 184)$

6.05 , $p = 0.015$, $M_{speexp} = 9.36$, $SD = 1.09$ than recalling an ordinary experiential gift, $M_{ordexp} = 8.81$, $SD = 1.91$, $\delta = 0.35$.

Mediation model. The significant influence of how special the experiential gift was on the construal of meaningful consumption memories allowed us to test the mediation model including gratitude as a relevant outcome. We once again followed the guidelines set by Hayes (PROCESS, model 4, Hayes, 2018). A bootstrap test showed a significant effect of the experimental condition on the construal of meaningful memories, $b = 0.55$, $p = 0.015$. The relationship between the construal of meaningful memories and gratitude, while controlling for the experimental condition, was also significant, $b = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$. Conversely, the influence of the experimental condition was not significant, $b = -0.10$, $p = 0.32$. Last, the indirect effect of the experimental condition on gratitude, through its influence on the construal of significant memories, was significant, 0.44 , $CI = 0.09, 0.84$. Hence, our results showed that bringing to mind an experiential gift that represented a special moment and memory led indirectly to greater gratitude than bringing to mind an experiential gift that represented an ordinary moment and memory by increasing the construal of meaningful memories of consumption episodes.

Brief discussion. Study 5 showed that the mediating effect of the construal of meaningful memories on the relationship between type of gift and gratitude did not depend on whether the experiential and material gifts were framed as special or ordinary. However, we did find a significant effect of special experiential gifts when compared to ordinary experiential gifts on the construal of meaningful memories which then had a positive relationship with gratitude.

General discussion

The purpose of the present investigation was to examine the influence of type of gift on gratitude and social connection by affecting the construal of experiential gifts as more meaningful memories in consumers' lives. We tested five hypotheses and found strong support for all of them. We discussed the theoretical and applied implications of our results.

Theoretical implications. Consumers want to have meaningful lives and one way to achieve so is by accumulating important life moments that form part of their autobiographical memory (Baumeister et al., 2013; Ratnayake et al., 2010; Zauberman et al., 2009). Our main claim was that consumers would construe experiential gifts as more meaningful memories than material gifts because they are more important to the self and because they represent opportunities to express who consumers truly are (Baumeister et al., 2013; Gilovich and Gallo, 2019). Across two studies, we found strong support for our claim. When asked to recall the consumption of gifts, consumers construed experiential gifts as more important memories than the consumption of material gifts. These findings were consistent with the idea that the consumption of experiential purchases leads to better affective outcomes because consumers value experiences as more important for the self (Gilovich and Gallo, 2019). Our findings also addressed a recent suggestion to pay attention to memory dynamics when examining the implications of experiential and material purchases (Weingarten and Goodman, 2021). Specifically, memory scholars claim that individuals are constantly assessing the meaningfulness of different life events (Brockmeier, 2015). Consumption episodes are ambiguous; hence, when assessing how meaningful a given episode is, consumers would pay attention to what different episodes represent to the self (Sedikides et al., 2021). Among the different benefits of constantly

engaging in meaning-making interpretations is that cognitions of meaningfulness connect the past self with the present and future self (Baumeister et al., 2016), allowing the self to have a coherent structure. Consequently, when recalling the consumption of experiential and material gifts, experiential gifts have the advantage of representing more meaningful memories with important affective and social implications.

Specifically, we found a positive relationship between the construal of the consumption of experiential gifts as more meaningful memories and the social emotion of gratitude. Our results were consistent with some studies examining the affective implications of experiential purchases and gifts (Chan and Mogilner, 2016; Walker et al., 2016). Specifically, one study showed that experiential gifts generated more intense emotions (Chan and Mogilner, 2016). Our results showed, more specifically, increases in gratitude. In addition, our results extended the implications of type of purchase on gratitude (Walker et al., 2016) by showing similar results for gifts. Therefore, gifts and purchases can lead to higher levels of gratitude.

Besides the two studies just discussed, the attention paid to gratitude has been limited. Given the social nature of gift exchange, it would seem natural to experience gratitude. However, our results showed that greater gratitude was observed from the consumption of experiential gifts because they were more important to the self and represented better opportunities to express who consumers truly were (Baumeister et al., 2013; Gilovich and Gallo, 2019) and this experiential gift advantage was more likely to be observed when experiential gifts were special as opposed to ordinary. The lack of significant differences in the construal of meaningful consumption episodes between special and ordinary material gifts represented a finding worth exploring in future studies.

In addition, our results also showed that participants felt stronger social connections with gift givers when recalling the consumption of experiential gifts. Our findings were consistent with one previous study (Chan and Mogilner, 2016), but showed that gratitude was partially responsible for the higher social connection along with the construal of experiential gifts as more meaningful consumption memories. Specifically, recalling the consumption of experiential gifts led to construing these memories as more meaningful because they represented better opportunities for consumers to express who they truly were. Finding that gratitude, as opposed to general emotions or affect (Chan and Mogilner, 2016), was responsible for the greater sense of social connection could represent a small, yet relevant contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of gift exchange.

Consumer scholars suggest that consumption has relational goals (Bandelj and Gibson, 2019). Similarly, conceptual and empirical findings support the idea that experiential gifts facilitate social connections (Chan and Mogilner, 2016). Hence, when planning gifts for significant others and assuming that consumers' goal is to increase the social connection with gift recipients, consumers should allocate more resources to acquiring experiential gifts.

Applied implications. Given the construal of consumption of experiential gifts as more meaningful memories, one important implication is helping consumers make these moments as memorable as possible. Marketers could provide consumers with souvenirs, and photos, and organize contests on social media to encourage consumers to share their experiences and photos. The use of social media could help consumers consolidate these moments in memory (Wang, 2016). In addition, assuming that comments from friends and relatives are positive, this social interaction would probably enhance the meaningfulness and uniqueness of this moment and memory in consumers' lives, with

positive consequences for consumers and brands responsible for creating experiences.

Limitations and future directions. This study had limitations. First, we used, for the most part, college students from two private universities as our participants, limiting our ability to generalize our results to a broader, more diverse population of Mexico. Second, we used a cross-sectional design which limited our ability to examine how the process of gift consumption evolved across time. Future studies could use diaries to examine how often consumers engage in the natural recall of gift consumption and also assess how the process of making stronger connections between gift givers and recipients unfolds. Third, the present investigation only focused on gift recipients. It would be interesting to examine in future studies whether gift givers are aware of the opportunity to give meaningful moments as gifts that would form part of the autobiographical memory of significant others.

In sum, our results showed that giving meaningful consumption episodes as gifts to important others resulted in greater gratitude and social connections when gift recipients construed these experiential gifts as more meaningful memories. We posited and found strong support for the idea that the construal of meaningfulness was the key mechanism that led to positive social outcomes. Hence, when having limited resources and the main goal is to give memorable moments as gifts, consumers would be well-advised to allocate their resources to the acquisition of experiential gifts for significant others.

Data availability

The data set is available upon request from the first author.

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Notes

- 1 Results from this meta-analysis showed an effect size of 0.383. Yet, they estimated that a third was due to publication bias. Hence, we made our estimations with an effect size of 0.26.
- 2 We thanked one of the reviewers for bringing this to our attention.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the human subjects committee of the author's university and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The approval number for this study was 2020-0180 reviewed by the author's university.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01486-w>.

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