

The Paradox of Surprise

Empirical Evidence about Surprising Gifts Received and Given by Close Relations

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Introduction

To contribute to the literature stream on gift giving in the context of consumer behavior, we propose investigating the role of surprise, as a particularly powerful emotion in the gift market context. Gift markets represent enormous, year-round selling opportunities, “not just from Black Friday to Christmas” (Danziger, 2017); in the United States, the gift market was worth more than \$130 billion in 2015 (Unity Marketing, 2015). This market provides unique marketing opportunities to touch both the buyer who purchases the gift and the recipient who receives it. Retailers therefore should deliver outstanding, emotionally gratifying gifting experiences to both buyers and recipients, to build loyalty among multiple consumers in a single sale.

Four decades ago, Belk (1979: p. 95) wrote that “Gift-giving is a largely unexplored context of consumer behavior.” Numerous studies have since then shed light on different aspects of gift giving. But even as many studies shed light on different aspects of gift giving since 1979, little extant research investigates the role of specific emotions in this context. Surprise, for example, is relevant for retailers, in that it offers strong potential as a tool for large-scale social influence; people appear notably likely to remember and share surprising stories or experiences with others (e.g., Derbaix and Vanhamme, 2003; Hutter and Hoffmann, 2014). Yet no research directly studies surprising gifts given and received, and only limited attempts have tried to explain theoretically the influence of surprise, mainly focused on the relatively narrow context of a “perfect gift.” However, not all surprising gifts are necessarily perfect gifts. Therefore, extant research does not account for the full range of variables associated with surprising gifts, nor their related dynamics. Rather, findings pertaining to surprise often emerge as unexpected, accidental, or tangential to the main research questions being pursued (e.g., Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993). For example, Areni, Kiecker, and Palan

(1998) identify “surprise as value” as just one of 10 themes in their study of memorable gift experiences.

With this study, we provide a thorough and systematic examination of surprising gift giving from the viewpoints of recipients and givers, above and beyond the relatively narrow context of Belk’s (1996) perfect gift. This is the first time that such an examination has been done empirically. In support of our attempts to contribute to this stream of research, we first review literature pertaining to emotions, gift giving, and surprise in gift giving specifically. Then we present and analyze findings derived from an exploratory, small-scale, open-ended questionnaire with 48 respondents, integrated with insights from in-depth interviews with eight informants—both givers and recipients of surprising gifts.

From the above analysis, we derive a framework that comprises six important variables that define surprising gift giving, according to the viewpoints of both givers and recipients. With this framework, we identify surprising gifts, highlight characteristics of positively and negatively surprising gifts, and specify strategies that givers and recipients use to enhance surprise, as well as the likelihood that a surprising gift will be perceived positively (i.e., not be a “miss”; Durgee and Sego, 2001). We also uncover some additional ways to surprise recipients, which have not been identified previously; and we identify combinations of these ways to surprise recipients. Additionally, we discuss the paradox that constitutes the core of surprise gift giving, namely that givers and recipients cannot communicate and still maintain the element of surprise. Thus, although both parties prefer surprising gifts, they may settle for unsurprising gifts to avoid disappointment. Finally, we discuss this study’s theoretical contributions, offer recommendations for manufacturers and retailers, and suggest some avenues for further research.

Literature Review

Throughout the history of humanity (e.g., Davis, 2000;; Mauss, 1990), personal gift giving has been a universal behavior (e.g., Ruffle, 1999; Sherry, 1983), which serves various purposes. Since ancient times, gifting surpluses (e.g., food, water, money) has created an implied obligation of returned assistance (Cheal, 1988; Mauss, 1990;), a phenomenon known as reciprocal obligation. Other purposes include the maintenance and reinforcement of social ties (Chan and Mogilner, 2017), symbolic communications in social relationships (Schieffelin, 1980), value fulfillment in everyday life (Beatty, Kahle, and Homer, 1991), and integration with the gift recipient (Banks, 1979; Belk, 1988). Gift giving inherently entails an effort to make others happy, though gift choices also might be motivated by selfish goals, such that givers intentionally bypass the gifts that would make the recipient happiest (e.g., Givi and Galak, 2019).

Accordingly, gift giving is a prominent topic in marketing (Hwang and Chu, 2019; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel, 1999; Saad and Gill, 2003; Steffel and LeBoeuf, 2014), as well as in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, 1965; Mauss, 1990), economics (Ruffle, 1999), philosophy (Schrage and Paradiso-Michau 2014), psychology (Zhang and Epley, 2012), and sociology (Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2009).

Emotions in gift giving

Sherry (1983) offers a multidisciplinary model and a comprehensive view of gift giving. (For other conceptual models of gift-giving processes, see Banks [1979] and Belk [1979].) There are three stages in Sherry's model: gestation, presentation, and reformulation. It also includes the gift, the relationship between the giver and the recipient, and situational factors. The model has been applied successfully to examine different variables associated with gift giving (e.g., Durgee and Sego, 2001; Fisher and Arnold, 1990; Pieters and Robben, 1998; Stevenson and Kates, 1999). Accordingly, Sherry's (1983) multidisciplinary model appears apt for examining gift giving.

Ruffle (1999) also contends that though strategic considerations may influence *some* gift-giving situations, emotions (e.g., surprise, disappointment, pride, guilt, embarrassment) are inherent to *all* gift-giving scenarios. For example, in Otnes and Lowrey's (1993) research on the selection and meaning of artifacts in U.S. weddings, brides describe gifts as "cold" (i.e., non-emotional) if they are not spontaneous. Chan and Mogilner (2017) similarly find greater improvements in relationship strength due to experiential gifts (cf. material gifts), due to the intensity of emotion evoked by such gift consumption. Areni, Kiecker, and Palan (1998) bear testimony to the importance of emotions and note that people generally find gift giving to be particularly memorable and enjoyable if the gift is given or received unexpectedly and when they are surprised, thrilled, or shocked.

In Ruffle's (1999) two-player, psychological game-theoretic model, a gift recipient's chief emotional benefit is surprise, which also acts as the source of the giver's pride. More generally, Ruffle (1999) posits that if the psychological benefit derived from surprising the recipient does not merit the monetary cost of that gift, no gift is given. Also, if a gift giver is not familiar with the gift recipient's preferences, it is better to give appropriate, conventional gifts to avoid embarrassing the gift recipient. No empirical data offers support for Ruffle's (1999) game-theoretic gift-giving model though. Other studies in extant literature are consistent with this contention, namely, that sentiments and a desire to surprise the recipient drive givers. For example, Caplow (1984) reports that an existing rule of Christmas gift giving is that the gift should surprise the recipient. McGrath, Sherry, and Levy (1993), studying the meanings of gifts, find that unexpected gifts are especially valued.

Studies designed to gather empirical evidence of different aspects of gift giving also offer accidental insights into the influence of emotions such as surprise. For example, in an exploration of gift selection strategies for different recipients, Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim (1993) mention in passing three strategies for learning about the creation of surprising gifts:

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3 testing reactions of the recipient for possible gifts, shopping around for special items, and
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5 selecting a gift to compensate for a loss the recipient experienced recently. Caplow (1984)
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7 and Katz (1976) argue that surprise results if the giver expresses more affection (aesthetic
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9 partial value) than what the recipient reasonably anticipates or has more knowledge than the
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11 recipient expects. Surprise also might arise if the gift is spontaneous or no gift previously has
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13 been exchanged between the giver and the recipient (Caplow, 1984; Katz, 1976). It is
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15 possible to enhance and dramatize this surprise, and heighten suspense, by wrapping the gift
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17 (Belk, 1996; Kuper, 1993; Löfgren, 1993; Searle-Chatterjee, 1993).
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22 In a theoretical explanation of the influence of surprise, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry
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24 (1989) argue that when people receive a surprising gift, it can be sacred to them. Surprise also
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26 may be an important property of the “perfect gift,” as is frequently encountered as an
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28 expression of agapic love (Belk, 1996; Belk and Coon, 1993), which is unselfish, non-
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30 possessive, unconditional, spontaneous, affective, celebratory, and sacrificial. In contrast with
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32 the predictions of gift theorists (e.g., Carrier, 1991; Mauss, 1990; Panoff, 1970), a perfect gift
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34 is given without any expectation of reciprocal obligations (Belk, 1996). The influence of the
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36 critical symbolic properties of the perfect gift in turn depends on the giver, the recipient, their
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38 relationship, and the ritual presentation, so the perfect gift entails not just the gift but also gift
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40 giving and gift receiving (Belk, 1996).
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45 For the purposes of this study, we consider two critical symbolic properties of the
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47 perfect gift (Belk, 1996): an ability to surprise and an ability to delight the recipient. By
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49 giving a perfect gift, givers demonstrate that they understand what pleases recipients and that
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51 they love them. It follows that though perfect gifts are surprising (Belk, 1996), surprising
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53 gifts are not necessarily perfect gifts. Yet, if emotions (which may include surprise) are
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55 inherent to all gift-giving situations, and perfect gifts are always surprising, why might givers
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57 prefer not to surprise recipients in all gift-giving situations? To develop an answer to this
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question, we turn to the notion of sacred gifts. Stevenson and Kates (1999) describe the meanings of gifts associated with people dying from AIDS, such that a last gift serves as a remembrance of the loved one and is part of the sacred realm. These authors contend that surprise is not a prerequisite of the perfect last gift in this context, because to avoid negative surprises, the gift giver and recipient discuss the appropriateness of the gift, or else the recipient chooses a gift from among the loved one's possessions. Admittedly, people dying of AIDS is a special context. We seek to broaden the view to other, perhaps more conventional gift-giving scenarios, by starting with considerations of surprise.

The emotion of surprise in gift giving

Surprise is a short-lived emotion (Derbaix and Pham, 1991; Meyer *et al.*, 1994; Plutchik, 1980) that results in a specific pattern of reactions, including behavioral and physiological changes, as well as the surprised person's subjective experience (Reisenzein, Meyer, and Schützwohl, 1996). Surprise is elicited when products, services, or attributes are unexpected or misexpected (Ekman and Friesen, 1975), which forms a schema discrepancy (Meyer *et al.*, 1994). Although neutral in nature, surprise often is followed by an emotion that colors it positively (e.g., surprise + joy) or negatively (e.g., surprise + anger), as exemplified in mentions of positive (good) surprises and negative (bad) surprises (Ekman and Friesen, 1975; Meyer *et al.*, 1994).

Positive surprise should trigger delight, the highest level of satisfaction (Rust and Oliver, 2000; Vanhamme, 2008). That is, according to literature that adopts this view, people will be more satisfied if they receive a surprising gift. This prediction helps explain why gift givers might be willing to spend time and effort to find and give surprising gifts. Furthermore, surprising gifts might offer satisfaction to both the recipient and the giver, who also become more involved in the gift giving; the surprising gift thus strengthens their social ties (Belk, 1996; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993). Empirical support for this link comes from

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3 Wolfinbarger and Yale (1993), who cite three motivations for interpersonal gifts: obligated
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Wolfinbarger and Yale (1993), who cite three motivations for interpersonal gifts: obligated reciprocation, experiential motivations, and practical motivations. When the motivation is experiential, givers enjoy the gift-selection process and give it a great deal of thought and effort. They believe the gifts reflect their love and friendship with recipients. In line with Belk's (1996; Belk and Coon, 1993) reasoning, we also contend that the motivation underlying surprising gifts likely is experiential in nature.

However, relatively little research effort has been invested directly in understanding emotions in dyadic gift-giving settings, through analyses of both recipient and giver. Specifically, empirical data relating to the emotion of surprise tend to be gathered accidentally, and literature on gift-giving remains predominantly devoted to the giver. Our study addresses both gaps. First, we examine surprising gifts specifically, which are received and given between close relations. Second, we collect empirical data pertaining to the dyadic processes, in accordance with Sherry's (1983) dyadic model of gift giving. By incorporating the behaviors of both the giver and the recipient, we contribute to the relatively limited insights reflecting the perspectives of both parties. Our findings both confirm scant previous findings involving surprising gifts in gift-giving literature and extend current knowledge with entirely new findings regarding the drivers of surprise and paradoxes in surprising gift giving.

Method

The main objective of our study is to explore empirically dyadic, surprising gift giving between close relations. That is, we are interested in respondents' perceptions of surprising gifts when they are in a receiving or giving role. To this end, we present and analyze findings derived from an exploratory, small-scale, open-ended questionnaire study. We integrate the findings obtained from 48 respondents with in-depth interviews with eight different informants, conducted with both givers and recipients of surprising gifts. We present the findings obtained from both studies simultaneously, after outlining our general approach.

General approach: dyadic considerations of close relationships

We examine surprising gift giving between close relations, such as partners, family members, and friends, in which surprising gift giving is more likely to take place. As Belk (1996) argues, givers of perfect gifts (recall that by definition, perfect gifts are surprising) are motivated by the desire to please the recipients and feel “emotionally swept up in feelings of love” (p. 62). The relations that Belk mentions are all close: wife–husband, parent–child, friend–friend, and lover–lover. Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim (1993) also identify the social roles that gift givers express and the strategies they adopt to select gifts. Easy recipients include partners, family members, and friends, for whom gifts are often bought without the recipients’ knowledge, with givers “sneaking around trying to find out” (p. 232) or “[digging] around and [going] to flea markets” (p. 233).

On a more general level, Caplow (1982) shows that the likelihood of multiple gifts declines with increasing relational distance. (Caplow defines primary relations as mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, wife, and husband; secondary and tertiary relations reflect two [e.g., mother’s sister] or three [e.g., mother’s father’s brother] primary relations, respectively.) Saad and Gill (2003) find that givers spend most on gifts to their partners, followed by gifts to close kin members, and then to close friends. Observations from evolutionary psychology support these findings (e.g., Axelrod, 1984; Batten, 1992;). The closer the relation is between a giver and a recipient, the more likely it is, *ceteris paribus*, that the giver knows what is surprising to the recipient.

Because the properties of a gift depend on both the giver and the recipient, we consider both viewpoints in our study (this is what we refer to as “dyadic gift-giving” hereafter). Merely adopting the perspective of either side would create the risk of ignoring important aspects of the gift giving. As a result, the simultaneous inclusion of givers and recipients in our research was deemed valuable at the time when the research was being designed because

the findings would relate to how each person views surprising gift giving. We also retrospectively confirmed that this empirical approach was appropriate, because we identified significant differences in respondents' commentaries, according to whether they take a giver's or recipient's role. For example, the empirical data suggest that, paradoxically, some givers like to surprise recipients, yet they prefer not to be surprised when they receive a gift. It is therefore necessary to consider both givers and recipients to understand the dilemma that givers face when choosing between a surprising and a non-surprising gift. These dual viewpoints also are required to understand surprising gift giving and its effect on givers' and recipients' satisfaction.

Study 1: Questionnaire design

With the exploratory, small-scale, open-ended questionnaire study with 48 respondents, we aim to establish the prevalence of surprising gifts given and received between close relations and obtain some preliminary, qualitative insights about surprising gift giving and receiving. The structured survey contained open-ended questions that were exploratory in nature (Table 1). Following a pre-test, we used a snowball sampling technique to collect the data. It took respondents about 40–60 minutes to complete the survey. Their ages ranged from 18 to 79 years, with an average of 32 years. The gender split was 35 female respondents and 13 male respondents. Forty-four respondents were married or lived together with their partner. Respondents varied in their occupations and social backgrounds. Some of the surveys had to be excluded from segments of the analysis though, because they did not deal with close giver–recipient relations. In total, we obtained 43 stories about surprising gifts given and 39 stories about surprising gifts received.

The findings from Study 1 indicate surprising gifts in both obligated and non-obligated gift-giving occasions. Nineteen (24) respondents described a gift they had given for an obligated (non-obligated) occasion, and 23 (16) respondents described a gift they had

received for an obligated (non-obligated) occasion. The respondents also mainly described surprising gift giving between partners or kin (68 stories) rather than friends (14 stories).

In turn, we identify six important variables that are prevalent in eliciting surprise during gift giving: type of occasion, time of giving, type of gift, place of giving, gift giver, and gift-giving surroundings. Furthermore, Study 1 offered some preliminary insights into givers' and receivers' preferences for, and perceptions of, surprising gifts.

(Insert Table 1 around here)

Study 2: Design of in-depth interviews

The purpose of the in-depth interviews with eight informants, focusing on gifts given and gifts received, was to explore the six variables identified in Study 1 and the preferences and perceptions thus unearthed, as well as to create thick descriptions of informants' experiences with surprising gift giving. We selected informants using purposive sampling, chosen from among an interviewer's family members and friends, involved in surprising gift giving with close relations. The interviewer was recruited by the authors. Interviewing ceased when no further insights were available (theoretical saturation; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We interviewed six women and two men (see Table 2). The gender split favored female informants because women are more involved in gift giving (Sherry and McGrath, 1989; Steinkamp and Wallendorf, 1991), so women may be better sources of information in this study context. The extensive, in-depth interviews took place at informants' own residences.

(Insert Table 2 around here)

We asked the informants to reflect on their experiences of both giving and receiving surprising gifts (Sherry, 1983). They provided first-hand, personal experiences of giving and receiving gifts, as well as the associated meanings and behaviors that surrounded these surprising gift experiences. By including multiple informants, we account for a wide variety of consumer experiences related to surprising gifts. Finally, the inclusion of both givers and

recipients provides an expanded view, building on the few studies that have taken such a perspective (e.g., Areni, Kiecker, and Palan, 1998; Belk, 1979; Caplow, 1982; Caron and Ward, 1975; Durgee and Sego, 2001; Stevenson and Kates, 1996). Except for one gift, the accounts we gathered are not truly dyadic in nature; we did not interview the giver and the recipient of the same gift. But in each in-depth interview, the informant described having both given and received surprising gifts, so we were able to gather rich data about both sides.

Most informants spontaneously wanted to discuss surprising gifts exchanged between them and their partners, family members, or friends. In most cases, the close relations had lasted at least three years and could be characterized as good. Two accounts differed notably though. In the first, an informant had given a surprising gift to a colleague, after having worked together for about four years, so they knew each other well; arguably, their relation could be defined as close. In the second account, the informant received a surprising gift from his employer, who was also a friend, so this relation could be described as close too. All the findings from Study 2 confirm that surprising gifts, as chosen and described by the informants, are exchanged between close relations and appropriate for our study.

The in-depth interviews followed the principles of phenomenological psychology (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). During each in-depth interview, we started with broad “grand tour” questions that enabled the informants to present the material on their own terms, with little prompting from the interviewer (McCracken, 1986). Because the unit of analysis was gifts, at the beginning of each in-depth interview, we asked informants to recall the last gift they received and the last gift they gave and then to describe their experiences, including the giver–recipient relationship, motivation for the gift, and choice of gift. When the preceding gift experience had not involved a surprising gift, we asked the informant to recall a previous gift experience. During each in-depth interview, informants discussed multiple instances of

gift experiences, including both positive and negative ones. Also, we followed up with floating prompts to gain greater insights into the specific lines of inquiry.

Each interview lasted 90 minutes on average. The same interviewer conducted each in-depth interview to reduce the role of potential bias. Furthermore, the interviewer knew the informants in advance and already had established rapport with them. To keep the interactions as natural as possible, we decided not to record the in-depth interviews (Sherry, 1983). However, immediately after each interview, the interviewer prepared detailed notes, reflecting the extensive notes taken during the interview (Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993). All informants were ensured anonymity in the presentation of the research findings.

Next, we analyzed the open-ended responses to the exploratory, small-scale study and the in-depth interviews individually (within-interview analysis), before comparing them (across-interview analysis) to identify similarities and differences (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Through this two-step process, we gained a greater understanding of surprising gift giving. The quotations offered in the following sections reflect respondents' answers to the open-ended questions in the exploratory, small-scale study and our summary of the responses during the in-depth interviews.

Findings

Variables behind surprising gift giving

We identified six variables that alone or together might explain why a gift is surprising (Table 3). Here and throughout this article, the sequence in which we discuss the variables does not imply any primacy of cause.

(Insert Table 3 around here)

1. Why: type of occasion. Surprising gifts are given for two types of occasions. An obligated occasion involves dates such as Christmas, anniversaries (birthdays, weddings), and graduations. Non-obligated occasions instead offer no particular reason for a gift (Belk,

1996). Our findings suggest that surprising gifts most often appear in relation to the first type; this prevalence might explain why receivers often expect Christmas gifts to be surprising (Caplow 1984). Obligated occasions remind givers that they should give a gift and recipients that they will receive one. Therefore, recipients are not surprised *per se* that they receive a gift. Yet as we detail in the following sections, by manipulating the when, what, where, who, and how of the gifting, it is still possible for givers to surprise recipients.

On non-obligated occasions, gifts are surprising because they are given spontaneously, “just like that,” as when Michael’s girlfriend gave him perfume. There was no way that Michael could tell he would receive a gift, and he was therefore surprised:

Some time ago, I received perfume from my girlfriend. She just gave it to me, just like that. I was really surprised although I had told her about two weeks ago that I would need to buy new perfume. I was even more surprised because the smell of the perfume was really nice. (...) I opened it immediately and put it in my toilet bag. I use it every day. (Study 2, #1)

Michael’s comments reveal his delight in spontaneously receiving something he desires. Because he does not enjoy shopping for perfumes, and because his girlfriend made the right choice of a very personal, sensual gift, the effect gets magnified. Choosing the right perfume communicates to Michael that his girlfriend understands his personal taste and relieves him of a task he does not enjoy. A key ingredient in giving surprising gifts thus is that givers demonstrate good knowledge of the recipient, as Caplow (1984) contends.

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2. When: time of gift giving. It is surprising if the gift giving takes place at time other than the actual occasion. For example, from the viewpoint of a giver, Stephanie gave her parents tickets to a concert with their favorite band, The Rolling Stones, for their birthdays. Her parents were surprised, because she offered the gift six months prior to their birthdays:

My parents have been fans of Rolling Stones since their teenage years. I thought that if I would get tickets for us [Stephanie and her sister] I could also buy two tickets for my parents' birthdays. This would be a nice surprise. My parents once mentioned that they wanted to go to a Rolling Stones concert, but never asked for tickets. I gave my parents the tickets the day I bought them, almost six months before their birthday. That made the surprise even bigger because they had not expected to receive something then. It cost me a lot of time and a lot of patience to get the tickets. I had to get up early in the morning to go to the post office. The tickets sold out within half an hour. (...) My parents reacted extremely enthusiastically. The tickets were put in a bookshelf so everyone could see them, and my parents told everyone about the tickets they got from us. My father had tears in his eyes and even started to dance. I was very happy because they were so happy for the tickets, and I found it very nice to be able to give them such a surprise after all they have done for me. (Study 2, #3)

Stephanie also offered an example from the viewpoint of the recipient: She received a tablecloth from her grandparents for having graduated successfully. She was surprised, because it had been some months since she graduated, and she did not think she would receive more gifts:

It was a graduation gift. I had forgotten about the graduation because I had passed my exams three months ago. I had not expected still to receive something for passing my exams. I got the gift. It was really unexpected, and naturally I was really glad for it. This tablecloth is very special to me because my grandpa made it for me. If I had

received it for Easter, and if I had paid for it, the tablecloth would have been special, too. However, the way I got it made the tablecloth even nicer. (Study 2, #3)

Even if recipients receive gifts on the day that an occasion is celebrated, givers can add surprise by providing the gift at a slightly different time than gifts normally are given. For example, "While drinking coffee, I got the gift" (Study 2, #3) or "I received the money before we started to eat at my parents' place" (Study 2, #2).

3. What: type of gift. We identified eight strategies that givers use to select surprising gifts.

a. Gift has not been communicated by the recipient. When the givers select a gift that the recipients have not communicated they would like to receive, it is a surprise to the recipients. Had the givers communicated they would like to receive the gift, it would not have been surprising. Somewhere in between is a situation in which recipients communicate they would like to receive a range of gifts, which they might summarize in a list; the surprise relates to which of the gifts the givers will select. For a previous occasion, Debra had made a wish list, which her boyfriend kept and used to buy her a gift she had expressed interest in before. Debra was surprised, because she had not expected to receive a gift and she was unable to guess what was in the package, having forgotten the contents of the wish list:

I got a cooking book written by Jamie Oliver. The book was a surprise because I had not expected that I would get a book just like that. I was really very happy because I had asked for the book for my birthday, but had not received it then. In fact, I usually receive things from my wish list for occasions such as Christmas, and these gifts are therefore never surprises. With those kinds of occasions you also often give hints about what you find nice and what you do not find nice. (Study 2, #2)

b. Gift has been communicated unknowingly by the recipient. In other cases, recipients communicate what they would like to receive, without knowing they have done so. Durgee

and Sego (2001) suggest this strategy underlies finding a perfect gift. It also raises the consideration of risk, an aspect hinted at in Stevenson and Kates's (1999) discussion of last gifts. Three examples from a previous section reflect this factor. First, Michael (recipient) had told his girlfriend that his old perfume was almost used up, so he needed to get a new bottle. It represents a low-risk gift, because he had mentioned that he wanted perfume. However, this gift was not entirely risk-free, because he did not mention the type of perfume or his personal scent preference (which is often highly personalized, so small, subtle differences can make all the difference between a desired gift and an undesired one). Second, Stephanie (giver) knew that her parents would love to get tickets for a Rolling Stones concert, because they had been fans of the band for years. These unknowingly communicated, surprising gifts are risk free or low-risk. Due to her ongoing, close relationship with her parents, Stephanie could choose and give a surprising gift with absolute certainty. Third, Stephanie (recipient) had asked her grandfather to make her a tablecloth some time ago, so her grandfather knew for sure that she would be happy with the gift. Such certainty provides a key characteristic of a successful surprising gift. Giving the perfume entailed little risk, though admittedly greater than that associated with the tablecloth or concert tickets.

When recipients unknowingly communicate what kind of gift they would like to receive, the risk associated with giving the gift decreases, and even if the gift is not perfect, it surprises and communicates shared understanding between the giver and the recipient. The ability of the giver to read signals gets interpreted positively by the recipient. Also, givers are confident in their knowledge that the gift is desired, that they can give a surprising gift without much risk, and that it will result in a positive outcome.

c. Gift replaces something that is broken or needs to be changed. This third strategy is comparable to what Durgee and Sego (2001) describe as compensating or giving a gift to a recipient who recently has lost something similar (see also Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993).

For example, Lara explains that when she was once burgled, her two piggy bags had been ruined. Her boyfriend found out and bought her a new piggy bag. She was surprised and also very happy, because she found it nice of him to make the effort to find a similar bag:

I once received a piggy bag from my boyfriend for St. Valentine's Day. Our house had been burgled and my two old piggy bags had been ruined. Then I got a new piggy bag from him. I had not expected him to buy me a new piggy bag. I thought it was sweet of him to think of me, and that it was sweet that he had taken the effort of finding a similar piggy bag to make me happy. (Study 2, #7)

Another example of this strategy involves Michelle's husband, whose weather station was broken. She decided to make him happy by giving him a new one to replace it:

I recently (...) surprised [my husband] with a weather station because the old one was broken. He was really surprised because he had not expected that I would buy such a thing for him. I gave it to him when he came back from work. I had just bought the weather station that afternoon. It took me some time to buy it because you cannot get hold of such a weather station just anywhere, but I thought it was nice to look around for it. I also wanted one that was as good as the one that was broken. I gave him the weather station at home, and he was surprised. He thought it was really nice and said that he would replace the old station with the new one right away. (Study 2, #4)

d. Gift is based on the giver's knowledge of the recipient. Both Lara and Michelle used their knowledge of the recipients to find a suitable gift for them, which is the fourth strategy identified from our findings. Durgee and Sego (2001) contend that a giver's insight into the wants and values of a recipient creates a unique opportunity to select a perfect gift. When givers have intimate knowledge of the recipients, they can use it to find a gift that surprises them. Emma knew that her friend had recently given birth to a baby daughter, and she wanted

to give the friend a birth tile (i.e., tile with an inscription to commemorate the birth, traditional in the Netherlands):

I found it nice to give such a gift, and I also like to see that it is being used. I had really done my best to make it as nice as possible. I found the birth tile much nicer than baby clothes. My friend thought that the tile was extremely nice. I gave the tile when I visited her. I had expected her to react the way she did. I was really happy that she found the birth tile nice, too. You never know for sure with those kinds of things. I gave the same kind of thing to my niece, but with her I do not know whether she liked it or not. When I visit her, I cannot see it hanging anywhere. I find that a pity. It was rather expensive, and the worst thing is that I spent all that effort making the birth tile. My niece also reacted in a weird way. I had expected that she would react much more spontaneously, but instead her reaction was not very enthusiastic, rather a little repressed. (Study 2, #5)

Lara used a similar strategy to buy Miffy socks for her little sister:

I received some funny socks with toes on them for my birthday. I liked them very much and bought the same socks for my sister. These are socks with Miffy on them. My sister also likes funny stuff like that. I just gave the socks like that, and she was really happy for them. I found it nice to give my sister the socks. I thought she would be happy for them, and it is always nice to please someone you love. I also like to go shopping for the socks, which did not take a long time. My sister found them nice and so did I so we were both happy. (Study 2, #7)

Gifts have greater meaning if the givers pick an item on the basis of a reading or intuitive understanding of the recipient's desire. Because the recipient does not communicate his or her desire for such a gift expressly to the givers, the recipient's emotional response to the gift increases (as with the tiles, Miffy socks, weather station, and piggy bag). The process

that the giver undertakes to identify an appropriate gift involves implicitly knowing the central activities and interests of the recipient. Positively surprising gifts are those desired by recipients; they reflect the givers' personalized knowledge of the recipients (Caplow, 1984).

In the first case, Emma's niece apparently did not like the birth tile. Although Emma spent effort and money to make the birth tile, the niece showed little enthusiasm or surprise when she received it. Emma therefore was not happy. But in the second case, Lara's sister loved the Miffy socks, she was happy, and Lara was happy too. If givers do not know for sure that a gift will please the recipients, they run the risk that the recipients will not like the gift. With surprising gifts, the financial risk is greater than that for other types of gifts, because more uncertainty characterizes the purchase decision; it is more difficult for the giver to know whether the recipient will like the surprising gift or not, as is clear from Emma's description. If the recipient does not like a surprising gift that was expensive, the gift represents a waste of money (from the giver's perspective). In that case, as Ruffle (1999) contends, it would have been better not to offer a surprising gift and rather offer no gift or something conventional.

Emma's comments also highlight the social risk inherent to surprising gifts. Gifts must please the recipient (Belk, 1996) and serve as a form of symbolic communication between the giver and recipient (e.g., Belk, 1976). The tiles exhibit many of the characteristics of what ultimately could lead to a positively received, surprising gift: They are handmade, symbolic, and personalized, and they are contextually relevant. However, Emma's comments contain little consideration of the recipient. She admits that she was sure her friend would react positively but was surprised to get a negative reaction from her niece. Emma has often given tiles to friends and loved ones who recently had given birth. In contrast to givers of positively received, surprising gifts, Emma's strategy of giving without consideration of the recipient increases the risk of a negative surprise. This risk is exacerbated by Emma's lack of knowledge of her niece and because tradition obligates her to give the niece a gift.

The choice of the right gift to convey a message is very important, because the giver runs the risk that the recipient will misinterpret its meaning, which could jeopardize their relationship. Emma's gift to her niece also might not be appropriate, because their relationship is not strong. For Emma to give such a gift, she presupposed a closer relationship with, and a better knowledge of, her niece than was the case. As Lara stated, "A surprising gift is nice when you get it from someone you care about and you know" (Study 2, #7). This claim is consistent with Areni, Kiecker, and Palan's (1998) finding that memorable, surprising gift giving mainly takes place between people who share a close relationship (e.g., children–parents, sibling–sibling). Emma, however, overlooked the type of relationship she shared with her niece and did not chose a gift that was appropriate. The result of the gift experience was a negative surprise.

e. Gift is made by the giver. With this strategy, givers make the gift themselves. Debra, for example, used a little bottle she received from the hospital where she gave birth. The bottle has a special meaning to her; she used it to make a gift for a colleague whom she had known for the past five years:

I made something myself using one of the little bottles I got from the hospital when I gave birth to my son. I found it very nice to surprise her with such a gift. She thought that the gift was very nice, too. She was surprised. She did not expect any gift from me. She was therefore surprised, and I had hoped for this reaction. It is a good colleague of mine, and she has been my colleague for five years. (Study 2, #2)

Such surprising gifts have a great deal of symbolism but also carry increased risk, which results from uncertainty about how the recipient will view the gift. Some gifts may be successful; Debra's bottle, a highly symbolic gift to a colleague, involved projecting her personal experience onto the experience of her friend. Given out of friendship, Debra's gift is based on her belief that the colleague has shared the experience of giving birth and therefore

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3 tacitly understands the bond they share. Debra's gift is risky, though some factors reduce this
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5 risk. First, because it is handmade and unusual (cf. Emma's traditional handmade tile gift),
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7 the gift is highly personalized, which increases its uniqueness and authenticity. Nevertheless,
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9 such gifts can be riskier than other surprising gifts, if the giver does little to reduce the risk
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11 and tailor the gift to the recipient's desires. Second, though the two women are friends, the
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13 gift is not obligated as a result of familial bonds or a loving relationship. Therefore, any gift
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15 would be unexpected, and a small, personalized gift symbolizing shared experiences should
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17 be viewed positively.
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22 f. The gift completes a collection of the recipient. We also identified strategies that
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24 Durgee and Sego (2001) have described for perfect gift-selection strategies. One respondent
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26 (Study 1, #31) thought that he already had all the books by a certain author. He therefore was
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28 surprised when he received yet another book that could extend his collection of this author.
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32 g. The gift is personal and symbolizes the self or the giver-recipient relation. The
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34 girlfriend of one respondent (Study 1, #13) personalized a greeting card by sticking onto the
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36 card a photograph of the respondent and her little cousin. The recipient had not expected the
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38 card in the first place, and definitely not the personal photograph, which reminded him of a
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40 funny situation.
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43 h. The gift was thought not to be available any longer. One respondent (Study 1, #7)
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45 knew that the giver wanted to give her tickets for a concert, but apparently the concert had
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47 sold out. When she then actually did receive the tickets, she was surprised. This example
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49 illustrates the element of deception, which will be described in more depth shortly.
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52 4. Where: place of gift giving. It can be surprising to a recipient if the gifting does not
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54 take place at the actual occasion, as happened, for example, when Charlotte received a gift at
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56 work. Adding to the surprise was that she had not previously received a gift at her workplace:
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3 Last year, I got a big photograph of my daughter (...) for Christmas from the parents of
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5 my daughter's stepmother. These people are really nice, but I would not expect to
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7 receive anything from them. I see them once in a while when I pick up my daughter and
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9 talk a little with them (...). My daughter and her stepmother gave me the framed
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11 photograph at my work after they had celebrated Christmas. This made the surprise
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13 even bigger because I never receive gifts at my work. (Study 2, #8)
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17 Studies 1 and 2 offered further elaborations on examples of unusual places, such as schools,
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19 hospitals, restaurants, cars, or stores. Often a gift that is not given at the actual occasion is
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21 given at an unusual place. For example, a mother (Study 1, #14) gave a birthday gift to her
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23 daughter when they arrived at school on a Monday morning, after the daughter already had
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25 celebrated her birthday. As Emma puts it "the place where you receive the gift can also
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27 increase the surprise" (Study 2, #5). Most surprising gift giving, however, takes place at a
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29 home, whether of the giver, the recipient, or their shared residence.
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33 5. Who: gift giver. We identified four reasons receiving gifts from certain givers is
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35 surprising.
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38 a. The giver has not previously given a gift to the recipient. When Charlotte (Study 2,
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40 #8) received a framed photograph from the parents of her daughter's stepmother, she was
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42 surprised because she had not previously received a gift from them. Charlotte's photograph of
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44 her daughter provides another example of a risky, successful, surprising gift. In receiving a
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46 framed photograph from her daughter's step-grandparents, Charlotte was surprised because
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48 she had not expected a gift from them, with whom she did not have a very close relationship,
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50 but she also found the gift pleasing.
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54 b. The giver only seldom gives gifts to the recipient. There are people who only seldom
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56 give gifts, so when they actually do so, it is more surprising. Emma would be more surprised
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if she received flowers from her boyfriend, rather than from her mother, because the boyfriend almost never buys her flowers, in contrast with her mother:

The surprising gift has to be something that you really do not know anything about. It should be unexpected, spontaneous, and unprepared. The gift can be more surprising if it comes from certain people. For example, if my boyfriend surprises me with a bunch of flowers, the surprise is bigger because my boyfriend never buys me flowers. (Study 2, #5)

c. The giver has already given a gift, and the recipient does not expect to receive another. Some people have already given a gift, so the recipients do not expect to receive yet another gift. These recipients are therefore surprised when they receive another gift.

d. The giver is not present when the recipient receives the gift. Our findings suggest that surprise can result from the giver not being present when the recipient receives the gift. This situation happened when a female informant (Study 1, #12) went to her graduation ceremony. Even though it was not surprising that she would receive a gift from a particular giver, it was surprising because the giver asked someone else to present the gift.

6. How: gift-giving surroundings. Our findings suggest that in many cases, recipients are surprised because of the gift-giving surroundings.

a. The giver and the recipient purchase the gift together but unexpectedly (gift purchase, not planned). Going shopping with his girlfriend, Michael saw a pair of trousers that he thought looked really good on her. He had not planned to give his girlfriend anything on that particular day, but he still bought the trousers for her. Because the girlfriend had not expected to receive a gift from him, and the trousers were expensive, she was surprised. For Michael, the experience was surprising too, because he had not planned on giving his girlfriend a gift but ended up doing so:

I gave my girlfriend a pair of trousers when we went shopping. I gave them to her just like that. I find it nice to give her gifts once in a while. She was trying on this pair of trousers but hesitated to buy them. I thought that the trousers looked really good on her and said that I would give them to her. She said it was really nice of me. She was surprised because she did not expect to receive this pair of trousers from me. She wanted to buy them herself but thought they were a bit too expensive. (...) She is like that, but she was extremely happy for the trousers and thanked me several times. This made it extra nice for me because I was then absolutely sure that she liked the gift. I had not planned to give her anything. We just saw the trousers and I thought, 'I'll give them to her.' (Study 2, #1)

b. The giver stages a surprising gift. John (Study 2, #6) deliberately wanted to surprise his girlfriend and therefore staged the surprise. One day, when he knew his girlfriend was in the city's shopping center, he called her. It surprised his girlfriend when he asked if she would like to come along with him so that could buy her a mobile telephone.

c. The giver stages a surprising gift with an element of deception. Michelle's daughters staged a surprise with an added element of deception. They told their mother that they were going to buy tickets for a Rolling Stones concert; when they returned, they falsely claimed the concert had sold out, whereas they actually had been able to purchase tickets. The daughters also manipulated two other variables: They provided the tickets only after the parents' birthday celebration, and the tickets also were very expensive, so the parents were surprised by the extravagance:

I knew that my daughters went to the post office to buy tickets for themselves, but they told me that they could not get any tickets. I believed them until they came for coffee and gave us two tickets. (...) It was really a special, unexpected, and rather expensive gift. (Study 2, #4)

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3 In contrast with deceptive practices by companies that can tarnish marketing images and
4 cause harm in society at large (Kimmel, 2001), deceptive practices by consumers to enhance
5 surprise evoke positive perceptions. In surprising gift giving accounts, deception makes the
6 experience nicer for the receiver and giver.
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12 d. The giver and recipient have different cultural backgrounds and expectations of gift
13 giving. A young woman (Study 1, #24) described the situation when her boyfriend proposed
14 to her. Unaware of the traditions in her boyfriend's culture, she was surprised when he also
15 gave her a gift. Another female respondent (Study 1, #46) described receiving flowers to
16 celebrate when she passed a course successfully, which surprised her because it was not
17 something she would expect in her own culture.
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26 e. The gift giving surroundings are suddenly been changed by the giver. One female
27 respondent (Study 1, #43) described an arrangement she had with three other people to go out
28 to eat for her birthday. When they arrived at the restaurant, she received a surprise, because
29 all her friends were already there. In this case, an occasion that the receiver anticipates
30 developing one way surprisingly changes to be something else.
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38 f. Combinations. It is possible to combine the five different variables to form new
39 surprises. For example, the gift of a tablecloth surprised Stephanie for several reasons. First,
40 she received it at an unexpected time (when). Second, she desired the tablecloth, which
41 offered symbolic value because it was handmade and gifted by a loved one in recognition of
42 an important occasion (what). Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) cite a handmade sampler
43 that a grandmother gave to surprise her granddaughter; we similarly find that because the
44 tablecloth was a surprise, Stephanie cherished it more than she might have otherwise.
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54 Whereas the tablecloth was gifted for an obligated occasion, a combinatory strategy also
55 applies to non-obligated occasions, which already are surprising by their very nature and
56 spontaneity. In both examples of Michael buying trousers for his girlfriend and Debra
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receiving a cookbook from her boyfriend, the time and type of gift both created surprise. Even with this assertion that combined surprises can involve both types of occasions, they might be particularly relevant for obligated occasions, because recipients are aware that they will likely receive a gift. Thus, a combination strategy may be more critical if the giver wants to surprise the recipient. The examples representing this finding include daughters getting Rolling Stones tickets for their parents (time and type), Charlotte receiving the photograph of her daughter (place and giver), and Emma giving her colleague a birth tile (type and giver).

Viewpoints of the giver and the recipient

Our analysis of the interview data reveals further insights into givers' and recipients' preferences for type of gifts, as well as which reactions givers expect of recipients (Table 4).

(Insert Table 4 around here)

1. Givers' preferences for type of gift. For givers, the findings suggest three types of gift preferences.

a. Prefer to surprise and give surprising gifts (emotion-driven motivation). As John asserts, givers generally invest more time and effort to find surprising gifts:

When I give a surprise I only want to give people something they really like, and that requires a lot more time and effort. (Study 1, #6)

According to Belk (1996), a gift is perfect if it goes to the heart of the relationship and demonstrates that the giver has a deep-seated understanding of the recipient. Stephanie's account of the Rolling Stones tickets gifted to her parents bear the characteristics of such gift. Stephanie's closeness with her parents enable her to identify the perfect gift for them. She gives the tickets unconditionally; her sole interest is her parents' pleasure. Consistent with Belk's (1996) view, the selection of the perfect gift is not without considerable effort, and the gift-giving episode entails a total surprise, enhanced even more by Stephanie's decision to give her parents the tickets six months before their birthdays. The gift is highly symbolic,

because it is something her parents greatly desired. By giving *this* gift in *this* way, Stephanie communicates that she loves her parents, understands their values, and places their feelings ahead of her own, so the gift truly delights the parents.

Givers who prefer to surprise also find it nice for themselves to give surprising gifts. Although it is not always easy to find a surprising gift, it is worth the time and effort when the givers can watch recipients use the gifts, as explained by Emma:

It is not always easy to find a nice surprise, but it is good to make the effort to come up with something nice. Surprises are nice to give, and it is nice to see people using my surprising gifts. I find it nicer to buy something that people do not know anything about. The surprise is then bigger, and if it is a success, you enjoy it twice as much. This is not easy. It is much easier to buy something that a person has asked for. It is not always straightforward to find a nice surprise. (Study 2, #5)

Michelle explains that it does not matter whether she gives a surprising gift or not, but she enjoys reactions from surprised recipients more, because they react spontaneously:

It does not really matter to me whether I buy something people know about or not, but it is more fun if they do not know (...) because of the surprising effect. The reaction of the people is different than when they know what they will get—much nicer, more spontaneous. (Study 2, #4)

Givers also enjoy the very process of looking for surprising gifts, as represented in Charlotte's account, in which she explains how she appreciates the enthusiasm receivers display when they receive a surprising gift:

Surprising people is nicer because the reaction is different from that when they get a gift they expect. People are a lot more enthusiastic. It is a hobby of mine to look for surprising gifts. I find it very nice to go to the city and look for gifts everywhere. If I

then come across something that I think really might please someone I usually buy it. I find that great, and it gives me a good feeling. (Study 2, #8)

These examples illustrate Ruffle's (1999) contention that the psychological benefits derived from a surprise must be sufficient to merit the monetary cost of the gift. The cost seems to go beyond monetary considerations though, such that it also includes time and effort spent.

The respondents identify a battery of emotional reactions to surprising gifts, including smiling, jumping up and down, dancing, or getting tears in their eyes. These findings are in line with McGrath, Sherry, and Levy's (1993) assertion that unexpected gifts are especially valued; they also align with the emotional testimonials described by Areni, Kiecker, and Palan (1998). Some recipients were not just happy but indicated they were stunned or protested that there was no need for the gift. As Debra (Study 1, #2) explains, "She was stunned. I believe she did not expect to receive a gift just for her telling that she was pregnant." Recipients give thanks again and again, and they tell their family and friends about the gift, as is exemplified by Stefanie's (Study 2, #3) parents, who put the Rolling Stones tickets on display and kept talking about them, or Michael's (study 2, #1) girlfriend who received unexpectedly expensive trousers and was so happy that she kept thanking Michael several times.

The demonstration of such emotions may explain why many givers who give surprising gifts do not expect to receive a gift in return. This finding seems somewhat contradictory; Pieters and Robben (1998) cite, as an important characteristic of gift giving, reciprocation, especially in close relationships. Perhaps givers of surprises know how much time and effort they devoted to finding the surprising gift and thus do not expect recipients to go through the same hassle. Alternatively, perhaps givers gain sufficient satisfaction from experiencing the receivers' reaction.

Givers' satisfaction also reflects their own emotions, such as feeling pleased, happy, proud, cheerful, excited, or curious, in addition to demonstrating gratitude toward gift recipients. The latter factor could explain why some recipients spend so much time and effort finding surprising gifts; even without an obligated occasion, some respondents actively choose to give them, which may prompt extra satisfaction for both the recipient and the giver, who become deeply involved in the gift giving. In this way, the gift might strengthen the social ties between the giver and recipient (Belk, 1996; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993), as was the case for Lara's new piggy bag from her boyfriend. The value of this gift is both symbolic and functional. The symbolic value includes the love and affection communicated by the gift; to reinforce this symbolic value, her boyfriend undertook significant effort to find a way to replace a ruined piggy bag, loved by the recipient. This gift also entails low risk. Yet it provides a positive surprise, because the giver provides it altruistically and signals that he put her interest, as a gift recipient, above his own.

Most gift recipients reacted in a way expected by gift givers (i.e., positive evaluations). As examples, we note Charlotte's (Study 2, #8) account of giving her daughter a new bike ("She was very proud that she was already tall enough for a bigger bike. I had expected this reaction, of course, but I was a little touched anyway") or Michael's (Study 2, #8) description of giving his girlfriend trousers. As we noted previously, the latter gift was a surprise both to the girlfriend (who had not expected any gift, especially such an expensive one) and Michael (who had not gone shopping to buy something for her that day). Feelings experienced by impulse buyers also appear in Michael's comments: They tend to exhibit greater feelings of amusement, delight, enthusiasm, and joy than other shoppers (Weinberg and Gottwald, 1982). Moreover, because the purchase of the trousers occurred in the presence of the recipient, the gift was risk free (i.e., safe). Yet compared with other instances of safe, surprising gifts, Michael as the giver was not driven solely by a desire to please the recipient.

That is, Michael did not prioritize the interest of the recipient entirely over his own; rather, he liked the way his girlfriend looked in the trousers. If he had not liked them, he probably would not have surprised her with the trousers. Therefore, the gift could be labeled imperfect.

In other times, recipients reacted in unexpected ways, as when Emma gave her niece a birth tile (Study 2, #5). These situations can evoke frustration in the giver; despite her good intentions and effort or money spent on the gift, the recipient did not appreciate it. Furthermore, if a surprising gift is inappropriate, givers express displeasure with the reaction by recipients or with themselves, noting, “It is a pity when a person does not like your gift” (Study 2, #39) or “It is a pity that I made the wrong choice” (Study 2, # 6).

b. Prefer to surprise but give gifts that are not surprising (opportunistic-oriented motive). As John explains, he prefers surprising gifts but often provides gifts that are not surprising, because of the difficulty of finding a gift that recipients appreciate. If givers cannot know for sure the receiver will like a gift, or they lack the time and energy to search for a surprising gift, they likely offer a gift that is not surprising:

But when I give a surprising gift I want to buy something that I know for sure the recipients would really like. Yes, that takes much more effort and time, but the surprise is bigger. I enjoy looking for a nice, surprising gift, but, of course, to some extent I should not have to put all my time and energy into shopping for the gift, but that is only logical. (Study 2, #6)

Other givers, such as Lara, also are afraid that the recipient will not like the gift, in which case they would regret spending money on it. Another risk is that the giver would feel embarrassed watching recipients pretend they like the gift (Ruffle, 1999):

I prefer to buy something that the person has asked for unless I know the gift will definitely please the person. I am always afraid that the person will be dissatisfied with

a gift, and then I think it is a pity that I bought that gift. You are embarrassing the person because he has to pretend that he likes it. (Study 2, #7)

The occasion might determine the type of gift too. For example, on obligated occasions, Debra prefers gifts that are not surprising, because the recipients already expect to receive a gift, and she dislikes spending money on something they might not like. For non-obligated occasions though, the risk involved in giving a surprising gift diminishes, because recipients do not expect a gift. Even if they may not be particularly happy for the gift itself, they would likely appreciate that Debra took the time and spent money on any gift. Debra also notes the added bonus of observing whether recipients appreciate the surprising gift. If not, she learns that it is not worth the effort to try to surprise them subsequently:

For occasions like Christmas, I prefer to buy something that people have asked for. However, when I want to give a gift to someone for no reason, just like that, I find it nicer to give something the person does not know about. The risk is also smaller. It is all about the attention. If the recipients are not thankful then, it is not worth trying to surprise them another time. For birthdays, I usually give gifts that people ask for. People expect something anyway. For birthdays, I find it a waste of money if the person would not like the gift. (Study 2, #2)

c. Prefer not to surprise and give gifts that are not surprising (practical-oriented motive). The gift givers in this group prefer not to search for surprising gifts and find it easier to select a gift that recipients have requested. Although recipients will not be surprised automatically (even if they might be, due to the manipulation of the different variables that we previously listed), they should be happy to receive a desired gift:

I think it is nicer to buy something unexpected because of the surprise. Still, I prefer to give something the recipients have asked for because I find it too difficult to think of

something nice, and I really hate having to search for something surprising. If I buy what they asked for, they are also happy for it. (Study 2, #1)

As noted, selecting a surprising gift comes at a cost, in terms of givers' time and effort (e.g., Durgee and Sego, 2001; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993). First, when givers do not know what the recipients would like, it is difficult to find an appropriate surprising gift. Some givers spend more time shopping for a particular gift, or else they might invest mental effort in coming up with ideas for surprising gifts. Yet some recipients remain "difficult," in the sense that finding an appropriate gift for them is hard (Laroche *et al.*, 2000). In such situations, givers may lack the time required; one of our informants noted that she likes shopping for surprising gifts, but for a particular gift, she was in hurry. Consequently, her satisfaction with the shopping experience was diminished: "I like to buy surprising gifts, but just not this afternoon because I had to buy the gift very quickly. I wanted to buy other things, too. I would have enjoyed the shopping much more if I had not been in such a hurry" (Study 2, #10).

Second, when relations between the giver and the recipient are very close, the giver often knows what the recipient might appreciate, as some of the brief statements from the exploratory survey in Study 1 indicate: "I knew what the person needed, and where to find it" (#17); "the idea just came to my mind" (#13); and "the person will love this gift" (#9). Some givers explained that they had not planned to surprise the recipient with a gift but because of some exposure (e.g., an advertisement asking "why don't you surprise your wife today with a bunch of flowers?" Study 1, #24), they realize a particular gift would surprise the recipient and decide to purchase it, whether for obligated or non-obligated occasions.

2. Types of gifts recipients prefer. We asked the respondents about the types of gifts they prefer to receive and thereby identified three groups, which generally correspond to the groups of givers: those who prefer to receive a surprising gift, those who prefer to receive a

gift that is not surprising; and those who would like to receive a surprising gift but often ask for a gift that is not surprising.

a. Prefer to receive surprising gifts. As Debra describes,

You should not have any idea that you will be getting something. It does not need to be something that you really wished for. It is the fact that someone makes an effort of buying something for you and thinks of you. It does not really matter, according to me, from whom you get it. A surprise can come from everyone. Anyway, there is no need for a reason behind the gift. I find it nicer to receive surprises. It is always nice to receive something just like that. If you know what you will get, the pleasure is gone. If you get something that you do not like, then it is just too bad. Anyway, it is a gift, and it is better than nothing. There is a risk involved in receiving a gift. A surprise does not need to be something that I really want. It is all about the idea that someone makes an effort to buy something for you. It is nice to know that someone has thought of you at an unexpected moment. If it is a choice between personal or expensive things such as a fridge, I go for personal things. If something like that does not fit your taste, you cannot just throw it away, store it somewhere, or give it to someone else. (Study 2, #2)

Even if recipients do not really appreciate the gift, they still might be happy, because the surprise gift demonstrates that givers have thought about them. The thoughtfulness and attention thus demonstrated compensates for the mismatch of a gift that the recipient does not like, as Michelle explains:

It is much nicer if you do not know what you will get, but if it is something personal like a ring, I like to go shopping for it together with the giver. With a surprise it is all about the attention, the thought that is behind, and not the gift as such. If the gift is something that you do not like, you just got bad luck. A surprise it nicer, but you are

still happy if you get something that is on your wish list. This is often the case for my birthday and St. Valentine's Day. (Study 2, #4)

In addition, our findings indicate the foundations for this preference, such that the respondents stated they liked surprising gifts because they perceived:

- The thought behind giving the gift is nice;
- They had wanted the gift;
- The gift was given with love;
- The gift was given unexpectedly;
- The gift brings back memories; or
- The giver had invested time and effort to surprise them.

Whereas Belk (1996) asserted that a perfect gift should be luxurious, our findings demonstrate that a surprising gift does not need to be expensive; it is the thought that counts, and inexpensive gifts that are personal are nice to receive. Some respondents even noted discomfort at receiving an expensive gift: "With a big, expensive gift where I did not ask for it, I will feel uncomfortable myself" (Study 1, #8). This finding seemingly contradicts with Belk's (1996) assertion, though here, we note that Belk considers the perfect gift only in the context of agapic love, whereas surprising gifts are not solely provided in that context.

b. Prefer to receive gifts that are not surprising. Recipients might prefer to receive a gift that is not surprising because, as Lara explains, they believe that only people with whom they have close relations know enough about them to buy appropriate gifts:

I rather like to receive gifts I have asked for because friends do usually not know what they should buy. Then I rather like something useful, or something that I have asked for, because when I get a gift that I cannot use, I am disappointed. I have sometimes received such useless gifts and that was a pity. A surprising gift is nice if you get it from someone you care about and you know. They have to know you well because only

then can they give something that you need or something that they know you will like. I find a surprising gift nice only if it is useful or if it is something I wanted. A surprise is also nice if it is something that has some emotional value such as the piggy bag. A real surprise, you get that without any reason, just like that. (Study 1, #7)

Emma explicitly explains that she likes appropriate but not surprising gifts more than an inappropriate, surprising gift: "I will be more pleased and happy with something that is appropriate but non-surprising than with something that is inappropriate but surprising" (Study 2, #5). Even if recipients appreciate the time and effort givers have devoted to finding a surprising gift, they prefer to receive something they requested. If he does not need a certain gift, Michael indicates that he prefers not to receive anything at all.

c. Prefer surprising gifts but ask for gifts that are not surprising. Some recipients claim they like to receive surprising gifts, but they actually ask for specific gifts, which reduces the chances that they will be surprising. For example, Lara liked unexpectedly receiving a book from some of her friends; it was a book she would enjoy reading. But when her mother surprised her by giving her pink beads, she could not find any use for them and put them in the closet, awaiting a future opportunity to re-gift them (e.g., Ertimur, Muñoz, and Hutton, 2015). Frustrated with the need to deal with the unwanted gift, Lara notes she would have preferred a gift from her wish list, even if it might have been less surprising:

It is always nice to get a surprising gift, but if the gift is such that you think 'what should I do with this gift?' then, independently of the price, I would prefer not to receive a surprising gift. Then I would be happier with a gift that was on my wish list because otherwise the risk that the gift does not turn out to be what you had hoped for is larger. (...) Recently, I received some pink beads from my mother. I cannot do anything with them. It was those beads that go under a vase. I am not so creative and I do not put flowers in my bedroom. (...) The gift is useless and remains in the closet.

Maybe I can please someone with the beads one day. I also got a book from friends.

That was a real nice surprise, and I had not expected it. We had invited them for dinner.

Then they could also see our new house, and then we get this book for our new house. I

was really happy for it. It is now in my bookshelf waiting to be read (...). (Study 2, #7)

Some recipients described the difficulty they had, pretending to like a surprising gift that they actually found inappropriate. In this awkward situation, recipients do not want to appear ungrateful, so even if they might like to receive an appropriate, surprising gift, they ask for specific gifts. John represents this belief:

I am always afraid that I cannot hide it if I do not fancy a gift. I do not want to disappoint people, but good surprises I find nice afterwards. However, at the moment someone says, 'I've got a surprise for you,' I think, 'oh, no.' I find it nice to be surprised, but the givers must know what they should give me. I do not like gifts that I cannot use for anything. That is why I usually have a wish list with things that I would like to receive. (Study 2, #6)

Finally, some recipients prefer gifts that are not surprising if they are especially personal or expensive. In that case, according to both Debra and Michael, it is better to exert some influence over which gift is bought.

These analyses also reveal some notable cross-perspective insights. Most givers have received at least one inappropriate gift, which seemingly should prompt a lack of satisfaction or enthusiastic response. Yet in our sample, the number of respondents who reported noticing that a gift recipient did not find their gift appropriate was significantly smaller than the number of respondents who claimed to have received an inappropriate gift. This asymmetry implies a giver's tendency to mispredict what recipients will like (for a review, see Chan and Mogilner, 2017). The recipients also may lie and say they like it. That is, some

recipients frankly tell givers that a surprising gift is not appropriate, but others never will, or even seek to convince the givers falsely that they like the gift.

Discussion and conclusions

In his theoretical argument, Belk (1996) suggests that the ability of a gift to surprise and delight the recipient is a critical symbolic property of the perfect gift. However, as the present study clearly highlights, surprising gifts extend beyond the narrow context of the perfect gift. Extant research does not account for the full range of variables associated with surprising gifts, nor their related dynamics. With this study, we provide for the first time a thorough and systematic examination of surprising gift giving from the viewpoints of recipients and givers, above and beyond the relatively narrow context of Belk's (1996) perfect gift and tangential empirical findings about surprising gifts (e.g., Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993; Areni, Kiecker, and Palan 1998). We also present findings that will be of importance in our understanding of how to deliver outstanding, emotionally gratifying gifting experiences to both buyers and recipients. Specifically, we extend available knowledge in three areas.

First, we establish which key variables define surprise gift giving; unlike most prior studies, we consider the viewpoints of both the giver and the recipient. In identifying these different variables, we also uncover some additional ways to surprise recipients, which have not been identified previously. These new ways relate to when (e.g., unusual moments, such as a month before an actual birthday), where (e.g., unusual locations such as the workplace), and how the gift giving takes place. We also identify combinations of these ways to surprise recipients.

Second, we highlight the paradox that constitutes the core of surprise gift giving. The parties involved hold surprising gifts as an ideal, but due to the risk of embarrassment for the giver or disappointment by the recipient, some givers choose unsurprising gifts (even if they

might try to stage the surprise by giving an unsurprising gift unexpectedly). The resultant paradox suggests that both parties prefer surprising gifts but settle for unsurprising gifts to avoid disappointment.

With regard to this contribution, we seek to highlight a particular element, by referring to O. Henry's (1906) famous story, "The Gift of the Magi." Belk (1996, p. 59) writes that this tale makes no sense "to those of a rational utility-maximizing frame of mind." In the ironic tale, Della sells her precious hair to buy a platinum watch chain for her husband Jim's gold watch, even as he is selling his beloved gold watch to buy a pure tortoiseshell comb for her hair. In this way, they sacrifice their most valuable possessions and end up with useless gifts. To Della, because it was completely unthinkable that she would receive a comb, she willingly traded her hair for a watch chain. Jim, in the same manner, traded his gold watch for a comb. Thus, their surprise was even greater at receiving the unthinkable gifts. Although the gifts were lavish, the unselfish love that underpinned them also rendered the gifts utterly useless. In this unique situation, the gift giving involves surprise, but notably, Della's and Jim's interests are largely aligned, which is not always the case. That is, our data reveal some incidents in which the interests of givers and recipients are aligned, so givers unconditionally prefer (not) to surprise and recipients unconditionally prefer (not) to be surprised, suggesting equilibrium.

But the paradoxes that we have cited also mean that whether a person prefers to surprise or be surprised tends to depend on predictions of the gift's likely success. Because givers and recipients cannot communicate and still maintain the element of surprise, they cannot discuss which equilibrium to choose. In turn, the parties are left to guess whether surprise is appropriate, and the resulting gift giving might be suboptimal for both parties. If givers fear a gift will be a negative surprise for recipients, they may refrain from trying to find one; if recipients fear having to pretend that they like an inappropriate gift, they may

communicate their preference not to be surprised. Thus, both givers and recipients must ask themselves two main questions: (1) Should givers try to surprise recipients and risk that they will have to pretend liking the gift, or should they avoid surprises and possibly lose the chance for fun associated with surprising recipients? (2) Should recipients forgo a surprising element and ask for a gift that is not surprising because they are afraid of having to pretend to like a surprising gift? The questions are not easy to answer, but our informants' stories reveal more successful than unsuccessful surprising gift giving incidents, probably because of the subterfuges and artifices that givers use to reduce their risk. For example, if a giver knows a recipient would like a particular gift (e.g., the recipient has communicated the desire, the item has been broken), it is safe to provide the surprise. If a giver lacks this knowledge and simply offers a gift, the recipient may be positively or negatively surprised or not surprised at all.

Third, the type of gift occasion represents an important variable. When the occasion involves a gift obligation, *ceteris paribus*, the hurdle to achieving surprise is higher, because recipients know they will receive something and may have specific expectations. Surprising gift giving outside these obligated occasions has a higher chance of success, because the recipients have no expectations. The surroundings also exert an influence here, in that they can define whether a gift (surprising or not) for a certain occasion (obligated or not) is positively or negatively surprising or not surprising at all. These aspects together determine how givers and recipients perceive gift giving. If a recipient knows what the gift will be and when it will be given, the giver still might create surprise by changing the surroundings (e.g., present the gift at work). A mildly surprising gift might become more surprising if the giver chooses to present the gift during a non-obligated occasion too.

Managerial implications

Gift giving is an effective means to initiate and enhance customer–brand relationships: Customers spend more, buy more often, and cross-buy more in the year following a purchase

if they have purchased an item from the retailer as a gift rather than for their personal use (Eggert, Steinhoff, and Witte, 2019). Accordingly, several managerial implications follow from our findings. First, manufacturers and retailers should advertise their brands and products as potentially risk-free surprise gifts. Retailers simply could try to encourage customers to give surprising gifts, for non-obligated occasions, such as by asking, “Why not surprise your partner today?” They can advertise their salespeople as experts who can offer advice about selecting appropriate gifts (Blackward, Miniard, and Engel, 2001; Vanhamme and de Bont, 2008). Because some givers do not like to look for gifts, retail designs and atmospheres also can have important effects (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Morrison and Beverland, 2003).

Second, with regard to the gift presentation, retailers should design the product to create as much surprise as possible, such as by offering gift wrapping (and this all year long). This offering may create more positive word of mouth. Although the giver primarily determines if a gift is surprising or not, the retailer should provide assistance. Gift wrapping also presents an opportunity for the retailer to put its brand on display, which may be relevant during obligated occasions (e.g., birthdays), at which observers tend to be present to watch receivers open their gifts.

Third, after the gift has been received, assuming recipients are happy and satisfied, they should exhibit higher brand recall. Moreover, the recipients’ emotions (happy versus not happy) likely have spillover effects on the giver. For example, when recipients indicate that they are not happy with a particular gift, givers are unlikely to be happy either. If their dissatisfaction is with the gift itself, it could have negative consequences, in the form of negative word of mouth about retailers. This outcome should be avoided by all means. Therefore, retailers should put in place a hassle-free system for gift exchange and make sure to communicate clearly about this system to the giver and recipient. For example, retailers

could include a “hassle-free gift-exchange guarantee” card put inside all gifts purchased so as to make sure that in the event of a ‘negative surprise, the recipient’s experience can still be turned into a positive one.

Limitations and further research

This study contains limitations that should guide interpretations of the findings but that also suggest directions for further research. First, we use convenience samples to generate insights into surprising gift giving. To make generalizations, further research should confirm the findings using representative samples. For example, surprise may be a characteristic valued only in individualistic Western cultures (Belk, 1996). The characteristics of delight also vary with culture. Additional research could examine differences in traditional customs and cultural norms between the giver and recipient, as well as whether such differences have any influence on perceptions of a surprising gift. As nations become increasingly diverse in their cultural, ethnic, and religious compositions, such research seems highly relevant.

Second, our findings suggest that the influence of surprise differs according to the type of gift giving occasion, because different occasions require differential investments of time, effort, and money (Scammon, Shaw, and Bamossy 1982). This relationship should be investigated further. We examined recipients’ satisfaction with the gift, even though it is not just the gift, but the overall gift giving experience, that determines recipients’ satisfaction. Further research might distinguish satisfaction stemming from the gift versus satisfaction stemming from other elements of the gift giving occasion. Differences might emerge with regard to how satisfied givers and recipients are with different elements of gift giving.

Third, the only unconditional, non-surprising gift giver in our sample is a man. Several studies indicate strong gender differences in terms of gift giving (e.g., Caplow, 1982; Fisher and Arnold, 1990). It is possible that these gender differences extend to surprising gift giving. Women might perceive less risk in buying surprising gifts, because of their broader

experience with buying gifts for multiple recipients. Moreover, more women tend to be recreational shoppers than do men (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980) and might enjoy hunting for surprising gifts. However, women are especially concerned with whether recipients like their gifts (Saad and Gill, 2003). As a result, they might prefer gifts that others have communicated they want. Gender differences in surprising gift giving should be investigated further.

Fourth, many gifts are given, and expected to be given, at Christmas, but does it follow that gift giving is relatively more likely to be positively surprising at other times?

Fifth, our findings suggest that common, non-luxurious objects can be excellent surprising gifts. However, our informants' stories indicate that not all common objects are suitable as surprising gifts (e.g., an oven). The exact characteristics and properties that make common objects potential candidates for successful surprising gifts should be studied further.

These limitations should be kept in mind in considering our findings. Despite the limitations though, we believe this study represents a substantial step in increasing understanding of surprising gift giving. Further research should expand on our findings.

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Table 1. Exploratory, small-scale, open-ended questionnaire, Study 1**A. Receiving gifts**

1. When do you usually receive gifts, and from whom?
2. What was the last gift that you received, and from whom?
3. Please provide a detailed description of this gift, as well as the context of receiving this gift.
4. Was the gift surprising? Was receiving the gift surprising? Please provide a detailed explanation.
5. What was your attitude and reaction vis-à-vis this gift?
6. If you were not surprised with this gift or the context of receiving this gift, when was the last time that you were surprised with a gift and/or the context of receiving a gift? Following that, questions 3 through 5 are asked.

B. Giving gifts

1. What was the last gift that you gave, and to whom?
2. Please provide a detailed description of this gift, as well as the context of giving this gift.
3. Please provide a detailed description of selecting the gift. How did you experience this selection?
4. Did the gift surprise the recipient? Did giving the gift surprise the recipient? Please provide a detailed explanation.
5. What was the recipient's attitude and reaction vis-à-vis the gift? Had you expected this attitude and reaction? Please provide a detailed explanation.
6. What was your attitude and reaction vis-à-vis the recipient's reaction?
7. What is your attitude in general toward giving surprising gifts? What are your habits and preferences in giving surprising gifts?
8. Why, if at all, do you prefer giving surprising gifts?
9. If the recipient was not surprised with this gift or the context of giving this gift, when was the last time that you gave a surprising gift? Following that, questions 2 through 8 are asked.

C. Perfect surprising gifts

1. When should the perfect surprising gift be given?
2. What should the perfect surprising gift be?
3. Where should the perfect surprising gift be given?
4. Who should give the perfect surprising gift?
5. How should the surroundings of the perfect surprising gift giving be?

Table 2. Informant demographics, Study 2

Informant	Name*	Age	Occupation	Home city	Civil registration
1	Michael	31 years	Floor manager	Goes	Single
2	Debra	26 years	Employee in a day care center	Goes	Married
3	Stephanie	23 years	Nurse	Goes	Single
4	Michelle	51 years	Housewife	Goes	Married
5	Emma	26 years	Manager in a restaurant	Wilhelminadorp	Married
6	John	26 years	Manager in Domino’s Pizza	Dordrecht	Single
7	Lara	23 years	Student	Utrecht	Single
8	Charlotte	40 years	Barkeeper	Goes	Single

* The listed names of the informants are pseudonyms.

Table 3. Variables defining surprise gift giving

Variable	Examples	
1. Why: type of occasion	a. The gift is given for a non-obligated occasion.	
2. When: time of gift giving	a. The gift is not given at the time of the occasion.	
3. What: type of gift	a. The gift has not been communicated by the recipient.	e. The gift is made by the giver.
	b. The gift has been communicated unknowingly by the recipient.	f. The gift completes a collection.
	c. The gift replaces something that is broken or needs to be changed.	g. The gift is personal and symbolizes the self or the giver-recipient relation.
	d. The gift is based on the giver's knowledge of the recipient.	h. The gift was thought not to be available any longer.
4. Where: place of gift giving	a. The gift is not given where the occasion takes place.	b. The gift is given at an unusual place, for example, schools, hospitals, restaurants, cars, or stores.
5. Who: gift giver	a. The giver has not previously given a gift to the recipient.	c. The giver has already given a gift, and the recipient does not expect to receive yet another gift.
	b. The giver only seldom gives gifts to the recipient.	d. The giver is not present when the recipient receives the gift.
6. How: gift giving surroundings	a. The giver and the recipient, together, purchase the gift unexpectedly (gift purchase not planned).	d. The giver and the recipient have different cultural background that impacts on expectations to gift exchanges.
	b. The giver stages a surprising gift giving by asking the recipient to come to a place where the gift is then presented.	e. The gift giving surroundings are not as 'agreed' upon, but have suddenly been changed by the giver.
	c. The giver stages a surprising gift giving and adds an element of deception to increase the surprise.	

Table 4. Viewpoints of givers and recipients on surprise gift giving

a. Preferences of givers		
1. Givers prefer to surprise and give surprising gifts (emotional-driven giving motive) because	a. they like the spontaneous reaction of the recipient.	ii. Givers do not expect reciprocation from recipients.
	b. they regard it as a hobby to look for surprising gifts.	iii. Most givers give surprising gifts to recipients whom they really like or even love.
	<u>Additional observations:</u>	
	i. Givers may be unsure about whether the gifts are appropriate.	iv. Most givers have at least once received a surprising gift that they found was not appropriate.
2. Givers prefer to give surprising gifts but often give gifts that are not surprising (opportunistic-oriented giving motive) because	a. it takes too much time and effort for them to find a surprising gift.	d. for obligated occasions, the recipient already expects a gift, and the risk of surprising the recipient negatively is therefore high.
	b. they do not know the recipient well enough to find a surprising gift that also is appropriate.	e. for personal or expensive gifts, they prefer to know for sure that the recipients will like the gift.
	c. they find it embarrassing if the recipient must pretend to like a surprising gift.	
3. Givers prefer not to surprise and give gifts that are not surprising (practical-oriented giving motive) because	a. it takes too much effort for them to find a surprising gift.	c. they do not know the recipient well enough to find a gift that also is appropriate.
	b. it takes too much time for them to find a surprising gift.	
b. Preferences of receivers		
1. Recipients prefer to receive surprising gifts because	a. they like to be surprised.	i. Recipients believe that as long as a gift is personal, it does not need to be luxurious.
	b. the thought behind giving the gift is nice.	ii. To recipients, the thought behind the gift is more important than the actual gift. They can even be happy for an inappropriate gift as long as it is a surprising gift.
	c. they wanted this gift.	
	d. the gift was given with love.	
	e. the gift brings back pleasant memories.	
	f. the gift was given unexpectedly.	iii. Some recipients let givers know if they do not like their gifts, or their reactions show it.
	g. The giver has invested time and effort in surprising the recipient.	
	<u>Additional observations:</u>	

2. *Recipients prefer to receive gifts that are not surprising because*

a. only if givers know the recipient well will they know which gifts the recipients will find appropriate.

3. *Recipients like to receive surprising gifts but often ask for gifts that are not surprising because*

a. they may receive an inappropriate gift.

b. they find it embarrassing if they have to pretend liking a surprising but inappropriate gift.

c. they prefer to purchase personal or expensive gifts to influence what will be bought.

iv. Some recipients try to convince the givers that they like the gift.

b. they find it embarrassing if they have to pretend liking a surprising but inappropriate gift.

Additional observation:

i. It is more acceptable to receive personal or expensive gifts in close relations than in relations that are not close.