Title:
Sometimes It’s Okay to Give a Blender: Giver and Recipient Preferences for Hedonic and Utilitarian Gifts

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Which authors are members of JDM?
Everyone! 😊

Short Abstract (100 words):
Gift givers often find themselves torn between hedonic gifts that are fun but potentially frivolous and utilitarian gifts that are more useful but less fun. Our work suggests givers heavily favor hedonic gifts and hedonic features in a gift, in part because they believe hedonic gifts communicate more care for and knowledge of the receivers than utilitarian gifts do. However, givers may be miscalculating: recipients are more satisfied with utilitarian gifts than givers expect, even preferring them to more enjoyable gifts.
Extended Abstract (600 words):

Anticipating which gift will make someone happiest can be challenging. When choosing a gift, givers often find themselves torn between gifts that are fun but frivolous and gifts that are more useful but less enjoyable, too often opting for the former, as scores of dusty knickknacks, unwatched movies, and regrettably-eaten chocolates can attest. Adding to the literature that highlights situations when and reasons why giver and receiver preferences may be misaligned (e.g., Gino & Flynn, 2011; Steffel & LeBoeuf, 2014; Zhang & Epley, 2012), we show that givers place undue emphasis giving hedonic gifts, relative to recipients' preferences for more utilitarian ones.

Our first study examined people’s perceptions of the best gifts they had exchanged with a friend. Participants described the best gift they had ever given and ever received and indicated how fun and enjoyable and how useful and necessary each was. People believed the best gift they have given is more hedonic than utilitarian, but this effect is attenuated for the best gift received, $F(1, 667) = 5.32, p = .02$. Further, this difference held regardless of whether the other person in the exchange was a close other or a causal acquaintance, and was not driven by how material or experiential the gift was.

In Study 2, we investigated prospective preferences for gifts. Participants considered a friend for whom they would buy a gift in the next few months, or a friend who would buy them a gift. They indicated how important six dimensions of a gift (fun, enjoyable, attractive, useful, needed, practical) would be in determining what they give, or how important they would like those features to be in determining what they would receive. Recipients want their friend to take utilitarian factors into account more, and hedonic factors less, than givers do, $F(1, 234) = 5.50, p = .02$.

Studies 3a and 3b show that these preferences for the qualities of a gift determine givers’ and recipients’ preferences for specific items. In study 3a, participants imagined taking part in a Secret Santa exchange, and as part of this they were going to give or receive a new flash drive. The giver in this exchange was considering a plain flash drive or a snowman-shaped drive with less storage capacity. Participants were more likely to prefer giving the less-useful-but-more-fun snowman drive than they were to prefer receiving it, $t(196.48) = -3.46, p = .001$. In Study 3b, participants imagined exchanging stocking stuffers with a group of friends, and chose five gifts from a list of fourteen, half hedonic and half utilitarian, to give to or receive from five of their friends. The proportion of utilitarian items people wanted to receive was higher than the proportion of utilitarian items people said they would give, $t(244) = -2.46, p = .02$.

Finally, in Study 4, we examined one reason why givers have this overly strong preference for hedonic gifts. We had givers consider giving a gift when they are attempting to show their partner how much they love and care for them or how much they know about them, or we gave no special instructions, and asked how they would prioritize hedonic and utilitarian features when selecting their gift. Givers think hedonic goods are equally expressive of care for and knowledge of a recipient, but see utilitarian goods as more expressive of knowing a recipient than caring for them, $F(2, 218) = 3.38, p$
= .04. Overall, our work suggests that to make their recipients happier, givers might consider more what their recipients might need and less what they might enjoy. Sometimes, it’s okay to give that blender.