

# The Perfect Present: Gift Giving and Gender Norms

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## Introduction

A quick look at the history of gifting, especially during the end-of-year holiday season, highlights how many cultural, religious and social celebrations continue to reinforce gender and social norms that began hundreds of years ago. While not exhaustive, this short primer looks at some of the effects of gendered gifting—that is, gifting based on the idea that there are gifts right for “girls” and “boys”—has on children’s understanding of gender and gender roles from infancy all the way into adulthood. Likewise, it traces connections between the emergence of the middle class and “nuclear” family to the ways in which women in particular participate in holiday gifting rituals. Plus, we are also sharing a short anthology of stories from you about gendered gifts you’ve received that didn’t meet your hopes of receiving the perfect gift for you.

## For Me? The Perfect Present, and What Holidays Gifts Say about Gender Norms, Recognition and Social Roles

What’s in a gift?

Marcel Mauss, a sociologist of gift exchange and its social meaning, **said** “to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself. . . . one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance.” Likewise, **Ralph Waldo Emerson** wrote, “The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him.” Both Mauss and Emerson understood “the gift” as a piece of oneself, a sort of biography. Thus, homemade presents (often “comfort foods” like jams, cookies or cakes) might be seen as expressions of intimacy that don’t need to be embellished with bright wrapping in the way mass-produced objects do. On the other hand, contemporary gift expert Margaret Rucker says that a successful gift matches what the giver wants. According to Lilly Ye of Frostburg State University and T. M. Adrian Robertson of Montana State University–Billings, the right gift—in demonstrating understanding of the receiver on the part of the giver—also mirrors the way the receiver sees him or herself, or would like to be seen. And this identity is in some ways created, or curated, through **shopping**. Consumers seem to agree with this logic: gift cards have been the **top present** for the past eight years. The efficiency of the gift card may help to close the gap between the amount gifters spend and the value recipients place on the gift, which at one point was estimated to be up to \$13 billion.

## Gifts for Children: Now and Then

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In 2011, an [article in the New York Times](#) framed the question of children wanting toys that aren't marketed to their gender as a "new" issue for parents, and cited *My Princess Boy*, a children's book by Cheryl Kilodavis. Yet, ten years before the Times article, a Parents magazine [article](#), "Avoiding Gender Stereotypes," featured diverging views on gender-specific gifts for children. While one mother said toys should "guide" children toward social norms, most others talked about following their children's lead when selecting gifts. As for forming a gender-normative identity, Kathy Taylor said: "Toys don't generate an interest that isn't already sprouting." She started giving her son trucks: "We simply used it as a starting point. Turns out, he doesn't like trucks or sports—both traditionally oriented towards boys. One year, he wanted anything to do with Egypt, the next year he wanted a tea set." And over thirty years before that, the song "William Wants a Doll" appeared on the 1972 children's record *Free to Be You and Me*. Going back even further, Litwack's research uncovered the story of a Georgia homemaker who, in 1905, wrote that her son asked for a doll (she made him one) and her daughter asked for a "tiny hammer" (sadly, her husband could not find one).

Researchers don't uniformly agree on the effects of gender-based gifting on children either. Among others, Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer Deborah Blum, and Susan Witt, a child development professor at the University of Akron, have written extensively about the "shaping" effects of reinforcing gender roles based on biological sex, i.e., giving boy-specific and girl-specific toys. In her well-regarded essay "The Gender Blur," Blum points out that, "Sex differences are always generalizations... They never define, entirely, an individual. And that fact alone should tell us that there's always—even in the most biologically dominated traits—some flexibility, an instinctive ability to respond, for better and worse, to the world around us." Witt, looking closely at intra-family dynamics, has [written](#) that "the strongest influence on gender role development seems to occur within the family setting, with parents passing on, both overtly and covertly, to their children their own beliefs about gender." Not only do parents represent "A child's earliest exposure to what it means to be male or female," but "From the time their children are babies, parents treat sons and daughters differently, dressing infants in gender specific colors, giving gender differentiated toys, and expecting different behavior from boys and girls." By this measure, the potential for reinforcing the enduring and limiting gender-stereotyped roles and expectations that are currently entrenched in the U.S. is significantly increased when children receive gender-specific toys.

Judith Elaine Blakemore of Indiana University–Purdue University, says her [research shows](#) "that girls' toys were associated with physical attractiveness, nurturing, and domestic skill, whereas boys' toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous. The toys rated as most likely to be educational and to develop children's physical, cognitive, artistic, and other skills were typically categorized as neutral or moderately masculine."

Jeffrey Trawick-Smith of Eastern Connecticut State University is director of the TIMPANI toy study of how young children play with toys. His research has found that girls are more likely to play with toys typically considered "male oriented" than boys are willing to play with "girl oriented" or gender neutral toys. Other studies support these findings, citing the greater threat of punitive action ([especially from parents](#)) for boys who don't conform to gender norms. As an [article](#) in *Feminist* put it: "While the boys who name their animals girl's names, identify with female characters in movies, and want to wear skirts might get taken to a psychiatrist; girls are expected to identify with male characters in movies... can wear only slacks (I refused skirts and dresses for years), and are free to name their stuffed bears whatever they'd like (mine was Tom). The implication that girls can aspire to be male, but that boys shouldn't condescend to act like girls is disturbing."

### **Gender and Holiday Gift Spending**

Among gifters, women [rule](#). They not only spend more time on gifts and give gifts to more people, but they also invest more—of their ideas, of themselves and their relationships—in the process. This is part of what makes women the single [largest consumer group](#) worldwide. If we align these findings with poverty statistics, we can extrapolate that gender expectations and social pressure around gifting stress women both economically and psychologically. Poverty rates are higher among women, and more than half of all children living in poverty are cared for primarily by their mothers. The average person celebrating Christmas, Kwanzaa and/or Hanukkah will spend \$804.42, up nearly 5 percent over last year's actual \$767.27, according to a [Prosper Insights & Analytics study](#). At the same time, median [family income in the U.S. fell](#) over \$4,000 over the past two years, and more Americans are paying [greater than 30 percent](#) of their income toward rent. Layaway plans help shoppers plan and perhaps budget for holiday gifts, but not without a back door to predatory lending similar to that of check cashing businesses. Sears and Kmart, for

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example, **charge fees** to set up layaway accounts, and—should consumers change their minds or find that they cannot afford to complete payment—Walmart, Sears, Kmart and ToyRUs all charge cancellation fees.

Social pressure to spend time and money on gifts is a phenomenon that goes back at least to the early 20th century. In her work, Litwicki has studied the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving, or SPUG, movement, which was started by a progressive women's organization in 1912, to push back against demands for office presents that cut into vacation savings. Ironically, SPUG's approach was to launch a new marketing campaign for so-called tasteful, well-made gifts. Pleck's research includes early 20th-century representations of African Americans in (luxury) home-centered gift giving scenarios, captured, for example, in an Amos 'n' Andy Christmas television special. In the 1940s, Charles Brown sang about "living in paradise" after getting a diamond ring in the song "Merry Christmas Baby," a line reminiscent of "Santa Baby," sung by Eartha Kitt in 1953 and covered by Madonna in 1987. The emphasis on luxury in the holiday season in recent years has been exemplified by the surprise gift-of-a-Lexus (or other luxury car brand), tied with a giant red bow for some lucky husband or wife, as seen in frequently shown commercials. Businessweek notes that "automakers have been even more explicit in making the connection between buying your significant other a Christmas car and showing up the neighbors."

Following historians' explanations of the role of gift giving in a social structure centered upon the immediate family, with women and men in normative roles, the value and specialness of the gift is greatest between parents and children, husbands and wives, and decreases as the circle widens to the extended family, friends, co-workers and employees or servers. Social expectations, however, seem quite codified and hierarchical in the tipping and gift-giving guides that are often published. A typical example might be the "**Holiday Tipping Guide**," as discussed on CBS local news.

Research may point to distinct ways men and women conceive of and respond to gifting differently. According to **Dunn et. al**, men underestimate the worth of a gift, and women overestimate. While women are more invested in giving and receiving gifts, they also "protect relationships" by downplaying a disappointing or misfired gift. Men will assess a relationship's compatibility and longevity more harshly when they receive a "bad" gift. The researchers explain this difference by claiming that women care more about relationships. One study found that "elementary school girls were more likely than boys to conceal negative reactions after receiving a disappointing gift," not only protecting a friendship, but also the other person's feelings.

Much research on gifting and behavior was conducted in the 1990s, and the research and analysis was framed in terms of the man/woman binary. Other, more recent studies looked to gender identification and gifting on a spectrum—categorizing some behaviors as "egalitarian" or "traditional." Eileen Fischer and Stephen J. Arnold **have found**, for instance, that women who identify with traditional feminine gender identity shop more, for more people, and begin the process earlier in the year. Men who are "more egalitarian" shop more than men who have a more traditional masculine gender identity. However, even when "attitudinal, role demand, and trait-based explanations have been taken into account—it still appears that women are more involved than men."

In terms of romantic relationships that are at least provisionally committed, gifts are highly charged—they are experienced, and judged, as a signal of the quality of the relationship. Yan Zhang of the National University of Singapore and Nicolas Epley of the University of Chicago published a **paper** looking at the kinds of questions that arise between couples at gift-giving moments: Will it last, are we compatible, does he/she get me? Their research focused on how gift giving and receiving affects people's assessment of their relationship. As it turns out, while givers guess and hope to find the perfect gift, receivers have to figure out the intention behind the gift, and then respond accordingly. This, **according to Theresa DiDonato**, is a kind of command performance that must be figured out immediately after unwrapping the box. "Even long-time partners can have difficulty predicting which products their partner might want," DiDonato notes. At the same time, DiDonato states that people appreciate receiving gifts that they asked for more than they appreciate a thoughtful but unrequested gifts. This explains the rising popularity of gift cards.

Yet gifts retain symbolic value within relationships, and personal meaning of course is more than a calculus of the monetary value—in the case of the gift card—or the individual labor—in the case of the homemade jam. Shared pasts and interests make up the adaptive, and imaginative, element of gifts that are purchased. **Mary Ann**

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McGrath uses the term “inter-consumer relationship” to capture the way that bought objects embody shared meaning. She uses the example of “retro” brands, like Star Wars toys, that are exchanged not only to remind people of a shared past, but also carry a sense of authenticity, and are not currently being advertised. This applies, of course, not only to romantic partners, but to gift giving between siblings—as gifts not only can serve to remember a shared past, commemorating closeness, but also to demonstrate understanding. Likewise, as people’s full identities are more recognized by broader social institutions—same-sex spouses, transgender co-workers and family members—efforts to be more sensitive at gifting moments is more prevalent. For example, there are many gender **neutral**, gender **sensitive** and trans-sensitive web-based resources for those looking to give gifts that fit right.

There are forums available to ask questions and explore gift choices with a broader, if anonymous, community. For instances, in 2011, a **transgender message board** featured a question about whether it would be appropriate to get a feminine present to commemorate a friend’s gender transition. Mostly, the responses commended the poster on her thoughtfulness, saying that something “girly” would be a way to affirm the friend, even as a kind of “welcome to the girls’ club” gesture. Others offered more nuanced advice that she should get her friend a gift that reflects her identity, her tastes. In this, these poster aligned with the logic some parents have advanced in choosing gifts for their children.

The winter holidays are also the season for engagements. Almost all holiday jewelry ads (e.g., **Jared, Zales**) feature heteronormative couples—straight, upper-middle-class, usually White. One notable exception is the inclusion of a male couple in a documentary-style **ad for Tiffany’s**, directed by Edward Burns (in the style of Harry Met Sally, featured couples share the story of how they met). With the legalization of same sex marriage, there is some evidence of a new market for engagement jewelry—one jeweler in New York City, for example, mentioned that several male couples have purchased matching watches.

Some companies have made awkward marketing steps to reached out to “non-traditional” consumers, attempting to fill (or create) a gifting ritual that aligns with these “new” kinds of relationship or family. For example, ads for the Kay Jewelers’s **“Open Hearts” line** featured a man giving his soon-to-be step-daughter a necklace (“I really happy that I’m going to be marrying your mom, and I’m really happy that you’re in my life too.”) Online comments showed that some viewed this ad as strange and creepy. Another **“Open Hearts” ad** featured a man giving a woman a necklace as they wait to receive their adoptive daughter. There was a vociferous backlash, perhaps most pointed being the rhetorical question, “How many stereotypes can you fit into one ad?”

But one of this year’s most popular, family-friendly movies, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, has at its emotional core a gift that would please Mauss and Emerson—a gift that really is a sort of biographical piece of the giver. A present from a dead mother to her son, a gift that shares something of herself and that accompanies him on his adventures: a mix tape.

### **Conclusion: What does this mean for you?**

Every one of us has the power to make change by making conscious choices. As you’re out shopping for holiday gifts in the next few weeks, and throughout the year, decide to disrupt the gender status quo. Buy gifts for the children in your life based on their individual personalities and interests instead of defaulting to gender-specific (read: limiting) gift options. If you want to be very bold, do the same for your significant other, your parents and friends.

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