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Factors influencing the perception of transactions as gifts or bribes in an online vignette experiment

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the distinction between gifts and bribes, investigating how the relationship between the giver and recipient, the value of the gift, and the form of the gift affect whether people view a transaction as a gift or bribe. In an online experiment, 521 US participants evaluated eight hypothetical scenarios. Results indicate that gifts are more likely to be perceived as bribes if they are of a higher value, monetary, and given in purely professional relationships. These factors may influence perceptions of reciprocity expectations, and hence the classification of a transaction as a bribe or a gift. Lay perception of bribery by gifts should be considered in the design of organizational rules related to giving and receiving gifts.

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KEYWORDS

Bribery; corruption; gift-giving

Introduction

While the exact definition of bribery is complex (Phillips, 1984), it is generally understood to involve the transfer of something of value with the expectation that the recipient will violate their duty in return. Gift-giving shares some of the features with bribery, making bribery sometimes difficult to distinguish from the benign social practice of gift-giving. Like bribery, gift-giving involves the transmission of something of value. Often, relationships that involve gift-giving also carry an implicit expectation of reciprocity (Fiske, 1992). People tend to display favoritism toward friends and family, and even in more distant relationships, it may be expected that a gift will be reciprocated if a similar opportunity arises (Pan & Xiao, 2016). Moreover, gift-giving can sometimes be used strategically to obfuscate an exchange that would be viewed as disreputable if it was explicit (Rossman, 2014). By separating a transaction of two goods over time, gift-giving can reduce social disapproval of such exchange (Schilke & Rossman, 2018). The difficulty of clearly distinguishing gifts from bribes has significant legal and ethical implications across various sectors, complicating the enforcement of ethical standards in both corporate and governmental contexts (Fridman & Luscombe, 2017; Steidlmeier, 1999).

The present research examines how three factors – the relationship between giver and recipient, the value of the gift, and its form – affect the perception of ambiguous transactions as either gifts or bribes. In many real-world situations, a bribe may not include an explicit agreement of reciprocity, requiring observers to rely on contextual cues to infer whether an exchange implies such an expectation or is simply a gift. Understanding the factors that shape this inference may help improve institutional rules around gift acceptance and inform ethics training. While some organizations enforce explicit gift policies, many operate under vague or implicit norms (Peltier-Rivest, 2024). We argue that a transaction is less likely to be perceived as involving an expectation of reciprocity – and thus less

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likely to be seen as a bribe – when it occurs within a close relationship and when it resembles typical social gift-giving, such as involving lower-value or in-kind (i.e., non-monetary) items.

Given that gift-giving is uncommon among individuals without an established relationship and is a common feature of close social ties (Komter & Vollebergh, 1997), a transaction should be more likely to be interpreted as a genuine gesture of goodwill without any expectation of associated reciprocity when the relationship is closer rather than merely professional. The value and form of the transaction are also usually selected to be appropriate to the situation. Most social situations do not call for high-value gifts (Cheal, 1986; Flynn & Adams, 2009), and such gifts are generally perceived as inappropriate for casual or purely social exchanges. As a result, they should be more likely to be seen as implying an expectation of reciprocity, and thus as potential bribes (Li et al., 2022). Similarly, monetary transactions are characteristic of market pricing relationships, where the implication is that something of equal value is expected in return (Fiske, 1992). In contrast, social norms typically favor in-kind gifts – such as thoughtful items or services (Webley & Wilson, 1989) – which are less likely to imply direct reciprocity and therefore should be less likely to be interpreted as bribes.

Methods

The materials, data, and analysis files can be found at: <https://osf.io/7gq8k/files/>

Participants

Five hundred and twenty-one US participants were recruited via Prolific. The study was administered online in November 2023. Out of the participants with available demographic information, 259 were females and 252 males. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 85 years ($M = 41.6$, $SD = 12.7$). The majority of respondents identified as white (72%) with a smaller proportion of respondents identifying as Black (13%), Asian (5%), mixed (7%), and other (3%). The employment status of the respondents was mainly full-time (70%), with smaller numbers of participants working part-time (17%), being unemployed (9%), or reporting other employment status (4%). The participants were paid 0.5 GBP for the study, which took on average 4.3 min to complete.

Procedure and design

The study used 2 (close or only professional relationship) \times 2 (gift of a lower or higher value) \times 2 (monetary or in-kind gift) mixed design. Participants were presented with eight hypothetical scenarios, each created to represent a situation in which the nature of a transaction as a gift or bribe could be contested. Each scenario was created in eight versions corresponding to all combinations of the three studied factors (relationship of the giver and receiver, value of the transaction, form of the transaction). The scenarios were presented in a fixed order to all participants. Versions of scenarios were determined randomly for each participant. That is, a version of a scenario was randomly chosen for each participant for each trial independently of other randomly chosen versions on other trials (a participant could therefore see the same combination of the three studied factors multiple times). Apart from the eight experimental scenarios, another four scenarios presenting clear-cut cases of bribes and gifts (two of each) served as filler items to obscure the nature of the study and to evaluate validity of the ratings.

Materials

The eight scenarios presented situations where a person gave something to a person with power with a presumed intent of future reciprocation. In particular, the pairs of people in the situations were a lawyer and a judge, a developer and an official, a country representative and an NGO investigator, a restaurant owner and a health inspector, a pharmaceutical representative and a doctor, a researcher

and a journal editor, a patient and a doctor, and a sports-club representative and a referee. For example, the scenario for the last pair read:

A representative of a sports club decides to give 1 000 dollars in cash to a referee after the last game of the season as a thank you for all the games that he oversaw well during the season. It is a known fact that the referee will oversee many games during the next season as well. The representative and the referee have been colleagues and friends for years.

Within these scenarios, participants were exposed to one of two levels of three factors: the form of the gift (monetary or in-kind), the relationship between the giver and recipient (close or only professional relationship), and the value of the gift (the higher value being ten times higher than the lower value).

For example, in the variations of the example scenario – which shows a monetary transaction of a lower value in a close relationship – the form of the transaction would change from cash to a voucher for a trip with the same stated value, the relationship would change from friendly colleagues to a strictly professional relationship, and the value of the transaction would change from 1 000 dollars to 10 000 dollars. The exact values varied depending on the scenario and were selected so that they would seem realistic. The form of the in-kind gift and close relationships also differed between scenarios and included, for example, a pre-paid trip, an antique book set, or a painting, and a family friend or a long-term friend, respectively. A list of scenarios and their variations is in the [Appendix](#).

The respondents rated the situation on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from “Definitely not a bribe” (1) to “Definitely a bribe” (6), with intermediate points on the scale: “Most likely not a bribe,” “Probably not a bribe,” “Probably a bribe,” and “Most likely a bribe.” The filler items had an average rating of 1.6 for the clear cases of gifts and 5.8 for clear bribes, supporting validity of the scale.

Results

The data were analyzed using a mixed-effect linear regression with rating of a situation as the dependent variable and value, relationship, and form as predictors. Value, relationship, and form were coded using simple coding (i.e., as -0.5 and 0.5) and their two-way interactions were also included in the model. Random intercepts and main-effect random slopes for participants and scenarios were included in the model. The random intercepts for scenarios took into account that the behavior was more likely to be seen as a bribe for certain scenarios and the random intercepts for participants took into account that some participants could have been generally more likely to view the described behaviors as bribes. The random slopes similarly took into account that the effects of the studied factors could have differed between scenarios and participants. Due to a singular fit, the model was simplified by removing random slopes for value for scenarios based on the estimated variances and Akaike information criterion. The results of the simplified model are displayed in [Table 1](#).¹

Participants were significantly more likely to perceive the transactions as bribes if they were of higher-value, monetary, and given between people in a purely professional relationship. A significant interaction between gift value and relationship between the involved parties showed that the effect of

Table 1. Results of a mixed-effect regression model.

Variable	Effect	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval		df	t	p
			Lower	Upper			
Intercept	Intercept	4.70	4.44	4.96	7.98	35.36	<.001
Value	High - Low	0.27	0.20	0.34	510.27	7.24	<.001
Relationship	Professional - Friendly	0.43	0.21	0.65	7.43	3.79	.006
Form	In-kind - Cash	-0.29	-0.46	-0.12	7.34	-3.27	.013
Value * Relationship	High - Low * Professional - Friendly	-0.15	-0.28	-0.01	3755.81	-2.12	.034
Value * Form	High - Low * In-kind - Cash	-0.03	-0.16	0.11	3754.26	-0.36	.718
Relationship * Form	Professional - Friendly * In-kind - Cash	0.06	-0.08	0.19	3758.62	0.85	.393

the transaction value on its perception was smaller for interactions between friends. However, transactions of higher value were more likely to be perceived as bribes both for interactions between friends, $b = 0.34$, $t(1809.62) = 6.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.23, 0.44], and for professional interactions, $b = 0.20$, $t(1843.28) = 4.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.10, 0.29]. Neither of the remaining two interactions was significant.

Conclusions

The results demonstrated that the type of a relationship between a giver and receiver, and transaction value and form influence the perception of transactions as gifts or bribes. People likely use these features to infer whether reciprocity is expected, and thus use them when evaluating whether a transaction is a bribe. The observed interaction between the value of the gift and relationship is in line with the possibility that people are more likely to view gifts of higher value as potentially appropriate between friends, and their expectation of reciprocity is therefore less influenced by the gift's value in a close relationship than in a purely professional relationship.

Because we used only two levels of each factor for each scenario, we could not examine possible non-linear effects of the studied factors on perception of the transactions. While characteristics of the situation were not systematically varied within the experiment, the study examined various scenarios to ensure the findings were generalizable across situations. However, the transactions in the scenarios were mostly viewed as bribes, with the average rating of 4.7 on a six-point scale, and it is possible that the studied factors may have different effects in more ambiguous situations. The sample consisted of US participants, and the studied effects might differ in populations from different cultures. For example, in China, gift-giving may be considered as a normal way of building relationships (Steidlmeier, 1999), and the type of a relationship could thus have a smaller effect on the perception of a transaction as a bribe. In Russia, the use of valuable items to pay for favors and build social capital with people in power is relatively more common (Listrovaya, 2021), and in-kind gifts could be thus less likely to be perceived as bribes.

The results may inform the design of policies toward giving and receiving gifts in organizations. The policies could consider when people intuitively view a transaction as a gift or bribe, so that they are aligned with these intuitions. When the policies are not aligned with intuitions, organizations should take care of properly communicating them to their employees. Future research could examine non-linear effects of the studied factors on the perception of gifts and variation of the studied effects across different contexts and cultures.

Note

1. As a robustness check, we also conducted the regression again with order of the scenario included as a covariate. The regression yielded virtually the same results and the order of the scenario was not significantly associated with the ratings of transactions, $b = 0.04$, $t(5.99) = 0.77$, $p = .473$, 95% CI = [-0.06, 0.13].

Disclosure statement

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Michael Arntz is pursuing his PhD at the Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business. His work explores social and moral aspects of decision-making, especially how people judge fairness and integrity in everyday and organizational settings.

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Open scholarship



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Appendix

The eight scenarios with their variations in brackets were:

Scenario 1: Lawyer – Judge

A lawyer representing a large investor in a multimillion lawsuit gives the judge who is presiding the court [antique book set worth] [10 000/100 000] dollars. She says that it is because the judge celebrated his 60th birthday a week ago and she didn't know what to get him. The judge and the lawyer have [been friends for years/a purely professional relationship].

Scenario 2: Patient – Doctor

A patient is waiting for surgery. The priority of the patients is decided by the doctor based on the urgency of the patients' medical state. The patient decides to send the doctor, who [is a long time family friend/he met for the first time during his examination], [a painting worth/an envelope with] [1 000/10 000] dollars and a note that says: "Thank you for taking good care of me."

Scenario 3: Developer – Official

A developer wants to build an apartment complex and he is in the final three of the selection procedure. The developer decides to give the official who decides the winner [a nice watch worth] [1 000/10 000] dollars along with a card wishing her a merry Christmas and to say thank you for judging the procedure fairly. The developer and the official [have been good friends for years/met for the first time during the procedure].

Scenario 4: Sports club representative – Referee

A representative of a sports club decides to give [1 000/10 000] dollars [in cash/voucher for a trip] to a referee after the last game of the season as a thank you for all the games that he oversaw well during the season. It is a known fact that the referee will oversee some games during the next season as well. The representative and the referee [have been colleagues and friends for years/have a strictly professional relationship].

Scenario 5: Country representative – Investigator

A country is being inspected by a nonprofit organization because of possible human rights violations. A representative of the country in question decides to give the investigator, [with whom he has a friendly relationship] [an envelope with/a voucher for an all-inclusive stay in the best resort in the country worth] [2 000/20 000] dollars and a note congratulating her on a new promotion.

Scenario 6: Restaurant owner – Inspector

The restaurant is going to be under inspection after some customers had complained about the standards of hygiene. The owner of the restaurant [who is friends with the inspector] gives her [a voucher for a luxurious meal worth] [500/5 000] dollars before the inspection congratulating her on her 20th wedding anniversary.

Scenario 7: Pharma representative – Doctor

A very large pharmaceutical company is rolling out a new drug for hair loss that has had mixed results throughout testing with some unwanted side effects. A representative of the company decides to give a doctor with a lot of patients with whom he has worked before, [and they are friends/in a strictly professional setting] an [envelope with/all-inclusive skiing trip worth] [5 000/50 000] dollars along with a congratulatory letter commending the doctor on 10 years of practice.

Scenario 8: Researcher – Journal editor

A researcher who has finished his study and needs it to be published to finish his doctoral degree decides to send the journal editor, [whom he has known for years, and with whom he is a friend/whom he doesn't personally know], [an envelope with/a luxurious pen worth] [500/5 000] dollars and a letter congratulating the editor on the journal's 5 years anniversary of being first published along with the study.