

Disconnected in a Digital World: How Receiving Digital versus Physical Goods Affects Interpersonal Closeness

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Abstract

Consumers give and receive items in digital form that could once only be shared in physical form (e.g. money, books). While digital exchanges have many advantages, the objective of this research is to examine their disadvantages. We bridge findings from Atasoy and Morewedge (2017) on psychological ownership of physical (vs. digital) goods with research on merging extended selves (Belk 2009) and feelings of interpersonal closeness (Aknin and Human 2015; Argo et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2015) to predict that receivers will feel closer to givers after receiving physical (vs. digital) goods. Our proposed mechanism is the receiver's perception of the giver's psychological ownership over the good. Three studies demonstrate this effect and also show that it is moderated by whether the giver actually owns the good or not (e.g. it is rented). These findings contribute to research on digitization and interpersonal exchanges and show how consumers can feel disconnected in a digital world.

Keywords: *digital ; interpersonal; closeness*

Track: Consumer Behaviour