

## Gifts in a Romantic Relationship: A Survival Analysis

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Employing a survival analysis approach, this study synthesizes 3 aspects of gift literature and suggests their effects on the timing of dissolution for a romantic relationship. Products or services can be consumed for the purpose of enhancing self-attractiveness (self-gift), expressing love to partners (other-gift), and announcing a relationship to the outer world (joint-gift). Results indicate that the distribution of time until dissolution for young students' romantic relationships is more likely to first fall and then rise. Gifts can delay the timing of dissolution, but not the probability of its final destination. For female students, self-enhancing gifts are found to delay the timing; for male students, love-expressive gifts speed up the timing; and for both male and female students, relationship-announcing gifts delay the timing of dissolution. Consumers, thus, are advised to use gifts to make their relationships endure, but not to attempt to alter a poor relationship into a successful one.

What are the effects of gifts in consumers' romantic relationships? Using survival analysis, this study attempts to answer the question, "How do gifts influence the timing of a relationship's dissolution and the probability of its eventual dissolution?"

From an evolutionary point of view and for reproductive reasons, a romantic relationship is much more significant for a consumer than a relationship with a friend or coworker (Kenrick & Trost, 1989). In the attempt to have a satisfactory and enduring romantic relationship, consumers use gifts for various purposes over the course of their relationship. Gifts such as cosmetics, perfume, and clothing are often purchased by consumers in relationships to enhance their own attractiveness (Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992). Gifts such as roses and chocolates are frequently exchanged as forms of symbolic communication to convey love to one another (Belk, 1979). Gifts such as a pair of watches or matching clothes are customarily shared to communicate the relationship to the world.

Thus, it is important for consumer researchers to study the triangular consumer-object relational bond within the context

of a romantic relationship. However, past studies in consumer research tend to address this bond under a variety of relationships and using purely qualitative data. For example, Mick and DeMoss (1990a, 1990b) used content analysis, as well as interpretative analysis, to study the self-gift phenomenon. Belk and Coon (1991, 1993) conducted a qualitative investigation, mainly in-depth interviews, to examine the role of gifts and expenditures in the dating process. McAlexander (1991) addressed the issue of divorce and the disposition of possessions using in-depth interviews with 18 divorced informants.

Using survival analysis to take into account the longitudinal nature of a relationship and combining it with the traditional qualitative approach, this study can provide rigorous tests of the bonds uncovered in qualitative studies. Compared to the more commonly known cross-sectional logit model, survival analysis is desirable for two reasons. First, it analyzes the longitudinal aspect of a relationship, taking the duration of the relationship into account. Second, it can estimate the dynamic effects of gifts that change in value (e.g., the frequency of gift consumption changes) over the course of a relationship. Without taking the two characteristics into account, Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) found that their cross-sectional statistical method weakens the statistical power of the study and disguises the actual relationship between covariates and the length of the relationship examined in their study.

The first section of this article elaborates three effects of gifts on relationships from synthesizing self-gift, other-gift, and joint-gift literature. The second section introduces survival analysis and its application to the study of a long-term relationship with covariates changing in value over time.

## THE DEVELOPMENTAL PATH OF A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

### Romantic Relationship Defined

A *romantic relationship*, in contrast to the specific phenomenon of falling in love, is an ongoing and enduring partnership of two people that may last over an extended period of time, including a lifetime. Falling in love is a physiological, emotional experience ordinarily shared between two people (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992, p. 20). This definition excludes loving episodes, such as a one-night stand, as being a relationship.

An ongoing and enduring relationship may go through a kind of modal developmental sequence, usually including the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution time periods (Byrne & Murnen, 1988). The phases of a relationship are considered more likely to overlap than be discontinuous (Kenrick & Trost, 1989). According to the increasing degrees of intimacy in a relationship, they can be operationalized into stages: (a) occasional or regular dating; (b) exclusive dating; and (c) living together, engaged, or both (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986).

### The Effect of Duration on a Romantic Relationship

The effect of duration on the timing of the dissolution of a relationship is more likely to follow a nonmonotonic function, with a low probability for relationship survival in the earlier stages and a high probability for relationship survival in the later stages of the relationship.

A relationship is unlikely to dissolve right after its formation, or it can be hardly labeled a relationship. However, as the pair gets to know each other a little better, the probability for it to dissolve reaches its highest point. This is the stage, based on initial satisfaction, that partners assess the potential for the relationship (Knee, 1998). With its continuing development, the chance for the relationship to survive increases. For example, Hendrick and Hendrick (1992, pp. 85–86) found that people who had been in love longer were more passionate and close in their relationship, which, in turn, enhanced the stability of the romantic relationship. In analyzing the fertility of Black adolescents, Hogan and Kitagawa (1985) observed that a longer dating period is associated with stronger emotional attachment, which thus increases the possibility for the relationship to survive. Sternberg (1986) proposed a nonlinear function for the effect of duration on a relationship. He stated that intimacy, the emotional basis of romantic relationships, grows gradually,

because early in the relationship one is unable to predict the emotions of the other. This lack of interpersonal knowledge creates disruptions in the relationship. However, as the actors in the dyad become more familiar, they form increasing numbers of paired action sequences, or scripts, and the amount of disruption decreases in the relationship.

Many sources contribute to the instability of the earlier stages of relationships. According to Holmes (1981), the first source is that in the earlier stages of a relationship, the role structure and social norm is not sufficiently articulated to provide rituals for dealing with minor frictions or to provide more complex rules for settling serious disputes.

The second source is from an implicit theoretical perspective proposed by Knee (1998). Knee found that the early stages of relationships could be viewed as tests of their potential success. Those who believe that relationships are destined may be sensitive to early indications that they cannot succeed at the relationship and thus may similarly tend to give up easily. As a result, the initial impressions of satisfaction and closeness may function as success cues (if positive) or failure cues (if negative) for the relationship.

The third source is that in the early phases of a relationship, partners tend to idealize each other, transform faults into virtues, and view their partner more positively than their partner views him- or herself. Such idealization of one's partner tends to predict higher relationship satisfaction (Knee, 1998); however, in the long run it may lead to dissatisfaction when the idealization gradually dissipates.

The relation between the duration of a relationship and the distribution of time in its dissolution is more likely to follow the principle of cumulative inertia, which suggests that the longer consumers are in a particular state, the less likely they are to leave that state. The first hypothesis is proposed to test the idea that the initial stages of a romantic relationship are less stable; with increasing length, the relationship is gradually stabilized.

H1: The effect of time duration first accelerates the timing of dissolution and then delays the timing of dissolution for a romantic relationship.

## GIFTS IN A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

### Dating Gifts Defined

Various products, services, or experiences, including both the tangible and intangible, can be gifts. Such gifts include goods acquired for personal use (self-gift), for giving to others (other-gift), and those acquired for mutual use (joint-gift). They can be material and nonmaterial in nature. Nonmaterial gifts include helping the other person when they are stressed for time, lending a car, and so on (Belk & Coon, 1991). Dating gifts, different from general product consumption, are typically highly motivated (Faure & Mick, 1993). Regardless of

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