

Online Surprise Gift-giving Services and Wellbeing: Sender and Recipient Perspectives

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Abstract

Purpose. Technology-mediated gift giving is prevailing as consumers seek convenience and novelty. Using an industry example, we explored how a subscription-based online gift-giving service contributes to the recipient's wellbeing, both from sender and recipient perspectives.

Design/ methodology/ approach. Online survey data was collected, with participants randomly assigned to sender ($n = 257$) or recipient ($n = 257$) scenarios, testing the underlying process and impact of surprise on the emotional value of the gift and two valenced emotions – happiness and disappointment. We also investigated how surprise, happiness, disappointment, and emotional value influence recipient's wellbeing, from the sender's and recipient's perspectives.

Findings. Sender's surprise positively impacts perceived recipient wellbeing via the perceived emotional value of the gift and the sender's happiness with the chosen gift. Conversely, recipient perceptions of wellbeing are impacted by both positive and negative emotional responses to the gift. The emotional value of the gift to the recipient is impacted by social closeness with the sender, highlighting the importance of the sender-recipient relationship.

Research Implications. We contribute to the emotions, consumer behaviour, and gift giving literatures by examining the nuanced context of online surprise gift giving and its impact on recipient wellbeing from dual perspectives.

Practical Implications. We highlight wellbeing as a key area for companies in the online surprise gift giving domain, along with the need to understand the relationship between senders and recipients, and the option for personalisation.

Originality. We extend theoretical and practical understanding by exploring technology-mediated gift-giving and wellbeing from both the sender and recipient perspectives.

Keywords: gift-giving services; surprise; wellbeing; emotions.

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Gift giving is a universal societal behaviour (Liu *et al.*, 2019), based on an exchange process between a “giver” (a “sender” in this paper) and a “recipient”. Surprise plays a crucial role in gift giving, as gifts inherently intend to surprise a recipient (Vanhamme and de Bont, 2008). In this paper we focus on online, subscription-based gift-giving services with a wellness orientation – an example of surprise gift giving designed to provide a series of gifts to a recipient, curated by the service provider to positively surprise both the sender and the recipient, and to enhance recipient’s wellbeing. Industry examples include Project Happy Note and Treatbox, two online start-ups which promote wellbeing by offering a subscription service that sends handwritten notes and curated surprise gifts (not selected by the sender) to a chosen recipient; or The Willoughby Book Club, offering surprise book subscription “gift tins” designed to promote relaxation and alleviate the effort of choosing what to read next.

Starting from this unique service setting, our study aims to understand how a subscription-based online gift-giving service can contribute to the wellbeing of a gift recipient, both from the sender’s and recipient’s perspective. While subscription-based online services have gained traction in recent services literature (Bischof *et al.*, 2020; Rudolph *et al.*, 2017; Woo and Ramkumar, 2018), their role within a gift-giving context and their impact on individual wellbeing has received comparatively limited attention. The subscription box e-commerce market is projected to continue to grow, being estimated at US\$ 37.5 billion in 2024, and forecasted to reach US\$ 116.2 Billion by 2033 (IMARC, 2024). While part of the market offering is orientated towards self-gifting, multiple companies have started to position their services as surprise gift giving for someone else (Wired, 2022).

Consumer wellbeing has been of academic interest in marketing since 1967 (Mick *et al.*, 2012), while more recently the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) movement has examined its important relationship with consumption behaviour (Mick, 2006). Wellbeing is

defined as a state of health, happiness and prosperity and has emotional, social, economic, physical, spiritual, environmental, and political dimensions (Mick *et al.*, 2012). Numerous studies have investigated wellbeing in various contexts (Devezer *et al.*, 2014; Sirgy *et al.*, 2007); however, within the gift-giving literature, research explicitly linking gift experiences to wellbeing remains limited (Chan and Mogilner, 2017). For the purpose of this study, we focus on emotional and subjective wellbeing, both of which are important components of overall wellbeing (Magyar and Keyes, 2019), and are sometimes used interchangeably (Park *et al.*, 2023). Given that gift giving is inherently relational (e.g., Liu *et al.*, 2019; Sherry, 1983), we focus on emotional and subjective wellbeing as both encompass the relational and affective dimensions of wellbeing. Social connection is an integral component of emotional wellbeing, as the quality of one's relationships is a key determinant of both subjective and physical wellbeing (Feller *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the sense of vitality and energy associated with emotional wellbeing and subjective feelings of wellness often stems from meaningful social interactions and supportive exchanges (Ryan and Frederick, 1997). This is therefore particularly relevant in a subscription-based online gift-giving context designed to enhance recipient wellbeing. Recent Google research shows that, globally, searches for "online gifts" have risen by 80% (YouGov, 2021), indicating a shift from physical gift exchanges toward online mediums (Gupta *et al.*, 2023). Thus, by investigating an online gift-giving service and contextualising wellbeing in this unique service context, our research is both theoretically meaningful and practically relevant.

We developed a conceptual model following a review of the literature and tested it in two surveys (one for the senders and one for the recipients, given that our hypotheses vary in the constructs included and mechanisms examined between the two sample groups). Survey results highlight the different responses to surprise gift-giving services by senders and recipients. While for senders a positive emotional response (i.e., happiness) and the gift's

emotional value are the mechanisms by which they believe surprise impacts recipient wellbeing, for recipients the very act of surprise gifting impacts their wellbeing, irrespective of the valenced emotional response the gift provokes. This study contributes to the gift-giving literature by reporting on both positive and negative emotions from the dual perspectives of the sender and recipient. Including negative emotions from the sender perspective is novel as senders would ordinarily choose the gift for the recipient themselves, hence reducing the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions. In our context, however, the gift choice is relinquished to the service provider, thereby increasing the possibility of such emotions. Additionally, we extend the surprise literature in marketing, which has largely focused on the relationship between surprise and customer satisfaction and delight (Kim and Mattila, 2013), while paying less attention to adverse emotional responses, especially from the sender's perspective.

Finally, by investigating how recipients' wellbeing (measured as sender's perceptions of recipient wellbeing and the recipient's perceptions of their own wellbeing) is impacted by surprise, the two differently valenced emotions elicited by gift giving (i.e., happiness and disappointment) and the perceived emotional value of the gift, we further contribute to the gift-giving and consumer wellbeing literatures. Given the context of our study, we ultimately provide insights on the mechanisms through which an online gift-giving service affects wellbeing, from a dual stakeholder perspective, with implications to the literature on subscription-based services.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND AND STUDY CONTEXT

Belk and Coon (1993, p394) define gifts as “a good or service (including the giver's time, activities, and ideas) voluntarily provided to another person or group (Belk, 1979) through some sort of ritual prestation.” Surprise is crucial to gift giving as gifts inherently intend to

provoke surprise in the recipient (Vanhamme and de Bont, 2008). However, marketing research often fails to consider the overall gifting experience including surprise. While Vanhamme and de Bont (2008) focus on gift buyers' motivations to surprise, Vanhamme *et al.*, (2021) explore recipients' responses to surprising gifts, predominantly focusing on the product. In our research, both the recipient and the sender are subject to surprise-driven responses, which provides a more nuanced and complex perspective on surprise gift-giving, unique to the literature.

While surprise is a defining feature of gift-giving (Vanhamme and de Bont, 2008), its experiential dimensions differ significantly for recipients and senders, a distinction often overlooked in the literature. Recipients encounter surprise as an immediate, involuntary emotional response to a break in expectation, a reaction that is spontaneous and often visceral. In contrast, senders experience surprise in a future-oriented, anticipatory form, rooted in their intent to provoke a specific emotional outcome. This involves imagining the recipient's response, making the sender's surprise more reflective and mediated by empathy and relational intent. In traditional gift-giving contexts, the sender exercises agency and control, crafting the conditions for surprise, while the recipient passively experiences it. Furthermore, surprise for senders can function as a form of identity expression and social signalling, whereas recipients decode the gift's meaning within the context of relational understanding (Belk and Coon, 1993; Vanhamme *et al.*, 2021). These asymmetries highlight the complexity of surprise in gift-giving, necessitating a dual-perspective approach that recognizes the distinct psychological experiences of both parties.

Subscription-based gift-giving services offer a novel context to understand the concept of surprise gifting, as recipients not only receive the gift itself, but also an experiential component (Bhatt *et al.*, 2021). Recent services literature concentrates on subscription-based online services, with many studies (Bischof *et al.*, 2020; Noorda, 2019; Rudolph *et al.*, 2017;

Woo and Ramkumar, 2018) attempting to theorise this emerging model. However, empirical research on subscription-based gift-giving remains limited, as scholarly attention to this area only began around 2016 (Andonova *et al.*, 2021).

The experiential aspect of subscription-based gift-giving aligns with research suggesting that experiential gifts, those providing memorable or emotional experiences, enhance wellbeing more effectively than just material gifts (Chan and Mogilner, 2017; Dunn, Gilbert and Wilson, 2011; Bastos and Brucks, 2017). Such gifts promote emotional connection between givers and recipients and foster enduring positive affect through shared experience and identity reinforcement (Caprariello and Reis, 2013; Tully and Sharma, 2018). Therefore, subscription-based gifting may not only provide convenience and surprise but also contribute to recipients' psychological wellbeing through experiential engagement.

Subscription-based online services also differ from other forms of e-retailing in the non-traditional decision-making process: the customer “outsources” information search, comparison of alternatives, and even the final product choice to the service provider, which is attractive in a fast-paced world where consumers seek time-saving services to enhance their way of life (Noorda, 2019). Importantly, surprise subscriptions are based less on functional necessities and more on hedonic desires and can stimulate inspiration without giving the recipient active control over the products they receive (Rudolph *et al.*, 2017).

Recent research has focused on subscription-based online services, though generally not in a gift-giving context. According to Noorda (2019, p.229), such subscription-based boxes, which also involve tangible products, are more than just a distribution model – they are “experiential, communicative, and social, and can be highly integrated into the social and symbolic performance of gift giving”. Further, a subscription-based surprise gift-giving service provider does not disclose the products and messages to the sender, creating an element of surprise for both sender and recipient. This deliberate choice by the sender to surprise

themselves (Bischof *et al.*, 2020) can provide a stimulating experience (Woo and Ramkumar, 2018) and enhance convenience as senders prioritise their time over the option to customise a product (Moreau *et al.*, 2011); furthermore, this distinguishes the experience between sender and recipient. Whilst senders choose to surprise themselves, recipients are inherently subject to surprise due to the decision-making of the relevant other. Such services can, however, also hinder successful delivery and risk the recipient perceiving the gift as unappealing (Bischof *et al.*, 2020) due to the sender's lack of influence over the process (Faraji-Rad *et al.*, 2017). Thus, within this specific gift-giving context, it is appropriate to study both positive and negative emotional responses, from both sender and recipient perspective.

Despite this new phenomenon entering the gift-giving space, our review of the two streams of literature showcases that most research on gift giving does not focus on surprise subscription services (see Table I). Although some studies do consider both giver and recipient perspectives by comparing gift senders to gift recipients, fewer explore how senders anticipate how a recipient will respond to a gift. We suggest that this perspective reflects more closely real-life gift-giving scenarios in which senders typically try to predict and shape recipient reactions to a gift when choosing how best to surprise them. Understanding this anticipatory process is key to capturing the psychological and relational dynamics that underpin gifting decisions. Indeed, several authors highlight the need to study real givers and recipients to fully understand the gift-giving context (Baskin *et al.*, 2014; Givi and Galak, 2022; Paolacci *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, with only a few exceptions (Chan and Mogilner, 2017; Wiener *et al.*, 2022), research included in our review has rarely considered wellbeing explicitly as an important outcome of gift-giving and technology-mediated subscription services, despite a review paper from Givi *et al.*, (2023) suggesting this context warrants further attention.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Sender surprise and emotional value to the recipient

Traditionally, surprise research focuses on the combination of surprise and the accompanying emotional response. However, in gift giving, the giver's anticipation of the recipient's reaction is also important for the giver to meet their gifting goals (Baskin *et al.*, 2014). There are various gift-giving contexts where the sender will not witness the recipient's affective response, such as sending a gift via post or via a subscription-based online service, as in our context. Thus, the sender must rely on how they believe the recipient will respond to a gift in such instances and the value the sender expects the recipient will gain from the gift. This can be conceptualised as the perceived emotional value that the sender believes the gift offers to the recipient as an outcome of surprise. Emotional value refers to the “mental or psychological needs of consumers and the utility they derive from the feelings or affective states that a product generates” (Walsh *et al.*, 2014, p261).

In the unique context of online subscription gift giving, where the sender does not select the exact product and is also surprised by the gift, this shared surprise creates a more ambiguous situation in which the sender relies heavily on their imagined version of the recipient's experience to assess whether the gift is meaningful (Flynn and Adams, 2009; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). This imagined response informs their perception of the emotional value the recipient will receive. That is, if the sender is positively surprised, they are more likely to project this reaction onto the recipient and infer greater emotional value. Thus, we hypothesised that:

H1s: *Sender's surprise to the gift positively impacts their perceptions of the gift's emotional value to the recipient.*

Recipient surprise, social closeness and emotional value of the gift

On the other hand, the experience of surprise from the recipient's perspective is more closely linked to their relationship with the sender. When receiving a gift, recipients may evaluate it not only based on its intrinsic qualities and how well it meets their expectations (Givi and Galak, 2022; Rixom *et al.*, 2020) but also in the context of their relationship with the giver (Sherry, 1983; Reshadi and Givi, 2023). Indeed, research shows that gift giving is characterised by a relationship focus (Liu *et al.*, 2019), and that gifts act as communication vehicles for the weight and nature of a relationship (Sherry, 1983). Recipients report greater closeness with the sender when they feel a gift reflects the sender (Aknin and Human, 2015). Additionally, in developing a relational model of gift giving, Davies *et al.*, (2010) suggest that the nature of the relationship between the sender and recipient dictates the extent to which the gift itself is considered appropriate. Therefore, building social connections is one of the fundamental tenets of gift giving (Aknin and Human, 2015).

Whilst surprise is acknowledged as a key aspect of gift giving (Belk and Coon, 1993; Givi and Galak 2022; Gupta and Gentry, 2018), fewer studies have measured the subjective experience of surprise itself and its downstream effects on both the sender and recipient. Evidence from psychology research outside the gift-giving domain suggests that surprise can significantly enhance positive social outcomes, for example when individuals reach out to an acquaintance unexpectedly; Liu *et al.*, (2022) found that the act of reaching out is appreciated more by the recipient when it is unexpected, suggesting that surprise triggers perceptions of intentionality, thoughtfulness, and connection. In the context of surprise subscription services, the inherently unexpected nature of the gift can heighten recipients' emotional responses and deepen their perceived closeness to the sender (Noordewier and Breugelmans, 2013). This is because surprise is not merely a reaction to the gift but also a relational signal, indicating that

the sender has invested effort and thought into the act of giving, thereby strengthening the social bond (Dunn *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, prior research into experiential gifting demonstrates that gifts evoking emotional or shared experiences foster deeper connections and lasting relational satisfaction (Chan and Mogilner, 2017; Caprariello and Reis, 2013). Such experiential encounters enhance wellbeing and emotional value because they are identity-relevant and memorable (Bastos and Brucks, 2017; Tully and Sharma, 2018).

However, the role of social closeness differs for senders in the context of surprise gift-giving. In traditional gift-giving settings, senders use relational cues, including social closeness, to guide gift selection. Interpretive work on gift selection shows that givers tailor gifts by drawing on relationship roles and recipient specific knowledge (e.g., who is “easy” versus “difficult” to buy for), implying that the ability to choose is what allows senders to incorporate closeness and other relational information into the gift (Otnes *et al.*, 1993). Moreover, Gong *et al.*, (2025) found that in both online and offline contexts, the choice of a hedonic gift by the sender was guided by a closer relationship with the recipient. Similarly, gift senders who select a gift that reflects the recipients interests or personality may also improve the relationship as a result by enhancing social closeness (Aknin and Human, 2015). However, in all of these studies, the sender has control over what is being sent; this is not the case within our study, due to a lack of choice that senders have over the product. The lack of choice in surprise gift-giving contexts reduces feelings of control and autonomy (Leotti *et al.*, 2010; Cutwright and Wu, 2022), limiting sender’s ability to translate various factors, such as social closeness, into their gift selection decision. Thus, by removing the opportunity to select the gift themselves, this gift-giving service has also essentially removed the pathway through which social closeness typically influences sender behaviour and their subsequent emotional responses. As such, although social closeness is important in traditional gift-giving contexts,

its role is substantially reduced in our setting for senders but remains a key part of the recipient model, in explaining how the recipient will respond to the gift due to the experience of surprise.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the surprise inherent in subscription-based gifting may serve as a relational catalyst, promoting perceptions of closeness that in turn enhance the emotional value recipients attribute to the gift. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

***H1_R:** Recipient's surprise to the gift will positively impact their perceptions of their social closeness to the sender.*

***H2_R:** Recipient's perceptions of social closeness to the sender will affect the recipient's perceived emotional value of the gift.*

Sender and recipient valenced emotional responses

While gift giving is commonly associated with positive emotions (Vanhamme and de Bont, 2008), recent subscription-based services literature shows that “a wrongful dose of surprise could lead to a negative perception about uncertainty and backfire” (Tan and Chen, 2021, p.2). This is especially relevant to the unique characteristics of our online subscription-based gift-giving service, where the sender “outsources” the gift choice, reducing their control and potentially their sense of effort invested in the gift.

Effort and personalisation based on the recipient's preferences are critical elements of a “perfect gift” (Liu *et al.*, 2019), which should communicate that the recipient is ‘extraordinary’ and ‘special’ (Belk and Coon, 1993). Givi and Galak (2022, p.448) further suggest that “a recipient's expectation for gift quality is that it is at a level that is sufficient to send them a signal that the giver cares about them.” However, this element of care and effort is missing when outsourcing the choice to an online gift-giving service. Therefore, mixed

emotional responses may emerge, ranging from happiness to disappointment, supporting the need for investigating both positive and negative emotional responses to gift-giving.

Importantly, this emotional response might differ between senders and recipients (Gupta *et al.*, 2023). For example, Flynn and Adams (2009) found that while givers assumed expensive gifts signalled appreciation, recipients did not necessarily feel more valued. Thus, the sender's expectations and emotional response may be based more on imagined outcomes than on the actual recipient experience. When the gift giver (i.e., sender) chooses a gift themselves, their expectations may pertain to how a recipient will respond to that gift, or whether it will meet their expectations (Wooten, 2000). In such situations, senders are likely to purchase gifts that provoke an overt, affective display from the recipient (Yang and Urminsky, 2019) so a recipient's positive emotional response to a gift can enhance the sender's enjoyment of the gift-giving scenario. Therefore, the sender emotional response will result from their expectations as to how the recipient will value the gift, as the act of giving itself is often driven by the anticipated positive affect associated with the recipient's reaction (e.g., Dunn *et al.*, 2008). In other words, when a sender believes the gift will deliver emotional value - regardless of the recipient's actual experience - it can elicit positive emotions like happiness or reduce negative ones like disappointment. For the recipient, the emotional value of a gift is often derived directly from their actual experience with the product or service received (Rust and Oliver, 1994), which is paramount in shaping their ultimate emotional response.

Drawing on the above, we expected that the emotional value of the gift would trigger both positive and negative emotional responses, and differ between senders and recipients (Meyer *et al.*, 1997). Therefore, we hypothesised that:

H2s: Perceived emotional value to the recipient impacts a sender's emotional response:

H2_s a) The sender's perception of emotional value to the recipient will positively impact sender's happiness.

H2_s b) The sender's perception of emotional value to the recipient will negatively impact sender's disappointment.

H3_R: *The emotional value of the gift to the recipient impacts their emotional response.*

H3_R a) The emotional value of the gift to the recipient will positively impact the recipient's happiness.

H3_R b) The emotional value of the gift to the recipient will negatively impact recipient's disappointment.

Emotional response to the gift and perceptions of wellbeing

Gift giving has also been shown to impact givers' wellbeing (Wiener *et al.*, 2022). Recent neuroscience research claims that surprise, through its impact on dopamine levels, is key to bringing vitality to our lives (Luna and Renninger, 2015) and "can be used to strategically enrich lives, create positive mindsets, and maximise influence," (Rousell, 2021). These positive effects are conceptually aligned with our subjective understanding of wellbeing, as per previous literature (Elosúa, 2015; King *et al.*, 2015) and suggest a positive relationship between surprise and wellbeing. Moreover, subscription-based services are inherently founded on the idea that a surprise box (self-gifting or otherwise) contributes to the recipient's overall wellbeing, often acting as a treat for someone "having a tough time" (Wired, 2022). Hence, it would be sensible to assume that the surprise generated by subscription-based gift giving will positively affect both the sender's and recipient's perceptions of recipient wellbeing, primarily via the affective states it engenders. Additionally, as Chan and Mogilner (2017) highlight, gift

giving can impact relationship strength between the sender and recipient, which in turn contributes to improved wellbeing due to the importance of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Wiener *et al.*, (2022) conceptualise wellbeing in regard to relationships, specifically to the importance of social support and how this contributes to recipient wellbeing as an intentional and non-reciprocal gesture by the sender. The authors note that where a sender has not provided in-person support to a recipient, sending a gift may reduce sender feelings of guilt and enhance not only sender wellbeing, but also recipient wellbeing by means of an improved relationship between the two parties. Within a subscription-based surprise gift context, the relationship between sender and recipient is therefore key to improving wellbeing, as demonstrated by Chan and Mogilner (2017) and Wiener *et al.*, (2022).

Gifts are inherently emotional artifacts, imbued with meaning and sentiment by both senders and recipients. This means that the true worth of a gift often lies not just in its material form, but in the subjective emotional value it evokes. It is this perceived emotional value, reflecting the personal significance of the gift, that we propose directly influences an individual's wellbeing. In tourism settings with an experiential and novel component, Junaid *et al.*, (2020) found that emotional value indirectly affected tourists wellbeing. In a consumer context, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) noted that the emotional value of a product was a fundamental predictor of overall product perceptions. Similarly, appreciation of and finding value in an event, object, or action has been linked with subjective wellbeing (Adler and Fagley, 2005). Yet, despite the clear relevance of emotional value to wellbeing across various domains, this is not explored in gift-giving research, despite the emotional aspect inherent to both giving and receiving gifts and the experience of a surprise subscription gift. This is particularly relevant to a gift-giving context as thoughtfulness impacts recipients' appreciation for a gift (Flynn and Adams, 2009), which is a key component of positive emotional experience and wellbeing. Therefore, we considered sender's perceptions of the gift's emotional value to

the recipient to be positively related to their perceptions of the recipient's. Concurrently, for the recipients themselves, we expect the gift's emotional value to directly affect their own wellbeing. Therefore, we hypothesised that:

***H3s:** Sender's perceptions of the gift's emotional value to the recipient positively impact sender's perceptions of the wellbeing of the recipient.*

***H4R:** Recipient's perceptions of the gift's emotional value positively impact their own wellbeing.*

Neuroscience research has also shown that, "experiencing positive emotions benefits psychological and physical wellbeing," (Alexander *et al.*, 2021, p.239). Concurrently, wellbeing has been characterised as a universally positive construct, involving an absence of negative affect (Keyes, 2002). Hence, we expect that happiness, as a positively valenced emotional response to gift giving, will have a positive impact on both sender's and recipient's perceptions of recipient wellbeing, whereas negatively valenced emotions (such as disappointment in our model) are likely to have a negative impact. Disappointment arises when expectations are unmet, resulting in an affective state characterised by loss and dejection (Zeelenberg *et al.*, 2000). Such emotions reduce subjective wellbeing by diminishing satisfaction and generating self-focused rumination (Van Dijk and Zeelenberg, 2002). In interpersonal contexts like gift-giving, disappointment may not only lower recipients' emotional evaluations but also signal relational strain or unmet relational expectations (Aaker, Drolet and Griffin, 2008). From a neurological perspective, negative affect triggers stress-related physiological responses that counteract the wellbeing benefits of positive emotions (Kross and Ayduk, 2017). Moreover, due to affective projection (Van Boven and Loewenstein,

2003), senders who experience disappointment may infer similarly diminished wellbeing in recipients, even when actual emotional states differ. Thus, disappointment represents a negatively valenced emotional pathway that can undermine both perceived and experienced wellbeing outcomes in the gifting context. For the senders, this involves a process of affective projection, where they infer the recipient's wellbeing state (i.e., perceived wellbeing) based on their own feelings and how they themselves would feel in those situations (Van Boven and Loewenstein, 2003). Thus, we expected that:

***H4s a):** Sender's happiness positively impacts their perceptions of recipient's wellbeing.*

***H4s b):** Sender's disappointment negatively affects their perceptions of the recipient's wellbeing.*

***H5R a):** Recipient's happiness positively impacts the wellbeing of the recipient.*

***H5R b):** Recipient's disappointment negatively impacts the wellbeing of the recipient.*

METHODOLOGY

We conducted two surveys in August 2020 with consumers from the United Kingdom, to understand senders' and recipients' responses to a surprise gift-giving subscription service. The sample aligns with the customer base of the service provider, Project Happy Note¹, which is predominantly based in the UK. Project Happy Note provided a useful case study as, at that time, they curated and provided a personalised suite of products and messages as gifts to a chosen recipient, delivered monthly for three months. In the case of Project Happy Note, the sender is informed of the contents of each surprise gift when they have been shipped by the service provider. Our collaboration with Project Happy Note was purely informational

and non-commercial, with the company providing general background information and feedback on ecological realism only. The collaboration ensured the experimental context accurately reflected how online wellness gift subscription operate in practice.

Following a set of demographic questions, we asked participants to imagine that they either wanted to send a gift to someone they knew (senders' condition) or that they had just received a gift from someone they knew (recipients' condition), then list the person's name, the nature of their relationship with this person and how close they were with that individual. Those in the sender condition were also asked how knowledgeable they are about surprise gift services, their prior experience, and expectations regarding the service. The concept of a surprise gift-giving service was then defined for individuals in the sender condition with the following text: "In this study "surprise gift series service" refers to three personalised gifts sent to a named recipient, on behalf of a sender by an online service. The gifts are chosen entirely by the service provider, and the sender cannot control the content of their purchased gifts. The recipient receives one gift per month, for a duration of three months." At this point, participants in the sender condition only were asked to visit the Project Happy Note website and spend some time browsing the site; participants were subsequently asked questions regarding their attitudes and perceptions of the website and brand. As participants did not know the nature of the product(s) sent to the recipient at this point, we have not included these variables within our analysis. We showed participants an example of a gift they may send or receive (depending on the allocated condition) and asked them to fill out scales measuring the eight constructs in our theoretical model (see Figure 1).

The gift that participants (senders and recipients) were exposed to was a pair of "funky" socks (see Online Appendix 1), chosen for four reasons: 1) to enhance external validity, we kept the gift and the scenario as realistic as possible, in line with the exact type of gifts that the

service provider offered to their recipients; 2) the gift was more hedonic in nature (confirmed by both sender and recipient groups, who rated it as more hedonic than utilitarian (measured on a three-item 7-point semantic-differential scale adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), where 1 is utilitarian and 7 is hedonic; $M_{\text{Sender}}=4.56$, $SD_{\text{Sender}}=1.41$; $M_{\text{Recipient}}=4.22$, $SD_{\text{Recipient}}=1.53$); 3) it had a relatively low perceived value that would not make either party uncomfortable due to the need to reciprocate (Givi, 2021; Givi *et al.*, 2021); and 4) a YouGov (2018) study shows that Britons (majority male) prefer receiving socks over other types of gifts. Though items such as socks may often be assessed in terms of their utilitarian function and qualities, we consider this novelty gift to be more hedonic due to the intangible hedonic emotions of joy and enjoyment associated with it. Im *et al.*, (2015) found that novelty and creativity can enhance perceptions of hedonic value and therefore attitudes towards a product. Furthermore, the socks (see Online Appendix 1) are brightly coloured and include blue, yellow, and white, all of which promote positive mood and improve physical wellbeing according to colour psychology research (Bourne, 2026; Jonauskaitė and Mohr, 2025). As products are evaluated as either hedonic or utilitarian based on the context within which consumption takes place (Dhar and Wertenbroch, 2000), we further suggest that as the product in our study is framed as a surprise gift, the experiential and affective aspects of the product become more salient and will therefore reinforce its interpretation as a hedonic product.

Sampling

We recruited respondents through convenience sampling, utilising Qualtrics Online Panels, with participants randomly allocated to one of two groups: “senders” ($n=257$) and “recipients” ($n=257$), in line with previous gift-giving research (e.g., Taute and Sierra, 2015). The two surveys were run simultaneously. While online panels and crowdsourcing samples are more diverse than convenience samples (Goodman and Paolacci, 2017), they may lack

representativeness and coverage, as they are non-probability based (Hulland and Miller, 2018) and not everyone in a research population has internet access. However, given the online provision of the service of interest, this does not pose a problem to our sample selection. We addressed data-quality concerns by employing attention checks, monitoring survey duration and investigating data for evidence of acquiescence bias (Deutskens *et al.*, 2004; Huang, 2006).

Measures

We measured recipient's perceived social closeness with the gift giver using a three-item scale from Chan and Mogilner (2017) which encompasses closeness, connectedness and strength of the giver–recipient relationship. We used a three-item scale adapted from Walsh *et al.*, (2014) to measure perceived emotional value, and two three-item scales to measure emotional response, capturing happiness (Richins, 1997) and disappointment (Smith and Bolton, 2002). Finally, we measured sender and recipient perceptions of recipient wellbeing via an adapted scale from King *et al.*, (2015). We measured surprise using a single-item scale (*surprised*) as per previous studies (see Valenzuela *et al.*, 2010; Shibly and Chatterjee, 2020). Although single-item measures have recognized limitations, their use is supported for constructs that are “easily and uniformly imagined” (Rossiter, 2002; Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007). Surprise fits this criterion, as it is a basic and universally experienced emotion (Ekman, 1992). All items for these constructs were rated on seven-point scales (1=not at all; 7=a great deal), unless otherwise stated. A full list of original scales can be found in Online Appendix 2.

FINDINGS

Sample characteristics

Sample demographics in the sender's sample show a balanced distribution by gender (51.4% female, 48.6% male), and age (18-24: 12.5%; 25-34: 19.8%; 35-44: 17.5%; 45-54: 19.8%; 55-

64: 16.7%; 65+ 13.6%), while 43.6% of the sample had a first or higher degree and 42.8% earned between £20,000-40,000 per annum. In the recipient's sample, females comprised of 65% of the sample, with a balanced distribution by age (18-24: 12.1%; 25-34: 18.7%; 35-44: 18.3%; 45-54: 20.2%; 55-64: 16.7%; 65+ 14%). Similar to the senders' sample, the vast majority of the participants in the recipient's sample had a first or higher degree (43.2%) and earned between £20,000-40,000 per annum (35.8%). We assessed the distribution of sample characteristics of age, income, and education across the sender and recipient samples using chi-square tests of independence. The results demonstrated that for the characteristics of age and income, there were no significant differences between our two samples (age: $\chi^2(5, 514) = .174$, $p = .999$; income: $\chi^2(4, 514) = 3.610$, $p = .461$). On the other hand, the results showed a significant difference between sender and recipient samples in terms of education ($\chi^2(6, 514) = 17.439$, $p = .008$; Cramer's $V = 0.184$), though adopting Cohen's (1988) guidelines the strength of association was small (Cramer's $V = 0.184$). Both age and income are more relevant to the nature of our study. Thus, we do not consider this to have had a significant impact on our analysis.

Around one quarter of the sender sample had prior experience with online subscription gift-giving services. Furthermore, we asked survey respondents to imagine the sender or recipient of such a service to enhance the personal relevance of the scenario and thus improve ecological validity (Diehl *et al.*, 2017). We asked senders to describe their relationship with the chosen recipient. 40% of participants in the sender sample chose to send the gift to a spouse or significant other, 25% to a close friend, 13% to a child or grandchild, 11% to a parent, and 9% to another family member. The remaining participants in the sender sample selected an acquaintance, colleague or other and their recipient of choice. Similarly, we asked participants in the recipient sample who they expect would send them a surprise gift. 38% chose a spouse or significant other and 32% selected a close friend. 12% selected a family member, whilst 8%

of the sample chose parent, and 6% chose a child or grandchild. The remaining participants in the recipient sample selected an acquaintance, colleague or other.

Measurement model estimates

All measurement scales were subject to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) procedures in Mplus 8.1 software (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017) using the robust maximum likelihood parameter (MLM) estimate with standard errors and a mean-adjusted chi-square test statistic (equivalent to Satorra and Bentler (1994) corrected statistics). No missing data were recorded. We scrutinised results for the existence of high modification indices (higher than 3.84 as per Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), high standard residuals, too low (.50) or too high factor loadings (>.95) (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) and for convergence issues. This resulted in some items being removed from the original scales in order to improve model fit across the two samples. Overall, the measurement model for the constructs included in the theoretical model showed excellent fit for both the sender and recipient groups (Sender: $\chi^2 = 201.189$, $df = 99$, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.972; TLI = 0.966; RMSEA = .063; SRMR = .125; Recipient: $\chi^2 = 205.018$, $df = 143$, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.985; TLI = 0.982; RMSEA = .041; SRMR = .048). Online Appendix 3 contains a full report of the CFA.

Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables for both the sender and recipient samples are shown in Table II. Composite reliability, AVEs, and squared correlations are also shown. Consistent with Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Hair *et al.*, (2010), AVE values exceed the minimum accepted value (0.5) and are higher than the correlation coefficients, indicating discriminant validity.

INSERT TABLE II HERE

Path analysis estimates and hypotheses testing

We used structural equation modelling in Mplus to test the ‘sender’ model with the sender’s group, which yielded an excellent model fit ($\chi^2 = 164.872$, $df = 99$, $p = .000$; CFI = .982; TLI = .978; RMSEA = .051; SRMR = .034). We then ran the recipient model with the recipient group ($\chi^2 = 205.330$, $df = 146$, $p = .000$; CFI = .985; TLI = .983; RMSEA = .040; SRMR = .041). We present direct path estimates for each model in Table III.

INSERT TABLE III HERE

The sender model shows a positive, significant relationship between surprise and the perceived emotional value of the gift ($\beta_s = .472$, $p = .000$), supporting H1_s. Consistent with our hypotheses, the perceived emotional value of the gift is positively related to sender’s happiness ($\beta_s = .856$, $p = .000$), and negatively related to sender’s disappointment ($\beta_s = -.561$, $p = .000$), supporting H2_{sa} and H2_{sb}, respectively. The relationship between perceived emotional value and perceived recipient wellbeing is positive and significant ($\beta_s = .548$, $p = .000$) supporting H3_s. Additionally, the model shows that sender’s happiness is positively related to perceived recipient wellbeing ($\beta_s = .394$, $p = .000$), consistent with H4_{sa}, but showed a non-significant relationship between sender’s disappointment and perceived recipient wellbeing ($\beta_s = .085$, $p = .077$), so H4_{sb} was not supported.

The recipient model shows a positive, significant relationship between surprise and social closeness ($\beta_R = .228$, $p = .001$), confirming H1_R. Similarly, social closeness was positively and significantly related to recipient emotional value ($\beta_R = .309$, $p = .000$), consistent with H2_R. Emotional value was positively and significantly related to recipient happiness ($\beta_R = .856$, $p = .000$), and negatively and significantly related to disappointment ($\beta_R = -.707$, $p = .000$), thus confirming H3_{Ra} and H3_{Rb}. Emotional value also positively predicted recipient

perceptions of wellbeing ($\beta_R = .371, p = .009$), which supported H4_R. As expected, happiness predicted recipient perceptions of their own wellbeing ($\beta_R = .424, p = .000$), confirming H5_{RA}. Recipient's disappointment significantly predicted wellbeing ($\beta_R = .201, p = .000$), but as we hypothesised a negative relationship, we reject H5_{Rb}. We explored this unexpected result in the discussion section. All path coefficients are visually displayed in Figure 1.

To further explore the data, we tested the mediations as a post hoc analysis, using the bootstrapping method with 1000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval (CI) (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) for both the sender and recipient models. The analysis showed that for senders, perceived emotional value to the recipient significantly mediated the relationship between sender surprise and perceived recipient wellbeing ($\beta = .338, p = .000, CI [.155, .490]$). Sender's happiness also significantly mediates this relationship between sender surprise, perceived emotional value to the recipient, and perceived recipient wellbeing ($\beta = .160, p = .000, CI [.074, .249]$). For the recipient model, post hoc analysis showed a mediating effect from emotional value through to recipient wellbeing via both happiness ($\beta = .363, p = .002, CI [.146, .603]$) and disappointment ($\beta = -.142, p = .011, CI [-.250, -.029]$). Both emotional value and happiness significantly mediate the relationship between social closeness and recipient perceptions of their own wellbeing ($\beta = .112, p = .015, CI [.037, .218]$), as does emotional value and disappointment ($\beta = -.044, p = .023, CI [-.084, -.008]$). Lastly, social closeness significantly mediates the relationship between recipient surprise and emotional value ($\beta = .071, p = .015, CI [.023, .132]$). These findings suggest distinct mechanisms between the sender and recipient models which are further discussed in the next section.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Our results show that, for both senders and recipients, online surprise gift-giving subscription services can have a positive impact on sender's and recipient's perceptions of recipient

wellbeing, largely through the same sequence of psychological processes: surprise – emotional value – emotions (happiness, disappointment) – wellbeing, with an additional focus on social closeness for the recipient. However, our findings also show that the impact of the online gifting service on emotions and wellbeing differs between senders and recipients.

As hypothesised, our findings show that surprise significantly influences the emotional value attributed to the gift for both senders and recipients. For senders, surprise directly enhances their perceptions of the emotional value the recipient will experience. This supports prior research suggesting that when givers anticipate positive affective reactions, they perceive their gifting goals as fulfilled (Baskin *et al.*, 2014). In our context, senders relied on their anticipated understanding of how the recipient would respond - a common feature of mediated or subscription-based gifting. Thus, a positive surprise may lead senders to project their own affective state onto the recipient, inferring higher emotional value from the gift (Flynn and Adams, 2009; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). For recipients, however, this relationship is indirect, operating through social closeness. The experience of surprise appears to heighten recipients' awareness of the sender's intent and thoughtfulness, which in turn strengthens perceived closeness and enhances emotional value (Noordewier and Breugelmans, 2013; Dunn *et al.*, 2008). This aligns with the relational view of gift giving, where gifts serve as symbolic expressions of social connection and relationship quality (Sherry, 1983; Liu *et al.*, 2019).

The positive impact of the perceived emotional value of the gift to the recipient on sender's happiness might be explained by Dunn *et al.*'s (2008) research which found that spending money on others may more positively impact happiness than spending money on oneself. Therefore, givers might be more inclined to feel happiness as they are less concerned with the feasibility of the gift (Baskin *et al.*, 2014) than their own altruistic gesture. Recipients might feel disappointed at the lack of perceived effort put into gift choice (Givi and Galak, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2019) or the nature of a gift (in our case, a pair of socks) that perhaps was not

seen as “extraordinary and special” (Belk, 1996). Other elements that determine ‘the perfect gift’ and positive reactions include the occasion, the timing, the place, and the surroundings (Vanhamme *et al.*, 2021), which in our research had to be imagined which might explain recipients’ negative feelings. Therefore, our findings about disappointment could confirm assumptions from past literature acknowledging that, with subscription services, there is the risk of receiving unappealing products (Bischof *et al.*, 2020).

Our results further show a non-significant relationship between disappointment and perceived recipient wellbeing, for senders only. The sender may feel disappointed by the gift that is chosen (particularly in this specific gift-giving context where they outsource gift choice to the service provider and therefore do not have control over the chosen gift), but this does not significantly affect how they believe recipient wellbeing will be impacted. This finding could be explained by several mechanisms identified in prior research. For example, emotional self–other distinction enables individuals to separate their own emotional responses from others’ experiences, particularly in the context of social exchanges such as gift giving (Silani *et al.*, 2013; Epley and Caruso, 2009). Thus, it is possible that some senders attribute their disappointment to personal dissatisfaction/disappointment/expectations rather than to the recipient’s emotional responses and related wellbeing. Some theories such as motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) suggest that cognitive mechanisms can help individuals ensure consistency in self-image, thoughts, emotions and/or expected outcomes as, “people are more likely to arrive at conclusions that they want to arrive at” (Kunda, 1990, p480). Moreover, research connected to affective forecasting research posits that, “humans can predict the hedonic consequences of events they’ve never experienced by simulating those events in their minds,” (Gilbert and Wilson, 2007, p1351; Gino and Flynn, 2011) which can explain why senders can overrate the emotional impact of their gesture and gifts, leading to an expected positive wellbeing outcome for

recipients even when the sender is personally disappointed with the gift. Moreover, prior work suggests that prosocial motivation (e.g. empathic concern, Batson, 1991; compassionate goals, Crocker and Canevello, 2008) can block negative affect spillover, in our case from sender's disappointment to recipient's wellbeing. This could mean that, despite their disappointment, the senders can maintain a perception of the recipient as happy and well, consistent with their initial prosocial intent and the positive meaning of the gesture.

Conversely, though the recipient may express disappointment at the gift itself, receiving a surprise gift is enough to positively impact their wellbeing. One plausible explanation to this unexpected finding is that, in this context, disappointment reflects an appraisal of the gift itself but does not necessarily undermine the broader positive impact of the gift-giving act. Recipients may express disappointment with certain aspects of the gift yet still experience positive effects on wellbeing simply by being the target of a thoughtful, surprising gesture. This is consistent with prior work showing that emotional wellbeing is not contingent on the absence of negative emotions (Park *et al.*, 2023); rather, it can emerge from a complex mix of affective states. Therefore, for a surprise gift to positively affect wellbeing, a combination of valenced emotions may be experienced. When combined with the specific gift-giving context, the very experience of surprise appears to be enough to affect recipient's wellbeing. Our findings also suggest that the emotional value of the gift plays an important buffering role: when recipients perceive high emotional value, disappointment is reduced, which in turn diminishes its potential negative impact on wellbeing.

We further explain these findings by considering the sender–recipient relationship. Chan and Mogilner (2017) show that gift giving plays an important role in maintaining and strengthening relationships, and Ruth *et al.*, (1999) show that even if negative emotions are experienced because of the actual gift, the recipient may still view the relationship positively. In other words, disappointment about the object can coexist with gratitude and appreciation for

the act, and these latter feelings may dominate in shaping wellbeing outcomes. Therefore, the valence of the emotional response may not be the sole determinant of the impact of surprise on wellbeing; the recipient also considers the wider gift-giving context and process, rather than focusing solely on the gift.

For senders, on the other hand, our results demonstrate a significant relationship between surprise and perceived wellbeing only via perceived emotional value and happiness. Importantly, the mediation via disappointment is non-significant. This indicates that sender's perceptions of recipient wellbeing do not rely on whether they believe the recipient will appreciate the surprise. Instead, the emotional value generated by the surprise is important. Our findings indicate that the sender's response to a surprise gift incorporates both their own valenced emotional response (i.e., happiness or disappointment) and their perceptions of the recipient's response (i.e., perceived emotional value), thus distinguishing such services from traditional gift-giving contexts where senders may be less likely to have an emotional response themselves to the gift they are giving.

Overall, our findings extend prior research which hints at differences in gift givers and recipients in responses to gift giving. Baskin *et al.*, (2014) suggest givers place greater emphasis on desirable products, rather than feasible ones, which may not accurately reflect recipient preferences, and Givi and Galak (2024) indicate that social norms guide both sender and recipient responses to gifts and the type of gift may violate such norms, resulting in discomfort. Similarly, Gino and Flynn (2011) demonstrate that recipients show higher levels of appreciation for gifts they have requested than for gifts that a sender believes they may like. In both studies the focus is on evaluating the gift itself, whereas our findings indicate the actual gift is less important. Instead, we demonstrate a distinction between senders and recipients and focus on the emotions attached to gift giving. A positively valenced emotional response to the gift guides sender's perceptions of recipient wellbeing, whereas the valence of the emotional

response is unimportant to recipients; it is the act of giving itself, the element of surprise, and the emotional value of the gift that positively affects their wellbeing, a concept perhaps familiar as “it’s the thought that counts” (Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011).

Theoretical implications

Overall, these insights into the differing psychological processes of both parties are novel and valuable, highlighting a nuanced and complex reaction to gift giving via an online subscription service. We contribute to the gift-giving literature by examining the impact of the senders’ and recipients’ emotional response on wellbeing, which is generally characterised by experiencing positive emotions and an absence of negative emotions (Keyes, 2002). Though Flynn and Adams (2009) mention that givers worry about their gift choice disappointing the recipient, and Vanhamme *et al.*, (2021) suggest that givers may choose a non-surprising gift to avoid this, both studies focus on the recipient’s potential emotional response. To our knowledge, no study has compared giver and recipient emotions. Therefore, we provide novel insights to individual sub-fields (i.e., emotions and consumer behaviour, technology-enabled services, gift giving, wellbeing) and connect knowledge from these areas by examining the effects of an online surprise gift-giving service on recipients’ wellbeing, from both senders’ and recipients’ perspective.

Importantly, our findings highlight that whilst recipients may indeed experience disappointment at a gift, the act of gift giving can positively influence recipient wellbeing due to the importance of the sender-recipient relationship. Whilst a focus on relationships has indeed been considered in much prior research on gift giving (as shown in Table I), our findings suggest differing psychological processes for senders and recipients, whereby the recipient’s response to a surprise gift is driven by social closeness with the sender, which ultimately impacts their wellbeing, irrespective of the valenced emotional response elicited by the gift.

On the other hand, senders consider the perceived emotional value of the surprise gift to enhance recipient wellbeing. This might suggest a mismatch in sender and recipient expectations around gift giving and its effects on wellbeing. Whilst Mu and Givi (2025) found that senders place greater importance on gift choice than recipients to the extent that senders overestimate the negative implications of choosing an undesirable gift, our study extends these findings by linking this to recipient wellbeing and explaining the psychological processes from both sender and recipient perspectives. By highlighting these complex psychological dynamics, we consider our findings enrich the current theoretical understanding both in consumer gift giving and related fields, particularly past research connected to the affective forecasting and egocentric bias in the context of gift-giving which infers that individuals often misjudge how others will feel because of psychological mechanisms such as projection or self-focused expectations (Gino and Flynn, 2011; Dunn *et al.*, 2008).

Additionally, the inclusion of recipient's wellbeing as the outcome variable in our decisional model represents an important addition not only to the gift-giving literature, but also to emerging research on online subscription-based services, mainly focused on product- or service-related outcomes (e.g., attitudes towards the offering, appeal, and perceived value). Table I clearly shows prior research fails to include wellbeing as a key variable of interest in the context of gift giving. Therefore, our focus and findings on recipient wellbeing from the dual perspective of giver and recipient, and how it links to surprise, is a key contribution. The findings also extend current understanding of the surprise-wellbeing link; the physiological effect of surprise on wellbeing is established in neuroscience research (see Luna and Renninger, 2015) but has not been explored in the marketing literature yet, providing scope for further study.

Furthermore, we contribute to the literature on subscription-based services, a new and growing area of online consumer behaviour (e.g., Bischof *et al.*, 2020). Despite consumer

appetite for them, knowledge about online subscription services, and particularly their application to gift giving and wellbeing, is lacking (as illustrated in Table I). The ongoing digital transformation, driven by increased technology adoption across the service sector (Sheth, 2020), further highlights the value of this research.

Practical implications

As online surprise gift-giving service providers typically focus on outcomes such as emotions, satisfaction, repurchase or recommendations, rather than wellbeing, our findings suggest that these companies should prioritise wellbeing outcomes in their offering, considering both the sender's and recipient's perspectives. To achieve this, companies could focus on the importance of the sender-recipient relationship to subjective wellbeing (d'Astous and Mouakhar-Klouz, 2022), and curating gifts that reflect this relationship could enhance perceptions of wellbeing. Additionally, the findings show that from the early stages of setting up the service, companies must understand the type of connection between the gift givers and recipients, as this affects the gift giving outcome, as well as the underpinning psychological mechanisms (e.g., social closeness in the recipient's model). Subscription gift services may also consider exploring the provision of experiential gifts as part of the subscriptions, as experiences are shown to enhance wellbeing more so than material gifts (Carter and Gilovich, 2012). Lastly, companies could focus on wellness-related gifts; a 2021 report from McKinsey & Company indicates that consumers are increasingly focused on health and wellness, with related products accounting for 70% of spending on wellness (Callaghan *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, tourism research indicates that wellness destinations enhance overall wellbeing (Thal and Hudson, 2017). Thus, drawing on this same idea, companies offering a subscription service that focuses on physical wellbeing can simultaneously increase overall subjective and psychological wellbeing.

Our research confirms that surprise plays an important role in online subscription gift-giving services for both givers and recipients. Whilst ordinarily gift givers bear the responsibility for gift selection and anticipating the recipient's response, surprise subscription gifts are chosen by the service provider; therefore, understanding expectation formation and how this differs between givers and recipients is crucial. Furthermore, the experience of surprise has different emotional outcomes. It is important to assess customer expectations to ensure an "adequate" level of surprise, "enough" to elicit emotional value and positive emotions, amongst both senders and recipients. Similarly, as too-high expectations can provoke a negative emotional response, marketing practitioners should consider the threshold at which disconfirmation may be reached, and the impact this might have on gift-giving behaviours. This could be facilitated by better understanding individuals, their relationship, and expectations around surprise gift-giving.

Our research also points to the important role of technology in improving wellbeing; though surprise is central to gift giving, online subscription services simplify the process by facilitating: i) surprise through handling gift selection, removing control from either party, and ii) the subscription gift model which permits the sequencing of the gift-giving and gift-receiving experience. Given the positive relationship between gift giving, positive emotions and wellbeing, this research spotlights the potentially multiplying effect of technology-enabled services on such outcomes. Moreover, given the convenience (a top consumer priority: NRF, 2020) and decreased decision fatigue offered by such services, it is likely that online subscription-based services (gift giving or beyond) will enhance wellbeing in today's fast-paced world.

Technology can also enable a personalised user experience which can positively impact shopping behaviours in certain circumstances (Riegger *et al.*, 2022), therefore this should be explored further in this context. For example, a questionnaire on the service provider's website

might be used as a personalisation tool. Aligned with research from Bischof *et al.*, (2020), this approach might be referred to as a curated surprise subscription, which would differ from the context of our study, as it gives the sender more control over the choice of gift and ultimately reduces the level of surprise the sender will also experience. Moreover, enhancing the level of autonomy and control the sender has over the gift selection through collecting sender's input could enhance senders' perceptions of the gift and also how they believe it will be received by the gift recipient, in line with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2012). Indeed, research from Mu and Givi (2025) indicates that choosing a good gift is more important to gift senders, which might suggest an increased importance of control in gift giving. As enhanced autonomy has been shown to improve positive affect (Deci and Ryan, 2000), applying this to a surprise gift-giving context could have significant positive and practical implications for the sender's relationship with the service provider.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite its novelty and contributions, this study has limitations. Firstly, the survey sample was drawn from an online panel. Therefore, despite being based on an existing service, survey respondents had to imagine the circumstances of gift giving. This might have influenced how thoroughly they carried out the task and responded to the stimuli. Future studies could replicate our survey with actual customers of the gift-giving service and over a longer period, given its repeat/subscription nature. Such research could also compare consumers' responses to different types of gifts across varying product categories (e.g., hedonic versus utilitarian) to assess whether the type of value offered shapes recipient reactions and relational outcomes, examine whether the service's novelty fades and its impact on key outcomes, and consider if subscription-based gift giving has the same effect on senders and recipients when chosen for occasion-based versus non-occasion-based gifting. Furthermore, future research in a real-life

setting could match giver and recipient responses from specific gift-giving exchanges and explore the potential (a)symmetry of reactions referred to by Givi (2021). While this study focuses on a single gift experience within a subscription-based service, future research could explore the longitudinal effects of multiple gift episodes to better understand how emotional and wellbeing responses evolve over time.

The survey focused on a British non-probability sample only; future research should replicate it with a more diverse sample and in a different cultural setting (e.g., collectivist societies) where gift giving might come with different expectations or emotional responses due to cultural and social factors (Beatty *et al.*, 1991). Coupled with our suggestions that future research could explore the context within which surprise gift giving takes place, addressing other samples and settings would enhance the generalizability of our findings and provide further evidence to support the psychological mechanisms we have identified for both senders and recipients in this study. By improving the external validity of our models, such findings could also provide further practical benefits to marketing researchers and practitioners.

Additionally, using a single-item measurement scale (“I was surprised”) to measure the subjective experience of sender and recipient surprise could be considered a limitation of our paper. Though prior research has labelled single-item measures as unable to adequately capture the complexity of psychological constructs (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007), a single-item measure of surprise is quite widely used within the literature, suggesting good validity and reliability (see Meyer *et al.*, 1997, Valenzuela *et al.*, 2010, Woltman Elpers *et al.*, 2004). As a valence-neutral emotion, the experience of surprise may be measured most effectively by measuring both the neutral emotion, along with the emotional response that follows it (in the case of our study, this comprises emotional value of the gift, as well as positively and negatively valenced emotions of happiness and disappointment). Allen *et al.*, (2022) indicate that single-item measures may indeed be more useful and efficient, particularly when collecting

panel data. Furthermore, it may be most pertinent to use single-item measures when a construct is considered unidimensional (Allen *et al.*, 2022). As a valence-neutral emotion, surprise is often measured solely along the dimension of arousal (Noordewier and Breugelmans, 2013), thus supporting the use of a single-item measure in our study.

Fourthly, the model did not consider any moderator variables (e.g., proneness to experiencing positive versus negative emotions (Larsen and Ketelaar, 1991)); personality traits (such as risk aversion, propensity for variety-seeking behaviour) that could strengthen or weaken the researched relationships and ultimately impact wellbeing. Since recipients usually feel obliged to show their gratitude when receiving a gift (Ward and Broniarczyk, 2016) due to social and cultural norms, gratitude in the context of surprise gift-giving services could be examined in future research as well, particularly when emotional responses are negative. Additionally, control variables could be used to further test both the sender and recipient models; for example, personality variables such as openness to new experiences and extraversion (see John and Srivastava, 1999) may affect an individual's propensity to use surprise gift-giving services.

Lastly, we examined only physical wellbeing. Future research could investigate other classifications or dimensions, such as cognitive and affective wellbeing (Davern *et al.*, 2007), eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2001), or social cohesion as a dimension of wellbeing (Kibria *et al.*, 2022). Senders' own wellbeing due to gift-giving could also be researched.

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Footnotes:

¹ Project Happy Note was an online start-up which aims to promote wellbeing through human connection by offering a subscription service that sends handwritten notes and surprise gifts (not selected by the sender) to a chosen recipient.

Table I: Overview of gift-giving and subscription-based services literature

Source	Methodology	Gift Giver/ Recipient Focus	Subscription-focused	Technology-mediated content	Surprise	Positive/Negative Emotions	Wellbeing	Relationship-focused	Key Findings	Main Research Gaps
Gift-giving literature										
Baskin <i>et al.</i> , (2014)	Survey Experiments	Giver Recipient				Positive		✓	Givers prioritise desirability over functionality and believe gifts impact recipient happiness and their relationship.	- The study focuses on gift selection but not on lack of control in subscription gifting - The effect of gift selection (or the giver electing a service to choose the gift) on interpersonal relationships is not fully examined. - The emotional responses to surprise gifts is not examined.
Branco-Illodo <i>et al.</i> , (2023)	Online diaries Interviews	Giver Recipient						✓	Givers develop a network of recipients based on their relationships, which can change over time.	- Traditional gift giving is examined but the study does not consider alternative contexts such as technology-mediated gift giving. - The study focuses on the giver-recipient relationship but does not consider the emotional response of both sender and recipient.
Chan and Mogilner (2017)	Experiments	Giver Recipient				Both	✓	✓	Gift giving affects the giver–recipient relationship and the wellbeing of both. Experiential gifts trigger more positive emotions when recipients take part in the experience. This also has a more positive impact on the giver-recipient relationship which impacts wellbeing.	- The study does not consider different types of wellbeing or examine wellbeing empirically from different perspectives. It only considers wellbeing as an outcome of material purchases.
Ciampa and de Valck (2024)	Netnography Guided introspections	Giver Recipient		✓				✓	The study explores co-creative gift systems within digital platforms, defining them as systems where consumers actively engage in content creation and sharing.	- The paper focuses on digital platforms and co-creation, but it does not explore the emotional outcomes (positive or negative) of these exchanges for either givers or recipients. - Although it discusses relationships and roles, it lacks an explicit wellbeing perspective.
Flynn and Adams (2009)	Online survey Experiment	Giver Recipient				Positive			Gift givers believe spending more on a gift equates to increased thoughtfulness for the recipient, yet price does not affect recipient appreciation when receiving a gift.	- The impact of the value of the gift on emotional response of the recipient is not investigated. - The focus is on positive emotional response only, therefore negative emotional responses are not examined.

Source	Methodology	Gift Giver/ Recipient Focus	Subscription-focused	Technology-mediated context	Surprise	Positive/Negative Emotions	Wellbeing	Relationship-focused	Key Findings	Main Research Gaps
Fu <i>et al.</i> , (2024)	Experiments	Givers		✓				✓	Givers avoid AI gift tools for close friends due to concerns over relational signaling and preference matching. This is moderated by perfectionism, giver identity disclosure, and AI interactivity.	- While the study has a strong technology focus (AI gift recommendation), it does not explore gifting via other tech platforms. - Wellbeing outcomes for givers or recipients are not directly measured - There is no exploration of recipient emotional responses, especially in mismatched gift scenarios resulting from AI use.
Givi (2021)	Experiments	Giver Recipient				Negative		✓	Sending an unexpected gift can make recipients uncomfortable as they are unable to reciprocate. This response and how it is perceived by the giver may lead to an appreciation imbalance.	- The potential asymmetry of gift giving and its impact on wellbeing is not explored. - The context of unexpected gift giving does not include the experience of surprise.
Givi and Galak (2021)	Experiments	Recipient				Both		✓	Gift quality matters less for non-occasion gifts; recipients expect higher quality for occasion-based gifts but don't always experience positive emotions.	- The study does not explore different gift giving contexts, such as subscription gifts. - Expectations are considered but the impact of the gift on future expectations around gift giving is not considered.
Givi and Galak (2024)	Experiments	Giver Recipient				Negative		✓	Social norms guide sender and recipient responses. Some gifts cause more discomfort, and senders may feel more discomfort than recipients.	- Expectations based on the relationship are explored but resulting surprise from norm violation is not considered in the study. - The effect of discomfort on the overall wellbeing of both sender and recipient is not explored.
Givi <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	Experiments	Giver Recipient				Both			Givers may focus on price, but recipients value thoughtfulness and compare less across gifts.	- Other factors that may impact the positive and negative emotional responses of givers and recipients are not examined, such as surprise.
Gupta <i>et al.</i> , (2020)	Qualitative interviews	Self-gifting	✓		✓	Both			Self-gifting, where the consumer is both giver and recipient, is common with surprise-based subscription boxes. The surprise can be positive or negative.	- Surprise may be categorised as positive or negative but the impact of negative surprise on wellbeing is not considered. - The focus is on self-gifting, so the study does not examine the fading effect of surprise over time.
Liu <i>et al.</i> , (2019)	Conceptual	Giver		✓		Positive		✓	Gift givers may choose gifts according to the recipients' preferences or gifts that balance these with their own. They may also select gifts that are focused on the recipient or the relationship.	- The study focuses on gift selection from a giver perspective only and does not account for control given to a surprise subscription service. - The role of digital gift giving is not examined. - The focus is on positive emotional responses.

Source	Methodology	Gift Giver/ Recipient Focus	Subscription-focused	Technology-mediated context	Surprise	Positive/Negative Emotions	Wellbeing	Relationship-focused	Key Findings	Main Research Gaps
Moreau <i>et al.</i> , (2011)	Experiments	Giver			✓	Both			Givers spend more and invest more time on gifts for others than for themselves when customisation is possible. Expectations formed around customisation can lead to positive or negative surprise. Givers are less willing to pay more when customisation includes brand names than when they have some input into the design.	- The role of uncertainty in customisation and the effect on giver's surprise is not considered. - Traditional gift giving is examined, rather than different contexts such as subscription gifting.
Mu and Givi (2025)	Experiments	Giver Recipient				Both		✓	Givers perceive selecting a good gift as more important than recipients do, often overestimating the impact of giving a bad gift. This mismatch can lead to poor gift choices and is shaped by the nature of the relationship.	- The study does not engage with technology-mediated gift selection tools. - It does not address the broader wellbeing implications of gift decision for givers or recipients.
Paolacci <i>et al.</i> , (2015)	Scenario-based experiments	Recipient				Both		✓	Higher congruence between the gift and the giver's identity increases recipient appreciation. Gifts that reflect the giver's core identity are better received than those aligned with the recipient's identity.	- Expectations around identity congruence and surprise are not explored
Park and Yi (2024)	Experiments	Giver Recipient		✓				✓	Givers believe offering recipients choices improves the gift, but recipients perceive these as less thoughtful. This giver–recipient asymmetry stems from differences in perceived effort. The negative response lessens in distant relationships or when attributes are preselected.	- While the study touches on digital gifting contexts, it does not explore the emotional consequences of using these platforms. - Wellbeing implications of perceived thoughtfulness are not explored. - Surprise or unsolicited gifts are not considered.
Reshadi and Givi (2023)	Experiments	Giver						✓	The perceived wealth of the recipient impacts how much the gift giver spends. Givers believe more expensive gifts will be better received by wealthier recipients, and wish to signal their own financial status through the gift they send.	- Liking the gift is examined, but the emotional response of both sender and recipient to the gift are not considered. - The study does not explore alternative gift-giving contexts such as surprise subscription gifts.
Reshadi <i>et al.</i> , (2023)	Experiments	Giver Recipient		✓					Givers are less likely to choose digital gift cards than recipients are to prefer receiving them, due to a perceived violation of gift-giving norms. Givers overestimate how negatively recipients perceive digital gift	- The study has a technology angle (digital vs. physical cards), but focuses on delivery mode. - While it addresses gift-giving, it focuses mainly on givers' norm perceptions and does not explore the emotional implications for recipients.

Source	Methodology	Gift Giver/ Recipient Focus	Subscription-focused	Technology-mediated context	Surprise	Positive/Negative Emotions	Wellbeing	Relationship-focused	Key Findings	Main Research Gaps
									cards, and this asymmetry is driven by attentiveness to social norms.	- Wellbeing implications of mismatched gift formats (digital vs. physical) are not directly explored.
Rixom <i>et al.</i> , (2020)	Survey Experiments	Recipient			✓	Positive		✓	Neat gift-wrapping affects expectations regarding gift quality, which can result in positive and negative surprise if these expectations are disconfirmed. It also affects how recipients perceive the nature of the giver-recipient relationship. This is consistent across gifts that provoke positive, negative, and neutral responses.	- Focus is on traditional gift giving rather than other contexts such as subscription gifts. - Negative responses are considered but the effects of negative surprise are not examined.
Ruth <i>et al.</i> , (1999)	Qualitative interviews Critical incident surveys	Recipient			✓	Both		✓	Receiving a gift can have six effects on the giver-recipient relationship from the recipient's perspective, based on the focus of the gift and the valence of the emotional response: i) strengthens the relationship, ii) affirms it, iii) little to no effect, iv) negatively confirms the relationship, v) weakens the relationship, and vi) results in the ending of the relationship.	- Negative emotions are considered but not the negative effect gift giving may have on the recipient (such as their wellbeing). - The focus is on a traditional gift-giving context and does not consider other types such as subscription gifts.
Sherry (1983)	Conceptual	Giver Recipient				Both		✓	Gift giving follows a three-stage process: gestation (encompasses everything prior to gift exchange), prestation (actual gift exchange) and reformulation (post gift exchange behaviours).	- The conceptualisation of the gift-giving process refers solely to traditional gift-giving settings (rather than new contexts such as surprise subscription services) and does not account for the effects of the recipient's emotional response to receiving a gift on post-exchange behaviours.
Sherry <i>et al.</i> , (1993)	Ethnographic study	Giver Recipient				Negative		✓	Sending and receiving gifts can provoke anxiety amongst consumers, which could be related to conflict in the giver-recipient relationship. Negative emotional responses can affect gift exchange and the relationship.	- The study does not consider the impact of surprise on emotional responses and recipient wellbeing.
Vanhamme and De Bont (2008)	Consumer panel data	Giver			✓			✓	Surprising the recipient using a gift is a strategic decision on the part of the gift giver.	- The impact of emotional variables is not examined within the gift-giving context; the authors suggest only sentimental value as an option but not actually an emotion. - It does not examine gift purchasing scenarios where surprising the recipient is not a strategic decision.

Source	Methodology	Gift Giver/ Recipient Focus	Subscription-focused	Technology-mediated context	Surprise	Positive/Negative Emotions	Wellbeing	Relationship-focused	Key Findings	Main Research Gaps
Vanhamme <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	Survey Interviews	Giver Recipient			✓	Positive		✓	The occasion, the time gift giving occurs, the type of gift, the location, who the gift is from, and the surroundings all affect whether a gift is perceived as surprising. Recipients enjoy surprising gifts because it is unexpected, and the sender has taken time to surprise them.	- The focus is specifically on the experience of surprise in gift giving and not its emotional antecedents or outcomes. - The study only considers traditional gift-giving settings.
Ward and Broniarczyk (2016)	Experiments	Giver Recipient				Both		✓	Gift givers who have a more distant relationship with the recipient focus more on what the recipient would like. A closer giver-recipient relationship is reflected by choosing a gift that is linked to this close relationship.	- The role of social closeness in gift exchange is not examined. - The role of recipient expectations based on the giver-recipient relationship are not examined.
Subscription-based services literature										
Bhatt <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	Qualitative interviews	Recipient	✓		✓	Positive			The experience of a surprise subscription package is related to experiential shopping. The anticipation regarding its contents, the surprise, and the positive emotional response (particularly a sense of fun and excitement) incentivise surprise subscription purchases.	- Surprise subscription gifts are examined from the buyer perspective only. - The emotional response to surprise subscription as gifts, from giver and recipient perspectives, are not included in the study. - The study adopts a qualitative methodology and therefore cannot establish causal relationships between key variables.
Bischof <i>et al.</i> , (2020)	Experiments	Recipient	✓	✓	✓	Both			Risk mediates the relationship between the type of subscription and attitudes towards it. A taxonomy classifies subscription services according to the degree of customisation and whether control is handed to the service provider or the consumer.	- Surprise subscription packages are explored but not in the context of gift-giving. - The study does not account for wellbeing in this subscription-based services context.
Noorda (2019)	Qualitative interviews	Recipient	✓	✓	✓	Positive			Subscription boxes are effective and provoke a positive emotional response in the recipient as surprise is a key component. Curated surprise is important as there is a theme to the subscription box so recipient expectations about its contents are formed.	- The effects of surprise subscription packages on the emotional response of the recipient (and gift giver) are not considered. - The focus is on subscription boxes in general, so the effect of themed subscription boxes (e.g., wellness) on the wellbeing of the recipient is not explored.
Rese and Baier (2025)	Choice-based conjoint analysis	Recipient	✓	✓	✓				Consumers prioritise price, overall value, and sustainability when selecting rental fashion subscription boxes. Willingness to pay for	- While the study examines technology-enabled subscription services, it does not consider them

Source	Methodology	Gift Giver/ Recipient Focus	Subscription-focused	Technology-mediated context	Surprise	Positive/Negative Emotions	Wellbeing	Relationship-focused	Key Findings	Main Research Gaps
									surprise is low unless combined with sustainable labels, particularly in self-assembled options.	through a gift-giving lens or for their relational impact. - The research focuses on consumer purchase intention, not the emotional dynamics of giving or receiving curated boxes as gifts.
Rudolph <i>et al.</i> , (2017)	Conceptual	Giver	✓	✓	✓				Product subscriptions can be classified into three types: i) predefined subscriptions, where contents are expected, ii) curated subscriptions with a degree of customisation resulting in moderate surprise, and iii) surprise subscriptions where contents are unexpected.	- The importance of the valenced emotional responses from a business perspective are not considered. - The value that surprise adds to the subscription model, to both givers and recipients, is not explored.
Woo and Ramkumar (2018)	Survey	Recipient	✓	✓	✓				Women, individuals with higher e-tailer trust, and those who are more fashion-conscious are more likely to use subscription-based online services (SOS). Surprisingly, age and exploratory product acquisition tendencies did not significantly predict SOS use.	- The study focuses on consumption behaviour and predictors, not the gift-giving potential of SOS models. - Emotional responses, especially those tied to surprise, are mentioned in passing but not empirically explored.
This study	Online Survey	Giver & Recipient	✓	✓	✓	Both	✓	✓	For senders, surprise at the gift impacts their perceptions of recipient wellbeing via the perceived emotional value of the gift and the sender's happiness with the chosen gift. On the other hand, the actual wellbeing of recipients is impacted by both happiness and disappointment at the gift. Social closeness with the sender guides the actual emotional value of the gift to the recipient, highlighting the importance of the sender-recipient relationship.	- Different types of gifts, for example both hedonic, utilitarian, or experiential gifts are not considered. - The study focuses on one gift sent as part of a surprise gift subscription. - Moderator variables that may impact the experience of surprise and subsequent relationships between variables are not included.

Source: Authors own work

Table II: Descriptive statistics

					Correlations				
Study variables		M	SD	CR	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Sender</i>									
1	Surprise	4.500	1.840	-	-	.839**	.897**	-.349**	.833**
2	Perceived Emotional Value	4.263	1.761	.941	.704	.841	.847**	-.549**	.837**
3	Happiness	4.069	1.852	.966	.805	.717	.905	-.561**	.819**
4	Disappointment	4.101	1.994	.946	.122	.301	.315	.853	-.442**
5	Sender Perceptions of Recipient Wellbeing	3.726	1.782	.961	.694	.701	.671	.195	.806
Note: Average variance extracted (AVE) in bold along the diagonal; correlation coefficients above the diagonal; squared correlations italicised below the diagonal.									
					Correlations				
Study variables		M	SD	CR	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Recipient</i>									
1	Surprise	4.990	1.612	-	-	.227**	.085	.150*	.005
2	Social Closeness	5.920	1.137	.876	.052	.702	.310**	.266**	-.220**
3	Emotional Value	4.913	1.756	.941	.007	.096	.842	.848**	-.694**
4	Happiness	4.750	1.751	.966	.023	.071	.719	.904	-.675**
5	Disappointment	3.012	1.975	.962	.000	.048	.482	.456	.895
6	Recipient Perceptions of Recipient Wellbeing	3.555	1.701	.944	.008	.023	.352	.372	.120
Note: Average variance extracted (AVE) in bold along the diagonal; correlation coefficients above the diagonal; squared correlations italicised below the diagonal.									

Source: Authors own work

Table III: Path analysis for Sender and Recipient Models

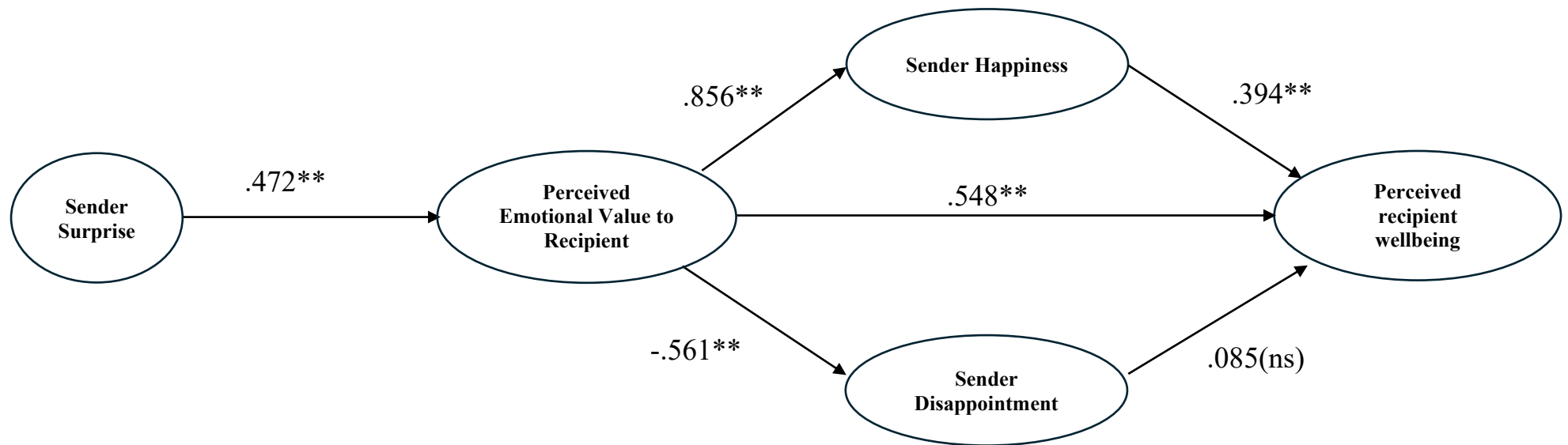
Hypotheses	Sender	
	Standardised estimate β	p-value
H1 _S Sender surprise → Senders perceived emotional value to recipient	.472	.000
H2 _{sa} Senders perceived emotional value to recipient → Sender happiness	.856	.000
H2 _{sb} Senders perceived emotional value to recipient → Sender disappointment	-.561	.000
H3 _S Senders perceived emotional value to recipient → Sender perceptions of recipient wellbeing	.548	.000
H4 _a Sender happiness → Sender perceptions of recipient wellbeing	.394	.000
H4 _b Sender disappointment → Sender perceptions of recipient wellbeing	.085	.077
*p < .05. **p < .001; (-) denotes a negative relationship. Sender Variance Explained: Perceived emotional value = 0.223**; Happiness = 0.733**; Disappointment = 0.314**; wellbeing = 0.750**.		

Hypotheses	Recipient	
	Standardised estimate β	p-value
H1 _R Recipient surprise → Social closeness	.228	.001
H2 _R Social closeness → Recipient perceived emotional value	.309	.000
H3 _{ra} Recipient perceived emotional value → Recipient happiness	.856	.000
H3 _{rb} Recipient perceived emotional value → Recipient disappointment	-.707	.000
H4 _R Recipient perceived emotional value → Recipient perceptions of recipient wellbeing	.371	.009
H5 _{ra} Recipient happiness → Recipient perceptions of recipient wellbeing	.424	.000
H5 _{rb} Recipient disappointment → Recipient perceptions of recipient wellbeing	.201	.000
*p < .05. **p < .001; (-) denotes a negative relationship; n/a denotes that the relationship was not hypothesised. Recipient Variance Explained: Social Closeness = 0.052(ns); Actual Emotional Value = 0.095*; Happiness = 0.733**; Disappointment = 0.500**; Wellbeing = 0.419**.		

Source: Authors own work

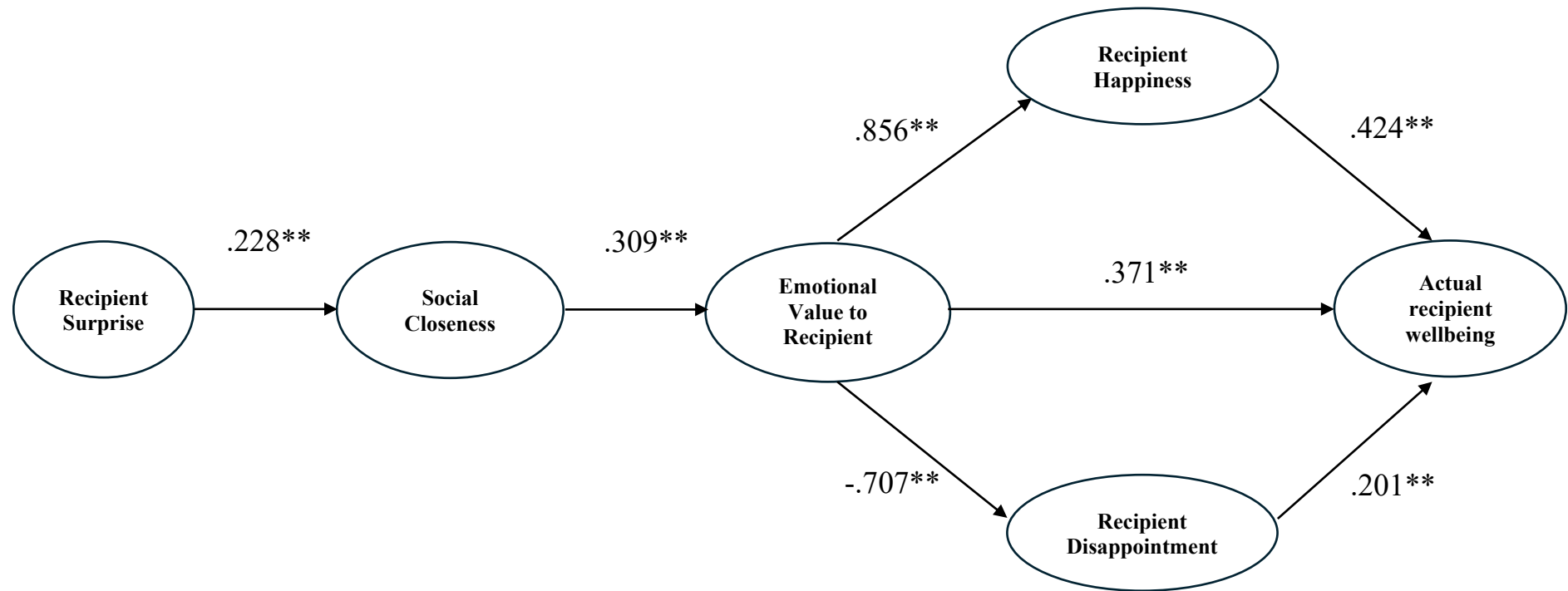
Figure 1
Structural equation modelling results for senders and recipients

Sender Model



Model fit ($\chi^2 = 164.872$, $df = 99$, $p = .000$; CFI = .982; TLI = .978; RMSEA = .051; SRMR = .034).

Recipient Model:



Model fit ($\chi^2 = 205.330$, $df = 146$, $p = .000$; CFI = .985; TLI = .983; RMSEA = .040; SRMR = .041).

Source: Authors own work

Appendix 1: Visual prompts used in the scenario: “Funky socks”

Please study the following product and message. Please imagine you would send/receive this gift to/from [recipient/service user chosen earlier]



Appendix 2: Original measurement scales

Construct	Items	Source
Subjective knowledge of subscription-based services (sender model only) <i>How much do you know about surprise gift services? (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	- I pretty much know about surprise gift services - I do not feel very knowledgeable about surprise gift services - Among my circle of friends, I am one of the “experts” on surprise gift services - Compared to most other people, I know less about surprise gift services - When it comes to surprise gift services, I really do not know a lot	Flynn and Goldsmith (1999)
Social Closeness <i>How would you describe your relationship with [insert name of giver] before receiving a gift? (7-point semantic differential scale)</i>	Closeness: - Extremely distance – Extremely close Connection: - Extremely disconnected – Extremely connected Relationship strength: - Extremely weak – Extremely strong	Chan and Mogilner (2017)
Surprise <i>Were you surprised at the gift? Please rate the extent to which you felt the following: (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	- I was surprised* - I was astonished - I was shocked - I was taken aback *indicates item used to measure surprise.	-
Happiness <i>To what extent did you feel... (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	- Happy - Pleased - Joyful	Richins (1997)
Disappointment <i>To what extent did you feel... (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	- Disappointed - Unimpressed - Underwhelmed	Smith and Bolton (2002)
Perceived Emotional Value <i>This service ... (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	- Is one that the recipient (/ you) would enjoy* - Would make the recipient (/ you) want to use it* - Is one that the recipient (/ you) would feel relaxed about using* - Would make the recipient (/ you) feel good - Would give the recipient (/ you) pleasure *indicates items used to measure perceived emotional value.	Walsh <i>et al.</i> , (2016)
Perceived (service user model)/ Actual (recipient model) wellbeing of the recipient <i>How... [insert scale item] ... do you think the recipient would feel as a result of receiving the gift you were shown previously? / How ... [insert scale item] ... do you think you would feel as a result of receiving this gift? (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	Physical: - Refreshed* - Energetic* - Resilient* - Rested - Invigorated* - Healthy* - Active* - Fatigued - Tired *indicates items used to measure perceived wellbeing.	King <i>et al.</i> , (2015)
Hedonic/ Utilitarian <i>To what extent would you agree that the gift is ... (7-point semantic differential scale)</i>	- Is functional – is pleasurable* - Affords enjoyment – performs a task - Is useful – is fun - Is a sensory experience – does a job - Is a necessity – is an indulgence* - Is a ‘must’ in life – is one of life’s ‘rewards’* *indicates 3 items used to report hedonic/ utilitarian nature of the gift.	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)

Note: (r) denotes reverse scored items.

Appendix 3: Confirmatory factor analysis

Construct	Items	Factor loadings		
		Sender	Recipient	
Sender (/ Recipient) surprise				
<i>Were you surprised at the gift? Please rate the extent to which you felt the following: (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	Surpris1	I was surprised	-	-
Social closeness <i>How would you describe your relationship with [insert name of gift giver] before receiving a gift? (7-point semantic differential scale)</i>	SocClos1	Extremely distant – Extremely close	-	.820
	SocClos2	Extremely disconnected – Extremely connected	-	.799
	SocClos3	Extremely weak – Extremely close	-	.892
Perceived (/ Actual) emotional value to the recipient <i>This service ... (1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	Pemvalue1	Is one that the recipient (/ you) would enjoy	.912	.932
	Pemvalue2	Would make the recipient (/you) want to use it	.944	.938
	Pemvalue 3	Is one that the recipient (/ you) would feel relaxed about	.899	.881
Sender (/ Recipient) happiness <i>To what extent did you feel...(1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	Happ1	Happy	.970	.962
	Happ2	Pleased	.943	.971
	Happ3	Joyful	.941	.917
Sender (/ Recipient) disappointment <i>To what extent did you feel...(1=not at all; 7=a great deal)</i>	Disapp1	Disappointed	.915	.938
	Disapp2	Unimpressed	.945	.968
	Disapp3	Underwhelmed	.910	.933
	Pwellb1	Active	.933	.907
	Pwellb2	Energetic	.927	.906
	Pwellb4	Healthy	.924	.879
Perceived (/ Actual) wellbeing of the recipient	Pwellb5	Invigorated	.846	.798
	Pwellb6	Refreshed	.908	.904
	Pwellb7	Resilient	.838	.744
	Model fit indices: Sender: $\chi^2 = 201.189$, $df = 99$, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.972; TLI = 0.966; RMSEA = .063; SRMR = .125; Recipient: $\chi^2 = 205.018$, $df = 143$, $p = 0.000$, CFI = 0.985; TLI = 0.982; RMSEA = .041; SRMR = .048 Note: Surprise was measured using a single item. Social closeness was measured only in the recipient model.			