Choice consistency and inconsistency between self- and gift-purchases: the role of attitude functions

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore when and why consumers hold inconsistent and consistent choices between self- and gift-purchases.

Design/methodology/approach – Across three paper-based questionnaire experiments, the authors examine how consumers’ preferences for desirability and feasibility vary with purchase types (self- vs gift-purchases) based on the functional theories of attitudes. The authors examine consumers’ attitude functions and their self-monitoring closely associated with chronic attitude functions.

Findings – The findings show that the social adjustive function moderates whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences across the two purchases. Specifically, consumers generally rely more on desirability in gift-purchases than self-purchases, whereas this inconsistent preference only exists when the social adjustive function is comparable or advantaged to the utilitarian function. When the social adjustive function is significantly disadvantaged relative to the utilitarian function, consumers consistently prefer feasibility irrespective of self- or gift-purchases.

Research limitations/implications – The research contributes to the familiar topic of consumers’ choice trade-offs between self- and gift-purchases. It documents the moderating role of the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes in whether they hold consistent or inconsistent choices across the two purchases. This extends the extensive research on self-other decisions.

Practical implications – The findings strongly suggest retailers identify or manipulate consumers’ attitude functions to make the attitude functions align with the purchase type when recommending products.

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Most relevant literature focuses on exploring choice differences between self- and gift-purchases. This research not only explores the choice differences but also attempts to find the condition under which people’s choices do not differ between the two purchases.

**Keywords** Self-purchase, Gift-purchase, Desirability, Feasibility, Attitude functions

**Paper type** Research paper

**Introduction**
Imagine that you are considering picking up a restaurant gift certificate for a friend. After screening, you notice two options:

1. a gift certificate for a highly-rated restaurant but an hour away (high desirability but low feasibility); and
2. a gift certificate for a medium-rated restaurant but only a few minutes away (high feasibility but low desirability).

Which one do you prefer? Would you choose a different one for yourself? Gift-giving is an important part of our lives (Sherry, 1983; Baskin et al., 2014). Consumers spend considerable money and time on gifts each year, e.g. Americans spent more than $1,000 on gifts per family and 15 h on average on gift selection in 2019 (Cheng et al., 2020). The choice conflicts between self- and gift-purchases are mostly common issues consumers face in daily consumption.

Desirability and feasibility are two frequently concerned attributes in self- and gift-purchases (Baskin et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2013; Rim et al., 2019). Desirability reflects the overall value of the end state, while feasibility reflects the process of achieving the end state (Lu et al., 2013; Trope and Liberman, 2010). Some products emphasize desirability, whereas some highlight feasibility. Although these two attributes are not entirely mutually exclusive (i.e. a product can be high in both desirability and feasibility), conflicting choices that are high (vs low) in desirability but low (vs high) in feasibility are more commonly faced (Lu et al., 2013). As such, it is necessary to understand which attribute is more attractive in self- and gift-purchases. This knowledge is quite valuable for offline and online retailers to selectively stress the more effective attribute in the hope of satisfying consumers’ needs. Particularly these days, online retailers have made it practical to personalize product recommendations (Lambrecht and Tucker, 2013). Understanding which attribute is more effective can help retailers improve recommendation algorithms and advertise products more efficiently in different purchases.

Self- and gift-purchases are fundamentally different (Eggert et al., 2019). Gift-purchases mainly serve to strengthen social ties and as a tool for interpersonal investments, whereas self-purchases primarily serve to satisfy personal needs or desires (Eggert et al., 2019; Ward and Broniarczyk, 2016). Most research stresses how consumers’ preferences differ across these two purchases (Eggert et al., 2019; Wu and Lee, 2016). For instance, Wu and Lee (2016) argue that consumers respond more favorably to the scarcity cues (e.g. limited edition) for self-purchases than gift-purchases. However, these two purchases are also interrelated because they both serve to facilitate self-presentation and meet self-values (Paolacci et al., 2015). Both self-possession and gifts are perceived as extensions of the self (Paolacci et al., 2015; Belk, 1988). This implies that there may exist a boundary condition under which consumers may hold consistent preferences between self- and gift-purchases, while little research has considered it.

This article seeks to investigate when and why consumers have consistent or inconsistent preferences for desirability and feasibility between self- and gift-purchases. The differences and similarities between self- and gift-purchases may lead consumers to hold different or similar expectations toward them. This will be reflected by the emphasis on the end-state (desirability) or
ease-to-use (feasibility) of product usage, which is closely associated with their attitudes (Grewal et al., 2004; Maio and Olson, 1995). The functional theories of attitudes suggest attitudes serve several psychological functions, including facilitating social interactions (the social adjustive function), seeking instrumental values (the utilitarian function), communication (the value expression function) and decision-making (the knowledge function) (Grewal et al., 2004; Shavitt, 1990; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Katz, 1960). These functions contribute to product attribute evaluations to meet intended expectations (Katz, 1960; Shavitt et al., 1992). We adopt consumers’ attitudes as a cue to identify the boundary condition under which they maintain preferences across the two purchases. Specifically, we attempt to answer the following questions:

Q1. When do consumers’ preferences for the two attributes (i.e. desirability and feasibility) hold consistent or inconsistent across self- and gift-purchases?

Q2. Why do consumers change preferences for these attributes across the two purchases from the perspective of consumers’ attitude functions?

Based on the functional theories of attitudes, we examine two functions of consumers’ attitudes (i.e. the social adjustive function and utilitarian function) that are most relevant to the core merits of self- and gift-purchases (i.e. satisfying self-needs vs improving social ties) and the construct of self-monitoring that is closely associated with the two attitude functions (Shavitt et al., 1992). We find that consumers generally rely more on desirability in gift-purchases relative to self-purchases. However, when we delve into consumers’ attitude functions, we find that:

- When the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is significantly disadvantaged relative to the utilitarian function, they consistently rely more on feasibility rather than desirability, irrespective of self- or gift-purchases.
- If the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is comparable or stronger relative to the utilitarian function, they rely more on desirability in gift-purchases relative to self-purchases.

Therefore, our findings suggest that the social adjustive function moderates whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences for the two attributes across self- and gift-purchases. Most existing literature on self-other decisions is based on the construal level theory (CLT) framework, such as Baskin et al. (2014) and Lu et al. (2013). This theoretical perspective stresses how consumers vary in choices with their psychological distance in self-other decisions. Nevertheless, we identify a boundary condition under which consumers do not differ in choices with the purchase type. Hence, our research contributes to both self-other decision literature and CLT research. Besides, we offer several implications for retailers. We suggest retailers align product attributes with consumers’ attitude functions. Online retailers can identify consumers’ attitude functions by analyzing consumers’ characteristics by tracing historical data, and offline retailers can achieve this through custom management (Das et al., 2018). Moreover, in addition to analyzing consumers’ attitude functions, retailers can even manipulate their temporary attitude functions by priming them with specially-designed advertising messages (Wilcox et al., 2009). We believe these practices will help retailers improve product recommendations.

Theoretical background

This part contains the following parts to illuminate consumer preferences between self- and gift-purchases:

- self-purchase vs gift-purchases;
- attitude functions and purchase types;
attitude functions and preferences between self- and gift-purchases; and
self-monitoring and preferences between self- and gift-purchases.

Self-purchases vs gift-purchases
Self- and gift-purchases are fundamentally different because gift-purchases entail two parties, but self-purchases only involve buyers themselves (Eggert et al., 2019). In self-purchases, the target product mainly serves to fulfill consumers’ needs and wants, driven by the motives that seek to conform to one’s values (Paolacci et al., 2015; Eggert et al., 2019). Consumers do not necessarily need to guess others’ views, although they sometimes need to show their possessions to others. This involves a much lower level of interpersonal risks (Eggert et al., 2019). In contrast, in gift-purchases, givers are not the ultimate consumers of the products. When selecting products, givers need to predict recipients’ preferences with the knowledge of recipients (Goodman and Lim, 2018) and imagine what will happen when the gifts are in recipients’ hands (Baskin et al., 2014). Givers seek to get appraisals from recipients and avoid gift failures (Yang and Urminsky, 2018), which elicits a high level of social anxiety and interpersonal risk (Wooten, 2000).

Such differences in self-other decisions have attracted intense academic interests, and most of them are established on the CLT. People experience high psychological distance when inferring others’ preferences in other-decisions, whereas they experience low psychological distance to evaluate self-preferences in self-decisions (Lu et al., 2013; Baskin et al., 2014). CLT claims that people rely more on the objects that fit their activated mental construal (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Specifically, consumers who experience high (vs low) psychological distance weigh more on high (vs low) construal attributes. This CLT account (i.e. the effect of psychological distance) for consumers’ preferences has been examined across eastern and western cultures and reached similar results (Lu et al., 2013; Baskin et al., 2014; Rim et al., 2019).

Regarding the two attributes, desirability vs feasibility, desirability represents the overall value of an action or object’s end state, which is regarded as a high construal level feature. Feasibility mainly refers to the means of how to get the end which is considered as a low construal-level feature (Trope and Liberman, 2010; Liberman and Trope, 1998). Hence, in accordance with the CLT framework, we suggest that consumers generally rely more on desirability in gift-purchases than in self-purchases.

Despite the evident differences, self- and gift-purchases still share similar disciplines. Consumers always pursue the feeling of making the right choice to conform to their identities, which is conceptualized as identity-based motivation (Paolacci et al., 2015; Oyserman, 2009). Gift-giving is not the exception to this motivation, and givers also have a strong desire to seek identity congruency when selecting a gift for others (Wooten, 2000; Paolacci et al., 2015). Otherwise, gift-givers will experience an identity threat (Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). Hence, there may exist a condition that consumers will not differ in their preferences between self- and gift-purchases, which is contingent on their motivations. Fundamentally, the functions of different purchases for pursuing particular goals play a core role in consumers’ preferences, which are largely determined by the intrinsic characteristics of different purchases and by the social definitions of the purchase (Shavitt et al., 1992). The goals that a certain purchase motivates consumers to achieve largely drive consumers’ motivations which are closely associated with attitudes toward the purchase (Shavitt, 1990). Hence, in the following, we discuss the roles of consumers’ attitudes in their preferences across self- and gift-purchases.

Attitude functions and purchase types
Functional theories of attitudes, first introduced by Katz (1960), suggest that people’s attitudes serve different functions closely associated with peoples’ motives and behaviors in
diverse conditions (Grewal et al., 2004; Shavitt, 1990; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). For instance, past research has proved that aligning the product message with consumers’ attitude functions can enhance the persuasion of the message (Clary et al., 1994; Petty and Wegener, 1998). Attitudes, generally, serve four functions, including seeking social approvals (social adjustive function), seeking benefits from products (utilitarian function), facilitating decision-making (knowledge function) and expressing selves (value expression function) (Shavitt et al., 1992; Grewal et al., 2004; DeBono, 1987; Locander and Spivey, 1978).

With regard to the core functions of self- and gift-purchases (i.e. satisfying self-needs vs improving social ties), the utilitarian and social adjustive functions of attitudes are most relevant because they precisely capture the merits and distinctions of the two purchases (Wilcox et al., 2009; Shavitt, 1990). Although some literature argues that the value expression function is also salient in self-purchases, we still reckon that the utilitarian function reflects the merit of self-purchases more precisely. The value expression function primarily serves to express one’s internal values and beliefs, which mainly works in a social setting and presents highly correlated with the social adjustive function (Wilcox et al., 2009).

In the following, we focus on the utilitarian and social adjustive functions and discuss how these two functions play in consumers’ preferences for feasibility and desirability across self- and gift-purchases.

**Attitude functions and preferences between self- and gift-purchases**

Much literature has been devoted to exploring the effects of attitude functions on consumers’ preferences. Some even carry out cross-culture research (i.e. eastern vs western cultures) and find that cultural factors have no direct impact on consumers’ attitude functions (Gregory et al., 2002; Choi et al., 2020). Typically, the utilitarian function of attitudes drives consumers to get maximum rewards and avoid punishments for products or services (Grewal et al., 2004; Shavitt et al., 1992). A strong utilitarian function drives consumers to focus on the intrinsic utility of the products and guides them to stress functional attributes (Snyder and DeBono, 1985) that are quite closely associated with the feasibility aspects of products (Baskin et al., 2014). Conversely, the social adjustive function of attitudes helps consumers achieve social approval and acceptance, driving them to highly conform to others’ expectations and social norms in decision-making (Wilcox et al., 2009; Grewal et al., 2004). Consumers whose attitudes mainly serve a social adjustive function are more responsive to products’ social valence, such as image appeals (Grewal et al., 2004; Shavitt et al., 1992; Snyder and DeBono, 1985), closely associated with desirability aspects of products (Baskin et al., 2014).

If the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is significantly lower relative to the utilitarian function, the role of the utilitarian function will override that of the social adjustive function in consumers’ decision-making. As a result, consumers are typically highly concerned about the aspects related to the functional and practical dimensions of products, i.e. feasibility aspects, such as the convenience of a printer or the ease of using an air conditioner (Shavitt et al., 1992). In other words, the relative weight of social appropriateness and valence of products decreases in consumers’ decisions. In gift-purchases, as gift-givers, consumers usually emphasize the social valance of products in product selection (Baskin et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the strong utilitarian function of consumers’ attitudes will drive them to respond more favorably to function-related attributes than social valence-related attributes that are associated with the social adjustive function (Schlosser, 1998; Grewal et al., 2004). Consequently, the salient utilitarian function leads the feasibility aspects of products to play a major part in decision-making, and consumers will rely more on feasibility in gift-purchases relative to desirability. In self-purchases, consumers primarily pursue what the functional aspects of products can offer to...
satisfy self-needs (Eggert et al., 2019), which echoes what feasibility mainly reflects. Hence, it is reasonable to conjecture that consumers will prefer products with high feasibility but low desirability relative to those with low feasibility and high desirability. Formally:

**H1.** When consumer attitudes’ social adjustive function is significantly weaker than the utilitarian function, consumers will consistently rely more on feasibility relative to desirability in both self- and gift-purchases.

However, if the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes rises to a comparable or even stronger role relative to the utilitarian function, consumers will become sensitive to social factors and the message which makes appeals to social approval. Consumers will consider social factors more in their decision-making and change their preference weight between feasibility and desirability. As aforementioned, desirability emphasizes the overall quality and desired end state (Lu et al., 2013; Baskin et al., 2014), which helps enhance givers’ social standing and express how much givers care about recipients. In gift-giving, pleasing recipients and establishing desirable public images are the two main goals (Paolacci et al., 2015; Wooten, 2000; Baskin et al., 2014). Hence, desirability matches the core merits of gifts (Rim et al., 2019; Baskin et al., 2014). When selecting gifts for others, the social adjustive function will drive consumers to put more weight on desirability for its high social utility. However, when selecting products in self-purchases, consumers mainly think about self-consumption and satisfying personal needs instead of social appropriateness (Eggert et al., 2019). In this case, the utilitarian function will play a dominant role in consumers’ preferences. As aforementioned, a strong utilitarian function will lead consumers to be more responsive to feasibility attributes. Hence, the social adjustive function should not change the preference for feasibility in self-purchases. Therefore, consumers’ preferences for feasibility and desirability are inconsistent across self- and gift-purchases, and we hypothesize:

**H2.** When the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes plays a comparable or stronger role relative to the utilitarian function, consumers rely more on desirability in gift-purchases than in self-purchases.

By combining H1 and H2, we conclude that when the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is significantly weaker than the utilitarian function, they hold consistent preferences across the self- and gift-purchases. When the social adjustive function is comparable to or stronger than the utilitarian, consumers hold inconsistent preferences across the two purchases. Hence, we propose the following:

**H3.** The social adjustive function moderates whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences for feasibility and desirability across self- and gift-purchases.

**Self-monitoring and preferences between self- and gift-purchases**

Self-monitoring reflects the extent to which individuals regulate their behaviors in response to situational or dispositional factors (Lennox and Wolfe, 1984; Snyder, 1974). Previous research finds that self-monitoring is closely associated with the functions that individuals’ attitudes chronically serve (Wilcox et al., 2009; Shavitt et al., 1992). Low self-monitors have high self-consciousness and individuation, and they are less likely to consider social influences and care less about social norms (Spangenberg and Sprott, 2006; Lennox and Wolfe, 1984; Shavitt et al., 1992). Hence, they are consistently influenced by self-concepts,
which leads them to be strongly in line with internal feelings and easily persuaded by the message satisfying their own needs (Spangenberg and Sprott, 2006). Consequently, the attitudes of low self-monitors predominantly serve the utilitarian function, and they are supposed to consistently stress the feasibility aspects (Shavitt et al., 1992).

In contrast, high self-monitors are highly concerned with the public images that help them fit into social situations and gain others’ approval (Snyder, 1974). They tend to care much about how others will perceive them through evaluating their purchase, and they are easily persuaded by the aspects of products that convey high social valence. Hence, the attitudes of high self-monitors predominantly serve the social adjustive function (Spangenberg and Sprott, 2006; Shavitt et al., 1992). Therefore, in line with H1 and H2, we propose that:

H4. Low self-monitors consistently prefer feasibility more than the desirability of products in both self- and gift-purchases. However, high self-monitors prefer desirability in gift-purchases than in self-purchases.

Study overview
We performed three studies to examine our hypotheses, and the data availability link is shown in Appendix 4. Study 1 provides a baseline of our research, which examines consumers’ general preferences for desirability and feasibility between self- and gift-purchases based on the CLT framework. Study 2 first replicates the result of Study 1 and then extends it by examining participants’ attitude functions and identifying the boundary condition under which consumers hold consistent preferences in both self- and gift-purchases. We predict that the social adjustive function moderates whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences between self- and gift-purchases.

Nevertheless, there is a potential risk that participants’ attitude functions may vary with the purchase type. Hence, to mitigate such a risk, we carry out Study 3 to bolster the findings of Study 2 by applying the self-monitoring construct to reflect participants’ attitude functions because the trait-based construct is supposed to be more stable. Across the three studies, we successfully document our hypotheses and conclude the article by discussing theoretical and managerial implications.

Study 1
In this study, we seek initial evidence to disclose consumers’ asymmetric preferences for desirability and feasibility across self- and gift-purchases, as well as their mental construal. As aforementioned, products with both high (vs low) desirability and feasibility should probably be most (vs least) preferred. Hence, in this study and the following studies, we only test participants’ preferences for the conflicting choices (i.e. products with high desirability and low feasibility or products with low desirability and high feasibility).

We use a widely applied measurement, the behavioral identification form (BIF) questionnaire, to examine participants’ mental construal, which requires them to describe daily actions with abstract or concrete expressions (Liberman and Trope, 1998; Baskin et al., 2014). The classic BIF questionnaire contains 25 items from Vallacher and Wegner (1989). However, previous literature also documents that a relatively small number of items chosen from the 25 items can also effectively measure participants’ mental construal levels (Alter et al., 2010; Sinha and Lu, 2019). We adopt a shortened version of the BIF questionnaire from Sinha and Lu (2019) because this research also tests participants’ mental construal and
preferences in a psychologically close vs distant context, similar to our research. The shortened version of the BIF questionnaire contains 10 items chosen from 25 items.

Participants and methods
Two hundred and twenty students (38.2% males, $M_{\text{age}} = 23.70, SD = 5.76$) from a marketing course at a large Chinese public university attended this study in exchange for monetary payment. Participants got paid with the help of the WeChat Red Packet. We adopted a 2 (purchase type: self- vs gift-purchase) between-subject design. We mixed the questionnaires with the two conditions and distributed them to participants randomly, which was also adopted in the following two studies. Participants were instructed to avoid communication throughout the experiment. We confirmed that participants’ age and gender factors did not affect their preferences and mental construal across the two purchases and reported the analysis in Appendix 5, which was the same in Studies 2 and 3.

Participants imagined that they were going to make purchases either for themselves or gifts for their friends. They viewed a list of six products we prepared in advance and indicated their preferences for each product. Each product has two descriptions, one with high desirability-low feasibility (e.g. a high-rated restaurant that is far away) and the other with low desirability-high feasibility (e.g. a medium-rated restaurant that is nearby). We asked participants to rate their preferences between the two descriptions of each product. The six products were a coffee maker, a restaurant choice, a pen, movie tickets, a backpack and a thermos cup. We picked up the first four gifts from Baskin et al. (2014), which were relatively common in gift-giving, and newly created the last two options (i.e. a backpack and a thermos cup) based on the previous research on desirability and feasibility (Baskin et al., 2014; Liberman and Trope, 1998). The details are shown in Appendix 1.

After indicating preferences, participants responded to a modified BIF questionnaire consisting of 10 behaviors. By doing this, we aimed to examine participants’ mental construal in self- or gift-purchases. Finally, the participants completed a survey related to demographics, got paid and ended.

Measures
Preferences ratings When rating preferences between two descriptions of each product, participants were asked to rate with an 11-point scale (1 – strongly prefer Description A, 11 – strongly prefer Description B). A larger scale could help to reflect participants’ preference differences effectively, similarly applied in Study 1a of Goodman and Lim (2018). The product order and the two descriptions were counterbalanced across participants.

Mental construal The modified BIF questionnaire was from Sinha and Lu (2019), which contained ten daily behaviors and is shown in Appendix 2. The 10 daily behaviors were taken from the BIF questionnaire developed by Vallacher and Wegner (1989). Each behavior had two descriptions, i.e. the low-construal description and the high-construal one. For instance, for the behavior of “making a list,” the low-construal description was “Writing things down,” and the high-construal description was “Getting organised.” Participants rated between the two descriptions of each behavior on a 7-point scale (1 – strongly prefer Description A, 11 – strongly prefer Description B). The two descriptions were also counterbalanced between participants. Since the modified BIF questionnaire was developed in English, we translated it into Chinese and back-translated it into English to check the description accuracy. This method was also adopted in the following two studies for other measures.
Results
In the data analysis, we reversed ratings of both preferences and BIF for the final data analysis to let high (vs low) ratings for the desirability (vs feasibility) options and high (vs low) construal level descriptions. We averaged the preferences for the six products and the ten activities from BIF to create preference and mental construal scores. We compared the overall participants’ preferences with the mid-value of the scale ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.68$ vs $M_{\text{mid}} = 6$, $t(219) = 1.7$, $p = 0.09 < 0.1$, $d = 0.16$) and revealed a marginally significant result, indicating that, generally, participants emphasized more on feasibility aspects than desirability ones in decisions.

Further, we performed a repeated-measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) analysis with the purchase type as the between-subject factor and participants’ ratings for preferences and mental construal as within-subject factors. The results showed a significant main between-subject effect of the purchase type on participants’ ratings for preferences and mental construal ($F(1, 218) = 8.48$, $p = 0.004 < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.037$), whereas the interaction between the purchase type and within-subject factors was not significant ($F(1, 218) = 1.25$, $p = 0.264 > 0.1$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.006$). Specifically, participants preferred high desirability-low feasibility options more in gift-purchases than in self-purchases ($M_{\text{self}} = 5.56$, $SD = 1.67$ vs $M_{\text{gift}} = 6.05$, $SD = 1.67$, $F(1, 218) = 4.85$, $p = 0.029 < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.022$).

As expected, participants’ mental construal was higher in gift-purchases than in self-purchases. Participants’ ratings for high construal level descriptions in gift-purchases were significantly higher than in self-purchases ($M_{\text{gift}} = 4.37$, $SD = 0.70$ vs $M_{\text{self}} = 4.15$, $SD = 0.72$, $F(1, 218) = 5.62$, $p = 0.019 < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.025$), shown in Figure 1.

Discussion
This study documents consumers’ general inconsistent preferences and mental construal between self- and gift-purchases. This echoes previous literature on self-other decisions, particularly the study of Lu et al. (2013), which studies individuals’ preference between desirability and feasibility when making decisions for the self and others as advisors. However, the role of making decisions for others in Lu et al. (2013) is advisor, which is different from ours, i.e. gift-givers. Advisors usually communicate with decision targets, whereas givers usually do not. The findings of both this study and Lu et al. (2013) follow the
CLT framework. This suggests that mental construal plays a key role in self-other decisions irrespective of the kind of other-decisions. Nevertheless, this study only provides information about consumers’ inconsistent preferences across self- and gift-purchases, which does not support our hypotheses. To document our hypotheses, we examine consumers’ attitude functions in Study 2 in the hope of identifying a boundary condition under which such inconsistent preferences do not hold.

Study 2
In this study, we aim to provide support for our \(H1, H2 \text{ and } H3\) to better understand consumers’ preferences across self- and gift-purchases. Using the functional theories of attitudes, we segment consumers based on their attitude functions and predict that:

- if the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is significantly disadvantaged relative to the utilitarian function, they consistently prefer feasibility more in both self- and gift-purchases; and
- if the social adjustive function plays a comparable or stronger role relative to the utilitarian function, consumers prefer desirability more in gift-purchases than in self-purchases due to the activated social adjustive function.

We also adopt a 2(purchase type: self- vs gift-purchases) between-subject design.

Participants and methods
Participants and procedure. Two hundred and thirty-eight students (33.6% Males, \(M_{age} = 20.58, SD = 1.71\)) from a large Chinese public university attended this study in exchange for monetary compensation. We adopted four products from Study 1: the pen, the movie ticket, the backpack and the thermos cup, whose descriptions were identical to Study 1. We removed the coffee maker and restaurant choice because most participants in Study 1 reported that they had few opportunities to use coffee makers and rarely considered them as gifts. In addition, most participants reported that it was unimaginable to spend 1-h travel for dinner currently. The whole procedure was similar to Study 1 with the following differences:

- we measured the social adjustive and utilitarian functions of participants’ attitudes after participants indicated their preferences for all products; and
- we removed the mental construal measures (i.e. BIF questionnaire). The measures for the two attitude functions were counterbalanced.

Measures
Preference ratings. Similar to Study 1, we still adopted an 11-point scale for measuring preferences (1 – strongly prefer Option A, 11 – strongly prefer Option B).

Social adjustive function. We adopted a six-item, 7-point scale adapted from Grewal et al. (2004) \((\alpha = 0.83)\). We asked participants to indicate how much they agreed with the following six statements when indicating preferences for the products (1 – extremely disagree, 7 – extremely agree): “The product helps to express my tastes”; “The product is a symbol of social status”; “The product helps me in fitting into important social situations”; “The product helps to indicate to others what kind of person I am”; “I enjoy others will like what I have bought”; “The product that a person owns tells me a lot about that person”.

Utilitarian function. We synthesized the measures from Grewal et al. (2004) and Shavitt (1990) \((\alpha = 0.89)\) to measure the utilitarian function with a six-item, 7-point scale (1 – extremely disagree, 7 – extremely agree). Participants indicated how much they agreed with...
the following claims when rating preferences: “The features or attributes of the product seem quite useful”; “The product helps in minimizing life’s punishments”; “The product makes it possible for me to maximize life’s rewards”; “The product is practical to satisfy daily needs”; “It is convenient for the product to be effective”; “The performance of the product fits daily needs well.”

Results

Preferences ratings. Similar to Study 1, we transformed the ratings of preferences into low scores for feasibility and high scores for desirability (1 – feasibility description, 11 – desirability description) and then averaged the scores for the four products to reflect participants’ preferences for feasibility and desirability. We also found that participants generally prefer the high-feasibility and low-desirability options (M = 5.58, SD = 1.45 vs M_mid = 6, t(237) = 4.49, p < 0.001, d = 0.41). Further, results of one-way ANOVA showed that the participants’ preferences differed between the two experimental conditions: they preferred products with high desirability-low feasibility in gift-purchases more than in self-purchases (M_gift = 5.87, SD = 1.51 vs M_self = 5.32, SD = 1.35, F(1, 236) = 8.706, p = 0.003 < 0.01, η^2_p = 0.036). All these results were consistent with Study 1.

Construct of attitude functions. To assess the measurements of the social adjustive and utilitarian functions of attitudes, we applied an exploratory factor analysis (EFA): the loading of the items in each construct was higher than 0.5, and the items were loaded into separate factors (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = 0.820, Bartlett’s test of sphericity, chi-square = 1323.701, df = 66, p < 0.001), detailed results shown in Appendix 3. Then we averaged the scores of the items for each construct to reflect the social adjustive and utilitarian functions of participants’ attitudes.

However, results of one-way ANOVA showed that the two attitude functions did not differ across the two conditions (social-adjunctive: M_gift = 4.91, SD = 0.90 vs M_self = 4.93, SD = 1.02, F(1, 236) = 0.024, p = 0.878, η^2_p = 0.000; utilitarian: M_gift = 5.70, SD = 0.75 vs M_self = 5.83, SD = 0.67, F(1, 236) = 1.737, p = 0.189, η^2_p = 0.007). Based on Pearson correlation analysis (two-tailed), we further found that the correlation between the social adjustive and utilitarian functions was rather low (r = 0.182, p = 0.005), and these two functions were not correlated with purchase type (social adjustive function = -0.01, p = 0.878; utilitarian function = -0.085, p = 0.189), implying these two constructs were independent and integral (Wilcox et al., 2009).

Moderating role of the social adjustive function. We dummy-coded the conditions of self- and gift-purchases as “0” and “1”. We first mean-centered all the variables (Aiken and West, 1991) and then conducted a multiple regression by regressing preferences on the purchase type, social adjustive function and utilitarian function, purchase type × the social adjustive function and purchase type × the utilitarian function (F(5, 232) = 8.754, p < 0.001, R^2_change = 0.159). As expected, the purchase type (b = 0.481, t = 2.742, p = 0.007 < 0.01) and social adjustive function (b = 0.303, t = 3.247, p = 0.001 < 0.01) served as positive predictors of preferences, suggesting that the gift-purchase and social adjustive function led to greater preferences for desirability. In contrast, the utilitarian function served as a negative predictor (b = -0.608, t = -4.773, p < 0.001), suggesting the utilitarian function led to preferences for feasibility. Notably, the interaction between the social adjustive function and purchase type was marginally significant (b = 0.360, t = 1.918, p = 0.056 < 0.1), whereas the interaction between the utilitarian function and purchase type was not (b = 0.219, t = 0.867, p = 0.387).

To better explore the effect of the interaction between the purchase type and social adjustive function, we investigated two regression lines’ slopes (Aiken and West, 1991), one
for the strong social adjustive function (one standard above the mean) and the other for the weak social adjustive function (one standard below the mean). Finally, we found that the purchase type was a positive predictor of the preference for desirability when the social adjustive function was strong ($b = 1.01$, $t = 3.89$, $p < 0.001$) but was not when the social adjustive function was weak ($b = 0.092$, $t = 0.35$, $p = 0.72$). Hence, the social adjustive function served a moderating role, and $H3$ was supported.

These results further supported the moderating role of the social adjustive function and our prediction that participants preferred desirability in gift-purchases when their attitudes served a strong social adjustive function. Given that the moderator (i.e. social adjustive function) was a continuous variable, we decomposed the interaction effect by applying the J–N method (Johnson and Neyman, 1936) and performed a floodlight analysis to examine the effect of the social adjustive function, see Figure 2.

**Group comparison.** Because the two attitude functions were independent, integral and uncorrelated with the purchase type, we split the participants into two groups: a social adjustive group and a utilitarian group. We split the participants around the median value of the difference between social adjustive and utilitarian functions (social adjustive scores minus utilitarian scores, the median was $-0.67$). This method has also been adopted by Wilcox et al. (2009), Shavitt et al. (1992) and Shavitt and Fazio (1991).

Then we compared the preferences, social adjustive and utilitarian functions across the two groups. One-way ANOVA showed that the attitudes of the utilitarian group served a significant stronger utilitarian function compared to the social adjustive group ($M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 6.03$, $SD = 0.68$ vs $M_{\text{social}} = 5.53$, $SD = 0.67$, $F(1, 236) = 31.70$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.118$), and the social adjustive group served a significant stronger social adjustive function compared to the utilitarian group ($M_{\text{social}} = 5.50$, $SD = 0.66$ vs $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 4.28$, $SD = 0.83$, $F(1, 236) = 160.61$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.405$). As expected, the utilitarian group showed greater preferences for feasibility attributes than did the social adjustive group ($M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.24$, $SD = 1.31$ vs $M_{\text{social}} = 5.88$, $SD = 1.51$, $F(1, 236) = 12.28$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.049$), thereby confirming the successful manipulation of splitting. In the following, we compared participants’ preferences between feasibility and desirability in each group.

In the utilitarian group, the social adjustive function of participants’ attitudes plays a significantly weaker role than the utilitarian function ($M_{\text{social}} = 4.28$, $SD = 0.83$ vs $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 6.03$, $SD = 0.68$, $t(112) = 22.95$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.32$). The results of repeated-measure ANOVA showed that both the interaction between the purchase type and the attitude functions and the main effect of the purchase type on the preferences were not significant (both $Fs < 1$). Both the social adjustive and utilitarian functions did not differ

![Figure 2. Study 2: floodlight analysis of the social adjustive function’s moderating role](image-url)
across the two experimental conditions (both Fs < 1). In addition, in each experimental condition (i.e. self- and gift-purchases), the utilitarian function of participants’ attitudes played a dominant role (self-purchase: $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.98$, SD = 0.72; gift-purchase: $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 6.07$, SD = 0.63), compared with the social adjusitive function (self-purchase: $M_{\text{social}} = 4.22$, SD = 0.87, $t(58) = 16.36$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.20$; gift-purchase: $M_{\text{social}} = 4.34$, SD = 0.78, $t(53) = 15.97$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.45$), shown in Figure 3. Participants’ preferences held steady across self- and gift-purchases ($F < 1$). With a one-sample $t$-test (test value = 6), we compared participants’ preferences with the middle value of the scale and confirmed that the preferences in both experimental conditions were significantly below 6 (self-purchase: $M = 5.14$, SD = 1.26 vs $M_{\text{mid}} = 6$, $t(58) = 5.22$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.96$; gift-purchase: $M = 5.34$, SD = 1.38 vs $M_{\text{mid}} = 6$, $t(53) = 3.51$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.68$), indicating the participants consistently preferred high feasibility-low desirability products, supporting $H1$.

In the social adjustive group, the social adjusitive function of participants’ attitudes plays a comparable role with the utilitarian function ($M_{\text{social}} = 5.50$, SD = 0.66 vs $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.53$, SD = 0.67, $t(124) = 0.491$, $p = 0.66$). The results of repeated-measure ANOVA showed a significant interaction between the purchase type and the attitude functions ($F(1, 123) = 4.27$, $p = 0.041 < 0.05$, $\eta^2_p = 0.034$) and a significant main effect of the purchase type on the preferences ($F(1, 123) = 4.43$, $p = 0.037 < 0.05$, $\eta^2_p = 0.035$). Specifically, the social adjusitive function presented steady across the two conditions ($M_{\text{gift}} = 5.43$, SD = 0.66 vs $M_{\text{self}} = 5.57$, SD = 0.67, $F(1, 123) = 1.26$, $p = 0.263$, $\eta^2_p = 0.010$), whereas the utilitarian function varied significantly. The utilitarian function showed significantly weaker in gift-purchases than self-purchases ($M_{\text{gift}} = 5.36$, SD = 0.70 vs $M_{\text{self}} = 5.69$, SD = 0.60, $F(1, 123) = 7.69$, $p = 0.006 < 0.01$, $\eta^2_p = 0.059$). Then, we conducted paired comparisons between social adjusitive and utilitarian functions in each experimental condition and found that the utilitarian function was stronger than social adjusitive function in self-purchases ($M_{\text{social}} = 5.57$, SD = 0.67 vs $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.69$, SD = 0.60, $t(65) = 0.023 < 0.05$, $d = 0.19$), whereas these two attitude functions were similar in gift-purchases ($M_{\text{social}} = 5.43$, SD = 0.66 vs $M_{\text{utilitarian}} = 5.36$, SD = 0.70, $t(58) = 0.878$, $p = 0.383$, $d = 0.1$).

Regarding the preferences between desirability and feasibility, participants showed significantly higher preferences for products with high-desirability and low-feasibility in gift purchases ($M_{\text{gift}} = 6.34$, SD = 1.47 vs $M_{\text{self}} = 5.47$, SD = 1.42, $F(1, 123) = 11.26$, $p = 0.001 < 0.01$, $\eta^2_p = 0.084$), shown in Figure 3. The $H2$ was supported. We also confirmed that preferences in self-purchases were significantly lower than the mid-value ($M_{\text{self}} = 5.47$, SD = 1.42 vs $M_{\text{mid}} = 6$, $t(65) = 3.01$, $p = 0.004$, $d = 0.52$), whereas those in gift-purchases were marginally higher than the mid-value ($M_{\text{gift}} = 6.34$, SD = 1.47 vs $M_{\text{mid}} = 6$, $t(53) = 1.79$, $p = 0.08$).

**Notes:** (a) Utilitarian group; (b) social adjusitive group
0.079, \( d = 0.33 \)). This suggested that the social adjustive function led participants to raise the weight of desirability in the decision.

Of our interest was whether the utilitarian function could explain the effect of purchase type on preferences. We applied PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) to confirm that the utilitarian function mediated the effect of purchase type on product preferences (\( \beta = 0.14, \) standard error = 0.095, 95% confidence interval: 0.0103 to 0.3972).

**Discussion**
This study extends Study 1 in two aspects on the basis of confirming the results of Study 1. First, we delve into consumers’ preferences across self- and gift-purchases based on their attitude functions. Specifically, we document the moderating role of the social adjustive function (supporting \( H3 \)) and then explore consumers’ preferences in two conditions:

1. when the utilitarian function is dominant (supporting \( H1 \)); and
2. when the social adjustive function is comparable to the utilitarian function (supporting \( H2 \)).

Second, we found that participants’ utilitarian function mediates their preferences across the two purchases when the social adjustive function is comparable to the utilitarian function.

However, this study has two limitations. First, we only test consumers’ preferences when the social adjustive function is weak than (i.e. in the utilitarian group) or equal to (i.e. in the social adjustive group) the utilitarian function. How about the condition when the social adjustive function is stronger than the utilitarian function? Second, there is a potential risk that participants’ attitude functions may vary with the purchase type to some extent, although we have documented that the two attitude functions are integral and independent of the purchase type. For instance, self-purchases elicit the utilitarian function of consumers’ attitudes, while gift-purchases arouse the social adjustive function. To eliminate this potential effect, we use a trait-based construct (i.e. self-monitoring) to reflect participants’ attitudes because the trait-based construct is relatively stable (Wilcox et al., 2009).

**Study 3**
This study aims to examine \( H4 \) and extend Study 2 in two aspects:

1. we want to eliminate the potential effects of the purchase type on attitude functions; and
2. we want to study the condition under which the social adjustive function of consumer’ attitudes is stronger than the utilitarian function.

To achieve this, we use the construct of self-monitoring to reflect participants’ attitude functions in this research, which is also adopted by Wilcox et al. (2009) and Shavitt et al. (1992). Prior research suggests that the attitudes of high (vs low) self-monitors predominantly serve a social adjustive (vs utilitarian) function (Shavitt et al., 1992). Hence, the social adjustive function of high self-monitors’ attitudes is stronger than that of low self-monitors’ attitudes. Besides, the trait-based construct is relatively stable, which can eliminate the potential effects of the purchase type on attitude functions (Wilcox et al., 2009). This study adopts a 2(purchase type: self- vs gift-purchases) between-subject design.

**Participants and methods**
We recruited 143 undergraduate students from a large Chinese public university to participate in this study (43.4% males, \( M_{\text{age}} = 21.10, \) SD = 1.52). In this study, we aim to
confirm the effect of the social adjusive function on consumers’ preferences. Hence, we
collect that if high self-monitors significantly raise the weight of desirability in their
preferences for the most utilitarian products, this can effectively confirm that the social
adjusive function drives consumers to rely more on desirability. Hence, we chose the most
utilitarian ones on our product list. Based on the preference ratings in Studies 1 and 2, we
find that participants’ ratings for the pen and the thermos cup are the lowest, indicating
these two products were considered as the most utilitarian ones. Then, we finally adopted
the pen and the thermos cup in Study 1 as stimuli in this study.

After participants’ arrival, we randomly assigned them to two experimental conditions:
self- vs gift-purchase. The procedure was also similar to Study 1 but has the following
adjustments:

- we asked them to complete a 25-item self-monitoring scale from Snyder (1974) after
indicating preferences for the two products; and
- we removed the measurements of mental construal. Finally, all participants
provided the necessary demographic information and left.

Results
Preference ratings. Similar to Studies 1 and 2, we reversed some ratings of preferences to let
high scores for desirability and low scores for feasibility. First, we also found that
participants’ overall preferences were lower than the mid-value ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 2.26$ vs
$M_{mid} = 6$, $t(142) = 5.71, p < 0.001, d = 0.68$), which confirmed that participants responded
more favorably to the high feasibility-low desirability options. Then, we compared
participants’ preferences for desirability and feasibility across the two experimental
conditions. As expected, participants showed significant greater preferences for desirability
in gift-purchases than in self-purchases ($M_{gift} = 5.33$, $SD = 2.28$ vs $M_{self} = 4.51$, $SD = 2.17$,
$F(1, 141) = 4.93, p = 0.028 < 0.05, \eta^2_p = 0.034$). The results were consistent with Study 1 and
Study 2.

Self-monitoring and preferences. To assess participants’ self-monitoring, we first
summed up all the scores for each item ($M = 11.73$, $SD = 3.37$, KR-20 = 0.54). We found no
differences for the self-monitoring across the two experimental conditions ($M_{gift} = 11.39$,
$SD = 3.20$ vs $M_{self} = 12.07$, $SD = 3.52$, $F(1, 141) = 1.47, p = 0.228$, $\eta^2_p = 0.01$), which revealed the self-monitoring as an independent construct. We adopted a similar method in Study 2 to
split participants into two groups around the median value (the median value was 12): high
vs low self-monitor groups (i.e. social adjusive vs utilitarian). This method was also applied
by Wilcox et al. (2009).

Then, we found a marginally significant effect of interaction between the purchase type
(self vs gift purchase) and self-monitoring (high vs low self-monitoring) on preferences
($F(1, 139) = 2.94, p = 0.088 < 0.1, \eta^2_p = 0.021$). Specifically, in the low self-monitoring group,
participants’ attitudes predominantly served the utilitarian function, indicating that the
social adjusive function of their attitudes was significantly disadvantaged relative to the
utilitarian function. Results of one-way ANOVA showed that participants presented no
differences in preferences for the high-desirability and low-feasibility products vs high-
feasibility and low-desirability products ($M_{gift} = 4.94$, $SD = 2.20$ vs $M_{self} = 4.76$, $SD = 2.50$,
$F(1, 68) = 0.102, p = 0.750$, $\eta^2_p = 0.002$). Specifically, participants’ preferences in both
self- and gift-purchases were significantly lower than the middle point of the scale (i.e. 6)
($M_{self} = 4.76$, $SD = 2.50$ vs $M_{mid} = 6$, $t(33) = 2.88, p = 0.007, d = 0.70$; $M_{gift} = 4.94$, $SD = 2.20$
vs $M_{mid} = 6$, $t(33) = 2.88, p = 0.007, d = 0.68$). These confirmed that participants consistently
relied more on feasibility aspects than desirability ones in both self- and gift-purchases when the social adjustive function was significantly lower than the utilitarian function.

However, in the high self-monitoring group whose attitudes were supposed to predominantly serve the social adjustive function, participants showed significant higher preferences for desirability in gift-purchases than in self-purchases ($M_{gift} = 5.72$, SD = 2.33 vs $M_{self} = 4.27$, SD = 1.81, $F(1, 71) = 8.90, p = 0.004 < 0.01, \eta^2_p = 0.111$). We also compared participants’ preferences in each purchase type with the middle value of the scale. We found that participants’ preferences in gift-purchases were similar to the mid-value ($M_{gift} = 5.72$, SD = 2.33 vs $M_{mid} = 6$, $t(35) = 0.716, p = 0.479, d = 0.17$), whereas their preferences in self-purchases were significantly low than the mid-value ($M_{self} = 4.27$, SD = 1.81 vs $M_{mid} = 6$, $t(35) = 5.83, p < 0.001, d = 1.36$). This finding indicated that if the social adjustive function was stronger than the utilitarian function, participants significantly relied more on desirability in decisions. The results supported $H4$; see Figure 4.

**Discussion**
This study uses the construct of self-monitoring to reflect participants’ attitude functions to explore consumers’ preferences (supporting $H4$). The result supports our core proposition that the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes moderates whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences across self- and gift-purchases from the perspective of self-monitoring. In addition, the findings of this study were consistent with our contention that even if the social adjustive function is stronger than the utilitarian function, consumers still rely more on feasibility in self-purchases.

**General discussion**
This research offers an in-depth understanding of consumers’ behaviors between self- and gift-purchases across three studies. In Study 1, we depict consumers’ general preferences that they prefer desirability more in gift-purchases than self-purchases. In Study 2, we extend Study 1 by identifying a boundary condition of consumers’ general preferences. Specifically, we document that the social adjustive function moderates whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences between the two purchases ($H1$, $H2$ and $H3$). Finally, Study 3 enhances the findings of Study 2 by using the construct of self-monitoring ($H4$). It also tests the condition in which the social adjustive function is stronger than the utilitarian one, which supplements Study 2. All these findings provide both theoretical and managerial implications discussed in the following.

![Figure 4](image-url)
Theoretical contributions
We provide several substantial theoretical contributions as follows. Although there exists extensive literature about self-other decisions, ours has two main differences:

1. most self-other decision literature explores the role of proxy decision-makers (i.e. advisors) (Lu et al., 2013; Polman, 2012a; Polman and Emich, 2011; Polman, 2012b) while we focus on the role of gift-givers; and

2. most literature stresses the differences in self-other decisions (Wu and Lee, 2016; Eggert et al., 2019) while we aim to find the condition under which people hold consistent preferences.

Regarding the first difference, as aforementioned, most advisors make a decision with the presence of decision targets. In contrast, the gift-giver, mostly making decisions in the absence of decision targets, is a purer other-decision role. However, our findings suggest that consumers generally rely more on desirability in other-decisions than in self-decisions irrespective of being advisors or gift-givers. Nevertheless, the social impact theory argues that even others’ mere presence can impact final decisions (Latané, 1981; Argo et al., 2005). This implies that the presence of others has a limited effect on consumers’ general preference inconsistency in self-other decisions. We suggest future research find a boundary condition of this effect.

With respect to the second difference, this research extends our understanding of consumer preferences in self-other decisions. Most existing literature on self-other decisions is established on the CLT framework and emphasizes consumers’ asymmetric preferences in self-other decisions, i.e. desirability is more preferred in other-decisions than in self-decisions (Lu et al., 2013; Polman and Emich, 2011; Polman, 2012b, Baskin et al., 2014; Rim et al., 2019). Nevertheless, based on the functional theories of attitudes, our results show that preference inconsistency only occurs when the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is at a similar level as the utilitarian function (Study 2) or serves a stronger role (Study 3). The results suggest that a certain extent to the pursuit of social utility might be a premise for consumers to hold the preference inconsistency. In that case, we further find that the utilitarian function mediates the effect of purchase type on the preferences between feasibility and desirability.

Importantly, we find that when the social adjustive function of consumers’ attitudes is at a significantly disadvantaged position relative to the utilitarian function, the preference inconsistency does not hold. In that case, consumers consistently rely more on feasibility in both self- and gift-purchases. We propose that this may be attributed to the close relationship between the utilitarian function and low-level self-monitoring, both of which lead consumers to lowly be concerned about social factors and put more weight on products themselves (Shavitt et al., 1992). This finding succeeds in reconciling the complicated relationship between self- and gift-purchases and provides theoretical supplements for CLT application in self-other decisions.

In addition, although feasibility and desirability were studied by much literature to compare consumers’ asymmetry preferences across self- and other-purchases (Lu et al., 2013; Baskin et al., 2014; Rim et al., 2019), little links them with consumers’ attitudes. This research presents the interaction between the two attribute functions and consumers’ attitudes. We demonstrate that the preference for desirability is built on the fact that consumers should care about social variables to some degree, i.e. the social adjustive function of their attitudes should not be too low. This suggests that some trait-based constructs may interact with consumers’ preferences for the two attributes in self-other purchases, e.g. self-monitoring in this research.
Managerial contributions
Our findings also provide some key implications for retailers. First, we disclose that, generally, consumers differ in preferences for feasibility and desirability across self- and gift-purchases. Hence, there exists a link between purchase types and the two attributes (i.e. desirability and feasibility). When recommending products for consumers who buy for themselves, retailers should weigh the feasibility aspects of products strongly. Conversely, retailers should emphasize desirability for consumers who search for products as gifts for others. For instance, when retailers promote a pen, it is better for them to stress the writing function for self-buyers but should weigh highly on the desirable design for gift-givers.

However, retailers should not limit their recommendations only based on the purchase type as there is a boundary condition underlying the relationship between the preferences and purchase type. We demonstrate that consumers’ attitude functions are an essential boundary factor to predict whether consumers hold consistent or inconsistent preferences for the two attributes across the purchase. Hence, identifying what kind of functions consumers’ attitudes serve is quite important to retailers, and this is quite closely associated with personal characteristics, i.e. self-monitoring. Online retailers can identify consumers’ characteristics by analyzing historical data and consuming habits to distinguish them (Das et al., 2018). Then, they can consistently highlight the feasibility aspects for the low self-monitoring consumers irrespective of their decision targets (i.e. themselves or others). For the high self-monitoring consumers, retailers should align the marketing focus of products with consumers’ purchase types, i.e. feasibility aspects for self-purchases and desirability aspects for gift-purchases. Regarding offline retailers, they can get familiar with consumers’ personal characteristics through custom management practices to align the marketing focus of the product with consumer goals (Das, 2016).

Moreover, previous literature documents that consumers’ attitude functions can be manipulated by advertising messages (Wilcox et al., 2009). Wilcox et al. (2009) confirm that when consumers are exposed to a social adjustive-oriented advertisement, like “Wearing this watch to get noticed by others, and it will help you elevate your social standing,” the social adjustive function of consumer attitudes is significantly enhanced. Hence, if retailers aim to promote products with high desirability attributes to gift-givers who are recognized as low self-monitors or whose attitudes predominantly serve a utilitarian function, it is possible for retailers to elevate consumers’ purchase intentions by manipulating consumers’ attitude functions through priming consumers with social adjustive oriented advertisements.

Limitations and future research
Although this research nourishes our knowledge about self- and gift-purchases, there are still several limitations. First, using college students as the research sample may affect the validity of our findings. We consider this issue from two aspects. On the one hand, we aim to explore consumers’ basic preferences and the underlying mechanisms. This may benefit from the student sample for its apparent homogeneity (Lynch, 1983; Lynch, 1982). On the other hand, college students are usually well-educated but less experienced, which makes them different from “real-world” populations (Calder et al., 1982). For this point, we consider that students are an important part of gift-givers and behave similarly to other populations in gift-giving (Joy, 2001; Rucker et al., 1996). Particularly, students and other populations behave similarly toward the products we select in the studies (Appendix 1) (Baskin et al., 2014). Nevertheless, we still cannot ignore the potential weakness of the sample that students are not real consumers because we strive to provide effective managerial implications. Hence, we hope future research can consider it comprehensively.
Second, this research is completed in the Chinese context, i.e. eastern cultures. Although we argue that cultural factors are not supposed to affect the important factors (e.g. the psychological distance between self- and gift-purchases and attitude functions) in our research, we still reckon that cultural factors are necessary to consider. Consumers in different cultures have a distinct sense of the self and others (Singelis, 1994) and rituals, which are closely associated with consumer behaviors in gift-giving (Joy, 2001) and self-purchases. It is reasonable to expect that cultural factors may somehow influence givers’ preferences and our findings (Carrier, 1990; Parry, 1986; Joy, 2001). We can consider cultural factors in our future research on consumer behaviors in gift-giving to get a more in-depth understanding.

Finally, other potential factors can also be considered, such as gift occasions, giver-recipient relationships and brands. These factors have close links with consumers’ attitudes and preferences in gift-giving. For example, Baskin et al. (2014) contend that highly desirable gifts are more favored on Valentine’s Day than on birthdays, while feasible attributes are more accentuated on birthdays than Valentine’s Day. On the other hand, products with high desirability appear more emotional, whereas highly feasible gifts seem more superficial. Consumers prefer to give emotional gifts to close recipients and superficial gifts to distant recipients (Goodman and Lim, 2018; Givi and Galak, 2017). In addition, brands also can reflect a sense of desirability and feasibility. For instance, luxury brands reflect more hedonism (high desirability) and mass brands express more utilitarian values (high feasibility). This, in turn, interacts with consumers’ attitudes (Leboeuf and Simmons, 2010). All these factors and potential effects on consumers’ preferences between self- and gift-purchases offer new directions for future research.

References


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Appendix 1. Descriptions of products in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gift</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coffee maker</td>
<td>A high-end coffee maker which is able to brew a variety of coffee types, including espresso and cappuccino. However, it requires a while to learn how to use it correctly and also requires frequent cleaning and part replacement. An ordinary coffee maker that does its job and is easy to use. It can only make basic coffee. It is extremely reliable and does not usually break down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant choice</td>
<td>A high-rated restaurant but with nearly an hour travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pen</td>
<td>A state-of-the-art pen which is considered very fancy. It has a nice hand feel and highly rated aesthetics and is perfect for formal business functions. However, it is not as portable or practical due to its weightiness. A very practical pen that has a long ink life and is retractable so that it is easily portable. The aesthetics are medium-rated, and it is suitable for all practical occasions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie ticket</td>
<td>Movie tickets to a newly arrived 3D-MAX movie that is premiering in your local area. Because this is a new movie that has not been in theatres before, these tickets are only for a Tuesday night several nights after the premiere. Reviews have suggested that this is a very exciting, well-done movie. Movie tickets to a movie released about two months ago in your local area. As this movie has been in theatres for a while and a lot of people have seen it, these tickets can be redeemed for any showtime during the week. Reviews have suggested that the movie might, at times, be somewhat boring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backpack</td>
<td>This is a newly launched backpack. It looks beautiful and feels good. However, the separation within the package is not very reasonable, and some comments say it is not very practical. This is a backpack that has been on the market for a while. It does not look amazing and has a general touch. But the internal separation is very reasonable, and many after-use reviews think it is very practical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thermos cup</td>
<td>This is a newly launched thermos cup, which looks very beautiful and makes people feel very good. But the capacity is a little small, and the weight is a little larger, which seems not very portable. This is a well-sold thermos cup, not so amazing in appearance, but the capacity can fully meet daily needs, and it is relatively light and easy to carry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A1. Descriptions of gifts choices

Appendix 2. BIF measures in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making a list*</th>
<th>“Getting organised”</th>
<th>“Writing things down”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>“Following lines of print”</td>
<td>“Gaining knowledge”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning the house*</td>
<td>“Showing one’s cleanliness”</td>
<td>“Vacuuming the floor”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locking a door</td>
<td>“Putting a key in the lock”</td>
<td>“Securing the house”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting*</td>
<td>“Influencing the election”</td>
<td>“Marking a ballot”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toothbrushing*</td>
<td>“Preventing tooth decay”</td>
<td>“Moving a brush around in one’s mouth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting someone</td>
<td>“Saying hello”</td>
<td>“Showing friendliness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting temptation</td>
<td>“Saying no”</td>
<td>“Showing moral courage”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating*</td>
<td>“Getting nutrition”</td>
<td>“Chewing and swallowing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveling by car</td>
<td>“Following a map”</td>
<td>“Seeing countryside”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A2. Modified version of behavioral identification form

Note: *Reverse-scoring items
Appendix 3. Results of EFA in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>% of variance explained</th>
<th>Cumulative % of variance explained</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factor 1: Social adjustive function</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADJ 1</td>
<td>0.777</td>
<td>32.46</td>
<td>32.46</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADJ 2</td>
<td>0.793</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADJ 3</td>
<td>0.837</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADJ 4</td>
<td>0.766</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADJ 5</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SADJ 6</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factor 2: Utilitarian function</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTF 1</td>
<td>0.791</td>
<td>27.61</td>
<td>60.07</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTF 2</td>
<td>0.785</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTF 3</td>
<td>0.815</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTF 4</td>
<td>0.828</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTF 5</td>
<td>0.772</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTF 6</td>
<td>0.765</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A3. Exploratory factor analysis for attitude function measurements (N = 238)

Appendix 4. Data availability

https://osf.io/xce7h/?view_only=eed9f94fa64f44b587679dd77a3b0307

Appendix 5. Analysis of effects of demographic factors on consumer behaviors

To examine the effect of demographic factors on our findings, we re-analyzed our core findings by adding age and gender into the regression model. In doing this, we document that the demographic factors do not affect our core findings.

In Study 1, we regressed participants’ preferences and mental construal on the purchase type, age and gender, respectively. Both regression results revealed a significant role of the purchase type (preferences: \( \beta = 0.50, t = 2.22, p = 0.028 \); mental construal: \( \beta = 0.22, t = 2.32, p = 0.021 \)) and insignificant roles of age and gender (All \( ps > 0.1 \)).

In Study 2, we also first regressed the preference ratings on the purchase type, age and gender, which showed a significant role of the purchase type (\( \beta = 0.56, t = 3.03, p = 0.003 \)) and insignificant roles of age and gender (age: \( \beta = 0.038, t = 0.67, p = 0.504 \); gender: \( \beta = 0.34, t = 1.69, p = 0.093 \)). In the group comparison analysis, we also confirmed the insignificant effects of the purchase type, age and gender on preferences (All \( ps > 0.1 \)) in the utilitarian group. In the social adjustive groups, we found the significant role of the purchase type (\( \beta = 0.897, t = 3.45, p = 0.001 \)), but the roles of age and gender were not significant (age: \( \beta = 0.078, t = 1.01, p = 0.314 \); gender: \( \beta = 0.318, t = 1.12, p = 0.265 \)).

In Study 3, we regressed participants’ preferences on the purchase type, age and gender. The results showed a significant role of the purchase type (\( \beta = 0.803, t = 2.14, p = 0.034 \)). The roles of age and gender were not significant (both \( ps > 0.1 \)). With a similar method, in the low self-monitor group, we found all the roles of the purchase type, age and gender were not significant as independent variables (All \( t < 1 \)). In contrast, we found a significant role of the purchase in preferences differing across the two purchases (\( \beta = 1.45, t = 2.95, p = 0.004 \)), whereas the roles of age and gender were not significant (both \( t < 1 \)).