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Differentiating between gift giving and bribing in China: a guanxi perspective

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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have long been interested in distinguishing gift giving from bribery, the impact of the degree of *guanxi* between a giver and a recipient on this distinction remains unclear. Drawing on a bystander perspective, this paper investigates how people distinguish between two types of giving behavior: gift giving and bribing. In three studies, we examined how *guanxi* (Study 1, $n = 143$ Chinese students), the price of a present (Study 2, including 106 students and 55 employees), and the motivation for giving a present (Study 3, $n = 33$ Chinese students) influence people's perception of a present (i.e., as a gift or a bribe). The results largely supported our expectation that presents were more likely to be considered a bribe when *guanxi* utility was high, if the present held high economic value, and if the giving motivation was instrumental-oriented. Implications of our findings for future research and business practitioners in Chinese culture are discussed.



KEYWORDS

Guanxi; gift giving; bribe; gift value; motivation


Introduction

Bribery refers to the act in which a person offers, promises, or gives another person a financial or other type of advantage, with the intention of inducing that person to engage in unethical behavior (Bello, 2014). Although it is consistently seen as a morally repugnant practice (Husted et al., 1996), bribery is not unusual. A world-wide survey reported that about 900 million people living in 16 Asian-Pacific countries (including China, India and South Korea) paid at least one bribe in the period of 2015–2017 to access public services (Transparency International Index, 2018). Globally, more than 3 USD trillion is paid in the form of bribes and stolen money annually (Johnson, 2018). Given the prevalence of bribery and its detrimental effects on social justice and national welfare, great effort has been paid to curb it (Khalil et al., 2015). However, what is still unclear is the nature of the distinction between bribing and “normal” gift-giving behavior (Fisher, 2007; Katz et al., 2010; Rose–Ackerman, 1998).

Conceptually, bribery overlaps to some degree with gifting behavior (Aydın et al., 2020; Fisher, 2007). Researchers have attempted to distinguish these two concepts by focusing on legal aspects (Bello, 2014), moral and cultural considerations (Steidlmeier, 1999), and the motivation for giving (Fritzsche, 2005; Rose–Ackerman, 1999), et cetera. Previous research proposed that the motives for bribing are based on cultural factors, such as *guanxi* (e.g., Steidlmeier, 1999). However, the role of *guanxi* (referring to interpersonal connections that create obligations for a continued exchange of favors, Steidlmeier, 1999), has been largely ignored in extant research. This is especially problematic in the Chinese culture, as *guanxi* has strong historical roots in the Confucian ethics of interpersonal

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kinship (Katerina, 2015). It is also an important factor when doing business in China (Opper et al., 2017; Wu & Huang, 2013), where parties often maintain and enhance their relationships (including business relationships) by giving each other larger or smaller gifts: a phenomenon known as *building guanxi* (Barbalet, 2017; Bedford, 2011; Chen et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2012). Parties with and without *guanxi* (Chan & Yao, 2018) or who have strong and weak *guanxi* (Chen et al., 2013) display different levels of trust and obligation. We therefore propose that the degree of *guanxi* between a giver and a recipient could influence an individuals' perception of a present as a bribe or as a gift. Further, previous research has shown that whether the giver is someone familiar or a stranger will influence a recipient's perception and attitude toward a present (Hayes & Simmons, 2015). Yet, how the different dimensions of *guanxi* (i.e., *guanxi* utility and *guanxi* intimacy) affect the distinction between gifting and bribing remains unclear.

Therefore, the current study aims to advance our knowledge by investigating how *guanxi* influences the distinction between two types of giving behavior (i.e., gift giving vs. and bribery). Our study seeks to make several contributions. First, this study is among the first to examine how *guanxi* influences students' perception of giving behavior (i.e., as a gift or a bribe). This knowledge is useful in developing specific policies to tackle corruption and understanding the nature of corrupt and gifting practices in the educational system (Julián & Bonavia, 2020). Moreover, we contribute to the literature by integrating gifting and bribing research to enhance our understanding of the distinction between these two concepts. Although a considerable amount of research on gifting and bribing has been published over the past decades, quantitative research has only rarely attempted to integrate these two areas (for an exception see Lambsdorff & Frank, 2010). One consequence of this lack of research is that it is difficult to distinguish between these two concepts. Unfortunately, as bribery is illegal, lack of understanding of the distinction between gifting and bribery can have serious consequences (Aydın et al., 2020). Finally, our study contributes to the literature by shifting away from the predominant focus on either the giver's (e.g., Julián & Bonavia, 2020) or the recipient's perspective (e.g., Hayes & Simmons, 2015; Xu et al., 2018), to that of an impartial bystander. As Fisher (2007) argues, whether receiving or giving a particular gift is wrong depends on how an impartial third party would view this specific action. Therefore, taking the perspective of this impartial other (or observer) into account can advance our understanding of the distinction between gift giving and bribing. By doing this, we bring a new perspective to the bribery and gifting literature.

In the section that follows, we first review relevant work on gifting and bribery, and propose hypotheses on the impact of *guanxi*, the economic value of a present, and motivation on students' perception of giving behavior (i.e., as a gift or a bribery). We then describe how we tested our hypotheses in three studies. We conclude by discussing the overall findings, study limitations, and implications of our results for research and practice.

Distinguishing Between Gift Giving and Bribing

Gift giving is a traditional activity that exists in many societies. Davies et al. (2010) defined a gift as the selection and transfer of something to someone without the expectation of direct and immediate compensation, but with the expectation of a return. On the other hand, a bribe is a payment (financial benefit) given or taken in a corrupt relationship to obtain an illegal opportunity, and this payment can take the form of money or other advantages (Hallak & Poisson, 2007). Bribery is typically unobservable (Czap & Czap, 2019). Thus, in the field of psychology, bribery has been measured as an individual's perception of the degree to which bribery occurs (Tian, 2008) or in terms of personal attitudes toward bribery (Napal, 2005; Torfason et al., 2013). In the current study, we focus on people's perception of a gift as a possible bribe. This is because such perception measures are strongly associated with actual experiences – at least in European countries (i.e., data were collected based on people's perceptions of corruption among peers, Charron, 2016). A similar definition or approach was applied by Transparency International Index (2018).

Researchers have attempted to differentiate gift giving from bribing by taking different perspectives, for instance, by focusing on its legal aspects (e.g., Bello, 2014; Chang et al., 2001), moral and cultural considerations (Steidlmeier, 1999), gift value (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Hongladarom, 2014; Aydın et al., 2020; Tian, 2008), or the motivation for giving (Fritzsche, 2005; Rose–Ackerman, 1999; Tian, 2008). Although these studies have provided valuable insights into the distinction between gifting and bribing, most of this research was conducted from a conceptual and/or moral viewpoint. To our knowledge, only few studies have addressed this distinction empirically. One exception is the study by Lambsdorff and Frank (2010), who found that in a “corruption game” those who framed their payment during the game as a bribe were more willing to punish non-delivering others than other participants. In a qualitative study, Xu et al. (2018) found that guanxi and gift value affected the degree to which Chinese officials treated giving behavior as corrupt. However, still lacking is a clear understanding of how guanxi influences the distinction between gift giving and bribery in Chinese society.

A guanxi perspective

Guanxi means “relationship” or “personal connection” (Barbalet, 2017). It is a form of social capital encapsulated in dyadic, particularistic ties (Xiao & Tsui, 2007) that refers to a direct bond between two or more individuals (Jacobs, 1979), and that determines the intensity and intimacy of their connection. Maintaining and strengthening guanxi within a system that is based on the individual instead of the organization often takes the form of the partners doing reciprocal favors and giving each other gifts (Steidlmeier, 1999). Interestingly, the “private” ethics of guanxi exchange, such as reciprocity and trust between guanxi parties, may conflict with and violate the “public” ethics of the community and the rules of law, impartiality and fairness (Fei, 1992). This potentially makes guanxi a key variable in distinguishing gift giving from bribing. Specifically, unlike other types of goods exchange, gift giving is focused on the relationship. When this relationship is only for material interest and immediate payment, this kind of exchange is best considered a bribe (Sison et al., 2020; Yang, 1989).

Furthermore, the familiarity between the giver and the receiver will affect the perception of the gift exchange. Hayes and Simmons (2015) found that if the receiver knows the giver well, the recipient will appraise a money gift positively, believing this gift to reciprocate previous acts of giving. However, if the gift is given by a stranger, the receiver will doubt the motives of the giver. In addition, Chan and Yao (2018) suggested that when patients offer a *hongbao* (i.e., a red envelope containing money) to a doctor with whom they have a long-standing, preexisting relationship, this behavior is gifting-oriented. However, if there is no such connection and a patient offers a *hongbao* to a doctor, this is considered to be bribery-oriented. These studies imply that the guanxi between two parties will affect a receiver’s evaluation of a gift as either a present or a bribe.

Guanxi has been conceptualized as a two-dimensional construct, i.e., guanxi utility and guanxi intimacy. Guanxi utility refers to the utility of another person for the attainment of personal goal(s) through social interactions (Nelissen, 2014), which depends on three factors. The first is the value of the goal, as some goals are more valuable and important for individuals than other goals. The second factor is the instrumentality of the relation for attaining a particular goal, in that people may differ in their usefulness for achieving that goal. The third factor is the level of in(ter)dependence on having particular relations to attain a goal, which refers to the degree to which a person requires someone else to achieve that goal. For example, if someone is perfectly capable of fixing a bicycle, then he/she is relatively independent from his/her social relations in attaining that goal. Based on this, in high-guanxi utility relationships, the receiver of a present may have the power to significantly increase the likelihood of achieving the giver’s goal. Conversely, the receiver in a low-guanxi utility relationship is unlikely to be able to offer much help in achieving the giver’s goal. In this type of relationship giving is more likely to be perceived as gift giving, because the motivation for gift giving is guanxi-oriented, which aims to show respect to others or to strengthen the mutual relationship (Steidlmeier, 1997). Conversely, the basic goal of a bribe is to ensure that the giver is privileged compared to others who strive toward the same personal goal (Dion, 2016) or to fulfill a personal interest (Millington et al.,

2005; Sison et al., 2020). In addition, according to justice theory (Deutsch, 1985; Greenberg, 1987), the perception that each party exchanges resources and receives rewards as promised represents distributive fairness. When the relationship is low-utility, the giving behavior is more likely to be perceived as ethical (i.e., gifting), whereas in a high-utility situation, the exchange of resources will be more likely to be perceived as unethical (i.e., bribing). Therefore, guanxi utility affects an individual's perception of giving behavior. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: A present will be perceived by a bystander as bribing in a high-guanxi utility context, but as gift-giving in a low-guanxi utility context.

Intimacy is the second dimension of guanxi. Bian and Ang (1997) conceived guanxi strength in terms of intimacy and trust but defined it in terms of familiarity, that is, how well the guanxi parties know each other. Based on intimacy/familiarity, Chinese society categorizes people as insiders (where ties are strong and close, and are driven by affective motives) and outsiders (where ties are weak or even absent, and are driven by instrumental motives; Chan et al., 2003; Hwang, 1987). Since the degree of mutual obligation between parties with high guanxi (i.e., intimacy) and those without varies (Bian & Ang, 1997), it follows that high-guanxi intimacy parties can trust each other. In this case, the insiders have a high-intimacy guanxi. Moreover, due to intergroup identification, people will hold a positive attitude to insiders while taking on a negative attitude to outsiders (Aronson et al., 2007). High-intimacy individuals are insiders, and since high-intimacy members will interact often, insider identification occurs. Vignoles and Moncaster (2007) found that intergroup identification affected the way people perceive the actions of insiders versus outsiders. In our case, a present is more likely to be seen as a bribe if guanxi intimacy between a giver and a receiver is low, while it may be considered a gift if guanxi intimacy is high. Therefore, guanxi intimacy affects people's perception of giving behavior. We propose

Hypothesis 2: An observer will perceive a present as a bribe in a low-guanxi intimacy context, but as a gift in a high-guanxi intimacy context.

No studies have examined how the interaction between these two guanxi dimensions affects people's perception of giving behavior (i.e., as gifting or bribing), but research on the joint effects of guanxi intimacy and guanxi utility that focuses on the social responsibility of subjects provides some relevant insights here. Specifically, Huang et al. (2016) found that for the low-intimacy group, those with high utility showed a significantly higher level of social responsibility (vs. low utility). The attitude to bribing behavior may to some extent reflect one's social responsibility. Therefore, the interaction between guanxi utility and guanxi intimacy may also influence people's perception of giving behavior. In addition, giving behavior among family members and friends is usually seen as normal in some societies (e.g., China, Czap & Czap, 2019). Thus, in a high-intimacy guanxi context, if the receiver has little influence on a giver's personal goals, this kind of giving is more likely to be perceived as gift giving. However, in a low-intimacy guanxi context, giving is more likely to be perceived as bribery if the receiver has a significant influence on a giver's personal goals (i.e., high guanxi utility). Therefore, we propose

Hypothesis 3: Guanxi intimacy and guanxi utility will interact in influencing an observer's perception of giving behavior, such that in a high-intimacy and low-utility context a present is more likely to be perceived as a gift, whereas in a low-intimacy and high-utility context a present is more likely to be perceived as a bribe.

The role of the economic value of a gift

The economic value of a gift may influence people's perception of the giving behavior. Expensive and personal gifts in a low-context culture (i.e., people are highly individualized and there is relatively little involvement with others; Hall, 1989) are likely to be evaluated negatively (e.g., as a bribe rather than a gift, Davies et al., 2010). Giving others presents with high economic value is generally discouraged in business, as a receiver will often perceive these as a "hard sell" or, even worse, as a bribe. James (2002) argued that, since bribery is hard to prove, the challenge is to define in what situations a gift will be considered a bribe. Fisher (2007) proposed a bribery scale, with low-value gifts at one end and going through to holidays and cars to large sums of money at the other end. Similarly, in a qualitative study, Aydin et al. (2020) found that in Turkey teachers who accept gifts of high economic value may lead parents to expect them to behave unethically, which made a gift effectively an attempt to bribe them. Thus, the economic value of a gift may affect people's perception of a given behavior. We postulate

Hypothesis 4: Low-value presents are more likely to be perceived as gifts, while high-value presents are more likely to be perceived as bribes.

Tian (2008) further argued that whether a gift is judged as a bribe depends on its value. If its value is high enough to influence a receiver's decision, then such giving is considered a bribe. Similarly, James (2002) proposed that a small-value object should be considered gift giving, while a large amount of money that aims to promote one's interests is bribery. Empirical research has shown that gift value will influence a receiver's perception of this present as either a gift or a bribe (Hayes & Simmons, 2015). In summary, the value of a present and whether giving it may to some extent influence decisions (i.e., its utility) will determine an observer's perception of giving behavior. Thus,

Hypothesis 5: The economic value of a present and guanxi utility will interact in influencing people's evaluation of this present, such that in a high-utility context, a high-value present is more likely to be perceived as a bribe; while in a low-utility context, a low-value present is more likely to be perceived as a gift.

The motivation for gifting

Steidlmeier (1999) stated that one of the key points to differentiate bribes from gifts is the motive for which they are given. Gift giving is a behavior that shows respect to another person and strengthens relationships (Steidlmeier, 1997), whereas bribery occurs if the receiver is invited to pursue personal interests at the expense of the legitimate aims and objectives of their employer (Millington et al., 2005). Similarly, Fritzsche (2005) claims that if a gift is given with the intention to influence the receiver, then it is a bribe. In summary, the motivation for gift giving is emotion-oriented, such as expressing (Tian, 2008) or strengthening a friendship (Dion, 2016; Graycar & Jancsics, 2016; Millington et al., 2005). However, the basic intention of bribery is to be privileged in order to ensure that the status of the giver is superior to that of others (i.e., power and achievement motivation, Wu & Huang, 2013), or to pursue private interests (Millington et al., 2005). Similarly, researchers argued that bribery is motivated purely by economic interests and focuses on immediate and specific exchanges (Sison et al., 2020). So, we propose

Hypothesis 6: The motivation for giving influences people's perception of giving behavior, such that emotion-oriented giving is more likely to be perceived as gift giving, while instrumental-oriented giving is more likely to be perceived as a form of bribing.

Additionally, the motivation for gift giving is emotion-oriented and emphasizes affection (e.g., Dion, 2016; Graycar & Jancsics, 2016; Millington et al., 2005). Gifts are accepted as an indication of love, respect, friendship, or gratitude to the recipient (Steidlmeier, 1999), while the motivation for

bribery is more instrumental and focuses on one's material interests (e.g., Millington et al., 2005). Guanxi utility refers to the degree to which this kind of guanxi can impact individuals' private goals, which is an objective context. It is conceivable that an individual's motivation for giving another party a present will moderate the relationship between guanxi utility and the perception of a present as a gift or bribe. Here we propose that

Hypothesis 7: The motivation for giving and guanxi utility interact in influencing people's perception of the degree to which a present is a gift or a bribe. In a low-utility context, emotion-oriented giving is more likely to be perceived as a gift; in a high-utility context, if the motivation is instrumental-oriented, people are more likely to perceive it as a bribe.

General overview

Summarizing, we expect that guanxi utility and guanxi intimacy will predict people's judgment on the degree to which a present is a gift or a bribe. This effect will be moderated by the gift's value and the motivation for giving. Three studies were conducted to test our hypotheses, using two scenario surveys (Study 1 and Study 2) and one scenario experiment (Study 3). Study 1 manipulated guanxi intimacy and utility and Study 2 manipulated the economic value of a gift to examine their effects on participants' judgment. Study 3 manipulated guanxi utility and motivation. Below we report the procedures and findings of three studies.

Study 1: The Influence of Guanxi on Distinguishing Gift Giving from Bribing

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 152 visitors to the library of a Chinese university in Beijing. The data of 9 participants were deleted from the analysis due to missing values on some of the key variables (89.4% usable response rate). Of the remaining 143 participants, the majority (63.6%) were female, and most participants were 18 to 25 years old (88.1%). Most participants were university students (96.5%), and most worked on their MSc (62.2%).

Materials

Researchers suggested that bribery is a sensitive issue, which may trigger one's social desirability responses (Wu & Huang, 2013). Therefore, following previous studies (e.g., Wu & Huang, 2013), we developed different scenarios to test our hypotheses. As mentioned earlier, three factors affect guanxi utility: the value of the goal, the instrumentality of the relationship for attaining a goal, and the level of in(ter)dependence on relations to attain a goal (Nelissen, 2014). Based on this, we developed two different guanxi utility conditions: high-guanxi utility vs low-guanxi utility. In the high-guanxi utility condition, B (the receiver) possesses significant power to help A (the giver) realize his/her personal goals, while in the low-utility condition, B cannot help A in realizing these goals. In addition, Chinese guanxi is based on preexisting particularistic ties between two interacting parties (Jacobs, 1982; Tsui & Farh, 1997). Researchers have identified many characteristics that influence the strength of these ties such as kinship, alma mater (schoolmates or classmates), birthplace, or workplace (Chen et al., 2013). To examine the degree of intimacy of these guanxi ties, in a pilot study ($n = 95$) we asked students to assess the intimacy of various shared guanxi ties with response options ranging from 1 ("not close at all") to 7 ("very close"). The results showed that the intimacy of these ties ranked from high to low as: being family members ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 0.9$), bachelor classmates ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.62$), teacher and student ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.57$), sharing birthplaces ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.77$), being master classmates ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.99$), having workplaces

ties ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.27$), and being school mates ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.47$). Linear repeated measures analysis showed that these means differed significantly, $F(1, 6) = 74.55$, $p < .001$. Therefore, we manipulated high intimacy as being colleague classmates plus sharing one's birthplace, and low intimacy as being schoolmates plus having different birthplaces.

The main study employed a 2 (Guanxi Intimacy: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Guanxi Utility: High vs. Low) design, with intimacy and utility as between-subject factors. To ensure the validity of the study, each condition had three giving scenarios (a within-subject factor; Scenario 1: a student gives a present to another student; Scenario 2: an employee gives a present to his or her supervisor; Scenario 3: a student gives a present to a teacher. In the latter parts we will use these scenarios to refer to different giving contexts). In total 12 scenarios were developed and used in our study. A sample scenario (in the low-intimacy, low-guanxi condition) is

Sun is preparing to join the Communist Party of China, since he/she aspires to be a civil servant after graduation (being a Communist party member is a prerequisite for this). Zhou is in the propaganda committee of the party, and they met each other in a university optional course. Sun is from Shanghai while Zhou is from Beijing. Zhou is in charge of Party propaganda activities, but has nothing to do with who may join the party. Zhou has no influence on the decision whether Sun can join the communist party. Before the communist party decides who can join the party, Zhou's birthday comes and Sun prepares an exquisite present for Zhou.

In order to check the effectiveness of the utility manipulation, we used one question asking participants to estimate the guanxi utility of B (in each of the three scenarios) for A on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("no utility at all") to 9 ("extremely high utility") (Huang et al., 2016). To check the intimacy manipulation, based on Aron et al.'s (1992) interpersonal closeness measurement, we asked participants to rate the perceived intimacy of A and B, with response options ranging from 1 ("not close at all") to 9 ("extremely close").

Procedure

Once they had agreed to join the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. They were first asked to read three scenarios in which a person gives another person a present in a certain guanxi scenario (i.e., with these persons being classmates, an employee and his or her supervisor, or a student and a teacher). Participants were then asked to judge whether the offer was a gift or a bribe on an 8-point Likert scale ($-4 =$ definitely a bribe, $4 =$ definitely gift giving, 0 was not included). An example item is *as a bystander, how do you think about this behavior* (gift giving vs. bribing). After finishing three scenarios, participants would answer the aforementioned manipulation check questions. Finally, demographic information was collected. The study took 10–15 minutes. Anonymity was assured, all participants voluntarily joined the study and received a gel pen as a present for their participation.

Statistics

Two sets of analyses were conducted. First, we conducted an independent sample T -test to test the manipulations of scenario materials. Further, we used one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 23.0 to test Hypotheses 1–3.

Results

Manipulation checks

The manipulation check of guanxi intimacy showed that in Scenarios 1 and 2 the manipulation of intimacy did not reveal the expected main effects, Scenario 1: $t(141) = 0.35$, $p = .73$; Scenario 2: $t(141) = 1.24$, $p = .22$. In Scenario 3, the high-intimacy group ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.35$) scored significantly higher than the low-intimacy group ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.51$), $t(140) = 2.83$, $p < .01$.

The manipulation check of utility showed that in Scenario 2, the high-utility group scored significantly higher ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.77$) than the low-utility group ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 2.03$),

$t(141) = 3.44, p < .01$. Likewise, in Scenario 3, the high-utility group scored significantly higher ($M = 5.83, SD = 2.08$) than the low-utility group ($M = 4.53, SD = 2.30$), $t(141) = 3.55, p < .01$. However, in Scenario 1, there was no significant difference between the high-utility ($M = 5.73, SD = 1.91$) and the low-utility groups ($M = 5.22, SD = 2.07$), $t(141) = 1.53, p = .13$. Thus, the manipulation of utility was successful in Scenarios 2 and 3.

Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis 1 proposed that guanxi utility would influence people's judgment in distinguishing gifts from bribes. To examine this hypothesis, we first computed the mean score of participants' judgments across the three different scenarios, finding that the main effect of utility was significant, $F(1, 141) = 27.30, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .162$. Follow-up analysis showed that in Scenario 2 the low-utility group was more likely to perceive the giving behavior as gifting ($M = 1.76, SD = 1.91$) than the high-utility group ($M = 1.00, SD = 2.05$), $F(1, 141) = 5.30, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. In Scenario 3 the high-utility group was more likely to perceive the giving behavior as bribing ($M = -0.79, SD = 2.48$), while the low-utility group was more likely to perceive it as gifting ($M = 1.96, SD = 0.26$), $F(1, 141) = 56.54, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .29$. However, in Scenario 1 there was no significant difference between the high-utility group ($M = 0.80, SD = 2.29$) and the low-utility group ($M = 1.32, SD = 2.03$), $F(1, 141) = 0.84, p = .36$. Hypothesis 1 was supported in Scenario 3 while it failed in Scenarios 1 and 2.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that guanxi intimacy would influence people's perception of gift giving versus bribery. We computed the mean score of the gift-bribe judgments across the three different scenarios, but no significant effect was found, $F(1, 141) = 0.23, p = .88$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. Follow-up analysis showed that the main effect of intimacy was insignificant for all three scenarios. Specifically, in Scenario 1 there was no significant difference between the high-intimacy ($M = 1.07, SD = 2.16$) and low-intimacy groups ($M = 0.84, SD = 2.07$), $F(1, 141) = 0.41, p = .53$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. The same applied to Scenario 2, $F(1, 141) = 0.07, p = .78$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$; and Scenario 3, $F(1, 141) = 0.37, p = .54$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$. Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Hypothesis 3 postulates that guanxi utility and guanxi intimacy would interact in affecting people's perception of a certain giving behavior. We found that the interaction effect between intimacy and utility was not significant, $F(1, 139) = 0.33, p = .57$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. The follow-up analysis found no significant effect in either of the three scenarios (Scenario 1, $F(1, 139) = 0.29, p = .59$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$; Scenario 2, $F(1, 139) = 1.50, p = .22$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$; Scenario 3, $F(1, 139) = 0.25, p = .62$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$). Hypothesis 3 is not supported.

Study 1 discussion

In Study 1, we explored how guanxi utility (Hypothesis 1), guanxi intimacy (Hypothesis 2), and the interaction of these two dimensions (Hypothesis 3) affected an observer's judgment on distinguishing gift giving from bribing. The results supported Hypothesis 1 that in a high-utility context, participants were more likely to judge the giving behavior as bribing (in scenario 3). Conversely, guanxi intimacy did not significantly affect participants' judgments. Similarly, no interaction effects between intimacy and utility dimension were found. Thus, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 is not supported. Note that the manipulations in Study 1 did not always work as intended. For guanxi intimacy, only one (Scenario 3) of three scenarios showed a significant difference between the high-intimacy and low-intimacy groups. As regards guanxi utility, two scenarios showed the expected effects. One possible explanation is that the manipulation check items were presented in the last part of our questionnaire. Since each participant read 3 scenario materials, they may have been unable to recall the precise guanxi intimacy of the parties in all scenarios. The manipulation effect of guanxi utility is further examined in Study 2 in order to reveal the potential reasons for the findings in Study 1.

Study 1 did not consider the influence of gift value. In each giving context, the information included in the scenarios simply delivered a message of giving a present, without mentioning its value.

However, Tian (2008) argued that in China, whether a gift is judged as bribery depends on its value. Therefore, in Study 2 we will add the value of the present as a predictor, and explore how the gift's economic value and guanxi affect participants' judgments in differentiating gift giving from bribing in different utility contexts.

Study 2: The Effect of Gift Value and Guanxi utility on Differentiating Gift giving from Bribing

Study 1 confirmed the notion that guanxi utility influences people's judgment of a present as a gift or a bribe. No effect of guanxi intimacy was found. Study 2 builds on these findings, exploring the effects of gift value and guanxi utility on the distinction between gift giving and bribing.

Method

Participants

Respondents were recruited using a convenience sampling approach whereby the first author and his friends approached their networks via personal contacts. Ultimately, 170 participants were recruited. After deleting incomplete data, 161 observations remained and were analyzed (95.7% usable response rate). Of the participants, 74 were male (46%), most participants were 18 to 25 years old (69.65%), 106 were college students (65.8%), and 55 were full-time employees.

Experimental materials

The experimental materials were adapted from Study 1. Specifically, we controlled the intimacy dimension of the relationship by setting the giving context as low-intimacy. The manipulation only involved changing the value of the present. In a pilot study ($n = 95$) we asked subjects to provide an estimation of what constitutes a large/small-value present in a certain guanxi context. Most participants ($n = 55$, 57.29%) believed that the value of a small present in the student-to-teacher and the student-to-student situation would probably range from 100 to 200 RMB, whereas that of a large present would exceed 1,000 RMB. In the employee-to-supervisor situation, the value of a small present was estimated to range from 200 to 250 RMB, whereas a large present would value over 5,000 RMB. By manipulating guanxi utility and the value of a present, we obtained four experimental conditions and each of the conditions included three giving contexts, resulting in 12 scenarios in total. An example scenario (low utility-low economic value) is

In Wang's company, the organization plans to appoint a young CEO, and Zhang is an older employee. Wang and Zhang work in different departments of the organization, and whereas Wang is from Shandong, Zhang is from Guangdong province. Usually, Zhang's work focuses on staff attendance status, and has nothing to do with any promotion. Before the personnel appointment meeting is held Zhang's birthday comes, and Wang has prepared a gift to Zhang with a value in the range of 100 to 260 RMB. The other three scenarios can be found in the Appendix.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions, in a 2 (Guanxi utility: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Gift Value: High vs. Low) between-subjects design. Similar to Study 1, each condition has three scenarios, and scenario was a within-subject factor. Participants first read a giving scenario, after which they judged whether the present was a gift or a bribe on a Likert scale ranging from -4 ("definitely a bribe") to 4 ("definitely a gift"), which did not include zero. After finishing each scenario, two manipulation check questions were asked: first, how much the guanxi utility of B (e.g., Zhang) for A (e.g., Wang) was, on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = "has no utility", 9 = "extremely high utility") (Huang et al., 2016). Similarly, for gift value, participants were asked to judge the appropriateness of the present value, based on the receipt and context on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = "very unsuitable", 9 = "very suitable"). Once finished, participants received 1 RMB for their participation (it took

10–15 minutes to finish our survey). All participants were assured that their responses were anonymous and confidential.

Statistics

Independent-sample *T* tests were conducted to test the manipulations in the scenarios. Further, we used one-way ANOVA in SPSS 23.0 to test Hypotheses 4 and 5.

Results

Manipulation checks

First, we checked the manipulation of gift value. Independent-sample *T*-tests showed that the mean scores of the two groups were significantly different for Scenarios 1 ($t(159) = 4.27, p < .001$) and 2 ($t(159) = 4.22, p < .001$), with the value of a high-value present being evaluated as higher than that of the low-value present. This effect was marginally significant in Scenario 3, $t(159) = 1.91, p = .05$. Further, independent-sample *t*-tests of the guanxi utility manipulation showed that this manipulation was significant in all three scenarios (Scenario 1: $t(159) = -2.89, p < .001$; Scenario 2: $t(159) = -4.31, p < .001$; Scenario 3, $t(159) = -4.67, p < .001$). These findings suggest that our manipulations of gift value and guanxi utility were successful.

Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis 4 proposed that the value of a present would influence people's perception of a present as either a gift or a bribe. The mean score of participants' judgments across the three different scenarios showed that the main effect of gift value was significant, $F(1, 157) = 17.06, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. Follow-up analysis showed that in Scenario 1 ($F(1, 157) = 21.26, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$) and Scenario 2 ($F(1, 157) = 21.32, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$), the participants in high-utility group were more likely to perceive a high-value present as a bribe. The main effect of gift value was not significant in Scenario 3, $F(1, 157) = 1.29, p = .26$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ (see Table 1). Hypothesis 4 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 5 stated that gift value and guanxi utility would interact in influencing people's evaluation of presents as either gifts or bribes. Regarding the effect of guanxi utility on differentiating gift giving from bribery, the mean score of participants' judgments across the three different scenarios showed that the main effect of utility was significant, $F(1, 157) = 6.80, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Follow-up analysis showed that in Scenario 1 the high-utility group was more likely to perceive the giving behavior as bribing ($M = -0.12, SD = 2.64, n = 81$), whereas the low-utility group was more likely to perceive it as gift giving ($M = 0.85, SD = 2.57, n = 80$), $F(1, 157) = 6.35, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. In scenario 3, the high-utility group ($M = 0.19, SD = 2.97, n = 81$) was less likely to evaluate the giving behavior as gift giving than the low-utility group ($M = 1.31, SD = 2.51, n = 80$), $F(1, 157) = 6.76, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. No significant

Table 1. The influence of gift value on the evaluation of a gift as a possible bribe.

Scenarios	Gift Value	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	η^2
Scenario 1	Low	1.42	2.38	21.26***	.12
	High	-0.34	2.59		
Scenario 2	Low	1.91	2.23	21.32***	.12
	High	0.02	2.78		
Scenario 3	Low	1	2.77	1.29	.01
	High	0.58	2.82		
Average	Low	1.44	1.91	17.06***	.10
	High	0.09	2.32		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; In order to compare the results with Study 1, we transferred the score range from 1 to 8 to -4 to 4. A negative number denotes the extent to which a gift is considered a possible bribe (-4 means "absolutely a bribe", 4 means "absolutely a gift").

Table 2. Interaction effects between guanxi utility and gift value.

Guanxi utility× Gift value	Guanxi utility	Low Value	High Value	<i>F</i>	η^2
Scenario 1	Low	1.69	0.37	1.64	.01
	High	1.20	-1.13		
Scenario 2	Low	2.24	0.24	0.04	.00
	High	1.63	-0.22		
Scenario 3	Low	1.62	1.14	0.00	.00
	High	0.49	-0.04		
Average	Low	1.85	0.58	0.19	.001
	High	1.10	-0.46		

-4 means “absolutely a bribe”, 4 means “absolutely a gift”.

difference was found in Scenario 2, $F(1, 157) = 1.63$, $p = .20$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Contrary to our expectations, the interaction effect between guanxi utility and gift value on people’s judgment (as measured across three different scenarios) was insignificant, $F(1, 157) = 0.19$, $p = .66$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. Follow-up analysis showed that in three scenarios none of the interaction effects were significant (Scenario 1: $F(1, 157) = 1.64$, $p = .20$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$; Scenario 2: $F(1, 157) = 0.04$, $p = .85$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$; Scenario 3: $F(1, 157) = 0.00$, $p = .96$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$) (see Table 2). Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Study 2 discussion

Study 2 investigated the impact of guanxi utility, gift value (Hypothesis 4), and the interaction of these two factors (Hypothesis 5) on the differentiation between gift giving and bribing. Guanxi utility had a significant effect on participants’ judgments (in Scenario 1), which partially confirms the results of Study 1. Further, the results showed that gift value affected the evaluation of a present as either a gift or a bribe (except for Scenario 3, which is probably due to the insignificant manipulation of gift value). Low-value presents were more likely to be judged as gifts than high-value presents (in Scenario 1, Hypothesis 4 partially supported). In addition, when the evaluations of the participants were averaged across the three different scenarios, we found that both gift value and guanxi utility had significant main effects on the evaluation of gifting, but the joint effects of these factors were insignificant (Hypothesis 5 not supported).

Previous research suggested that the influence of guanxi utility on differentiating gift giving from bribery may be affected by the motivation for giving (Fritzsche, 2005; Steidlmeier, 1999). Study 2 did not control for this effect. Moreover, both Study 1 and 2 were survey studies using convenience samples, meaning that firm causal conclusions could not be drawn. To circumvent these limitations Study 3 used a laboratory experimental design, exploring how guanxi utility and the motivation for giving affect the evaluation of a present as a gift or a bribe.

Study 3: The Influence of Giving Motivation and Guanxi utility on Differentiating between Gift Giving and Bribery

Study 3 aims to explore how motivation and guanxi utility influence people’s judgment of gift giving and bribery.

Method

Participants

We recruited 33 undergraduates in China (10 male; $M_{age} = 20.55$ years, $SD = 3.27$). They were assigned to four experimental conditions, in a 2 (Guanxi utility: High vs Low) \times 2 (Giving motivation:

Instrumental-oriented vs Emotion-oriented) within-subjects design. All participants voluntarily joined our study.

Research materials

In a pilot study ($n = 95$) we included 6 adjectives that described the possible motivations for gift giving and bribing as obtained from previous research (Dion, 2016; Graycar & Jancsics, 2016; Millington et al., 2005), respectively (motives for gift giving: respect, maintain the relationship, show friendship, selfless, make others happy, responsibility; motives for bribery: interests, reciprocity, promotion, get preferential treatment, obtain a major project, solve a problem). The participants assessed the fit between these motivations and gift giving or bribing. Based on these results, we manipulated giving motivation and guanxi utility, obtaining four within-participants experimental conditions. In each condition, three giving scenarios were included (12 scenarios in total). An example scenario in the high utility-high emotion orientation condition is

The University is currently selecting excellent students for an international exchange program. Qian is in charge of this selection and has a major influence on who can join the program. Zhao is a potential candidate and is eager to go abroad. He met Qian in a school optional lecture. Before the interview, Zhao's father bought a mobile phone for Zhao, but he already has a new one. Unfortunately, Qian's mobile phone was broken, which was coincidentally seen by Zhao. So he wants to give this mobile to Qian, to show his respect, to express appreciation, and to keep a good relationship. The price of the mobile phone is 1,799 RMB.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in a single laboratory room. The scenarios were presented using *E-prime* Software. Each participant evaluated 12 scenarios, and these scenarios were presented in random order to each participants. After reading the introduction and each scenario, participants were asked to answer one question: *as a bystander, do you think A's giving behavior is gift giving or bribing* (1 = "definitely bribing", 8 = "definitely gift giving"). To avoid fatigue effects, after finishing two experimental conditions (i.e., 6 scenarios) the procedure was interrupted with a 30-second period of rest. After finishing the experiment, participants were asked to write down the criteria they used when making their judgment to check the effectiveness of our manipulation, and received 15 RMB for their time (i.e., 15 to 20 minutes). They were assured that their participation was completely voluntary and that their responses were treated confidentially.

Results

Manipulation checks

To check the validity of the motivation manipulation, we asked participants to write down the criteria they used when evaluating a giving behavior. Based on the answers of 31 participants, we categorized and coded the materials based on elements such as guanxi utility, motivation, and gift value. The results showed that participants' judgments were mainly based on guanxi utility, and this word and similar words occurred 23 times in their answers. The second most frequently mentioned term was motivation, which occurred 21 times. Next was the combination of guanxi utility and motivation in their answers ($n = 15$). These findings support our manipulation of relational utility and giving motivation.

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 6 stated that the motivation for giving would influence people's judgment of whether a present is a gift or a bribe. We computed the mean score of the participants' judgments across three different scenarios, finding that the main effect of giving motivation was significant, $F(1, 32) = 71.0$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .69$. Follow-up analysis showed that in Scenario 1, the instrumental-oriented giving group was more likely to judge this behavior as gift giving, whereas the emotion-oriented group

was more likely to judge it as bribing, $F(1, 32) = 48.6, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .60$; Similar results were found for Scenarios 2 ($F(1, 32) = 52.72, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .62$) and 3 ($F(1, 32) = 48.80, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .60$). Hypothesis 6 was supported.

Hypothesis 7 postulated that giving motivation would moderate the relationship between guanxi utility and people's judgment on distinguishing between gift giving and bribery. We first examined the effect of guanxi utility on people's judgment across the three different scenarios. The main effect of utility was significant, $F(1, 32) = 61.78, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .66$ (see Table 3). That is, the low-guanxi utility group was more likely to judge this behavior as gift giving, whereas the high-guanxi utility group was more likely to judge it as bribing.

To examine the moderation hypothesis, we computed the mean score of participants' judgments across the three different scenarios, finding that the interaction effect between giving motivation and guanxi utility was significant, $F(1, 32) = 3.52, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$. Follow-up analysis showed a significant interaction effect in Scenario 3, $F(1, 32) = 14.74, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .32$ (see Figure 1). For Scenarios 1 and 2, we found marginally significant interaction effects (Scenario 1: $F(1, 32) = 3.06, p = .09$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$; Scenario 2, $F(1, 32) = 3.52, p = .07$, partial $\eta = .10$). Therefore, Hypothesis 7 was partially supported.

Table 3. The influence of guanxi utility on the evaluation of a gift as a possible bribe.

Independent Variable	Guanxi utility	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	η^2
Scenario 1	Low	5.94	0.18	92.24***	0.74
	High	3.39	0.27		
Scenario 2	Low	5.21	0.23	37.71***	0.54
	High	3.42	0.29		
Scenario 3	Low	5.20	0.24	37.55***	0.54
	High	3.20	0.33		
Average	Low	5.42	0.21	61.78***	0.66
	High	3.34	0.27		

*** $p < .001$. 1 = "definitely a bribe", 8 = "definitely a gift".

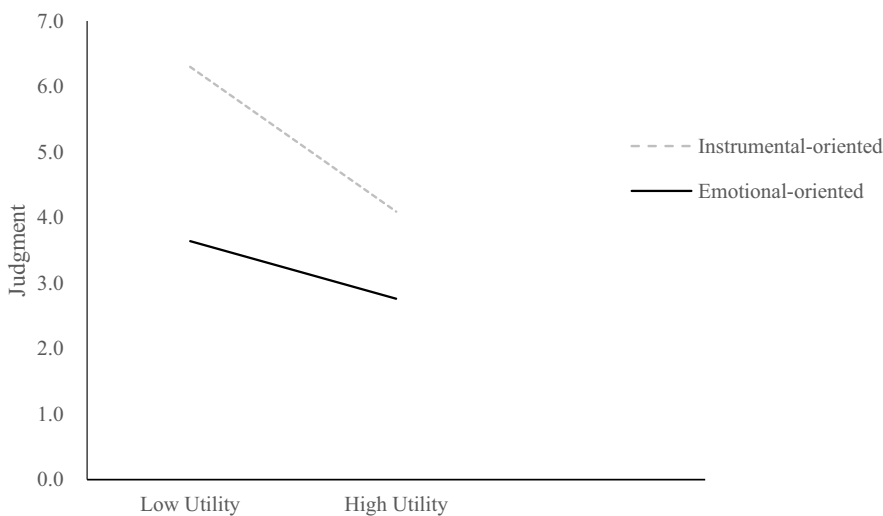


Figure 1. The influence of guanxi utility and giving motivation on the evaluation of a gift as a possible bribe. 1 = "definitely a bribe", 8 = "definitely a gift".

Study 3 discussion

Study 3 investigated how guanxi utility and the motivation for giving influence participants' judgments of a certain giving behavior as gift giving or bribing. The results showed that in a high-guanxi utility context, participants were more prone to perceive the giving behavior as bribing, while in a low-utility context, the giving behavior was more likely to be perceived as gift giving, which supported Hypothesis 1 and corroborates the results obtained in Study 1 and 2. Moreover, if the giving was emotion-oriented, this behavior tended to be perceived more as gift giving, whereas if it was instrumental-oriented, participants were more likely to judge it as bribing. These effects were shown across three scenarios (Hypothesis 6 was supported).

Moreover, we found an interaction effect between guanxi utility and motivation. Specifically, in a high-guanxi utility context, an instrumental-oriented giving behavior was more likely to be perceived as a bribing by a bystander. However, although this result was significant in Scenario 3, it was only marginally significant in Scenarios 1 and 2. We further averaged the scores of participant judgments across the three scenarios and found a significant interaction effect (Hypothesis 7 was supported).

General Discussion

This study explored how different features of guanxi affected the distinction between gift giving and bribing. Specifically, we examined how guanxi utility and guanxi intimacy influence an observer's perception of a certain giving behavior as a gift or a bribe, and whether these effects were further moderated by gift value and the motivation for giving. Across three studies, we found that guanxi utility, gift value, and giving motivation can significantly influence observer's judgment of giving behavior as gifting or bribing. Moreover, we found that giving motivation could moderate the main effect of guanxi utility on the evaluation of giving behavior.

The influence of guanxi utility on distinguishing gift giving and bribing

Across three studies, we found a main effect of guanxi utility. However, the effect of utility was not consistently present in all studies across all scenarios: we only found significant effects in Scenario 3 in Study 1, Scenario 1 in Study 2, and the three scenarios in Study 3. One possible explanation is that in Scenarios 1 and 2, we focused on giving behavior in a birthday context, and giving someone a present on his or her birthday is more often perceived as a normal social behavior rather than as bribing.

The influence of guanxi intimacy on differentiating between gift giving and bribing

Study 1 examined the main effect of guanxi intimacy, assuming that in a low-guanxi intimacy context, observers are more likely to interpret a giving behavior as bribing. However, none of the three scenarios in Study 1 supported this assumption. Apparently, when judging giving behavior, observers may not rely on guanxi intimacy. Thus, the intergroup bias hypothesis was not supported. These results are inconsistent with the findings of Vignoles and Moncaster (2007) that intergroup identification is positively associated with bias behavior.

At least two explanations can be given for this inconsistency. First, the research perspective. We took a third-party perspective that is different from the giving or receiving parties, which may have influenced participants' perception. Cavanaugh et al. (2015) found that a giver often wrongly predicts a receiver's attitude to their gift. Similarly, Baskin et al. (2014) found that even if the giver was sensitive to the distance between the two parties, the receiver was not, which led to an inconsistent cognition regarding the gift (i.e., givers put more weight on desirability attributes than feasibility attributes, but receivers rely more on feasibility when making their judgments of a gift). Thus, a third party may be less sensitive to the relational distance between the giver and the receiver than these parties, which means that their judgment is not significantly influenced by guanxi intimacy. Second, the

manipulation of relational intimacy. In our pilot study, we found that having a blood relationship with someone else was rated as the highest level of guanxi intimacy. Since the family relationship is special, we did not include it in our research. Although the manipulation check of intimacy showed a significant difference between two relational intimacy groups (e.g., in Study 1, Scenario 3), this difference may not have been strong enough to influence participants' judgments.

The influence of gift value on differentiating gift giving and bribery

Study 2 showed that gift value significantly affects participants' judgment: in case of a small-value gift, participants were more likely to perceive it as gift giving, whereas a high-value present was prone to be judged as bribery. This confirms previous conceptual research (e.g., Ariyabuddhiphongs & Hongladarom, 2014; Tian, 2008).

The influence of motivation on differentiating gift giving and bribery

Study 3 found that the motivation for giving influences an observer's perception of this behavior. In case of emotion-oriented giving, participants were prone to perceive it as gift giving, whereas instrumentally oriented giving was more likely to be perceived as bribing. This result was supported in three scenarios, which is consistent with previous arguments (e.g., Dion, 2016; Tian, 2008).

Study 3 also found a significant interaction effect between giving motivation and guanxi utility. In a low-guanxi utility context, emotion-oriented giving was more likely to be perceived as gift giving, while in a high-guanxi utility context, instrumentally oriented giving was more likely to be judged as bribing. These results are consistent with the argument that the motivation for gift giving is emotion-oriented and emphasizes affection (e.g., Dion, 2016; Graycar & Jancsics, 2016), while the motivation for bribery is more instrumental and focuses on one's material interests (e.g., Millington et al., 2005). In a high-utility context instrumental-oriented giving was especially detrimental (i.e., seen as bribery). Thus, guanxi utility and motivation have an interactive effect on people's judgments of a present as either a gift or a bribe.

Limitations and future research

Although the three studies presented here yielded some interesting results that confirmed and extended previous research on gift giving vs bribing, and in spite of the fact that the design of Study 3 allows for causal inferences, this research still has important limitations. First, the research design. Usually, bribery research takes a scenario or questionnaire approach (e.g., Napal, 2005). However, scenarios are limited in terms of their coverage and context. This also applies to the present research. In order to address this limitation, in all three studies, multiple scenarios were used. Specifically, we used three giving scenarios, involving different types of interactions (from student-to-student, employee-to-supervisor, and student-to-teacher). Moreover, the materials used in these three studies were related and can therefore to some degree be considered as replications. Thus, we believe that within the limitations that are inherent to the scenario paradigm, we can be reasonably confident in our findings. Relatedly, note that some of our manipulations did not always work as expected (e.g., scenario 1 in Study 1), so these results should be interpreted with caution, and future studies should attempt to replicate our results using different scenarios and different manipulations of guanxi intimacy.

Second, the sampling method put limits to the generalizability of the findings. We used a convenience sampling method, mostly involving students. This may have limited the generalizability of our findings (e.g., what constitutes a high versus a low economic value present will differ for the general population versus students), and the business context is more complicated than the scenarios presented here. Again, this means that we should be cautious in generalizing our results to the general population. However, this issue is to some degree addressed by using three different samples, i.e., we have attempted to replicate our findings across samples.

In addition, the present study took a third-party perspective. Bribery involves an ethical judgment, and taking a giver or a receiver perspective may lead the results to be biased by social desirability. Taking a third-party perspective can to some extent control this bias. However, this third party is different from the giver or receiver. An impartial observer may not be sensitive to the relational distance between the giver and the receiver (Baskin et al., 2014). Therefore, their judgment of guanxi intimacy may not be very sensitive, which could have affected the effects of this factor on people's judgments. Future research can take a givers' perspective or that of both parties to examine whether differences for giver and the third party's judgment arise.

Finally, in our study, while studying relational intimacy we did not include relatives, family members, and strangers. According to Hwang (1987), prior to or during social interactions Chinese often gauge the nature of the relation by categorizing others into family, familiar people, and strangers. In our research, we only included familiar guanxi (i.e., teacher-to-student, colleagues, and classmates). Future research could replicate our results by using different samples, examining whether the findings differ for family members, familiar others, and strangers (cf. Hayes & Simmons, 2015).

Study implications

We contribute to the literature in at least three ways. First, we extended previous research on differentiating gift giving from bribing by taking a guanxi perspective, finding that guanxi utility is an important predictor of an observer's evaluation of giving behavior as either gifting or bribing. Second, we examined how gift value and giving motivation influence an observer's evaluation of a present as either a gift or a bribe and developed useful scenarios to examine the giving behavior, which can be used in future research. Lastly, by taking a third-party perspective we broadened the perspective taken in gift-giving research. Most previous research took a giver or receiver's perspective, but our research used that of a third party, which provides a new perspective to understanding gift giving and bribing.

Our research also has significant practical implications for people's giving behavior in the Chinese education and business context. First, when choosing a gift, givers need to consider their guanxi with the receiver, after which they should decide about the appropriate value of the gift. Specifically, in a high-guanxi utility context, a relation-oriented giver should not chose a high-value present. Emotion-oriented or relation-oriented presents are more appropriate to be given in a low-guanxi utility context. Second, for the receiving party, people should also pay attention to the giving context. Even if the motivation for giving may be hard to guess, people should reject a high-value present in a high-utility context. Third, our study helped us to better understand gift-giving and bribing behavior, on the one hand, showing that the evaluation of this type behavior is influenced by many factors rather than by a single criterion, and on the other hand demonstrating the limitations of the legal perspective in differentiating gift giving from bribing. Finally, when it comes to bribery and gift giving, cultural training programs for managers and policy makers (Brand & Slater, 2003) should also consider the factors identified in our study to guide giving behavior in the Chinese context.

Conclusion

Guanxi is an important factor in China and it should be carefully considered when people use presents to build guanxi, since gifts may easily be confounded with bribes. The current research found that guanxi characteristics have a significant impact on a third party's (observer) perception and judgment of gift-giving versus bribing in a given situation. Three key variables help to predict their judgment: guanxi utility, the value of the present, and the motivation for giving, and these factors should be carefully considered when engaging in building guanxi.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The included three studies were conducted in accordance with APA ethical standards and relevant laws. All participants read and signed informed consent.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) declared that this article has no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication.

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