



The Gifts We Keep on Giving: Documenting and Destigmatizing the Regifting Taboo

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The Gifts We Keep on Giving:
Documenting and Destigmatizing the Regifting Taboo

Gabrielle S. Adams

London Business School

Francis J. Flynn

Stanford Graduate School of Business

Michael I. Norton

Harvard Business School

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Abstract

Five studies investigate whether the practice of “regifting”—a social taboo—is as offensive to givers as regifters assume. Participants who imagined regifting thought that the original givers would be more offended than givers reported feeling, to such an extent that receivers viewed regifting as similar in offensiveness to throwing gifts away (whereas givers clearly preferred the former). This asymmetry in emotional reactions to regifting was driven by an asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement. Givers believed that the act of gift-giving passed “title” to the gift on to receivers—such that receivers were free to decide what to do with the gift; in contrast, receivers believed that givers retained some “say” in how their gifts were used. Finally, an intervention designed to destigmatize regifting by introducing a different normative standard (i.e., National Regifting Day) corrected the asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement and increased regifting.

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The Gifts We Keep on Giving: Documenting and Destigmatizing the Regifting Taboo

People often receive gifts they will not use, gifts they already have, or gifts they do not like. Some refer to this problem as a “deadweight loss,” whereby the receiver would not spend as much on the gift as the giver did in purchasing it (Waldfoegel, 1993) – leaving the receiver with an unwanted present that lingers in a closet before eventually being thrown away. One seemingly sensible means of restoring some of this lost value is for receivers to pass unwanted gifts along to others who might appreciate the gift more. However, the notion of regifting evokes both positive and negative reactions: whereas some regard regifting as resourceful and thrifty, many consider it rude and distasteful. We posit that resistance to regifting is due in part to an asymmetry in beliefs about the practice that depends on one’s role in an exchange: giver or receiver. In particular, we suggest receivers may overestimate givers’ negative emotional reactions to regifting, making them loath to regift.

In a classic ethnographic study of regifting, Malinowski (1922) described the dynamics of the “Kula Ring,” a ritual performed by residents of the Massim archipelago in Papua New Guinea. Kula participants traveled by canoe to a nearby island bearing gifts of shell jewelry that were then transported to another island and presented as gifts, and so on. To Kula Ring members, keeping gifts destroyed the value created by the act of giving, whereas regifting ensured that the value of a gift would be maintained (Hyde, 1979). Historical accounts such as these suggest that regifting was uncontroversial—and even normative—in some cultures. In contemporary society, however, criticism against the practice has emerged such that the act of regifting is now frowned upon, if not explicitly discouraged. In short, regifting is considered a social taboo.

We investigate whether the taboo of regifting may be somewhat one-sided, such that receivers overestimate how offensive regifting is to the initial giver. Gift giving, like other forms

of social exchange, is a highly ritualized process, governed by role-specific expectations that are rooted in each party's own egocentric view (Teigen, Olsen, & Solas, 2005; Zhang & Epley, 2009). For givers and receivers, views of the exchange may be a matter of timing: different features of the exchange are more or less salient before, during, and following an act of giving. For givers, the acts of selecting and offering a gift are more salient than the manner in which gifts are utilized after the exchange has taken place (Mauss, 1925). Receivers' obligations, on the other hand, become salient after receipt of the gift; for example, they are bound to express gratitude as an acknowledgement of the givers' sacrifice (Schwartz, 1967).

We suggest that this contrasting temporal focus in givers' and receivers' role-specific expectations leads to an asymmetry in beliefs about *entitlement*: whether receivers are free to do what they please with the gift, or whether givers' original intentions for the gift must be honored. Because givers' obligations have been satisfied once the gift has been received, they are less likely to be concerned with how the receiver chooses to use it: the givers' actions in deciding to give, selecting a gift, and delivering a gift item remain intact regardless of what the receiver chooses to do with the gift. Receivers, in contrast, may feel that givers' concerns about the gift linger past the act of giving—after all, the receiver is not even made aware of the gift until the exchange takes place. As a result, receivers may believe that givers will feel entitled to determine the fate of a gift, whereas givers disagree. We suggest that this asymmetry in beliefs about entitlement underlies the asymmetry in emotional reactions to regifting: Because receivers erroneously believe that givers want their original intentions for the gift to be honored, they believe that givers will be more offended by their decision to regift than givers actually are.

What could strengthen would-be regifters' feelings of entitlement to do with a gift as they see fit? Given that regifting is a normative taboo, information that destigmatizes the practice—

making it seem more permissible and prevalent—should embolden receivers to regift. Holidays, for example, are crucial institutions for coordinating the gift exchange process by clarifying which gift-giving practices are considered normative (Camerer, 1988). In fact, several cultures have developed holidays specifically intended to reframe regifting as a socially acceptable practice: the annual *vrijmarkt* in the Netherlands, and National Regifting Day in the United States. Noting these examples, we suggest that providing information that regifting is normatively acceptable and common—by increasing awareness of a regifting holiday—should increase receivers’ feelings of entitlement, decrease their perception of the offense that givers will feel, and increase regifting.

Overview of Studies

We examine the psychology of regifting in both hypothetical scenarios and actual regifting among friends. We explore whether receivers’ erroneous beliefs about regifting would lead them to throw a gift in the trash rather than regift it. We assess whether the asymmetry in beliefs about offensiveness is mediated by a similar asymmetry in perceptions of entitlement. Finally, we examine how introducing a different normative standard for regifting—a National Regifting Day—might help receivers to feel more entitled, leading them to rate regifting as less offensive and increase their actual regifting.

Study 1: Regifting Gift Cards

In Study 1, we investigated beliefs about the offensiveness of regifting from the perspective of both giver and receiver by asking participants to imagine giving or regifting gift cards. We hypothesized that receivers would think regifting was more offensive to the giver than givers would report feeling.

Participants

Fifty-five participants (36 female; $M_{age} = 31.6$) completed the study online for a chance to win a \$25.00 gift certificate to an online retailer.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to the role of giver or regifter and asked to read a scenario about a \$50.00 amazon.com gift card. Givers were told to imagine they had given the gift card to a friend for his birthday, and that, when asked, the friend said he had regifted the card to his sibling. Regifters were told to imagine they had received the gift card as a birthday gift from a friend, and that, when asked, had told the giver they had regifted the card to their own sibling.

Givers completed eight items assessing the extent to which they would feel offended (*annoyed, irritated, disgusted, upset, offended, insulted, awkward, and uncomfortable*) if the receiver regifted the gift card, while regifters rated how much they thought the giver would be offended using the same items, on 5-point scales (1: *very slightly or not at all* to 5: *extremely*). We created a composite measure of offensiveness ($\alpha = .94$).

Results and Discussion

Regifters thought the giver would be more offended if they regifted the gift card ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.11$) than givers reported feeling ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .83$), $t(54) = 3.15$, $p < .003$, $d = .85$, providing initial evidence that beliefs about regifting are contingent upon one's role in the exchange: regifters overestimated the extent to which givers would feel offended by regifting.

Study 2: Regift or Destroy?

Study 1 shows that regifters believe that regifting is more negative than do givers—but just *how* negatively do they view regifting? One reaction to receiving a bad gift is to give that gift away, but this leads receivers to worry about destroying social value by offending givers;

another reaction is to simply throw the gift away, thereby destroying its material value. In Study 2, we explore whether regifters believe that the potential decrease in social value that comes from regifting is so extreme that they see destroying the gift's material value by throwing it in the trash as similarly offensive to givers; we expected givers to view destroying their gift as worse than giving it to someone else.

Method

Participants

One hundred seventy-eight participants (117 females; $M_{age} = 49.0$) completed this study online for a chance to win a \$25.00 gift certificate to an online retailer.

Procedure

Participants were assigned to one condition of a 2 (role: giver or receiver) x 2 (receiver's decision: regift or throw away) between-subjects design. They read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine they had recently given or received a wristwatch as a graduation gift. Givers were asked to imagine that the receiver had either regifted the watch to a friend or thrown the watch in the trash; receivers were asked to imagine they had regifted the watch to a friend or had thrown it in the trash. Participants then responded to the same measures of offensiveness from Study 1 ($\alpha = .94$).

Results and Discussion

We observed a main effect of role, such that receivers believed regifting and throwing a gift away would offend givers more than givers actually felt, $F(1, 172) = 14.55, p < .001, d = .57$, and a main effect of the receiver's decision, such that throwing the gift away was rated as more offensive than regifting, $F(1, 172) = 9.62, p < .001, d = .48$. Most importantly, we observed the predicted interaction between role and receiver's decision on perceived offensiveness, $F(1, 172)$

= 4.09, $p < .05$ (Figure 1). Givers were less offended when they learned the receiver regifted ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .97$) than when they learned the receiver threw the gift away ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(87) = 3.37$, $p < .001$, $d = .72$; receivers, in contrast, thought the giver would be equally offended if they regifted ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .79$) or threw the gift in the trash ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(85) = .84$, $p < .41$, $d = .17$. Thus, while givers clearly viewed the act of throwing a gift away as more offensive than choosing to regift, receivers believed that regifting was as offensive as destroying the gift entirely.

Study 3: Regifting with Friends

In Study 3, we extend our investigation in several ways. First, we move from scenario-based studies to a study in which groups of real-world friends gave gifts to one another. Second, we explore our proposed mechanism for the asymmetry in perceptions of offensiveness: beliefs about entitlement. Specifically, we assessed whether receivers fail to recognize that givers believe they pass “title” to the gift on to receivers with the act of giving, and whether this discrepancy in beliefs about entitlement leads receivers to feel that regifting is more offensive than givers do. Finally, we examined a situation in which regifting is most likely to occur—receiving a particularly bad gift—predicting that even after receiving such a bad gift, receivers would continue to overestimate givers’ offense at regifting.

Method

Participants

Thirty-three students (17 females; $M_{age} = 21.0$) at a west-coast university participated in triads in exchange for \$10.00.

Procedure

Participants were required to sign up for the study with two of their friends. One participant was randomly assigned to the role of giver and escorted to a separate room. On a table were three items: a magazine for retired people, a DVD called “Mandy Moore: The Real Story,” and a weight-loss cookbook. In a pretest with a separate sample, participants ($N = 29$) indicated how much they would like receiving each of twenty-two gifts from a friend on 11-point scales (1: *very much dislike* to 11: *very much like*); these three received the lowest ratings ($M_s = 2.17, 2.28, \text{ and } 3.41$). Givers were asked to select one of these items, wrap it with gift paper, and give it to one of their friends, the initial receiver.

Next, givers were asked to go back to the waiting room. Initial receivers—now regifters—were then told to wrap the item in different paper and give it as a gift to the third friend, the final receiver. Initial receivers entered the waiting room with the newly wrapped gift, informed the final receivers that they had chosen to regift the gift, and gave it in front of the initial givers.

Givers and regifters completed the offensiveness measures from the previous studies ($\alpha = .92$). We used four items to measure perceptions of entitlement. For regifters, the items were: *The gift giver feels that I am entitled to do whatever I want with the gift; The gift giver feels that I should use the gift as it was intended; The gift giver feels that I should do whatever I want with this gift; It doesn't matter what the gift giver wants me to do with this gift* (the second item was reverse-coded). Givers responded to the same items from their own perspective (e.g., *The gift recipient is entitled to do whatever he/she wants with the gift*), on 7-point scales (1: *strongly disagree* to 7: *strongly agree*). We created a composite measure of beliefs about entitlement ($\alpha = .70$) with higher numbers corresponding to beliefs that initial receivers should feel more entitled.

Results and Discussion

Offensiveness. Regifters ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.14$) again thought that givers would be more offended by regifting than givers reported feeling ($M = 1.47$, $SD = .56$), $t(20) = 2.99$, $p < .007$, $d = 1.34$.

Entitlement. As expected, givers and regifters differed in their perceptions of entitlement, with givers ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.14$) believing that regifters were more entitled to do what they wished with the gift than regifters thought givers would ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(20) = 3.25$, $p < .004$, $d = 1.38$.

Mediation. The effect of role on offensiveness was significantly reduced (from $\beta = .56$, $p = .007$, to $\beta = .21$, $p = .29$) when entitlement was included in the equation, and entitlement significantly predicted offensiveness, $\beta = -.71$, $p < .001$ (Figure 2). The 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (0.18; 1.68), suggesting a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007).

Even among friends who know each other well, and even when receiving bad gifts, regifters continue to believe that givers will be more offended by regifting than givers actually are. Importantly, we demonstrate that an asymmetry in beliefs about who had “title” to the gifts mediated the effect of role on perceived offensiveness; because receivers feel that givers should have a greater say in what happens to a gift than givers feel they should, receivers believe that regifting is more offensive than givers do.

Studies 4A and 4B: National Regifting Day

Can we make receivers more comfortable with regifting? The results of Study 3 suggest that interventions that encourage receivers to feel more entitled to do what they wish with a gift—to feel less that their normative obligation is to honor the wishes of the giver—might liberate them to regift. In Studies 4A and 4B, therefore, we attempted to enhance receivers’

feelings of entitlement by offering a normative standard that legitimized regifting, a social institution that encouraged the practice of regifting: National Regifting Day.

While we might expect the support of a social institution to increase the frequency of regifting, critical for our theoretical account is that these increases in regifting are driven by changes in receiver's beliefs about entitlement. Thus in Studies 4A and 4B, we examine whether knowledge about National Regifting Day will make receivers feel that regifting is less offensive by correcting their beliefs about the extent to which givers continue to have "title" to the gift—and therefore increase actual regifting behavior.

Study 4A: National Regifting Day Increases Regifting

In Study 4A, we explored whether informing participants about National Regifting Day would increase actual regifting behavior. We hypothesized that people would be more likely to regift on National Regifting Day.

Method

Participants

Seventy-one students at a west-coast university (38 women; $M_{age} = 21.8$) participated in this study in exchange for \$8.00.

Procedure

Participants were asked to bring a gift they had recently received to the lab. Upon arrival, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions; they were told either that it was National Regifting Day or not. All participants were asked whether they wanted to regift their gift to a friend of their choosing. If they chose to regift, we gave them a box for their gift, asked them to wrap the gift in wrapping paper and ribbon, obtained the new receiver's address, and shipped the gifts to the new receivers. Participants who chose not to regift kept their gifts.

Results and Discussion

Regifting. As predicted, participants were more likely to regift when informed it was National Regifting Day than not, $\chi^2(1, N = 71) = 4.89, p < .02$. Some 30% of participants who had learned about National Regifting Day chose to regift, three times as many as the 9% of participants who had not learned about the day.

Study 4B: National Regifting Day Increases Entitlement

National Regifting Day can therefore increase receivers' willingness to regift—but is this increased willingness to regift driven by a decrease in the asymmetry between givers' and receivers' perceptions of the gift exchange, as our account suggests? In Study 4B, we use a scenario-based paradigm to explore whether learning about National Regifting Day causes receivers to feel more entitled to regift—matching givers' beliefs about their entitlement—and whether this change in entitlement predicts receivers' more accurate perception of how offended givers are by the act of regifting.

Method

Participants

One hundred fifteen students (68 female; $M_{age} = 34.2$) at a west-coast university completed this study in exchange for a \$3.00 gift card to an online retailer.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the giver condition, participants were asked to imagine they had given a friend an iPod Shuffle as a birthday gift. They were then told to imagine that the receiver had regifted the gift to a friend. In the receiver and receiver-regifting-day conditions, participants imagined they had received an iPod Shuffle as a birthday gift and had regifted it to another friend. Participants in the giver and receiver

conditions completed the same measures of entitlement ($\alpha = .79$) and offensiveness ($\alpha = .96$) as in Study 3, with no mention of National Regifting Day; participants in the receiver-regifting-day condition reported their entitlement and their estimate of the givers' offense if they were to regift on National Regifting Day.

Results and Discussion

Offensiveness. The omnibus ANOVA on offensiveness was significant, $F(2, 113) = 7.27$, $p < .001$. As in the previous studies, participants in the receiver condition ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.18$) thought that givers would be more offended than givers reported being ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(77) = 3.64$, $p < .001$. Participants in the receiver-regifting-day condition, however, corrected their estimates ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .98$), believing that givers would be less offended than participants in the receiver condition, $t(72) = 2.45$, $p < .02$, such that their estimates of givers' offense did not differ from givers' reports, $t(77) = 1.23$, $p = .22$.

Entitlement. The omnibus ANOVA was again significant, $F(2, 114) = 12.89$, $p < .001$. Mirroring our results for offensiveness, whereas participants in the receiver condition ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.13$) felt less entitlement than givers ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.28$) felt they should, $t(77) = 4.87$, $p < .001$, participants in the receiver-regifting-day condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.09$) felt more entitled than receivers who had not been informed about National Regifting Day, $t(78) = 2.93$, $p < .004$, though they still felt less entitled than givers thought they should, $t(73) = 2.14$, $p < .04$.

Mediation. We conducted mediation analyses comparing the giver and receiver-regifting-day conditions to the receiver condition by recoding the condition variable into two dummy coded variables: one that coded for the giver condition, and one that coded for the receiver-regifting-day condition. The effect of role on offensiveness was significantly reduced (from $\beta = -.39$, $p = .001$, to $\beta = -.04$, $p = .63$ for givers; and from $\beta = -.26$, $p = .01$ to $\beta = -.12$, $p = .16$ for

participants in the receiver-regifting-day condition) when entitlement was included in the equation, while entitlement significantly predicted offensiveness, $\beta = -.67, p < .001$. The 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect excluded zero (-1.16; -.40 for givers and -.63; -.01 for the receiver-regifting day condition), suggesting a significant indirect effect.

As in Study 3, an asymmetry between givers' and receivers' beliefs about entitlement accounted for the asymmetry between givers' and receivers' beliefs about how offensive givers found regifting. Most importantly, increasing receivers' feelings of entitlement—by instituting a different normative standard that destigmatized regifting—corrected their perceptions such that their beliefs about entitlement and offensiveness more closely mirrored those of givers.

General Discussion

Despite the intuitive appeal of dealing with unwanted gifts by regifting them to others who might enjoy them more, our results suggest that this solution may not appeal to all parties to the exchange. Across different types of gifts and gift-giving occasions, receivers believed that regifting would be more offensive to givers than givers reported feeling. Indeed, receivers thought that regifting was as bad as throwing a gift in the trash, whereas givers saw the latter as more offensive. These effects were mediated by beliefs about entitlement: whereas receivers feel that givers are entitled to have a say in what happens to their gifts, givers feel that receivers are entitled to do whatever they like with a gift. In short, the taboo against regifting was felt more strongly by receivers than by givers. An intervention designed to destigmatize this regifting taboo—a national holiday devoted to the practice—increased receivers' feelings of entitlement and decreased their overestimation of givers' offense at regifting, thereby increasing receivers' willingness to regift.

Two factors central to the regifting process are worthy of further investigation: the relationship between the giver and receiver, and the type of gift given. These variables are interrelated, as the types of gifts given to close friends often differ from those given to acquaintances. In our studies, asymmetries in beliefs about regifting emerged even when givers and receivers were close friends (Study 3); nevertheless, given that gift-giving is frequently used to acknowledge and strengthen relationships, future research should explore the role of relationship closeness in reactions to regifting—though the direction of the impact is not clear: receivers might fear that close friends are more likely than acquaintances to be offended by regifting, but receivers might feel better about regifting gifts from close friends because they assume that people who care about them would want them to use the gift in any way they choose. The impact of relationship closeness on regifting may depend critically on the type of gift being regifted. In our studies, asymmetries in beliefs about regifting arose with both “good” (gift cards) and “bad” (Mandy Moore DVDs) gifts, but gifts vary on other key dimensions, such as “concrete” gifts (e.g., goods and services) and “symbolic” gifts (that convey love and status; Foa & Foa, 1974; 1980). Whereas regifting concrete resources (gift cards and DVDs) may be tolerable to givers, regifting symbolic gifts—for example, a hand-crafted scarf—may be more likely to offend givers because the act of regifting sends a stronger signal that receivers do not value their relationship with givers. In cases in which symbolic gifts are given to close friends—where gifts symbolize a social bond (Mauss, 1925)—regifting may have more negative consequences.

On a practical level, our results suggest a simple solution to increase regifting. Givers should encourage receivers to use their gifts as they please, perhaps going so far as to tell

receivers that they will not be offended if the receiver chooses to regift—or at least, not as offended as receivers might expect.

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Figure 1. Beliefs about the offensiveness of regifting as a function of role (giver or receiver) and what was done with the gift (regift or trash; Study 2).

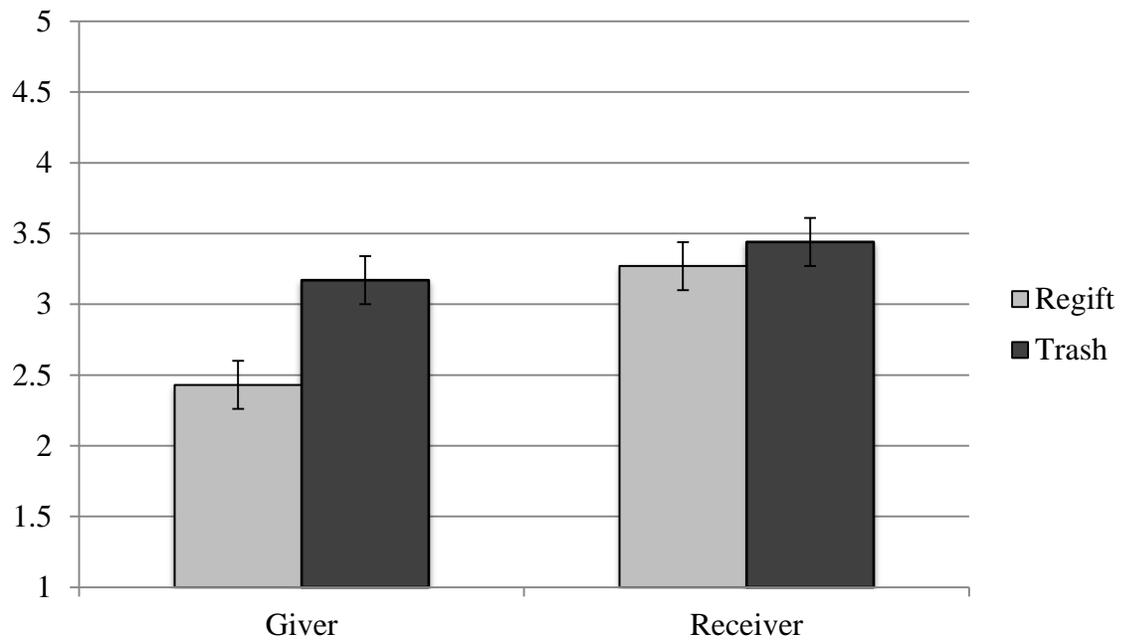
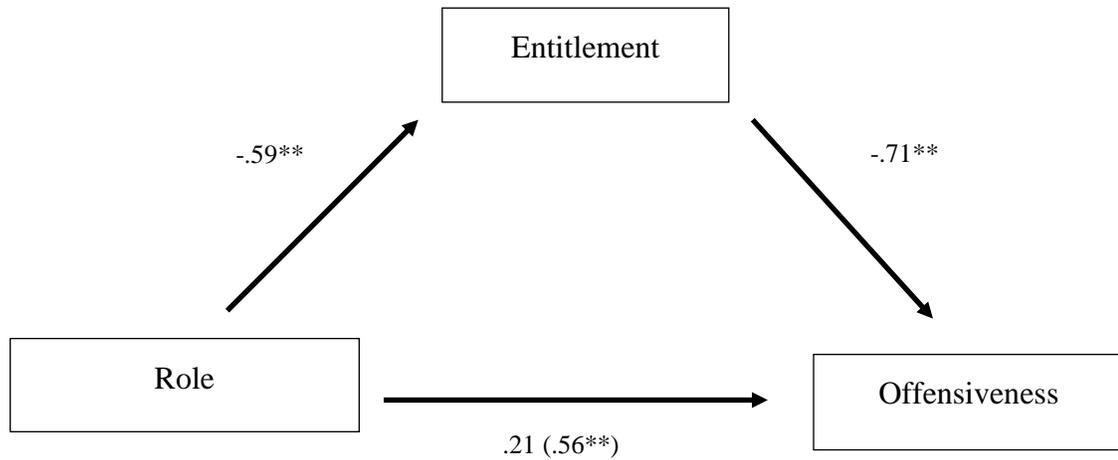


Figure 2. Entitlement mediates the relationship between role and perceived offensiveness (Study 3).



Note: Standardized betas are reported (the coefficient in parentheses indicates the direct effect of role on offensiveness prior to controlling beliefs about entitlement).

$** p < .01$.