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# You designed that yourself for me? Vicarious pride in customized gift exchange

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## Abstract

In four studies, we found that receiving a customized gift leads recipients to appreciate the gift more highly because of vicarious feelings of pride. This vicarious pride is the same feeling that the customizer experiences after having self-customized a product. In the first two experiments with real-life pairs of friends, vicarious pride was documented among recipients of customized gifts. The findings show that the relationship between customization and gift appreciation is mediated by vicarious pride. Study 3 and Study 4 replicate the results of the first series of experiments, and reveal the role of vicarious pride in enhancing state self-esteem and, in turn, gift appreciation. Study 4 also tests the effect of a relational variable (i.e., relationship anxiety) on this relationship. Specifically, relationship anxiety affects vicarious pride, and then consequently state self-esteem and gift appreciation, which are only enhanced by customization when the relationship is not anxious. As a practical implication, this research emphasizes the importance of communicating gift customization to gift recipients to enhance their gift experience and appreciation.

## KEYWORDS

customization, gift, pride, state self-esteem, vicarious experience

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you want to buy a gift for a friend: you want to gift them something unique and meaningful, but simultaneously you have both budget and time constraints. Many brands today offer the option of customized products by adding initials, selecting colours, or other features. Customizing a product seems to be the perfect solution for gifting something valuable; what is more, the customization process itself can be enjoyable (Moreau et al., 2011) and represents a way for the giver to escape the boredom related to a repeat gift (Givi, 2020). However, what about your friend? Will they appreciate your attempt at customization? Under what conditions will they like the customized gift?

Nowadays, product customization is a common tool for companies to provide unique products to customers. About 50% of customers of different ages declare themselves to be interested in self-customizing products online, and consider customization to be an excellent way to make special gifts (Deloitte, 2015). Gift personalization opportunities exist in all consumer markets, and they are increasingly facilitated by technology. Nike, on its website, for example, gives consumers the opportunity to personalize running shoes, and Labatt's Breweries sells beer with pictures proposed by the buyers on the label. Even video games can be personalized by modifying virtual characters with the gift recipient's features. The market for customized gifts, which includes seasonal decorations, embroidery and photo personalization, is expected to grow to \$13,011.27 million by 2027 (Technavio, 2022). While

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much of the research on mass-customization has focused on how to make this technology as user-friendly as possible (e.g., Hildebrand et al., 2014), the key driver of the success of mass-customization toolkits seem to be related to the feelings of pride generated by self-designing a product. This so-called “I designed it myself” effect increases the perceived value of the customized product and the consumer's willingness to pay for it (Franke et al., 2010; Troye & Supphellen, 2012). In the context of gift exchange, how the gift giver customizes the gift has been examined (Moreau et al., 2011), but the experience of the gift recipient has thus far been neglected.

The present research takes the perspective of the gift recipient, and seeks to reveal the mechanism that accounts for the greater appreciation for customized gifts. We suggest that feelings of pride play a role in the appreciation of a customized gift, even though the customization process was carried out by the gift giver, not the recipient. Building on simulation theory, we propose that gift customization elicits vicarious feelings, that is, when individuals observe others' actions and mental states, they may experience the same psychological states that would have occurred had the individual performed such actions themselves (Ackerman et al., 2009; Goldman, 2006). For example, parents often experience vicarious pride in the academic success of their children, or people may feel embarrassed at an unfortunate event that happens to someone they are observing. We hypothesize that the feelings of pride that are generated by self-designing a product and are felt by the gift giver are psychologically reproduced by the final user of the product (i.e., the recipient). In other words, the recipient vicariously experiences the pride generated by the customization process undertaken by the giver, even though the recipient him/herself has not participated in the customization process.

Our four studies support our hypothesis about vicarious pride, and consistently reveal the recipients' greater appreciation for customized gifts and the positive effects on self-perceptions (i.e., enhancement of state self-esteem). We employed experimental designs with real-life friends to test for the presence of vicarious pride, as well as its effect on state self-esteem and gift appreciation, through mediation analysis. These results are aligned with the literature suggesting the benefits associated with vicarious pride (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010), and product co-creation (Fuchs et al., 2015). Importantly, we experimentally disentangle this vicarious experience from alternative explanations related to the effects of gift exchange per se. Among the alternative explanations analysed, we excluded the effect of positive emotions and self-recognition, which are considered to be important predictors of gift appreciation because consumers prefer recipient-centred gifts (Ruth et al., 1999), and products that fit their preferences (Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005). We also rule out the possibility that the time and effort invested by the giver in selecting the gift affects gift appreciation (Areni et al., 1998): two studies show that gift appreciation for customized gifts is not conditional on the time and effort spent by the giver, reinforcing the role of vicarious pride. Finally, we offer insights into when such vicarious experiences occur. We find that anxiety in the relationship is an obstacle to the vicarious experience; the vicarious experience only emerges when the relationship between the giver and the recipient is not characterised by anxiety.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The current literature suggests that customization, the process by which consumers self-design a product by choosing product attributes according to their own preferences (Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005), can be a successful strategy to please consumers (Moreau et al., 2011). Customizers enjoy being engaged in such a challenging activity, and the effort they invest in self-designing the product is rewarded by psychological benefits, such as feelings of pride (the “I designed it myself” effect; Franke et al., 2010).

However, the value of customization might be questioned when it comes to gifts. First, gift purchasing is a challenging activity for consumers, who have to put themselves in the shoes of the recipient and find a balance between projecting their own identity and the recipient's self-identity (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). When the gift is not liked by the recipient, it might damage the relationship between the giver and the recipient (Ruth et al., 1999; Sherry, 1983), because the latter feels misunderstood and experiences negative emotions (Ruth et al., 2004). Although disliked gifts often are swapped, re-gifted or sold (Branco-Illodo et al., 2020), this might be impossible for a customized gift (Pizzetti & Gibbert, 2018). Additionally, recipients may not be easy to please, because they may evaluate gift attributes differently to the givers (Givi et al., 2021; Robben & Verhallen, 1994), and may not perceive the customized product in the same way as the giver (Pizzetti & Gibbert, 2018). Furthermore, the uniqueness of the customized gift might backfire: over-individuation is not always liked in received gifts (Steffel & LeBoeuf, 2014).

Despite the challenges that gift customization poses, several mass-customization toolkits are now positioning themselves as sources of unique gifts. Thus, the understanding of the recipient's reaction and the acceptance of customized gifts is vital to give advice to customization companies.

### 2.1 | The vicarious experience of pride in the receiving of gifts

We propose that gift recipients appreciate a customized gift because it vicariously elicits pride. Vicarious feelings occur when individuals mentally replicate and assess the actions of other individuals, and such simulation leads to the same psychological outcomes as the actual performance of the action (Ackerman et al., 2009). For example, supporters of sports teams tend to live their sports team's wins and losses as their own, experiencing similar pride or frustration to that felt by the players themselves (Cornil & Chandon, 2013). We propose that being aware of the customization process performed by the gift giver leads the recipient to experience the same psychological outcome of product customization: the recipient vicariously experiences feelings of pride.

Theoretically, this proposition builds on simulation theory: individuals react to others' mental states and actions by mentally replicating them, and this internal simulation elicits the same psychological effects as the actual performance of the action

(Goldman, 2006; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). The internal simulation means that people take another person's perspective, and this process allows the observer to gain insights into the observed person's goals and emotional states. The literature cites a variety of vicarious experiences, such as feelings of pain (Jackson et al., 2006), or emotions such as shame (Welten et al., 2012) and embarrassment (Kilian et al., 2018). It is intriguing that feelings of pride can arise not only from the evaluation of one's own achievement, but also from the assessment of another person's achievement (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010; Septianto et al., 2018), that is, vicariously. Prior research suggests that such vicarious experiences are facilitated in contexts of high connectedness, such as the case of a student who is proud of the achievement of a classmate (Bandura, 1997). Vicarious experiences underlie the empathic understanding of others' mental states (Bandura, 1997). Critically, gift exchange is one of the primary forms of interaction between individuals, one which increases connectedness and reinforces relational bonds (Mauss, 1925; Ruth et al., 1999). Given the existence of a bond between the gift giver and the gift recipient, it seems plausible that feelings of pride would be a response to a customized gift. Our hypothesis is that a similar mechanism to the "I designed it myself" in the consumer when customizing a product may occur when a recipient receives a customized gift. The recipient vicariously experiences pride in the customized gift. Therefore, we hypothesize that the awareness of the giver's customization process generates the same psychological experience in the recipient: the recipient feels pride vicariously. Or, more formally:

**H1:** Customized gifts (vs. non-customized gifts) elicit vicarious pride in the gift recipient.

The literature on customization suggests that the feelings of pride that are stimulated by self-designing a product account for why customized products are more highly valued by consumers. Such feelings increase the customizer's willingness to pay (Franke et al., 2010) because they (positively) bias the perceived quality of the product (Troye & Supphellen, 2012). Given that vicarious experiences are likely to lead to effects akin to those of actual participation in an activity (Ackerman et al., 2009), we might expect that vicarious pride accounts for this greater appreciation for customized gifts. More formally:

**H2:** Customized gifts are more appreciated than non-customized gifts because of vicarious pride. Vicarious pride mediates the relationship between gift customization and the recipient's appreciation of the gift.

Among the consequences of pride, the literature also suggests a sense of empowerment and an increase in self-esteem (Ben-ze'ev, 2001; Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). Because pride is an emotion elicited by the acknowledge of "possessions" that one deems valuable (e.g., personal qualities or special gifts), individuals tend to maintain this positive state when valuing these possessions. This tendency to self-

ascribe something good plays an important function in fostering our self-esteem (Ben-ze'ev, 2001). In gift exchange, receiving a customized gift might offer a boost to the 'ego' of the recipient, who might feel more valued and esteemed when their gift is customized. Thus, we predict that vicarious pride enhances self-perception, boosting state self-esteem, that is, "self-esteem experienced in a particular situation" (You et al., 2020, p. 135) - which in turn affects gift appreciation. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

**H3:** Vicarious pride enhances state self-esteem, which in turn affects the recipient's appreciation of the gift.

## 2.2 | The importance of the relationship between the giver and the recipient

Since gift exchange is a social process that involves at least two actors (the giver and the receiver), the relational aspects of the exchange should also be considered when investigating vicarious experiences and gift exchange. Relational variables affect how gifts are perceived, appreciated and accepted. For example, the valence of the relationship (i.e., positive or negative) with the giver influences the recipient's reactions to a gift. Low satisfaction in, or scepticism towards, the relational partner influences the pleasure associated with gifts (Nguyen & Munch, 2011). Moreover, individuals who are anxious about the relational partner do not experience gift-giving as a pleasurable and voluntary activity; rather, they feel forced to comply with the social norm of giving, and they use the gift exchange instrumentally to achieve other goals, such as forgiveness (Nguyen & Munch, 2014).

Vicarious experiences are also affected by relational variables. When individuals are psychologically close to others, they experience their emotions (Hatfield et al., 1994) and behave in the same way (Mende et al., 2019). Conversely, relationship anxiety may constitute an obstacle to vicarious experiences. Indeed, anxiety is associated with a negative model of the self and personal concerns about rejection and abandonment (Bartz & Lydon, 2004; Berry et al., 2007). In addition, thinking about an anxious relationship activates defence mechanisms aimed at reducing dependency on, or of, others, which may inhibit connecting with others (Bartz & Lydon, 2004). Thus, a high level of relationship anxiety between the giver and the recipient might affect perspective-taking and diminish the vicarious experience of pride.

By contrast, when a relationship is not characterized by anxiety, individuals have positive expectations regarding interpersonal exchanges (Bowlby, 1969); they are more open and inclined to find social support from relational partners (Wright et al., 2017) because they are not worried about emotional intimacy (Mende et al., 2019). In a non-anxious relationship, recipients feel less sceptical, more secure and open about their gift partner (Nguyen & Munch, 2014), as well as feeling more receptive to gift exchanges. We thus expect that, when the relationship between the giver and the recipient is non-anxious, the recipient's awareness of the giver's customizing activity

facilitates the vicarious experience of pride and enhances state self-esteem, increasing gift appreciation. More formally:

**H4:** Relationship anxiety affects the relationship between the gift, vicarious pride, state self-esteem and gift appreciation. When the relationship is characterized by low anxiety, the gift recipient experiences greater vicarious pride, self-esteem and gift appreciation.

### 3 | OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

Four studies were conducted to test our main hypothesis that customized gifts elicit vicarious feelings of pride, enhance state self-esteem and are more highly appreciated by gift recipients compared to non-customized gifts. Studies 1 and 2 involved real-life couples of friends recruited using snowball sampling procedures. Studies 3 and 4 involved participants from Prolific Academic and used scenario experiments. The studies employed different measures of gift appreciation and different customized products. Figure 1 presents an overview of the studies.

#### 3.1 | Study 1

Study 1 aimed to offer initial evidence for our intuition that customized gifts elicit the vicarious experience of pride (testing H1), which in turn accounts for the greater appreciation for customized gifts (testing H2). Study 1 also helps to rule out an alternative explanation for the phenomenon. Specifically, we took

into account the role of positive emotions in determining the greater appreciation for the customized gift. Gifts that are recipient-centred are associated with positive emotions, which have the power to reinforce the relationship between the giver and the recipient (Ruth et al., 1999). Furthermore, we analysed self-identification with the gift as an alternative explanation for the greater appreciation for the customized gift. Customization, indeed, increases the fit between the product and the consumer (Dellaert & Stremersch, 2005), and a similar effect might be expected in the gift context, which might account for the appreciation of customized gifts.

#### 3.1.1 | Method

74 participants (41.9% male,  $M_{age} = 25.45$ ) from the neighbourhood of one of the authors' institutions participated in this study, and were enrolled in a raffle for gift cards. The study was a single factor (gift: customized vs. non-customized) between-subject design. We employed snowball sampling. First, university students were involved as gift givers, and were asked to think about a friend as the possible recipient of a gift, and to provide their email address. Subsequently, we contacted the recipients and asked them to take part in this study. The involvement of givers was meant to increase the authenticity of the experience of receiving a gift, and to recruit participants via snowball procedures.

The gift was exactly the same in both conditions (an outfit consisting of a blazer, t-shirt, trousers and shoes), but was described differently. In the customized gift condition, the scenario presented a selection process carried out step-by-step by adding items to the outfit; in the non-customized gift condition, the outfit was selected

Study design	H tested	Sample	Gift stimuli	Main results
<b>Study 1</b> Gift (customized vs. non-customized)	<b>H1 &amp; H2</b>	74 international participants paired with one friend	Clothes outfit	Customized gifts elicit vicarious pride, and in turn gift appreciation
<b>Study 2</b> 2(gift: customized vs. non-customized) x (time and effort: low vs. high)	<b>H1 &amp; H2</b>	134 international participants paired with one friend	T-shirt	Customized gifts elicit vicarious pride, and in turn gift appreciation. These effects are not conditional to time & efforts spent by the giver
<b>Study 3</b> 2(gift: customized vs. non-customized) x (time and effort: low vs. high)	<b>H1, H2 &amp; H3</b>	225 UK participants from Academic Prolific	Mug	Customized gifts elicit vicarious pride, enhance state self-esteem and, in turn, increase gift appreciation. Not conditional to time and efforts spent by the giver
<b>Study 4</b> 2(gift: customized vs. non-customized) x (relationship anxiety: low vs. high)	<b>H3 &amp; H4</b>	198 US participants from Academic Prolific	Wristwatch	When relationship anxiety is low, customized gifts elicit vicarious pride, enhance state self-esteem and, in turn, increase gift appreciation.

**FIGURE 1** Overview of the studies.

from a set of off-the-peg outfits. Given that high gift appreciation might imply that recipients are more eager to accept a gift with attributes chosen by the giver, and less willing to change the features of the gift (Sherry et al., 1992), we assessed gift appreciation by asking recipients to change any items of the gift they did not like. We expected recipients who received the customized gift to change fewer items. Given that the outfit was composed of four items, the volume of changes ranged from 0 (= no changes) to 4 (= all items were changed). Then, we measured the vicarious pride (two items from Franke et al., 2010; Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.890$ ). We also measured positive emotions (two items from Soscia, 2007; Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.806$ ) and self-identification with the gift (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.914$ ). Appendix A presents the scale items for each study.

A manipulation check question (single-item, multiple choice) was included at the end of the questionnaire. Participants in the customized gift condition correctly indicated that their friends had created the look by selecting each item from a set of options ( $n = 39$ ). Conversely, those in the non-customized gift condition indicated that the look was chosen by the friend from a set of predefined looks ( $n = 35$ ). Finally, we asked demographic questions, and thanked the participants.

### 3.1.2 | Results

*Gift appreciation and vicarious pride.* The results show that the recipients of customized gifts changed fewer outfit items ( $M = 1.03$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) than the recipients of non-customized gifts ( $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ,  $t_{(64.26)} = -2.021$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Moreover, the results revealed higher scores of vicarious pride in customized ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ) than in non-customized gifts ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ,  $t_{(72)} = 2.059$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Using the model 4 of PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022), we tested the extent to which the effect of gift customization on gift appreciation is mediated by vicarious pride. The results revealed that, using 10,000 bootstraps, the indirect effect was significant ( $b = 0.3139$ ; 95%CI [.0169, 0.6857], meaning that the vicarious pride (i.e., the mediator) accounts for the relation between the predictor (i.e., gift customization) and gift appreciation.

*Ruling out the alternative explanation of positive emotions and self-recognition.* We found a non significant difference in positive emotions between the two conditions ( $t_{(70.41)} = -0.897$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{customized}} = 7.80$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ; vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 8.18$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ). The same analysis on self-identification revealed a non significant difference between customized and non-customized gifts ( $t_{(72)} = 1.449$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ;  $M_{\text{customized}} = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ; vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ). Thus, we exclude that both positive emotions and self-recognition can account for the greater appreciation for customized gifts.

These findings provide initial support for the idea that gift customization elicits vicarious pride (supporting H1), which has an effect on gift appreciation (supporting H2). Further analyses excluded the role of positive emotions and self-identification in accounting for

the greater appreciation for customized gifts. Our explanation, based on vicarious feelings, implies that the appreciation for customized gifts does not depend on what recipients infer about the giver's time and effort expended in customizing the gift. The next studies manipulate the length and difficulty of the process undertaken by the giver in customizing (vs. selecting) the gift to exclude the effect of time and effort on gift appreciation.

In this study, we measured gift appreciation in terms of the number of outfit items that the recipient is willing to change. However, changing a gift is often regarded as impolite by recipients (Sherry et al., 1992), meaning that they might only decide to keep the gift to avoid offending the giver. For this reason, in Study 2 we directly asked participants to rate their appreciation for the gift.

## 3.2 | Study 2

Study 2 sought to provide further evidence of how customized gifts elicit vicarious feelings of pride, excluding the role of time and effort, in shaping the recipient's appreciation for the customized gift. An alternative explanation to the phenomenon might be that customization is seen as a time-consuming and effort-requiring activity for the giver. Such time and effort might be drivers of gift appreciation, since recipients prefer gifts that require a large amount of time and effort on the part of the giver (Robben & Verhallen, 1994). We expected the greater appreciation for customized gifts not to be conditional on time and effort, but to be mediated by vicarious pride.

### 3.2.1 | Method

134 participants from the neighbourhood of one of the authors' institutions participated in this study (41% male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 25.11$ ). We followed the same snowball procedure as in Study 1 to recruit participants, who were then randomly assigned to conditions.

The study was a 2 (gift: customized vs. non-customized)  $\times$  2 (time and effort: high vs. low) between-subjects design. The gift was exactly the same in the conditions (a T-shirt), but we showed two different videos to manipulate the gift-selection process. Videos were employed because they facilitate perspective-taking (Prussia & Kinicki, 1996). The video showed a customization process undertaken via online toolkits versus a gift selection made by surfing different websites. The time and effort factor was manipulated by informing participants about the length of the process (high: 2-h process and several websites vs. low: 30-min process and one website). After the video, two questions from Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.910$ ), assessed how the recipients appreciated the gift. The recipients then answered questions about vicarious pride, as measured in study 1 (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.859$ ).

A multiple answer item was used to check the effectiveness of gift manipulation. 49 participants of the non--customized gift condition correctly identified that the friend had surfed on various websites and selected one T-shirt; 60 participants of the customized

gift condition indicated that the friend had personalized the T-shirt. Those participants who failed the manipulation check ( $n_{\text{non-customized}} = 4$ ;  $n_{\text{customized}} = 21$ ) were excluded from the sample. The final sample was therefore composed of 109 participants.

Two items from Franke et al. (2010) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.716$ ) were used to check the effectiveness of the time and effort manipulation. A *t*-test confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation ( $t_{(107)} = 5.428$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with participants in the high time and effort condition indicating greater time and effort having been expended in purchasing the gift compared to participants in the low condition ( $M_{\text{highTE}} = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ; vs.  $M_{\text{lowTE}} = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ).

### 3.2.2 | Results

We conducted an ANOVA on vicarious pride, with gift and time and effort as factors. It revealed a significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1,108)} = 5.640$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), with higher means for the customized gift condition ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ; vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). No other significant effects were found.

We also found that gift appreciation significantly varied between gift conditions ( $F_{(1, 108)} = 7.832$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ): customized gifts ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ) were significantly more appreciated than non-customized gifts ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ). No other significant differences were found.

To test for the mediating role of vicarious pride, we conducted a mediation analysis using model 4 of the PROCESS macro with 10,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2022). Gift appreciation was significantly mediated by vicarious pride ( $b = 0.5001$ , CI 95% [.1013, 0.9052]); conversely, the direct effect was not significant ( $b = 0.3582$ ,  $t = 1.4748$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; CI 95% [-0.1233; 0.8398]).

The findings of Study 2 offer further support to H1 and H2. The effect of vicarious pride on gift appreciation appears to be independent of the time and effort expended on selecting or customizing the gift. Our analyses indeed show that time and effort influenced neither gift appreciation nor vicarious feelings. However, customization may require even less time than 30 min, and such a short time and very limited effort might affect the hypothesized effect. Study 3 further disentangles the role of time and effort in gift customization.

### 3.3 | Study 3

This study aims to further disentangle the role of time and effort and to generalize the results by using alternative scales for our focal constructs. Accordingly, in this study we included a shorter customization process to exclude the effect of time and effort on the hypothesized relationships. We also included a measure of state self-esteem to assess whether gift customization through vicarious pride positively affects self-perceptions, functioning as a boost to the recipient's ego for having received a special customized gift (testing H3).

### 3.3.1 | Method

225 participants (52% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 42.69$ ), recruited online through the U.K. Prolific Academic panel in exchange for a small compensation, participated in a 2 (gift: customized vs. non-customized)  $\times$  2 (time and effort: low vs. high) between-subjects design.

The study employed ad hoc, created scenarios to manipulate the independent variables, inspired by relevant literature on gift exchange. Participants were asked to imagine that their friend Robin was looking for a gift for their birthday. In the customized condition (vs. *non-customized*), Robin customized a mug by personalizing the colour combination, the picture and the writing (vs. *searched on a website for a mug and compared some mugs*), to come up with a personalized mug with a picture and the name of the recipient. In the low time condition (vs. *high time*), the process only took a few minutes (vs. *some minutes*), and after 3 min and a few attempts (vs. *30 min and some attempts*) of personalization/mug comparisons, the friend Robin comes up with a mug. Appendix B provides the scenarios of the studies.

Then, the participants were asked to rate gift appreciation (5 items from Paolacci et al. (2015) and Moreau et al. (2011); Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.921$ ). Vicarious pride was measured with an alternative set of items adapted from Trail et al. (2000) and Septianto et al. (2018) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.805$ ). We also included a scale on state self-esteem (3 items from Rosenberg (1965); Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.955$ ). Items were measured on 7-point Likert scales. Demographic questions were asked at the end of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire included an attention check. Participants who failed the attention check were excluded from the final sample. The effectiveness of the time and effort manipulation was assessed with the same items as in study 2 (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.823$ ). The analysis confirmed the effective manipulation of the variable ( $M_{\text{lowTE}} = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ , vs.  $M_{\text{highTE}} = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ;  $t_{(223)} = -11.361$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The effectiveness of the gift manipulation was measured with one item from Moreau et al. (2020). The analysis conducted on the manipulation check confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulation ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 6.35$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ , vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ;  $t_{(145.367)} = 6.808$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.3.2 | Results

*Vicarious pride.* The ANOVA conducted on vicarious pride with gift, and time and effort as factors revealed a significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1, 224)} = 7.356$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), showing significantly higher means for the customized gift ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ) compared to the non-customized gift ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). No other significant differences were found.

*State self-esteem.* We conducted an ANOVA on state self-esteem with gift, and time and effort as the independent variables. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1, 224)} = 6.611$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), showing significantly higher means for the customized conditions ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) compared to the

non-customized conditions ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ). No other significant differences were found.

**Gift appreciation.** The ANOVA conducted on gift appreciation with gift, and time and effort as factors revealed a significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1, 224)} = 3.787$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), showing significantly higher means for the customized conditions ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) compared to the non-customized conditions ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). No other significant differences were found.

Based on the previous results that exclude an effect of time and effort on the dependent variables, but show main effects of the gift factor, we conducted a serial mediation with 10,000 bootstrapping resamples (Model 6) using the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022). The model included the gift as the independent variable (customized = 1; non-customized = 0), gift appreciation as the dependent variable, and vicarious pride and state self-esteem as the first and the second mediators, respectively. The gift factor had a significant positive effect on the first mediator, that is, vicarious pride ( $b = 0.5613$ ,  $t = 2.8166$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Vicarious pride had a significant positive relationship with mediator 2, that is, state self-esteem ( $b = 0.5509$ ,  $t = 9.8524$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Both mediators had a significant positive effect on gift appreciation (vicarious pride:  $b = 0.2459$ ,  $t = 5.0454$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; state self-esteem:  $b = 0.4559$ ,  $t = 9.3409$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The direct effect of the gift factor on gift appreciation was not significant ( $b = -0.0255$ ,  $t = -0.2061$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; 95%CI [-0.2691; 0.2181]). We found that the indirect effect of the independent variable (i.e., gift) on gift appreciation with vicarious pride and state self-esteem was significant and positive ( $b = 0.1409$ ; CI 95% [.0425; 0.2678]).

Study 3 replicates the results of Study 2 which excludes an effect of time and effort on gift appreciation and generalizes such results by including new measures of vicarious pride and gift appreciation, as well as a more limited condition of time and effort (only 3 min). Moreover, it suggests that customization has a positive effect on state self-esteem, which is explained by vicarious pride, supporting H3.

### 3.4 | Study 4

Study 4 investigates the role of relationship anxiety on customized gift appreciation. We anticipated that relationship anxiety is an obstacle to vicarious pride because it weakens emotional connection with others (Bartz & Lydon, 2004). Thus, we hypothesized that vicarious pride can be elicited only when the relationship between the giver and the recipient is not characterized by anxiety. In this case, the recipient also appreciates the customized gift more than a non-customized one.

#### 3.4.1 | Pre-test of the scenarios

We pre-tested the scenarios on a sample of 60 US participants (32% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.12$ ) recruited from Prolific Academic. The scenarios use a story to present the gift as customized versus non-customized, since stories have been deemed suitable for eliciting vicarious

experiences (Septianto et al., 2018). The customized gift (vs. *non-customized*) was described as customized by the gift giver on an online platform that allows one to select every relevant feature of the gift (vs. *selection of a watch from standard options*). We then asked respondents to indicate whether the friend had surfed on the website and actually personalized (vs. *selected*) one watch. The results support the operationalization of the manipulation, suggesting that the scenarios effectively manipulate gift customization (vs. *non-customization*) (Pearson Chi-Square = 16.000,  $p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, we measured vicarious pride (Franke et al., 2010) and gift appreciation (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2011). The results of t-tests show that gift customization increases vicarious pride ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 5.61$ ,  $SD = 1.14$  vs  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $t_{(58)} = 2.493$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and gift appreciation ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 6.27$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ; vs  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 5.67$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ;  $t_{(58)} = 2.137$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thus providing further support for H1.

#### 3.4.2 | Method

198 participants (55% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 41.63$ ), recruited online through the U.S. Prolific Academic panel, participated in a 2 (gift: customized vs. non-customized)  $\times$  2 (anxiety: low vs. high) between-subjects design.

Firstly, participants were asked to think about a friend with whom they share a highly anxious (vs. *low-anxious*) relationship to prime anxiety. Following established procedures (Bartz & Lydon, 2004; Mende et al., 2019), relationship anxiety was manipulated as the difficulty (vs. *ease*) of being involved in an emotionally close relationship with someone. Participants in the high-anxiety condition were asked to think about and visualize a friend who was reluctant to get emotionally close with the participant (vs. *one with whom it was relatively easy to get emotionally close to*). After the visualization, participants were asked to write a few sentences about the chosen person.

Gift appreciation was measured using five items (adapted from Moreau et al. (2011) and Paolacci et al. (2015); Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.923$ ). Vicarious pride (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.870$ ) and state self-esteem (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.961$ ) were measured as per Study 3. We also asked participant to rate the degree of the anxiety (one item from Mende et al., 2019) to capture this aspect of the relationship.

We assessed the effectiveness of the gift factor manipulation with the same item as Study 3. The analysis conducted on the item with gift as the independent variable revealed that the scenarios successfully manipulated the gift conditions ( $t_{(117.460)} = 16.744$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $M_{\text{customized}} = 6.64$ ,  $SD = 0.67$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ).

#### 3.4.3 | Results

**Gift appreciation.** An ANOVA was conducted on gift appreciation with the gift and anxiety as the independent variables. We found a

significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1,197)} = 34.641$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ): customized gifts were significantly more appreciated than non-customized gifts ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 6.16$ ,  $SD = 0.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ). We also found a significant effect of anxiety ( $F_{(1,197)} = 6.972$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ): gifts were significantly more appreciated when the relationship was characterized by low anxiety compared to a high anxiety relationship ( $M_{\text{low}} = 5.9$ ,  $SD = 1.08$  vs.  $M_{\text{high}} = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ). The interaction effect was not significant.

**Vicarious Pride.** We found a significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1,197)} = 3.990$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), with participants in the customized gift condition experiencing significantly more vicarious pride than participants in the non-customized gift condition ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.75$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ). No other significant result was found.

**State Self-esteem.** The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of the gift factor ( $F_{(1,197)} = 5.382$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), with participants in the customized gift condition experiencing significantly higher state self-esteem than participants in the non-customized gift condition ( $M_{\text{customized}} = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.26$  vs.  $M_{\text{non-customized}} = 5.35$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ). No other significant result was found.

These results are aligned with previous findings, supporting the idea that customized gifts elicit more vicarious pride, and increase state self-esteem and gift appreciation. Then we tested with a moderated mediation (Model 83 of PROCESS Macro, 10,000 bootstrapping resamples) whether relationship anxiety interacted with our independent variable in the way predicted by H4. The model included the gift as the independent variable (customized = 1; non-customized = 0), relationship anxiety as the moderator (continuous), and vicarious pride and state self-esteem as the first and the second mediator, respectively. The analysis revealed a significant direct effect of the independent variable (i.e., the gift) on gift appreciation. It suggested an increase of appreciation when the gift was customized ( $b = 0.7409$ ,  $t = 5.433$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; 95%CI [.4720;1.0098]). Looking at the levels of the moderator (i.e., anxiety), we found that the hypothesized

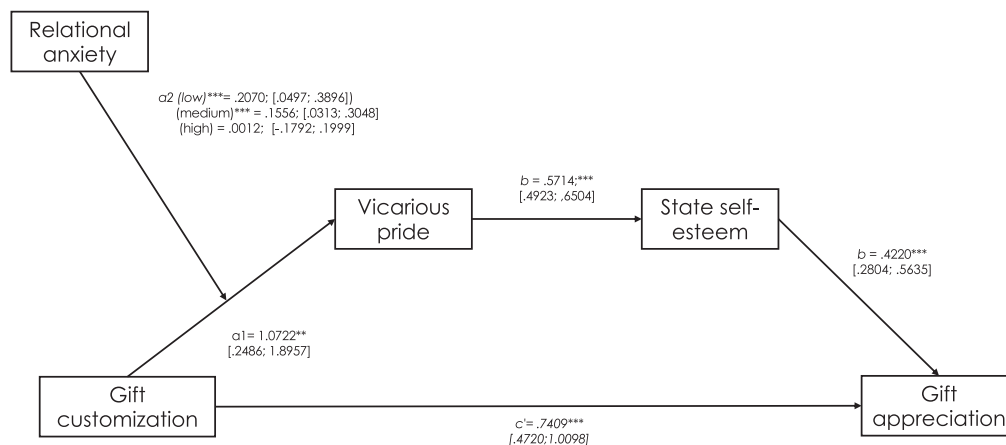
relationship between the gift and gift appreciation through vicarious pride and state self-esteem was significant only when the relationship anxiety was low or medium. We found a significant indirect effect when the relationship anxiety was very low (16th percentiles) ( $b = 0.2070$ , 95%CI [.0497; 0.3896]) or medium-low (50th percentiles) ( $b = 0.1556$ , 95%CI [.0313; 0.3048]). Conversely, when the anxiety was high (84th percentiles) the relationship was not significant ( $b = 0.0012$ ; 95%CI [-0.1792; 0.1999]), suggesting that vicarious pride and the increase of state self-esteem do not emerge when the relationship is filled with anxiety. Figure 2 shows the results of the moderated mediation.

Study 4 replicates the findings of our previous studies and shows the moderating role of relationship anxiety on the emergence of vicarious pride and the increase of state self-esteem. Specifically, relationship anxiety presents an obstacle to the experience of vicarious pride and the increase in state self-esteem, which do not emerge more for a customized gift compared to non-customized one. Conversely, in a non-anxious relationship, the recipient experiences greater vicarious pride and an increase in state self-esteem, both of which generate greater appreciation for the customized gift (supporting H4).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Our four studies investigate gift customization and vicarious pride from the perspective of the gift recipient. The findings of this research contribute to both the *customization* and *gift-giving* literature in several ways.

First, we investigate an important, but disregarded, aspect of customization: namely, how this process affects someone who is not actively involved in it, as the recipients of customized gifts. Our four studies suggest that customization offers benefits to consumers even if they are not actively involved in the customization process. Consistent with our prediction, gift customization elicits *vicarious pride*, i.e., the same mental state the customizer



**FIGURE 2** Moderated mediation of Study 4. Model 83 of PROCESS Macro, 10,000 bootstrapping resamples; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ .

experiences after a product customization. Importantly, we experimentally disentangle the effect of vicarious pride from alternative explanations, including the characteristics of the customization process (time and effort; Studies 2 and 3), and other recipient responses to the gift (positive emotions and self-identification; Study 1). Thus, we contribute to the growing literature on customization by showing that the value that consumers accord to these self-designed products does not depend on any actual participation in the activity, and that the effects of customization are more nuanced than had previously been assumed. In line with research that emphasizes how consumers value products that are crafted by other humans (Fuchs et al., 2015), particularly when designed by peers (Dahl et al., 2015), we found that recipients derive positive mental states (i.e., pride) from knowing the source of the customized gift. Our findings extend the understanding of customization, which has traditionally been regarded as a participative activity that requires effort on the part of the consumer, and which is compensated by the final product obtained. We show that the active participation by the consumer in the customization process is not necessary: the mere awareness of such customization having taken place allows for a substantial increase in the recipient's appreciation for customized versus non-customized products.

Second, we show that this phenomenon is not only an emotional experience, but that it also has important downstream effects. In all our studies, the recipients appreciated customized gifts more than non-customized gifts, thanks to vicarious pride. Moreover, Studies 3 and 4 show that vicarious pride boosts self-perceptions, by enhancing state self-esteem. These findings are aligned with the literature on mental simulation, which found that vicarious experiences impact self-perception (Bandura, 1997; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007), attitudes (Septianto et al., 2018; Williams & Davies, 2017), and intentions and behaviours (Cornil & Chandon, 2013; Septianto et al., 2018).

Third, we extend *gift exchange* literature by deepening our understanding of the implications of relationship anxiety for gift exchange. When a relationship is characterized by anxiety, vicarious pride is inhibited and, consequently, the recipient does not experience enhanced state self-esteem, nor do they appreciate a customized gift more. Individuals with anxious relationships (vs. non-anxious relationships) seem less able to vicariously experience the mental states of other individuals, despite the bond they share with them. This finding resonates with recent literature, which suggests the existence of a low ability of social projection by individuals in anxious relationships (David, 2018), and which supports the notion that anxiety diminishes pleasure in gift exchange (Nguyen & Munch, 2014). Individuals in anxious relationships may be less embroiled in social reasoning when it comes to receiving gifts; their inability to put themselves in the shoes of the gift customizer may lead them to evaluate gifts in a less biased way, because they value the intangible attributes of the gift differently, and may focus more on the actual tangible features of the gift. Conversely, customized gifts seem to be a successful solution for pleasing friends with gifts in a non-anxious relationship.

Our research offers actionable implications for the customization of gifts. Companies that allow consumers to customize products should actively encourage them to personalize gift products. Our findings suggest that customized gifts are appreciated irrespective of the time and effort expended by the giver in creating the product. Conversely, the perception of the time and effort required to customize a product might prevent the gift giver from participating in such a process. Thus, companies may want to optimise the process of gift customization. One way to do this is to have a separate section on the website for gift customization, wherein gift customizers find suggestions and guidance on how to please their friends with minimum effort. Current advancements in AI may facilitate this process, allowing the platform to predict a recipient's preferences starting from some limited inputs from the giver. Another option is to offer inspiration for gifts by showing examples of customized products for different recipients. For example, on the Converse customization web platform, the consumer can personalize the shoes starting from a blank pair, or find inspiration and modify an existing pair. Such guidance might be extended to include different suggestions for different types of recipients.

Moreover, it might be crucial to help recipients distinguish a customized gift from an off-the-shelf gift, given the vicarious pride that customized gifts elicit. One way to let gift recipients understand the customization process would be to emphasize the point that recipients appreciate and enjoy gift customization, and to provide ways for gift-givers to communicate what they have done. For instance, at the end of the customization process, the website could encourage givers to communicate that they self-designed the gift (e.g. "Let your friend know what you have done – especially for him/her"). Another way could be to offer custom labels to be displayed on the customized product, such as featuring the giver's name in short phrases such as "Made by...." or "Designed just for you by...." Such custom labels should make the recipient aware of the customization process, thereby activating vicarious pride, and consequently increasing the recipient's appreciation.

## 5 | LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We acknowledge that these studies may have potential limitations. Unlike many studies that investigate real exchange with fictitious scenarios or asking participants to recall past events, Studies 1 and 2 have the strength of being conducted on real-life friend couples. However, we acknowledge that their sample size is small due to the difficulty of involving real-life pairs. Future studies involving real-life friends may pre-recruit both friends before the experiment, or recruit givers and recipients from the same group (e.g., school associations) to optimize their participation (Ward & Broniarczyk, 2016).

In all the studies in this article, the gifted products were tangible products; however, gift recipients show a particularly positive attitude for experience gifts (Clarke, 2008). Notably, the travel and entertainment industries enable consumers to personalize service

packages. For instance, Audible or Book of the Month Club offer the option of gifting a subscription to someone tailored to their interests and preferences. The 'inseparability' that characterizes intangible gifts and the central role of the gift receiver in experiencing the gift (Clarke, 2008) may magnify the vicarious experience of emotions. Given that intangible experience is an increasingly popular gift choice, future research should further examine recipients' reactions to the customized gift experience.

Our choice to examine relational characteristics did not allow us to examine other boundary conditions for vicarious feelings. For instance, prior studies have suggested that only positive and successful customization experiences enhance the evaluation of self-designed products (Norton et al., 2012). What happens when the customization process frustrates the giver? How does the gift recipient respond to a gift customization that does not totally satisfy the giver? Further studies could usefully consider investigating whether vicarious emotions also arise when the customizer is not completely happy with the results of his customization.

Empathy might also be an important factor to analyse. Research in psychology (Lazarus, 1991) and consumer behaviour (Xie et al., 2015) show that empathy is a pro-social skill that may facilitate the elicitation of positive and negative emotions (Xie et al., 2015), or foster the desire to act (Soscia et al., 2018). Future research could investigate the role of empathy in fostering the effect of vicarious pride on gift appreciation.

Finally, it is worth investigating other possible downstream effects of gift customization related to the relational outcomes of the gift. How does gift customization contribute to the reformulation of interpersonal relationships? In the context of a disliked gift, does customization attenuate the negative effects the gift might have on the relationship (Branco-Illodo et al., 2020; Ruth et al., 1999)? Do gift customization and vicarious pride have a different effect on the relationship between a giver and a recipient whom it is difficult to please? Vicarious pride may vary and play a relevant role in the reformulation of interpersonal relationships when gift recipients perceive themselves as difficult to please. In some cases, for instance, between close friends, gift customization, experiential gifts or handmade gifts might generate a strong alignment between the giver and the recipient, to the point that the gift giver is 'integrated' into the recipient's extended self. We believe that these could be fascinating avenues for further research on gift customization.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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