ABSTRACT - Although the concept of gifts to oneself has been mentioned by researchers of gift-giving behavior, no empirical investigations have been conducted on the topic. This paper reports the findings of an exploratory study based on respondents’ descriptions of recent self-gift experiences. Some distinguishing aspects of self-gifts are identified and directions for future research are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have noted for many years that gift-giving is a widely practiced and essential component of human relations. Probably the most common form and function of gift-giving is an interpersonal act of symbolic communication, with explicit and implicit meanings ranging from congratulations, love, and regret to obligation and dominance. Other functions include social exchange, economic exchange, and socializing. Since Belk’s (1979) discussion of these functions, several additional papers in consumer research have addressed the conceptual side of gift-giving (e.g., Belk 1984, 1987, 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Sherry 1983) while a few empirical studies have also appeared (e.g., Macklin and Walker 1988; Scammon, Shaw, and Bamossy 1982; Sherry and McGrath 1989).

Across the span of social science and consumer research on gift-giving there is an underlying tendency to draw a dichotomy between goods acquired for giving to others and those acquired for personal use. Researchers like Gronhaug (1972), Ryans (1977), and Scammon, Shaw, and Bamossy (1982) have used this distinction overtly to examine differences in purchase behavior. For example, Ryans (1977) found that consumers buying for personal use were less likely to have a target price in mind than those buying a gift. Nonetheless, the phrase personal use is very broad and entails virtually every acquisition a consumer undertakes for him or herself. One outcome of this dichotomy has been a failure to recognize that some personal acquisitions may have dimensions that make them more like gifts than like other personal acquisitions. Such a distinction might lead researchers to a more refined understanding of consumer behaviors involving varied acquisitions for oneself, including situational and motivational determinants, acquisition strategies and processes, and experiential consumption meanings.

The idea of gifts to oneself is not novel, though to our knowledge it has received limited conceptual support and no direct empirical attention. Although focused on interpersonal (dyadic) gift-giving, Tournier’s (1961/1966, p. 6) book actually begins with a short discussion of gifts to oneself:

Before giving myself the pleasure of undertaking a new work, I have wanted to finish up other works I have promised. This task is a kind of present which I’ve given myself and which I enjoy as a reward for finishing off other duties....There are gifts not only for others; there are also those we give ourselves, generous or parsimonious, according to the formation we have had.

Tournier (1961/1966) also maintains that gifts to other people can serve as gifts to oneself, insofar as personal pleasure is anticipated and derived from observing the gift receiver’s happiness.
Schwartz (1967) has argued that the presentation of a gift imposes an identity on the giver and, especially, on the receiver (see also Belk 1979). After discussing issues of self-concept in gift-giving, Schwartz (1967, p. 3) goes on to say:

This leads us into the interesting area of the giving of gifts to oneself. This is normally spoken of in terms of "self-indulgence," opposition to which, stripped to its essentials, represents an unwillingness on the part of the ego to strike a bargain with the id. This inflexibility is dangerous when other people (as sources of satisfaction) are not available, for it makes adjustment to hostile environments unlikely. The "self-gratifier" is an interesting product of the nonintimate community, who, despite his perspicacity, has received little attention from the social sciences.

For Schwartz (1967), gifts to oneself are nutrients for emotional health when a person is devoid of satisfying interpersonal relations.

Tauber (1972) included self-gratification as a significant motive for people's shopping and purchasing behaviors, though he did not associate it with gift-giving to oneself. He proposed that the self-gratification motive leads people occasionally to buy "something nice" for themselves when they are feeling depressed.

Levy (1982, p. 542) appears to have been the first consumer researcher to suggest the possibility of gifts to oneself. Moreover, recent ethnographic work on gift shops has recorded some shoppers' remarks that reflect a potential richness to this phenomenon that calls for closer examination (Sherry and McGrath 1989).

In sum, self-gifts seem to be a viable concept, but remain a mystery within consumer research. Hence, we conducted an empirical study as a first, albeit exploratory step toward further substantiating and clarifying self-gifts. More specifically, like prior dyadic gift research, this study emphasized the occasions of self-gifts. Taking Lutz's (1979) suggestion, an added focus was consumer motivations for self-gifts. In general, this study constituted an emic research project aimed at the phenomenology of self-gifts. The study's insights are based considerably on the consumers' own words and actions as revealed through descriptions of self-gift experiences. This basic approach has been used recently in other consumer research, including studies on special possessions (Myers 1985) and impulse buying (Rook 1987).

Respondents in this study were 54 undergraduate business students at a large American university who received course credit for their participation. The use of this convenience sample, other than being commonly acceptable for exploratory studies, was also justified based on prior focus group interviews which revealed that many students readily related to the term "self-gifts."

A questionnaire was used to collect information from the respondents. The introduction page noted that gift-giving takes place worldwide and that most of what is known about gifts is based on studies of gift-giving between two people, for example, a husband and wife or a boyfriend and girlfriend. It was then pointed out that we had heard people say that sometimes they give gifts to themselves. These so-called "self-gifts" were identified as the topic of the study. Respondents indicated their gender, age, and marital status at the bottom of the introduction page and then self-paced their way through the remaining four pages of the questionnaire. The term "self-gifts" was not defined for the respondents, mostly because so little is known about the concept and extra detail might have biased their responses rather than encouraging an array of self-gift information.

The next page adopted a "critical incident" technique by requesting respondents to recall the last time they had acquired a self-gift (see Rook, 1987, for another example of this technique). They were asked to "describe in detail the situation (where, when, who, how, why, etc.) that led you to acquire for yourself this particular self-gift." Respondents had a full page to provide their descriptions. The subsequent two pages asked respondents to list additional circumstances and motivations, respectively, for self-gift behavior in which they had engaged. The final page asked them whether they had any final thoughts, opinions, or feelings about self-gifts.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 23 males and 31 females, with ages ranging from 19-24. Only two respondents were married.

Traditional content analysis was performed by coding the reported circumstances and motivations, both in the self-gift story and in the subsequent mentions of further circumstances and motivations. Two short lists of potential circumstances and motivations were developed based on prior conceptual discussions of self-gifts and the focus group interviews we had previously conducted. The first author then reviewed the 54 questionnaires in order to check the completeness of the two lists, resulting in the addition of three more circumstances and three more motivations.

Generally speaking, there was an understandable one-to-one relation between certain circumstances and certain motivations for self-gifts, e.g., to reward oneself (motivation) for a personal accomplishment (circumstance). (However, this does not imply that all respondents reported matching circumstances and motivations, nor that we inferred one when only the other was reported.) After the coding lists were finalized, the second author and another doctoral student in marketing independently coded each respondent's entire questionnaire for explicit mentions of self-gift circumstances and motivations. The judges agreed on 83% of their codings; joint discussions resolved the disagreements.

Further analysis of the main self-gift stories was strictly interpretive. Both authors read the stories independently and made notes on perceived commonalities across the stories as well as other emergent revelations. The authors then compared their notes while reviewing the questionnaires again, seeking clear evidence and consensus for the interpretive insights discussed here.

Content Analysis and Crosstabulations

The frequencies and percentages of reported self-gift circumstances and motivations appear in Tables 1 and 2. On average, each respondent reported a total of three circumstances and three motivations. As Table 1 shows, the dominant circumstances related to self-gifts are times of accomplishment (e.g., high exam grades), when feeling down (e.g., from poor performance on an exam, from human relationship conflicts), when a holiday arrives (e.g., birthday, Christmas), when feeling stressed (e.g., from too many demands at school or on the job), when there is extra money to spend, and when the item may be especially needed. Table 2 indicates that the most frequent motivations are to reward, to be nice to oneself, to cheer up, to fulfill a need, to celebrate, and to relieve stress. Although there were some circumstances and motivations that were not included directly in the coding lists (i.e., coded as "Other"), fully 92% of the circumstances and 95% of the motivations were classified according to prespecified categories. Given that these categories number nine and eight respectively, it appears that self-gifts are acquired within a relatively confined set of circumstances and motivations, several of which go hand-in-hand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Circumstances</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holiday Arrives</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Celebration</td>
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For Schwartz (1967), gifts to oneself are nutrients for emotional health when a person is devoid of satisfying interpersonal relations.
Exploratory research typically raises more questions than it answers and, easily and more.

The stories also revealed a picture of self-gifts characterized by considerable variability and flexibility. Self-gifts ranged from clothing, compact discs, a computer, a stuffed animal, jewelry, and an aquarium (products), to hair styling, restaurant meals, and a spa membership (services), to socializing with friends (experiences). Certain types of self-gifts (e.g., clothing) were reported in multiple circumstances, as described in the self-gift stories.

The stories also illustrated that, like dyadic gifts, self-gifts inherv properties of sacredness that may serve to differentiate them from other personal acquisitions (cf. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). For instance, there can be ritualistic aspects to self-gifts involving patterns or rules of conduct. As one respondent revealed, "I usually reward myself either by going out for an expensive dinner or treating myself to something that I normally wouldn't--a play, perfume, etc." Self-gifts can also have a mysterious quality, not completely understood by the individual, and are capable of producing ecstatic experiences, as this verbatim shows:

The New York Rangers are my favorite hockey team and they have been in first place... For years I have always wanted to buy a Rangers t-shirt, but for some reason I never did. When I bought the shirt I was very excited and could not wait until I could wear it.

Self-gifts can also involve sacrifice, i.e., abstaining from personal acquisitions in preparation for self-gifts. As one respondent wrote, "I don't do it often because I like to save money and therefore when I do buy myself something that I do not need but really want, it becomes that much more special." Similarly, self-gifts can be sacred by virtue of their opposition to other profane personal acquisitions--for instance, those that occur on a day-to-day basis. As another respondent wrote, "I try not to do it excessively because then it loses its specialness." In other words, excessiveness desacralizes self-gifts by making them more like regular, mundane personal acquisitions (cf. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). In sum, self-gifts appear to be a distinguishable form of personal acquisition based, in part, on their potentially sacred properties.

Another shared aspect of self-gifts and dyadic gifts concerns the role of self-concept. As noted earlier, Schwartz (1967) perceives interpersonal gifts as vehicles of identity imposition. Given that self-definition, self-consistency, and self-esteem are important dimensions of the global meaning of self-concept (cf. Sirgy 1982), it was evident in some respondents' stories that self-concept was crucial to self-gifts and vice versa:

Several-weeks ago I ordered a set of champagne glasses and bucket for myself for an early Christmas present. I was leafing through a bunch of Christmas catalogues and saw the set. I will be moving to a new, beautiful apartment in January, and I've always been a romantic, always loved champagne, and finally am dating a guy who will drink champagne. So I ordered it. Forty bucks--I figure I'm worth it. (emphasis added)

Another story involved a student whose self-concept had developed partly from competitions in horse shows:

I had been studying extremely hard and I did not do well on two exams so I treated myself to compete in a horse show I could not really afford. My thinking was that I had worked hard enough over the summer to earn my spending money and worked hard as I could on my exams and that it was time I did something for myself. Something I wanted to do and it would relax me--get some fun and sense of accomplishment out of my efforts. (emphasis added)

This same respondent wrote that self-gifts "make me feel better about myself." And on a related point, another respondent wrote that "A self-gift tells that I'm a worthy person and I should be appreciated." These quotes suggest that the relationship between self and self-gift may be among the strongest of relationships involving the self and personal acquisitions. Hence, this characteristic may further serve to distinguish self-gifts from many other personal acquisitions.

Although a few respondents had difficulty id relating to the idea of self-gifts, most began writing their descriptions within moments after reading the instructions. This fact and the results from this study suggest that self-gift behavior may be fairly common among young American, college-educated adults. The self-gift stories also pointed to several key dimensions of self-gifts, including their variability and flexibility, sacred properties, and critical ties to self-concept. Extrapolating our findings to other populations is not possible. However, informal conversations we have had with other adults of varying ages and backgrounds have suggested that self-gift behavior may be widespread throughout American culture. Additional exploratory and descriptive research is needed across a broader sample.

This study determined that self-gifts can be products, services, or experiences and that they are partly differentiated from other personal acquisitions by their situational and motivational contexts. However, while some respondents mentioned "need" as a motivation for acquiring a self-gift, others openly stated that self-gifts are nonessential. At this point, our conjecture is that self-gifts may at times be identifying factors in the study reported here. Otherwise, at this stage our recommendation would be to use the circumstances and/or motivations of self-gifts that emerged in this study. For instance, respondents may identify more easily and more accurately with the idea of "rewarding" or "cheering up" than with the term "self-gifts."

Exploratory research typically raises more questions than it answers and, as a result, this study provides several directions for future
research on self-gifts. The conceptual relation of self-gifts to interpersonal gifts should be investigated more thoroughly. This could lead to further distinctions from other personal acquisitions that could be significant for consumer behavior theory. The dyadic-gift literature might also suggest propositions for self-gifts that could be empirically tested. For example, Belk (1988) has speculated that the most gratifying form of gift-giving may occur when the recipient is a part of the giver's extended self. If so, then a comparative study might demonstrate that an even more satisfying form of gift-giving is self-gifts.

Research could address the socioeconomic correlates of self-gift behavior as well as the extent to which general and more specific types of self-gifts differ as a function of circumstance or motivation. In addition, given that qualities such as practicalness have been shown to vary across dyadic-gift circumstances (see Belk 1979), this same issue should be addressed with self-gifts.

The origins of self-gift behavior require research. For instance, the psychological impact of childhood dyadic-gift experiences on adult self-gift behavior is unknown; studies of parent-child relations and dyadic-gifts may serve as a good starting point (e.g., Belk 1987). On a macrolevel, the cultural influences on self-gift behavior might be considered according to the social history of possessions and consumption (Belk 1984; McCracken 1986).

The relationship between self-gifts and self-concept appears to be especially worthy of future research. For example, past research has shown that clothing often acts as symbolic self-enhancement (Holman 1981) and that improving self-esteem through weight-loss has become a national preoccupation in America (Verba and Camden 1987). An investigation of clothing purchases by people who have recently lost weight may offer deeper insights on self-gifts and self-concept as well as the symbolic nature of clothing.

Another question concerns whether self-gifts are sometimes nothing more than post hoc rationalizations for dealing with cognitive dissonance, perhaps emanating from guilt or regret over certain personal acquisitions. One way that future research might address this issue is to have respondents indicate whether they determined the acquisition, for example, to be a reward either before or after acquisition. If self-gifts are truly similar to dyadic-gifts, then it would seem that self-gifts are rarely after-the-fact rationalizations.

The measurement of self-gifts needs to be addressed. One major challenge will come from the fact that self-gifts are highly subjective and may not be easily quantified for the purposes of nomothetic research (see Hudson and Ozanne 1987). One approach might be to assess the propensity of consumers to engage in self-gift behavior, perhaps drawing on the circumstances and motivations identified here and having respondents provide frequency estimates based on past behavior. This technique could then help to establish which consumers are most prone to self-gift behavior (e.g., males versus females, young versus old). However, it would not provide new insights about the fundamental role and meaningfulness of self-gifts in consumers' lives. This likely will require more qualitative, phenomenological research.

CONCLUSION

This paper reported an exploratory study of self-gifts involving responses to several open-ended survey questions by a convenience sample of undergraduate business students. Within this context the notion of self-gifts was found to be a comprehensible concept and representative of behavior that most of the respondents reported having performed. For them, a self-gift was acquired primarily within a select set of circumstances and/or motivations. Descriptions of self-gift experiences pointed to additional distinguishing qualities of self-gifts and a number of directions for future research.

REFERENCES


