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Self-Gifts: Phenomenological Insights from Four Contexts

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This article reports the results of a study meant to portray a detailed picture of self-gift experiences in four contexts, focusing notably on reward and therapeutic self-gifts. Extending prior conceptual discussions, the findings suggest that self-gifts are a form of personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context bound. Discussion centers on theoretical implications and future directions for self-gift research. Overall, self-gifts represent a complex class of personal acquisitions that offer intriguing insights on self-directed consumer behavior.

Imagine that during the last year your best friend achieved a noteworthy career goal, celebrated a birthday, and fought moderate depression over an impending divorce. How might you have reacted? Perhaps with gifts to express your encouragement, fondness, and solicitude. Now suppose that this best friend was actually yourself. Would you have acted any differently? According to our research, maybe not.

The notion of giving gifts to oneself has an intuitive appeal that has not gone unrecognized by researchers theorizing about interpersonal gifts. Tournier (1966, pp. 5–9) begins his book with introspective commentary on self-gifts as rewards and incentives for personal accomplishments, as “consolation prizes for disappointments or upsets,” and as vehicles for holiday celebrations (e.g., birthday, Christmas). Brief discussions of self-gifts have also appeared in sociology (Schwartz 1967) and consumer research (Levy 1982; Mick 1986), these too in terms of reward, therapeutic, and holiday situations. The implication is that the roles and mean-

ings of self-gifts are considerably context bound, a point repeatedly stressed about interpersonal gifts (see Belk 1979; Sherry 1983).

Until quite recently, no empirical attention has been directed toward self-gifts. Sherry and McGrath's (1989, p. 154) ethnography of gift shops included customer interviews that captured some of the first glimpses of self-gifts. One woman said that an expensive piece of jewelry was “a present from me to me,” and another remarked about a doll she was purchasing, “I'm giving it to myself.” When we first looked at self-gifts through a convenience sample of students, we used open-ended and semistructured questions and paid particular attention to the circumstances and motivations mentioned (Mick and DeMoss 1990). Results confirmed that personal accomplishments, disappointments/depression, and holidays were prevalent circumstances under which consumers acquired self-gifts. Relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event, having extra money to indulge oneself, and just doing something nice for oneself (as in “I like me”) were other contexts cited. These findings, plus informal discussions with nonstudent adults, led us to conclude that self-gift behavior may be widespread, at least in the United States, though it remains largely uncharted in consumer research.

It is not surprising that advertisers have been capitalizing on consumers' self-gift propensities for some time. For instance, both MacDonal'd's (“You deserve a break today”) and Andes candies (“The perfect little thank me”) have incorporated reward self-gifts into their slogans. Also, a television ad for the floral industry shows former football star Merlin Olson arm wrestling a diminutive opponent who is informed about two bouquet arrangements, either of which he

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could purchase for himself after the competition—one for occasions of achievement, the other for times of solace.

Given that so little is known about self-gifts and that they may constitute a sizable share of self-directed consumer behavior, there is a clear need for further research. The paucity of work in this area establishes the necessity for basic discovery research as opposed to confirmatory research (Deshpande 1983). This fact and the topic itself underscore the importance of understanding self-gifts from a first-person perspective (Sherry 1983; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Our study builds on prior qualitative and emic approaches to self-gifts (Mick and DeMoss 1990; Sherry and McGrath 1989), but it focuses explicitly on certain types of self-gifts according to their circumstantial and motivational bases. This narrower focus converges with the emphasis in the phenomenological paradigm on examining context-embedded human experience (Thompson et al. 1989). Our overriding goal was to undertake an explorative and descriptive inquiry of self-gifts in four key contexts to cultivate both conceptual and empirical ground from which self-gift theory and research could grow. The design was purposive, but the bulk of the insights developed emergently and iteratively through a combination of content and interpretive analyses.

METHOD

A survey instrument was utilized in this study because it could be distributed across a broad sample and be self-administered. Also, its unstructured questions, which are most germane to this research, provided a flexible format that allowed respondents to freely express themselves and reveal detailed and potentially penetrating insights on self-gifts. These data are amenable to standard content analysis (Kassarjian 1977) as well as interpretive analysis (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988), both of which are valuable to consumer research, especially discovery-oriented studies.

Sample, Data Collection, Instrument

After a pretesting phase, 350 questionnaires were distributed to individuals in social and civic organizations, a retirement village, and a large university, most of whom resided in a midsize city in the southeastern United States. A total of 287 questionnaires were returned (82 percent response rate); the ratio of undergraduates to nonstudent adults was 164:123, and of males to females was 140:147. Nonstudent participants were paid \$4 whereas students received extra course credit. Nonstudents' ages ranged from 21 to 82, and they were mostly white and middle to upper middle class.

The cover page informed respondents that the survey concerned two topics, perceptions about themselves and selected behaviors they may have performed as consumers. The "Self-Perceptions" section included several concise psychological scales.¹ These were followed in the next section by the unstructured questions that sought a subjective record of thoughts, feelings, and behavior through a "critical incident" technique (cf. Rook 1987). Respondents were asked to recall and describe in detail the last time they acquired a product, service, or experience for themselves in two of four possible contexts. In writing their accounts, respondents were asked to report what the product, service, or experience was, why they acquired the one mentioned, and how it made them feel. For each report, respondents had approximately two blank pages.

Two-thirds of the respondents were asked to describe an acquisition "as a reward for having accomplished a personal goal" and then, on a subsequent page, to describe an acquisition "to cheer yourself up because you were feeling down." The other one-third of the respondents were requested to describe an acquisition "for your birthday" and then another "when you had some extra money to spend." The rationale for this disproportionate distribution of incident report requests deserves further elaboration.

Based on past discussions, our own prior work on self-gifts, and evidence from advertising themes, the two predominant contexts of self-gifts seem to be reward and therapy. The birthday context falls within the plainly admissible holiday category, and the extra-money circumstance was one of the newer potential contexts that emerged from our prior work. The latter two contexts are sufficiently important and different from the primary contexts to expand the scope of the present inquiry. The reason for the direct use of the four contexts was that our prior work found that the term self-gift puzzled some consumers, despite the fact that they subsequently admitted to acquisitions that researchers and many other consumers classified as self-gifts. Thus, we reasoned that the use of familiar context-specific phrases would result in quicker, more reliable activation of the relevant memories sought from the respondents.

After writing each account, respondents turned the page and answered two structured questions. One asked them whether the acquisition just described was determined to be a reward, a cheering up, for his/her birthday, or due to extra money, either *before* or *after* it was acquired. This question was included to gain insight on the extent to which self-gifts are predeter-

¹For example, the scales included Belk's (1985) five-item non-generosity scale and were followed by the unstructured questions and a series of adjective ratings. Neither the scales nor the adjective ratings are discussed further, as they form the basis of a separate project.

mined. The second question asked them to indicate on a zero (not at all) to eight (very much) scale their level of regret after the acquisition.

ANALYSIS

The written accounts were analyzed first with traditional content-analytic procedures (Kassarjian 1977). Although a couple of the coding categories were derived from past research, most were created inductively based on a representative subsample of 40 reports. Initially, 11 theme categories were established for analyzing respondents' descriptions of self-gift experiences. The themes were not considered mutually exclusive; therefore, each report could conceivably include several themes. Most of the 11 themes were moderately abstract and required written definitions. Two trained judges (graduate students in marketing and sociology) conducted the content analysis. The theme definitions were pretested on a subsample of 60 reports. Some definitions were revised, two themes were discarded because of low frequencies, and a third was removed because of low reliability.

From the 287 respondents, 392 usable reports of self-gifts were produced. As anticipated, some individuals rarely engage in self-gift behavior. Consequently, they could not remember a personal acquisition in one or both of the contexts they were asked to describe. The thematic content analysis involved 3,136 judgments, which resulted in 470 disagreements, and an overall interjudge reliability of .85. This meets the threshold of acceptable interjudge reliability for content analyses suggested by Kassarjian (1977). Individual theme reliabilities ranged from .72 to .96, with disagreements clustering around the most abstract themes. Disagreements between the judges were reviewed, and the results are based on 100 percent resolution. Three months after the initial codings, the two judges reanalyzed 37 self-gift reports from 25 randomly selected respondents. The intrajudge (test-retest) reliabilities were .90 and .95.

The content analysis yielded eight themes, but only six were retained for further interpretive analysis.² Consumer research has witnessed a rise in the use of interpretive methods (Hirschman 1989; Mick 1988), including naturalistic inquiry (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988), semiological analysis (Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Mick, Horvath-Neimeyer, and McQuarrie 1991), literary criticism (Stern 1989), and structural analysis (Hirschman 1988; Levy 1981). Generally speaking, interpretive methods are based on the close, critical inspection of a "text" (verbal or nonverbal message) for the purpose of determining the

text's meaning(s) (cf. Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988), usually in light of prior knowledge or research deemed relevant to the study's topical focus.

Two important literature streams were applied in the interpretive analyses of respondents' self-gift texts: interpersonal gift-giving (see, e.g., Belk 1979; Hyde 1979) and the self (see, e.g., Bandura 1982; Belk 1988). The interpersonal gift-giving literature is crucial because there has been an unquestioned dichotomy in consumer research—between goods acquired for giving to others and those acquired for personal use—that has led to inconsistent results across studies in which it played a prominent part (Sherry 1983). Perhaps more damaging to the field is that this preemptory distinction has obscured the insight that some self-directed acquisitions have much in common with interpersonal gifts, which, in turn, could lead to deeper understanding of these highly personal consumer behaviors.

As our interpretations shifted back and forth among specific self-gift texts, the six themes, and the diverse literature on gift giving, a framework emerged based on three significant parallel dimensions between interpersonal gifts and self-gifts. This framework served to codify the six themes and to empower further interpretive analysis of numerous self-gift accounts (see Table 1). In essence, the themes and dimensions became mutually reflecting facets of self-gift experiences.

In the same iterative manner, prior research on the affective, cognitive, and conative aspects of self (e.g., Greenwald and Pratkanis 1984) was used to interpret respondents' reports in terms of the self-gift process and the relation between self and gift. Since these aspects of self have been variously implicated in interpersonal gift-giving research (to be discussed), insights from literature on the self also cohered with the emergent framework.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the three parallel dimensions, synchronized with related themes from the content analysis. Since each self-gift account was a form of unaided recall and influenced by the individual's written communication skill, the themes are likely to have occurred more often than they were reported.

Communication

The communication dimension represents a generic function of interpersonal gift giving, with conventional messages ranging from affection or congratulations to get well or regret (Belk 1979; Cheal 1988). This dimension also incorporates the giver's attempt to match gift qualities to his or her own personality traits as well as to the receiver's (Schwartz 1967). Belk (1979) examined this issue empirically and found that the giver's ideal self-concept was most reflected in the qualities

²The primary reason for removing the two themes was their non-distinctiveness and, hence, lower diagnosticity relative to the self-gift topic.

TABLE 1
PARALLEL DIMENSIONS BETWEEN INTERPERSONAL GIFTS AND SELF-GIFTS

Dimension	Interpersonal gifts	Self-gifts
Communication	Symbolic messages between giver and receiver (thoughts and feelings), including the giver's impressions about the identities of both parties	Personally symbolic self-dialogue concerning affective self-regard and self-concepts; primary themes: self-esteem and identity
Exchange	Social obligations to give, receive, and repay, predicating and optimizing human behavior	Indulgences justified by effortful behavior and performance behavior propelled by self-bargains for indulgences; primary theme: deserving
Specialness	Extra meaningfulness facilitated by the conjoining of giver, receiver, and gift through deep emotions, culturally established rituals and values, and other qualities of sacredness	Extra meaningfulness based on the uncommonness, particularity, function, or sacred aspects of self-gifts; primary themes: perfect thing, escape, discovery, and deserving

of the chosen gift, that the giver's real self-concept was next most represented, and that the perceived characteristics of the recipient were the least represented. In general, the communication dimension in interpersonal gift giving involves the participants' expressions of feelings and thoughts, including the imposition of identities.

Analogously, self-communication appears to be an essential function of self-gifts. Through such personal acquisitions, consumers generate, alter, and display their self-attitudes. This aspect of self-gifts appeared in 25 percent of the reports as the *self-esteem* theme, which stands for the feeling component of this self-dialogue wherein self-esteem is viewed as affective self-regard (Greenwald and Pratkanis 1984). For example, the successful dieter purchasing a new dress reported, "I didn't even look at the price, just how it looked on me. I loved the way I looked and felt!" (female, 60, reward).³

The self-esteem motif confirms Schwartz's (1967) claim that self-gifts often serve as emotional nutrition. However, they need not be precipitated, as he implied, by a lack of "significant affectional [interpersonal] bonds" (p. 3). Life transitions can also invite the affective nourishment of self-gifts, as is indicated by the following example:

When I quit my job I treated myself to a hairperm at an expensive salon because I was going from a well paid, challenging job to the job of housewife and mother. . . . It made me feel more attractive and confident in my decision. [female, 31, therapeutic]

These types of data suggest that, as messages from and to oneself, self-gifts can be elevating, protective, or medicative to self-esteem.

Self-gifts also develop and sustain self-concepts. This cognitive element of the communication dimension hinges on a perception of self-distinctiveness (Belk

1988; Greenwald and Pratkanis 1984) as it was observed in the self-definitional messages of self-gifts. Seventeen percent of the reports included the theme called *identity*. Some respondents expressed this motif generally, as the respondent who bought some clothes after a difficult week at work and referred to himself as "a new person" (male, 23, reward). More expressive reports revealed beliefs and values linking self-concepts to self-gift qualities:

I usually buy an antique for my home. . . . I enjoy and admire history, nostalgia, gentler times (slower), and feelings of warmth, stability, and security. [female, 53, reward]

Equally poignant examples of the link between self-gift qualities and self-concepts were the national memorabilia purchased by the descendant of Irish immigrants (male, 20, birthday) and the camping trip taken shortly after a respondent's husband had died, which rejuvenated her and restored her sense of self-sufficiency (female, 57, therapeutic).

The identity theme was frequently found in reports from avowed hobbyists and collectors. One woman who collected children's literature described her gleeful experience of locating an illustrated book of fairy tales that, as she insisted, was intended for herself, not for her children: "It was beautiful, more beautiful than any of the others in the bookstore" (female, 42, reward). Although not highlighted previously, purposeful self-definition through hobbies and collections (Belk 1988) may also be founded and maintained through self-gifts.

The communication dimension is vital to self-gifts. The consumer acts simultaneously as sender and receiver of symbolic messages that harbor affective and/or cognitive meanings with formative implications for the self. As personal symbolism, the significance of self-gifts arises from an infusion of arbitrary, idiosyncratic connotations. Symbolism involves an arbitrary semantic relation between sign and object (Mick 1986), that is, the self-gift and what it represents to the in-

³ Parenthetical notations with self-gift texts indicate gender, age, and type of self-gift context from which the quotation originated.

dividual. In this sense, meaning is not natural or intrinsic to the self-gift but, rather, constructed by the individual. The self-gift message is also considerably idiosyncratic insofar as the same self-gift—whether new hairstyle, restaurant dinner, or vacation—is inevitably imbued with unique meaning by each individual.⁴

Belk (1979) has noted that the indirect and polysemous nature of social symbols furnishes interpersonal gifts with potential ambiguity that often results in communication errors. Unlike interpersonal gifts, however, the private coding of self-gifts ensures no misunderstanding of intended messages, a fact that not only demarcates these two forms of gift giving along the communication dimension but also enhances the value of self-gifts as personal acquisitions.

Exchange

Interpersonal gift giving has also been characterized as a continuing cycle of reciprocity in which people are obliged to give, receive, and repay (Belk 1979; Mauss 1954). This contractual aspect of gift giving predicates and even optimizes human behavior (Sherry 1983). Thus, as exchange, gift giving establishes, perpetuates, and clarifies interpersonal relationships (Belk 1979).

Some self-gifts also have an exchange dimension that involves both sociocultural and individual levels. In Western cultures, this manifests itself through the Protestant ethic generally characterized by fortitude, delay of gratification, and rational resolve in daily activities (Campbell 1987). Here the obligation in self-gifts concerns nonmonetary compensation. For example, in commenting on what he termed “the American Way,” one respondent wrote, “you work hard, do well, and receive a reward” (male, 21, reward). Though the social origins of this indulgence logic have been persuasively linked to parent-to-child gift giving (Belk 1987, 1988), neither its salutary nor its pernicious effects have been fully appreciated as a cultural heritage.

At the individual level, self-gifts can act as self-contracts in which the reciprocity for the gift is also personal effort and achievement. The *deserving* theme vividly depicted the exchange dimension of self-gifts. It appeared in 30 percent of the accounts and was most often in reward stories, indicated by a stated or implied conviction that the self-gift was earned. As the following verbatim also shows, strong performance moti-

vation can accrue from imagining and then striving to justify self-gifts:

I was training for a marathon to keep me busy and to get my mind off my ex-wife, so I made a goal that if I ran the marathon and finished, I would reward myself somehow. I ran the race in below-average time and was pretty happy with myself. I was in the best shape of my life. . . . Everyone kept telling me that all single guys need a spa, so I bought one. [male, 35, reward]

Some examples of the deserving theme were more mundane yet equally revealing, like the woman who undertook unpleasant household chores with a “promise [to] myself that if I get three rooms cleaned without a break, then I can put my feet up and watch a game show on television” (female, 46, reward). The deserving theme exemplifies the investment of psychic energy to create meaningfulness in acquisitions (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). This entails fulfilling an explicit or implicit self-contract in order to approve consumption indulgence.

Viewed in terms of psychological research on self-motivation (Bandura 1982), self-gifts point to one of the most striking roles that personal acquisitions can play in human behavior. Envisioned self-gifts may act as incentives and supply behavioral guidance while their attainment may contribute to self-efficacy and self-satisfaction (see Bandura and Schunk 1981). Moreover, self-bargaining and rewarding with self-gifts when a goal is achieved (e.g., completing a work project) may encourage individuals to reach higher levels of performance (see Bandura and Perloff 1967). In these cases, the exchange dimension of self-gifts may act as a self-regulatory function that reinforces not only achievement behavior but also various self-concepts (e.g., the disciplined self).

According to theorists such as Mauss (1954), the exchange dimension is universal to dyadic gift giving. In contrast, not all self-gifts have an exchange dimension. Those that do are remarkably capable of exacting human behavior and consumption meanings, by self-design.

Specialness

Sincere interpersonal gifts are special, even sacred, binding individuals through a ritual communion of cultural values and deeply felt emotions (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Gifts that fail to bind people are what Hyde (1979) calls false gifts and are rarely considered special, much less cherished (e.g., a “free gift” for listening to an investment opportunity, an obligatory Christmas gift from a boss who is not respected).

Dictionaries indicate that being special means surpassing what is common or usual; it can also suggest the peculiarity of a person, thing, function, or application; and it can suggest positive feelings or value.

⁴Of course, the sociocultural environment (marketers included) is also responsible for establishing many self-gift meanings (e.g., a vacation as a reward). However, the data suggest that self-gifts go well beyond those meanings and involve personally charged meanings as well (e.g., a lawyer’s reward, a vacation, for winning the most complex case of her career).

According to our data, true self-gifts are unquestionably special and distinct from ordinary personal acquisitions. The most direct support for this insight comes from respondents' comments on the singularity of their self-gifts or the relative infrequency of the self-gift process in their lives, including its attendant contexts. For instance, after finally breaking her smoking habit, one respondent purchased "things I would not normally buy myself" (female, 29, reward) and another remarked, "I try not to overdo it, otherwise it loses its function" (female, 22, reward). Others also admitted that, as much as they enjoyed their self-gifts, there was an apprehension that overemphasizing such personal acquisitions would lead to a loss of specialness (i.e., the supplementary meaningfulness of the objects and/or the activity).⁵

Specialness in self-gifts can vary by degree, with high levels potentially manifesting sacredness. According to Belk et al. (1989), sacred objects are venerated and they involve transcendent experiences of extraordinary significance to the individual(s). Hence, in addition to the basic characteristics of specialness, several of the properties and processes of sacredness (see Belk et al. 1989) can help explain the etiology of specialness in self-gifts.

In relation to the specialness dimension, the most important theme arising from respondent stories was based on the particularity of self-gifts to individual consumers. Labeled *perfect thing*, this theme appeared in 38 percent of the texts and was evinced by commentary on the exceptional or sui generis qualifications of self-gifts. This motif mirrors the sacralization process of quintessence in which the object possesses an unusual but precise consonance with underlying, often mysterious criteria. As one woman wrote,

I was feeling extremely frustrated and hapless at work. . . . I needed to have lunch with a friend and drink Masala tea at the Indian restaurant. The taste and experience of drinking this tea is very nurturing and calming. [female, 38, therapeutic]

Similarly, a 79-year-old man described his birthday self-gift (a whiskey sour and New York strip steak) as having "long been my idea of a good time." Even in extra-money stories, in which more frivolity and spontaneity might be expected, perfect self-gifts were just as evident, including a La-Z-Boy recliner, a box of pistol bullets, and a can of macadamia nuts. In each of these cases, the self-gift was not selected haphazardly, but rather with emphatic accuracy.

Autobiographical texts revealed long-standing reverence for certain self-gifts that were categorized as the perfect thing. As one respondent confessed,

Eating ice cream makes me calm and happy. It's smooth and cool. I felt more rational, more in control, ready to work my problem out. Eating ice cream has always been something I enjoyed. It was always a special treat as a child. [female, 22, therapeutic]

We sometimes mother ourselves—according to Freudian perspective and in the English vernacular—with precisely chosen gifts. In doing so, a peak consumption experience can occur, similar to the ecstasy and flow felt when sacred objects are encountered.

As noted, an object or activity can also be special because of its function. Self-gifts displaying this quality of specialness were observed in the *escape* theme, which appeared in 18 percent of the texts. This motif concerned the capacity of self-gifts as coping strategies, prototypically a freedom from the secular world. These diversionary self-gifts usually involved art (e.g., theatre, museums, television), literature, music, or nature (e.g., parks, beaches) and were sometimes ritualistic. For example, one person facing the breakup of an intimate relationship bought four books and a tape of synthesized music and then retreated for the weekend. She did this "to escape the hurt I felt. . . . It's my way of taking what I call a Mental Breather" (female, 24, therapeutic). Another conceded, "I like to throw myself into [a] movie. . . . For 2 hours the weight of the world is off my shoulders" (male, 29, therapeutic). Yet another admitted that, after a hard work day, he enjoyed "sleazing out in front of the television—something totally mindless and relaxing" (male, 57, reward).

A less frequently reported (5 percent) but insightful *discovery* theme involved specialness based on the novelty of the self-gift. In this motif, young and elderly respondents expressed a pioneering spirit for completely new, sometimes intense experiences, as these quotations show.

I went on an airplane trip and flew around Miami with a pilot in a 2-seater aircraft. . . . I always wanted to fly in a plane that small so I could really experience the magic of flying. [male, 22, birthday]

I had always wanted to travel to the Orient. . . . The entire experience was wonderful and I felt that I had at last done something I had always wanted to do. [female, 78, extra money]

As the prior quote also illustrates, the discovery theme occasionally aligned with the sacralization process of pilgrimage through touring. Other sites reported include California (female, 50, extra money), the Canadian Rockies (female, 75, birthday), and Hawaii (male, 59, reward).

Sacrifice and commitment are yet two more properties of sacredness that are pertinent to the specialness of self-gifts. Denial and perseverance, revealed in the deserving theme previously discussed, unequivocally demonstrate the existence of sacrifice in self-gifts, typ-

⁵This point and the quote about overdoing self-gifts are indicative of kratophany, a property of sacredness evident in the strong approach and avoidance tendencies evoked by certain objects (Belk et al. 1989).

ically through incentives and rewards. The new car purchased after completing a grueling postgraduate program is a story to which many readers can relate (female, 27, reward). Also, through commitment there exists a strong emotional attachment to a sacred object whereby it is incorporated into one's identity. Many self-gifts exhibited commitment, as shown in the explanation of the perfect thing, self-esteem, and identity themes. Overall, true self-gifts are special due to their rarity, particularity, or function for the individual and sometimes due to aspects of sacredness.

Hedonics

Since reports of feelings were explicitly requested in the survey instructions, nearly all 392 accounts included hedonics. The positiveness and intensity of feelings were noteworthy, which further indicates the specialness of self-gifts. In the therapeutic context, respondents often felt "renewed" or "refreshed," while in the reward context they typically felt "excited," "proud," or "satisfied." Stories from birthday and extra-money contexts regularly expressed excitement or more moderately positive feelings such as "good," "nice," and "satisfied." Across self-gift texts, respondents also reported feeling stable, spoiled, confident, youthful, successful, fulfilled, enthusiastic, beautiful, secure, independent, and in control. Guilt and regret were rarely mentioned. It appears from these data that self-gifts may stir human emotions as thoroughly as do interpersonal gifts and thus promise to be a fertile domain for the study of hedonics in consumer behavior (see Hirschman and Holbrook 1982).

Determination of Self-Gift and Levels of Regret

Following each report, respondents also indicated when they recognized (either before or after) that the acquisition was a reward, something to cheer them up, something for their birthday, or something purchased because they had extra money to spend. In 83 percent of the cases, respondents reported that they thought of the acquisition as a reward, a cheering up, and so on *before* they acquired it. Therefore, it seems that self-gifts usually do not come about through *post-factum* rationalizations.

On the zero-to-eight scale concerning subsequent regret over the acquisition, the grand mean for the four contexts was 1.1, with a range of .6 to 1.7. These quantitative findings substantiate what the qualitative hedonics data suggested, namely, that self-gifts are seldom second-guessed.

DISCUSSION

Self-gifts have been an undeniable, yet largely overlooked, consumer behavior. This study provided a

stock of phenomenological insights from which theory and research could build. Content and interpretive analyses of qualitative data identified six self-gift themes and a framework that illuminated three parallel dimensions between interpersonal gifts and self-gifts (communication, exchange, and specialness). Elaboration of these dimensions in terms of research on interpersonal gifts and the self distinguished self-gifts as an important class of personal acquisitions.

Toward a Conceptualization of Self-Gifts

In conjunction with prior writings and empirical work on self-gifts, results from this study are being utilized to construct a preliminary conceptualization of self-gifts, offered as a point of departure from which or against which future research can be positioned. The conceptualization has four major elements that individually and collectively help to differentiate self-gifts from both non-self-gifts and pseudo-self-gifts. Self-gifts can be any product (broadly defined), and they constitute a form of indulgence (the consumer is seeking to consummate a desire that goes beyond intrinsic human needs). Given this, we define self-gifts as (1) personally symbolic self-communication through (2) special indulgences that tend to be (3) premeditated and (4) highly context bound. The most recognizable, authentic self-gifts are those self-directed acquisitions that have elevated levels of each of the first three components and are embedded in a discrete context according to cultural norms.

Although it can be said that virtually every personal acquisition has at least a modicum of symbolic self-communication, authentic self-gifts thrive on this dimension. Prior research has proffered the view that each individual harbors a multiplicity of selves (ideal, real, extended, ought, good, bad, and so on) and that these selves evolve over the life span (Belk 1988; Cantor et al. 1986). Acquisitions and possessions develop, maintain, and alter these selves through their symbolic meanings. The cognitive and affective meanings in the self-dialogue of self-gifts can be viewed, even if only metaphorically, as messages between selves. For instance, an ideal self (well-disciplined) congratulates a real self (sometimes lazy) for perseverance toward a personal goal, or a good self (compassionate) consoles a real self (sometimes unlucky) when uncontrollable factors thwart hopes or disrupt life. The more a personal acquisition reflects this type of self-dialogue, the more likely it is an authentic self-gift. Similarly, if a self-directed acquisition has uncommonness, particularity, or sacred aspects, then it is special to the individual and potentially a true self-gift.

Self-directed acquisitions that are among the least likely to be self-gifts are low-involvement, routine consumer behaviors. However, it must be stressed that the self-gift process involves private psychological in-

vestment and that any product can be converted into a self-gift. The cup of coffee purchased at a waffle shop on Tuesday morning en route to work can become a self-gift on Saturday morning at the same restaurant following a successful or disastrous work week, provided that self-directed thoughts or feelings and a factor of specialness have been subjectively instilled into this consumption activity.

The accounts provided by our respondents also consistently showed that self-gifts are active and intentional acquisitions, namely, that they are premeditated. Results from the structured question following each report concerning self-gift determination also confirm this essential characteristic. Thus, other non-self-gifts include impulsive and compulsive consumer behaviors that are accompanied by feelings of being out of control (O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Rook 1987). This is not to imply that all self-gifts are planned or that they cannot involve acute emotional experiences (see Mick and DeMoss 1990). However, though "self-gift" *per se* may not cross the individual's mind, the consumer does realize that a special, personally symbolic acquisition is at hand. Whether this realization ever takes place after the fact, in the wake of an authentic self-gift, is still an open question, complicated by individuals' proclivities toward cognitive dissonance reduction when guilt arises from a particular consumption behavior. For example, the morning-after rationalization about a late-night eating binge ("I deserved it after working hard all day") more likely indicates that it was a pseudo-self-gift insofar as the message was self-deceptive. It suggests a faked, expedient sense of appropriateness or meaningfulness that belies the authenticity of the self-gift.

Self-gifts also tend to be highly context bound. Perhaps the most straightforward evidence of this characteristic is the inclination of researchers (see, e.g., Schwartz 1967; Tournier 1966) and American consumers (see Mick and DeMoss 1990) to readily encapsulate descriptions of self-gifts within several similar situations. Indeed, it is difficult to discuss self-gifts in the abstract, in a decontextualized vacuum. Sherry (1983) points out that the contexts of gift giving may be based temporally according to calendar or life stage (e.g., Easter, high school graduation) or on certain emergent antecedent states (e.g., reconciliations after interpersonal conflicts). In either case, the sociocultural environment is the principal arbitrator of what does and does not count as a potential gift-giving context. This appears to be equally true of self-gifts. The flowers bought to decorate the dinner table are transformed from commodity to self-gift when the basis for buying them is supplemented or replaced by such contexts as personal reward, therapy, or birthday. Owing to the limited research completed thus far on self-gifts, Belk's (1975) taxonomy of situational characteristics

may be useful as a framework for sketching the relevant contextual landscape more thoroughly.

As a final definitional point, discussing self-gifts naturally leads to examples in which an entire product is the self-gift (e.g., the flowers mentioned in the previous paragraph). Yet, self-gifts can be actualized as portions or features of products, for instance, over-and-above what the consumer basically seeks or customarily acquires (e.g., a large order of fried potatoes instead of a regular order—male, 28, therapeutic).

Further Implications and Future Research

In recent years, the scope of consumer research has widened progressively beyond a constricted focus on decision making and brand choice. Research includes more attention to the semiotic and experiential facets of consumption as well as the role of possessions in selfhood. The study of self-gifts fits comfortably into this trend, though self-gifts are more than just another previously unturned stone in the field of consumer research. Neisser (1973) has noted that successful interpersonal gift giving helps sustain a person's sense of adequacy and import throughout life. Individually and incrementally, self-gifts appear to promote self-perceptions of competency and worth unsurpassed in the realm of personal acquisitions.

Self-gift theory will likely benefit from drawing on additionally relevant psychological research, such as recent applications of attribution theory to achievement motivation and emotions (Weiner 1986). Suppose that a negative outcome emerges in a particular life setting (e.g., being overlooked for a job promotion). The likelihood of acquiring a therapeutic self-gift may depend on whether the negative outcome is attributed to an internal cause (poor effort or ability) or to an external cause (fate or luck). In the former case, the person may be more self-critical, even self-punishing, and conclude that a self-gift is unwarranted. If the cause is attributed to an external factor, then a therapeutic self-gift may be more likely, perhaps serving as a message to oneself about innate self-worth in a world in which many things are beyond one's control.

Positive outcomes (e.g., receiving the promotion) and performance attributions may have an impact on reward self-gifts in an opposite manner. When a positive outcome is attributed to an internal cause, then the probability of a reward self-gift should be greater because the sense of deservingness based on ability or effort should be high. On the other hand, a positive outcome attributed to an external cause should result in a reduced sense of deservingness and a lower likelihood of acquiring a reward self-gift.⁶

⁶It is worth noting that there is a specific extensive literature on self-rewards that cannot be reviewed within the scope of this article (see Ainslie 1986). In general, however, that research stream has

Life transitions (McCracken 1987) and rites of passage (Belk 1988) also seem to be commanding areas for developing self-gift theory. People may be especially likely to engage in self-directed consumption when life transitions are characterized by the severance of intimate relationships, as after a spouse's death or a divorce. Such self-gifts were evident in our data, and they underscored that the therapy derived from them can be profound. For example, one woman described how she had been deserted by her husband; subsequently she decided to dispose of the water bed they had owned and replace it with a new regular bed. As she wrote, "It's wonderful. Living in a house full of 'us' stuff, I needed something—a haven—that was just *me*. It made me feel I'd make it—that I'd be ok" (female, 38, therapeutic). Here the symbolism of the beds is intertwined with her attempt to redefine herself and restore her self-esteem. Focused research on self-gifts during these and other liminal states (e.g., graduations, retirement) could provide richer insights on the functions of possessions as markers or vehicles of personal history and maturation.

Theories of choice and self-gifts may also contribute to each other. Olshavsky's (1985) choice theory builds on the notion that the individual seeks to attain life goals, which are distal states representative of personal values such as power, success, and prestige. A life goal includes subgoals (some of which can be goods) that are added, deleted, obtained, and prioritized continually over a lifetime. In our study, prioritized subgoals occasionally took the form of a wish list that the consumer consulted as preference and choice unfolded in the self-gift process. One of the most detailed revelations of such a list came about during a presurvey exploratory interview.

For the most part, I already know what products I intend to purchase as self-rewards . . . probably as some by-product of my Puritan work ethic. I want these items, yet I cannot justify purchases unless I do something to earn them. My list seems to be rank-ordered in terms of some function of price and personal importance. Whenever I do something that justifies a self-reward, I mentally measure the value of whatever I did to deserve the reward. Then, with this value in mind, I refer to my list and select the item my action deserves. [male, 27]⁷

Less explicit, though also revealing, was the remark by a survey respondent who, after performing admirably on a project, intended to "get something I've wanted for a long time" (female, 24, reward). Such wish lists, their relation to life goals, and their influence

tended to equate all personal indulgences as rewards, most likely because of its paradigmatic heritage of behavioral psychology. Our perspective is that only some indulgences, particularly those contextualized by a perceived accomplishment, are rewards.

⁷As he told us later, his list was headed by a portable computer and a kayak, with a briefcase and cassette tapes further down.

on the choice and meanings of self-gifts require further investigation. The perfect thing motif and the sacralization process of quintessence that these lists serve to actualize may also hold new insights for choice theorists regarding what is chosen, when it is chosen, and even why it is chosen at a particular time.

Findings from this study suggest a positive role for self-gifts in personal causality (Bandura 1982) and life meaning (Belk 1988; Klinger 1977) among American consumers, offsetting many negative philosophical analyses of consumption (see Belk's 1985 discussion). Historically, consumer research has undervalued the beneficial role of possessions and consumption, especially in influencing people's self-perceptions, plans, and activities. Nonetheless, we recognize that this article has focused mostly on the favorable aspects of the self-gift concept, but there may be a dark side that cannot be easily dismissed. Some historians have charged that the morality of individual fulfillment pervades modern Western life to such a degree that consumption has become an illusory compass for the pursuit of well-being and psychic security (Lasch 1979; Lears 1983). These critics probably would consider self-gifts to be among the most narcissistic forms of contemporary behavior encouraged by marketers and endorsed—purposefully or not—through current parenting practices (see *U.S. News and World Report* 1989). Future research should address these issues so that we may understand more fully the positive and negative ramifications of self-gifts at both individual and societal levels.

It should be noted, however, that the very existence of self-gifts as well as their place in consumers' lives may depend on an individually centered versus group-centered view of self, as in non-Western societies (Belk 1984; Tuan 1982). For this reason and the fact that prior work has focused on U.S. consumers, there is a great need for cross-cultural self-gift research.

Two particular limitations to our empirical study deserve acknowledgment. We used a direct survey that likely accentuated the rational features of self-gifts, and we focused on only four contexts. Development of self-gift theory will require other methodological approaches, including those that are less invasive and rationalistic (e.g., projective techniques), more individually extensive (e.g., clinical interviews, diaries, case studies), more naturalistic (e.g., on-site retail observations, intercept interviews), more interpretive (e.g., semiotic analyses; see Mick [1990]), and causal (experimentation). Much less is known about other contexts of self-gifts, and these require concerted research. Among them are self-gifts to relieve stress, self-gifts to just do something nice for oneself (as a statement of self-affection), and self-gifts to celebrate public holidays (e.g., Christmas).

Gifts are prominent artifacts of life, and until recently they have been examined almost strictly in terms

of dyadic relations. Nevertheless, gifts to oneself appear to be equally ubiquitous, at least in American society. With rich and complex qualities, self-gifts provide a window through which consumer behavior can be viewed in some of its most adaptive, dramatic, and personally significant forms.

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