
The Dark Side of the Gift

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Probing of the semiotic significance of gift exchange behaviors has recently been resumed. The symbolic exchange value of the gift is especially amenable to investigation via ethnographic methods and projective techniques. In this paper, negativity and ambivalence in gift exchange, a theme derived from a comparative ethnographic study of two midwestern American gift stores, are refined and elaborated through projective analysis. What emerges is a more balanced and comprehensive account of gift giving than presently available in the literature of consumer-object relations. Gift giving and receiving engender high levels of anxiety among consumers. Gifts create and exacerbate interpersonal conflict. They are frequently used as weapons, and consumers' responses to them are carefully canalized. The ways in which negativity is managed by donors and recipients are examined. Consumers, victims of sentiment and symbolism, are found to be entrapped in rituals and enjoined by cultural ideology from expressing discontent in most ways except fantasy. The impact of such fantasy on gift giving, and its relevance for marketers, is explored in this article.

Introduction

The topic of gift exchange has recently reappeared on the agendas of several consumer researchers (Sherry, 1983; Sherry and McGrath, 1989; Fisher and Arnold, 1990; Mick and DeMoss, 1990). Because gift sales comprise at least 10% of retail purchases in North America (Belshaw, 1965), the topic deserves more than cursory attention. Traditional conceptualizations generally use the social exchange perspective and are based upon the work of Mauss (1924) and Caplow (1982). In this paper, however, we focus not on the broader sociological implications of

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exchange, but upon the psychological responses of individuals to the acts and anticipation of giving and receiving gifts.

It is Cheal (1988) who has provocatively asserted that we do not have an adequate conceptual framework for interpreting gift giving in "modern" society. He views gift giving as a vocabulary or idiom of articulation of love, friendship, and gratitude. He declares that relationships are based upon these sentiments in contemporary Western moral economies. Gift giving is underwritten by a "feminized ideology of love" motivated by emotions carefully arranged to produce "nurturant dependence" between donors and recipients. The givers ostensibly disavow reciprocal return. From Cheal's (1988, p. 108) perspective, studies of gift giving fail to probe the organization of intimacy and community between donors and recipients, and thus obscure the ways in which gift giving contributes to the social reproduction of domestic culture. His argument is persuasive, but his failure to examine consumer-object relations (or the literature of consumer research) and to probe contradictions inherent in the ideology of love, especially where rifts are particularly apparent, opens a window of opportunity for consumer researchers eager to explore the geography of moral economy. It seems that, because we have neglected the ritual and linguistic contexts of consumption, we have not described very carefully the indigenous categories and ideological core of gift giving (Raheja, 1988). In fact, as Bird-David (1990) has suggested, giving has not been adequately distinguished analytically from reciprocity.

Earlier theoretical work on gift giving has primarily explored the processes negotiated by exchange partners, the stages through which these partners evolve as gifts are used to modulate their relationship, and the motivations prompting a variety of partners' behaviors. Recent work has taken more of a phenomenological turn and has attempted to capture the experiences attendant to gift giving from the native's perspective. This turn toward the insider's perspective is of particular relevance to managers seeking to get closer to the consumer. It is resulting in a more complete and balanced conception of gift giving, and promises to revise our earlier theoretical understanding of gift giving as an exclusively prosocial activity to a more realistically ambivalent one.

There is a dark side to gift giving. It has been noted by the occasional poet or essayist (eg, Emerson, 1979; Hyde, 1979), and enshrined in some proverbs (eg, Beware of Greeks bearing gifts: Don't look a gift horse in the mouth; He gives twice who gives quickly). This perspective is rarely articulated by consumer researchers, who have done little to elicit the darker aspects from donors or recipients (McGrath, 1988). An additional aspect of gift giving and receiving involves "local resistance, both explicit and tacit, to the world of the market" (Lederman, 1986). In our analysis of the dark side we seek to reveal some of the ambivalence and contradiction experienced by gift participants as it relates to their private lives and to the context of the organized marketplace.

Methodology

The present study is an extension of an ethnographic investigation of gift store activities in two midwestern American cities (Sherry and McGrath, 1989; McGrath, 1989). In the original comparative ethnography, we examined how marketers used a sense of place as a retail strategy, how female consumers used gift giving to

reproduce domestic culture, how several kinds of love motivate gift exchange, how consumer choice heuristics for gift selection are often ineffable, and how process models of individuals' gift exchange practices also guide institutional procedures. Although we were able to produce a thick description of gift giving behavior from the perspectives of both managers and consumers, some of the more intriguing glimpses of gift giving dynamics come not from direct observation or interview, but rather from consumers' frustrations in relating what they felt was truly significant information. This covert or implicit knowledge was difficult for them to verbalize, but no less important to them given their impaired ability to articulate. Consequently, in this follow-up study, we used projective methods to elicit insights from members of these two local populations with which we had already developed an ethnographic relationship and appreciable familiarity. Our goal was to elaborate upon instances of negativity and ambivalence in the gift exchange process. Our ethnography had suggested the significance of this issue, but the topic proved resistant to conventional interview probes during our initial field study. Projective tasks seemed an appropriate way to deepen our ethnographic understanding.

The Respondents

The respondents in this study are a specialized sample of 83 female gift shoppers drawn from the mailing lists of two midwestern gift stores. This investigation deepens our understanding of specific issues arising from our earlier study of a homogeneous population of women comprising the customer base of these retail sites. We have detailed specific demographics in our original study (Sherry and McGrath, 1989) and elsewhere (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy, 1992). Overall the women tend to be upscale in their occupations, income levels, suburban locale, and their choice of gift shops. The median age of the women respondents is 49 years, which concurs with our in-store observations. The highly verbal nature of their responses may be attributable to their above-average level of education. All but two indicated some college study, and 41% had done post-graduate work. Because this study was designed to penetrate meanings rather than provide projectible totals, we do not report frequencies beyond these simple demographics. However, the qualitative findings reported here are based on patterns found to recur throughout the data.

Instrument Design

Each respondent completed a written instrument comprised of the following components: a battery of sentence stems requiring completion, a modified thematic apperception test (which we called a thematic apperception task, and describe hereafter as "tat" to distinguish it from its predecessor) composed of three pictures, a dream fantasy, and a set of demographic questions. All together, fifteen different pictures were used as stimuli for the story-telling exercise in the thematic apperception task. All pictures were selected according to clinical convention (Murray, 1943) and consumer research precedent (Rook, 1983). We have described these procedures in detail and have provided a theoretical overview of projective analysis elsewhere (McGrath, Sherry, and Levy, 1991; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy, 1992). The guiding principle of our tat procedure is gently directive probing. By

choosing an engaging picture—rich in denotation and connotation—and allowing respondents to impose a dramatic structure on its contents, we permitted the drama to raise the question for which we sought answers and to determine the parameters of the response itself. Line drawings, photographs, and artists' renditions were used as stimuli. Fifteen pictures were ultimately selected from a candidate pool of well over 100 for use in this study. To reduce respondent fatigue and help ensure compliance, only three pictures were used in any one instrument. Participants completed the written questionnaires privately. Their responses were self-paced and executed at their convenience.

We designed and pretested our projective instrument to elicit insight into six interdependent dimensions of gift giving behavior suggested by our earlier ethnographic study. In this paper, we address a single theme—negativity and ambivalence. Because the dream sequence did not relate to this theme, findings from this projective format are not reported in this paper.

Projective Methods and Consumer Fantasy

Informants in our earlier study reported mixed emotions about their gift giving behaviors. The ritual was clearly not as overwhelmingly positive an experience as cultural convention and commercial socialization might suggest. Yet a strong sense of social propriety governs the actual giving and receiving of gifts. Impression management surfaced in the unwillingness of respondents to admit directly to being resentful givers or ungrateful recipients. Green and Alden (1988) also report a number of verbatims drawn from focus group participants that highlight the anxiety attending such gift giving activities as search. The use of projective methods relieves informants of demand pressures and relaxes the standards of politesse by allowing negative associations to emerge via indirection.

Based on ethnographic precedent and suggestions from the literature in consumer research (Levy, 1985; Rook 1983, 1985, 1988), we assessed that negativity in gift exchange may best be tapped indirectly through the investigation of consumer fantasy. Our intent was to use projective techniques to explore this aspect of the consumer imagination. Fantasy is culturally patterned, subjectively compelling, and behaviorally impactful; it may be revelatory of social problems as well (Caughey, 1984). We surmised that charting the course of the consumer's imagination would reveal a full range of gift giving permutations and broaden our understanding of the motivations behind this frequently occurring behavior.

Detailed Findings: An Anxious Ambivalence

Following are specific responses selected to illustrate our corpus of data. Their presentation is separated into responses achieved from each of the two types of projective stimuli. The sentence stems and the story-telling exercises are analyzed and interpreted separately. Following these specifics, several general propositions are advanced that emerge from our interpretation of the body of qualitative data.

Our respondents are quite emphatic about the anxiety that surrounds gift giving rituals. Gift giving may be one of the few remaining critical incidents of true significance or sufficient periodicity that tests the social ties that consumers have formed in their relationships with others. A strong evaluative component is often

projected onto each stage of the gift giving process. Many of our respondents feel a strong pressure to "do the right thing," from search through disposition. A sense of this anxiety and a semblance of the tension underlying both giving and receiving are conveyed in the following sections.

I. Nasty Notions: Sentence Completions

This section details the findings of the sentence completion exercises related to the theme of negativity and ambivalence of the gift; these responses are evocative and varied. To facilitate analysis, the responses were ordered along appropriate continua, most often from positive to negative. The four sentence stems used as stimuli are highlighted in italics. A number of verbatims are included to communicate the flavor of the qualitative data.

These responses provide insightful descriptions of the dark side of the gift. Clear degrees of maleficence are discernible in respondents' perceptions of gift giving. For example, only one true positive response was elicited in our probing of gifts gone wrong. Some responses were fairly neutral, but the majority were clearly negative. At best, *the wrong gift* "doesn't exist," "seldom occurs," or "may turn out all right." It "could be accepted graciously," or "passed along," or "returned," but it "should still be acknowledged." Less charitably, *the wrong gift* "can't be returned" even if it is "seldom intentional." It can be read as an "unfortunate mistake," but it is sure to be "long remembered." The range of true maleficence runs from the cynical to the nihilistic. *The wrong gift* may be a "waste": it "disappoints," "frustrates," "annoys," "upsets," "embarrasses," "disheartens," and "hurts." Even worse, it is "impersonal" or "thoughtless." Recipients may feel that "it makes me feel unknown" or "does not contain caring." It remains "useless" and "inexcusable." At its worst, *the wrong gift* is "more frequent than not," and may be "inevitable."

Respondents find different kinds of fault when responding to *the problem with gifts*. For some, there are "no problems." Others face technical difficulties of "mailing," "wrapping," or "shopping." Still others find the process of "thinking of the right one" too taxing. The process may be "too time-consuming" or "too expensive." The nature of the gift vexes some respondents. The gift can be "not appropriate," "not appreciated," and "not wanted." It can be "disappointing" and "superficial." At its worst, it evokes "guilt" and is an "obligation" that "never ends."

Last minute shopping is differentially evaluated. Some respondents find the "do or die" ethos to be "exciting pressure," "hectic but fun." It "can be a delight" that may "turn up some treasures." For some, it is not just "part of my lifestyle; it is me." It "is better" than conventional shopping, is "sometimes necessary," and the lot of "most people." Negative evaluations are far more common. If it is not entirely "unnecessary," then it is "for men only" or "for those with a guilt complex." Again, for some, "it is not me." It is "foolish," "not productive," and "no fun." It may be "a drag," "a hassle," or "the pits." It is as well "a pain" (sometimes "in the ass"). Such shopping is "awful" and "dreadful"; it can "ruin the day." It is psychologically threatening as well, in a "nerve-wracking" sense: it "makes me nervous," "makes me neurotic," and "drives me crazy."

Most disconcerting to respondents was the notion of *owing someone a gift*. They are poised between acceptance and denial of the possibility of such a state of

affairs. For some, the situation is a "contradiction in terms": "it's not true," "it's no gift." "gifts shouldn't be owed." Others "don't mind" or "usually never do that." It is something "you should not let go on longer than a week!" because, "for any length of time, it presents a poor picture of one's self." It "should not be long term—get it over with." For some, it is "just fine." It may even be "a nice excuse for the search." It "sometimes happens" and is "in the course of life." At the opposite extreme, it is "better to have someone indebted to you." The range of negative connotation for this behavior is quite large. *Owing someone a gift* is "not fun," it is "pressure." It makes me feel "uncomfortable" or "uneasy": "it hangs over my head." It may be a "burden" or a "terrible feeling," "ridiculous," "thoughtless," or "foolish." *Owing* is "an irritation," "a pain" (this time "in the neck"), and a "guilt trip." It is "something which haunts you" and "makes you nervous." It is "dreadful" and "agonizing," a "horrible feeling." It is "horrid, uncomfortable blackmail."

Our respondents acknowledge in their sentence completions that bad gifts happen to good people. They realize as well that good gifts happen to bad people. What is the crux of ambiguity? Gift are swords as well as ploughshares. They are inflicted in act and imagination; they are deflected as well. They can be dispiriting and viscerally painful. Whatever the gift's physical disposition, its slights are stored in long-term memory (of individuals and families) and are evoked by sentence completion tasks. Gifts pose problems. Recipients must gauge the motivation of the donor and calibrate a response. Donors must gauge the response of the recipient and divine a motivation. The stress of shopping is acknowledged by our respondents; it is recognized even when it is verbally discounted. The pressure of reciprocation is often palpable. The logistical and psychological trauma reported by respondents contradicts the ideology of the gift that culture sanctions.

II. Narratives of Negativity: Thematic Apperception Tasks (tats)

In keeping with a presentation strategy that provides ever greater depth of elaboration and analyses (McGrath, Sherry, and Levy, 1991), we have selected several stories from our corpus to illustrate a number of points related to the theme of negativity and ambivalence. These tats allow us to refine our understanding of the sentence completion data. For expository convenience, we present first the story (or story set), and then our interpretation of its significance. Our discussion of these particular narratives is integrated with remarks drawn from other respondents reacting to a common stimulus. The stories are keyed to Figures 1 through 4—facsimiles of the stimuli that triggered these narratives.

1. Figure 1: Stories

It's gift opening day at the Stone's.

John: Mabel, why oh why did your brother send me this plaid shirt?

Mabel: John, Billy called and asked if you liked the way he dressed. I couldn't hurt his feelings.

John: Why didn't you tell him, I was a bit more conservative than he?

Mabel: It was a long distance call.



Figure 1. Afflicting presence.

John: Isn't it funny, how your gift is so pretty and mine looks like a roving used car salesman's loungewear?

Mabel: John, just throw it away or give it to the GoodWill and let the whole matter drop.

John: I don't want to let it drop. I paid good money to buy Bill and Nancy a gift that we thought was nice. We got them a set of very expensive wine glasses from Neiman Marcus.

Mabel: I told you what to do with the shirt once. Plus last year they got us both a really nice gift. And, when we visit they treat us great.

John: Yeah, you can talk, your gift is great. Mine is really garbage. Next year nothing, nothing, nothing. The D—n cheapskates.

Mabel: Let me tell you something, that's my brother. I don't complain when your mother gives me a pair of K-Mart stockings of which no one, I said, no one wears. Not pantyhose, but stockings for Xmas.

John: That's my mother you are talking about.

Mabel: Really! I'll talk about you, your mother and the rest of your family.

John: Mabel, I don't want to argue with you over this stupid shirt.

Mabel: John, I'm sorry you don't like the shirt, but I didn't give it to you.

Telephone rings ... John jumps up.

John: Hi Bill. Well yes, I got your gift. Yes!! It's real nice. The colors are definitely vibrant. Oh! You brought three for yourself. Got them in Hawaii, at Bally's. Paid a fortune ... you say. Designer, you say. Did I look at the label ... Ralph Lauren. Wish Nancy a Merry Christmas for me. You made reservations for Mabel and me and you and Nance to spend New Year's in Vermont. That's (gulp) nice. You already paid the inn!!! Thanks. Billy, you are a really good brother. Give my love to Nancy. Mabel, Nance wants to talk with you.

Mabel talks to Nance ... hangs up telephone.

John: Tells Mabel conversation between him and Billy.

Mabel: Billy is not so bad after all.

John: I don't know why my mother gives you stockings.

Mabel: She's old, don't worry about it.

THE END

It's in a Marshall Field's box! Who are you to say it came from K-Mart?

So what do you expect from relatives?

So I will price something similar at Bloomingdale's and give this to Catholic Charities for an income tax deduction!

Interpretation: Afflicting Presence. The first narrative reflects the threat to family solidarity and intimacy that in-laws embody. It unfolds as a defaming dialogue of the kin group. The gift creates and heightens conflict among intimates. The escalation of conflict requires remedial facework (Goffman, 1959) to be conducted. Feelings of guilt promote conflict resolution and reconciliation. The gift elevates the outsider to insider status and forces an enlarging of the domestic unit.

The initial gift is an embodiment of the donor, and is perceived as an attempt to co-opt the recipient's sense of self. In-laws send a demeaning, degrading gift, which the recipient uses to caricature the donor. Further, the recipient challenges the ideology of gift giving by engaging in calculation and expectation of equivalent return, as well as by plotting retribution. His wife is able to maintain the long view, explaining the stream of token giving (Sherry, 1983) as a defense for the longevity of the relationship. Yet even she manages to disparage gifts



Figure 2. Deceptive packaging.

in the short run. Hostilities are exchanged and redirected in the ensuing face-work (Goffman, 1959). Revelation of the expensive, sacral nature of the gift, and the almost potlatch-like added value of the vacation force the recipient to question his own pettiness and admit the donor to siblinghood.

The second narrative describes the notions of facework and packaging as equivalent strategies. Deceptive relatives give counterfeit gifts, to manage impressions, to economize, perhaps even to go one up on the recipient. Such duplicity from relatives is regarded as normal as is the understanding that stores are brands. The donor uses disposition as an opportunity to give a gift to the self in the form of a tax deduction. Lateral cycling (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, 1988; Sherry, 1990; Sherry, McGrath, and Levy, 1992) is also used, for both altruistic and selfish reasons.

2. Figure 2: Stories

She was hoping for a diamond or a mink. But the box was the wrong size for either. What could she say to him. After all it was Christmas eve, a time for happy spirits and uncomplicated hours of sharing around the fire and around the tree. She thought of the girls at the office just this morning telling them she was sure it was the year for a big or small, but expensive gift from Alex. How would she face them Tuesday? Why did she even start such a conversation? Was she that sure, or had she hoped that much for a thing to brag about with them, especially Ellen. Ellen always got what she wanted and no matter what it took. But was that so wrong? In those seconds of holding the package in her hand, her life as she knew it had stopped. She was a pretty girl, 32-years-old, smart, interesting, and independent. She wanted more. She wanted marriage, children, a house. She wanted someone to take care of her. The box size was wrong. Alex was wrong. She was wrong in thinking it could be different. She slowly opened the box. A sweater, a nightgown, maybe a silk scarf. It was a light box. As she took the lid off she noticed a smaller box—about the size of those wooden boxes Davidoff cigars come in. What could it be? She slowly unwrapped this box and found the most beautiful Russian lacquer box. It was a winter scene of a man and woman in a sleigh. So small was the painting, she didn't notice the rings around the horses' feet. Alex pointed them out to her and the big mink wrap that covered the innocent couple as they sat on the sleigh. She was covered. She could tell Ellen and the rest of the girls that she had indeed got her wish. The mink and the ring. She laughed; she kissed Alex. It was a beautiful gift. She always wanted one of those boxes. She then handed Alex his gift to him. Alex looked at her and said "You didn't open the box, my darling." Why hadn't she? "Oh Alex I didn't think . . ." And as she opened it a small piece of tissue paper stared at her. Her head was spinning. She opened the tissue and discovered the most glistening 3-carat diamond ring she had ever seen. She looked at Alex and said "My sweet, what does it mean?" She had gotten the gift, but never ever thought of its consequences. The girls at the office vanished from her mind and the next 30 years of her life lay before her.

What will it be this year? She asked herself as he reached toward her with the carefully wrapped box and a beaming grin. Last year it was a hideously ostentatious sweater—two sizes too small. The year before it was garish earrings in gold and stones. They were for pierced ears and she had never pierced her ears. He felt so crushed when year after year she returned her gifts. Though she tried to do it quietly. Now she felt the anger rise in her. His gifts made it abundantly clear that he took little notice of who

she was as a person. She wondered how he described her to the smirking, grinning saleswoman who helped him choose these tasteless gifts. How she had come to detest the holidays when gift-giving rituals highlighted for her the emptiness of their relationship. She opened the box—he watching attentively—and found a beautiful, classically elegant white silk blouse! She was stunned speechless. He began to frown in anticipation of her rejection. "I love it," she said softly.

Interpretation: Deceptive Packaging: Wrong!! The first narrative illustrates the romantic ethos that informs many of the stories in our corpus. It is a classically contemporary tale of the biological clock, of concerns about the competitive pressure in an increasingly impacted habitat, and of the ambivalence attached to conventional morality. The story recounts common gestation activities such as expectation, frustration, boasting, and facework. Envy, jealousy, and discontented comparison set the stage for a meditation on the nature of gift giving and the possibility of justice. In this meditation, the imagined (disappointing) gift sets the recipient free, even as the actual gift (and the life situation it represents) binds her tightly to a course of action. Both imagined and real gifts set wrongs aright. The unwrapping drama is charged with sexual symbolism, in which the issues of nubility, sexuality, chastity and frigidity arise. Concupiscence and innocence contend; rings harness passion in the service of partnership. On one level, the package is the gift. The donor teases the recipient and makes her earn the gift. The recipient is pleased enough with the package, because it is beautiful and useful. The actual gift, and the relationship it implies, dispels all thoughts of competitive pressure and provides an anchor for the recipient.

The second narrative also encodes issues of frustrated expectation, long-suffering and forbearance, and surprise. The recipient has punished a donor who has proven either inept, sadistic, or masochistic over time. The recipient engages in elaborate search fantasies, to plumb the nature of what amounts to the donor's annual anti-gift. This gift is experienced as the recipient's unself or antiself; it has been alienating and estranging. It is emblematic of an empty relationship. The successful gift comes as a complete surprise, and tangibilizes the recipient's self.

3. Figure 3: Story

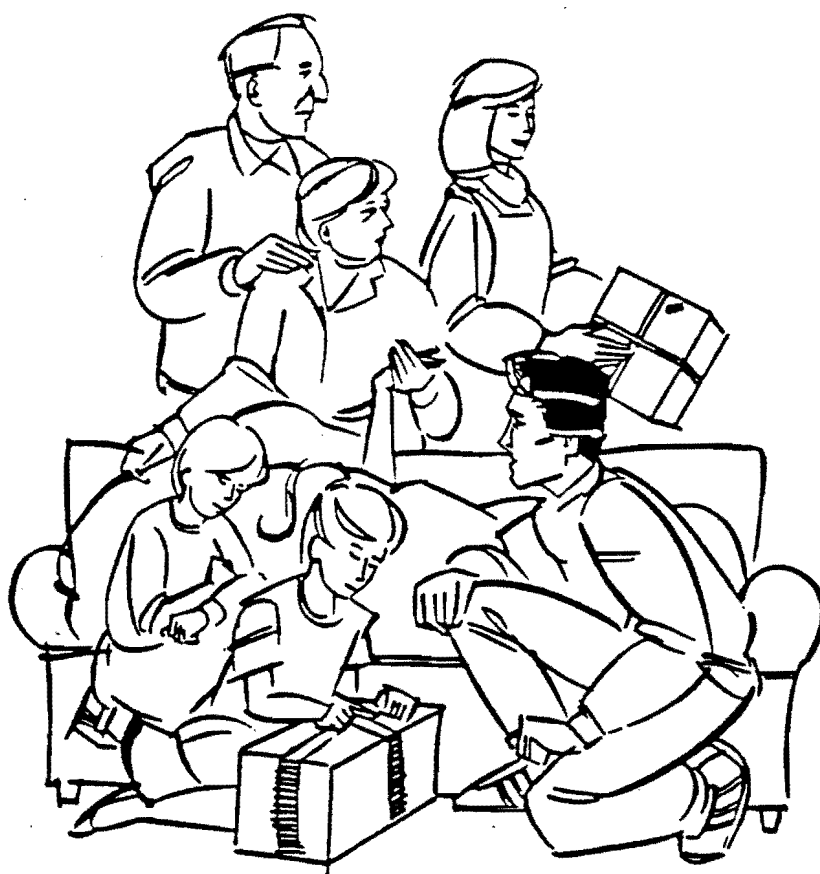
Ann and Bob's two sons woke them on Christmas morning by eagerly pulling on their arms. Ann's concerns about Christmas day had generated a nightmare that faded as she woke up. In the moment between sleeping and waking, this picture of the nightmare flashed in her mind.

Ann was peeking into a package from Bob that contained the ugliest blouse she had ever seen, her mother and father were fussing about the wrapping paper strewn around the room. Bob was noticing that the tree lights had just gone out; one son was without gifts because they had vanished during the night, and the other was unhappy with his gifts. Heard, but not seen in the picture, the thump that occurred when the family dog pulled the uncooked turkey off the kitchen counter.

The wonder of Christmas and a loving family quickly pushed the nightmare from Ann's mind.

Interpretation: Nightmare. This narrative encodes threats to the kin group as well as to the ritual constructs that invest the holiday with meaning. Kin conflict occurs in several forms. A wife receives a disappointing gift from her spouse.

Figure 3. Nightmare.



Intergenerational strife is reflected in the parental intrusion into the lives of adult children. A horrific holiday double-whammy is visited upon caring parents in the form of children: one ungifted, the other ungrateful. The very ritual structure of the holiday is threatened with the extinguishing of lights and the defiling of the meal. Darkness and hunger threaten to become the anti-focus of this scene of social disintegration.

4. Figure 4: Story

Kate and her daughter, Elisa, live in Newcastle in a new house they bought when her husband got his latest promotion. Her husband is a divorce lawyer with an important firm. His other passion is Irish wolfhounds. He owns three—all males—and dreams of someday buying an old estate with grounds of gardens and meadows for the dogs to wander. Kate's passion is fashion, she tells everyone, laughing at the rhyme. She wasn't born to wealth, and the major adjustment of her marriage to Ed has been a gradual change in her appearance, a subtle elevation in tone and style that she pursues the way others pursue truth or justice. This is her legacy to Elisa—the appearance of entitlement. They shop every Saturday together, almost always for clothes and almost always for Elisa. Kate does her own shopping on Wednesdays after the health club. They always dress meticulously for shopping and they punctuate the day with lunch or high tea at one of the hotels downtown. Today they have concentrated on lingerie—silk gowns, some lovely slips, and a special set of matching nightgowns. Quality from the skin out,

Kate says. They wait in the wind for a cab, joking and giddy in the moist air, feeling expansive suddenly as if the flush of ownership extended beyond their packages, their perfect things. Kate looks at her daughter and smiles briefly, brightly, feeling a small tinkling of pride at this child—so serene and cool and certain. This child, she thinks, could own anything.

Interpretation: Passion of Possession. This story is a chilling and ironic account of commodity fetishism. Domestic and political economies are carefully segregated. The husband is driven by an aristocratic fantasy, and thrives on kin conflict. Neither of his two passions (work and dogs) is centered on his family, so his wife consoles herself with material acquisition and with building the consummate consumer child. She is struggling with a vision of herself as a pretentious clothes horse, and evinces flashes of status panic, compensatory consumption and parody display. Something of the folk tradition that advises, "when you feel inferior, dress up the exterior," pervades the account. She elevates shopping to a ritual, equating selfhood with possessions. Not only do clothes make the person, as she describes a kind of oceanic ownership where the self becomes consumption: a literal and eloquent definition of possession. Hypocrisy and shallowness



Figure 4. Passion of possession.

provide a kind of Sisyphean victory. The child she is building not only resembles but completes the self her husband is becoming. In a perverse irony, the plebeian creates the patrician.

Interpretive Propositions

An overview of the responses to our projective instrument indicates that the gift is a preeminent locus of semiosis. It precipitates fantasies as well as overt action. These fantasies are as often negative as pleasant. The gift threatens social ties as much as strengthens them. Gifts create internal stress by requiring an examination of the canons of propriety and a negotiation of identity: imputation and resistance of inauthentic versions of the self are critical elements of this stress. Prestation demands facework, and hence a certain amount of insincerity.

A number of themes relating to negativity in gift giving emerges from the corpus of data. We present these themes along with their overlapping managerial implications in the form of four propositions. These propositions represent interpretive summaries of this exploratory study and are offered as guidelines for future research.

1. Entrapment in Ritual

Ritual behavior generally serves a positive function as an automatic decision maker, and traditional ritual helps give meaning to contemporary personal and social life. In our projectives, however, we found participants articulating resentment emanating from forced involvement. Gift giving frequently becomes a contest, even an ordeal. Both giver and receiver may be caught in the snares of temporal deadlines and unattainable expectations. Exchange rituals begin easily, but terminate with difficulty and discontent. Dissatisfaction with the exchange increases as personal control is relinquished.

Marketers can ease this discontent by offering a graceful way out of such entrapment. One method for avoiding the guilt and disappointment our respondents have expressed is to call a halt to gift giving or to operate under an alternative set of rules. Charitable organizations can intervene to ease the tension in a forced exchange. In lieu of a tangible gift with clearly measurable value, such organizations can suggest that donors give a donation to charity in the name of the recipient. Both giver and receiver can be formally acknowledged and ennobled by the third party organization, perhaps with a special card and, if appropriate, an ornament or gimcrack tastefully depicting the charity. All parties have given and received.

2. Relationship of Substance to Sentiment

The relationship between the substance of a gift, as measured by its monetary value, and the sentiment attached to it by the receiver is not a positive linear function. Table 1 illustrates the four quadrants of low and high substance and sentiment. The essence of the ideal gift, which respondents assign to Quadrant II, one so pure and pristine that it will always be treasured, is embodied in the handmade gift of a child. The actual gift exchange is probably asymmetrical; sentiment

Table 1. Substance and sentiment in gift giving.

S E N T I M E N T	HIGH	I Gifts to spouse Jewels, furs	II Gifts to parent from child Handmade items
	LOW	III Gifts to in-laws Appliances	IV Office pool or grab bag Categorical gifts blindly chosen
		HIGH	LOW
		SUBSTANCE	

is high, but substance may be relatively low. A well-chosen gag gift that reflects a common experience between the giver and the receiver may also fall into this quadrant. At the other extreme in Quadrant III, various projective stories reveal instances in which the gift object is substantial, but the poor relationship (notably in exchanges with in-laws who are frequently cast as outlaws) overwhelms the object and sours the gift exchange. A form of blackmail contributes to forced giving. In the worst case scenario, the gift is opened publicly to reveal the giver to observers; enough monetary value and effort must be expended to clear the donor's conscience and save face. In a continuing romantic relationship that we would place in Quadrant I, sentiment is high and expectations are that substance should also be significant. In this case, expected gifts are expensive specialty items such as jewels and furs or personalized gifts that require time and insight. These gifts serve as beacons to the future of the relationship or touchstones to its past. Both exchange participants expect that these gifts will be retained as mementos and possibly heirlooms. Quadrant IV pairs low sentiment with low substance. Insulting cards may reflect honesty in a strained relationship or may inject a note of levity into one that has become too intense. Commonly occurring examples are gifts given to grab bags or from "secret Santa;" these are blindly given and blindly received. The lack of personalization reduces them to generic gifts. Appropriate items are laterally cycled goods received from former grab bag participation or other disastrous exchanges—just wrap it.

Here we have begun to explore and construct categories of gifts appropriate for various relationships. The value and undefined nature attributed to handmade gifts hint that handmade items created by a third party or ready personalization

of mass-produced items may serve as an acceptable and realistic substitute in some situations. Some of the worst gifts received from those not involved in romantic relationships are gifts that have an unwanted permanence. Thus for nonsignificant others, good gifts probably should be consumable or intangible; they disappear rather than linger in the recipient's life. Food may be better than clothing, and a gift of service to the receiver or to a religious or learning institution of the recipient's choice allows the giver to substitute time for material substance. Appliances from in-laws are received with less negativity than from spouses, but our up-scale female sample generally disparages such gift items. The most negative associations by givers are tied to gifts of high substance that move outside of the immediate family. Here articulated and presumably negotiated rules such as cost ceilings or preferred retailers (so that unsatisfactory gifts can be exchanged easily) may ease the tension and free the donor from the entrapment they dread.

3. Displeasure at the Extremes

Dissatisfaction with the gift is often expressed by both the donor and the recipient when the task becomes either too difficult or too easy. When the effort is arduous, resentment stems from excessive demand on the giver. When the task is effortless, the implication is that insufficient thought and lack of caring predominated the transaction. A gift of cash may cause displeasure on both accounts, as the donor has only to write a check and the recipient is given the obligation to choose a meaningful self-gift. It is notable that few respondents in this study conceptualized a gift as a monetary offering.

The giver's desire to please and at the same time surprise the receiver is a source of negative tension during Gestation. The indirect elicitation of hints or outright questioning (Do you want this?) of the receiver removes glamour and mystery and makes for boring but safe gift giving. Here the retailer may intervene by offering a Christmas (or year-round) registry service, similar to those commonly used by brides. A mall-wide registry would expand the options of both the giver and recipient, and shopping counselors could be available to assist in the gift choice. Traditionally disappointed couples may be encouraged to incorporate shopping together for gifts into their holiday ritual activities. Retailers may institutionalize this as a festivity by coordinating an "Annual Christmas Walk" and offering appropriate holiday refreshments and entertainment in their stores.

4. Discontent in Possibility and Reality

Due to the social impropriety of being a reluctant giver or an ungrateful receiver, our indirect projectives offered an opportunity to express hostilities and anxieties. We witnessed the dark side of the gift in two phases of the gift exchange process. In the first, negativity revolves around the threat of disappointment on the part of the recipient and accompanying failure on the part of the donor, which is a basis for a generalized anxiety during the Gestation phase (Sherry, 1983) of the gift exchange. As in the case of John and Mabel (Figure 1) and the romantic interludes of Figure 2, ulcerous stories frequently evaporate to a happily-ever-after conclusion; the predicted disappointment is diffused as a dream or an unwarranted

fear. Recall that Ann (Figure 3) abandons her nightmare to the reality of "the wonder of Christmas and a loving family." The convention to characterize gift giving occasions as joyous and gratifying is so strong that it precipitates denial even within the format of projective storytelling. Our respondents will the positive conclusion. This is in opposition to the sentence stems, which reveal abbreviated, top-of-mind negative associations. The second type of disappointment happens at the time of the giving of the gift and may be more the lesson of life. We fret because what is concealed in the beautifully wrapped package can never be good enough. A gift is expected to be better than average or an indulgence we would not purchase ourselves. This is a perversion that we accept. For the recipient, the gift requires an incorporation into self; for the donor, it requires an extension of self. The reality of these expectations can be grim and difficult.

Gifts and relationships forge a painful juncture between myth and reality of a holiday celebration. The media portrait of a perfect Martha Stewart Christmas is a performance that may inspire, but ultimately will fall flat. Holiday hype virtually guarantees a post-holiday letdown and unmet expectations. Can the exchange (and the gift choice and the holiday) be positioned such that what lingers is contentment spiced with wonder?

A gift advertised as "an ideal gift" or "a surefire hit" may shift the burden of poor choice from the giver to the advertiser. In other work, however, we found that in the event of puffery the organizational participant should be prepared to bear the wrath of a disappointed recipient (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy, 1992). Gifts can please both the giver and the receiver if they are positioned as fun to buy, receive, and use. The suggestion of joint usage on the part of couples may diffuse negativity on both sides of the exchange and offer the buyer assurance that he or she will at least get one satisfactory gift.

In sum, the ideal gift is the union of the right persons and the right objects. Accomplishing this result is difficult, because it requires that both parties have the appropriate perceptions of each other and of the relationship between them, and that the gift aptly symbolizes those perceptions. In reality, gifts often fail because the motives of the giver are suspect, the object is symbolically wrong in its reference to the character of the relationship or to the appropriate sentiment, and because the gift does not meet the self or mutually perceived needs of the donor and recipient.

Conclusion and Implications

The cultural context of the gift, viewed either from the vantage point of collective categories of thought and emotion, or of personal experience, has been slighted by the disciplines comprising consumer research (Herdt and Stoller, 1990). By combining techniques of field and clinic, we have assigned gift giving to the realm of cultural erotics broadly construed. That gift giving is an integral part of the contemporary "cultural poetics of desire" (Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, 1990) is revealed in our respondents' fantasies. The gift may function as a transitional object as consumers forge a sensual relationship with the world.

Exploration of the dark side of the gift offers several useful implications. Due to the commercialization of gift giving in modern society, the marketer is a close affiliate to interpersonal giving in addition to their interactions with gift buyers

and returners in the marketplace. We have cited several applications of our findings in the previous section. We also suggest that the linguistic format and projective associations of our respondents may serve as guidelines for the vocabulary and phrasing of advertisements and sales presentations related to the giving of gifts. The sentence completion section specifically lists words and phrases to avoid because of their negative connotation. Our example of projective elicitation also suggests that this method may prove useful in the pretesting of advertising copy and illustrations. Respondents readily react to the stimuli, and a small sample yields a proliferation of images that can quickly alert the advertiser of possible misinterpretation or negative connotation.

Haug (1987) has asserted that the commodity aesthetic is the strongest social power organizing contemporary Western sensuality. Whether or not commodities actually cast amorous glances at potential buyers (Marx, 1867), consumers project such attributions onto the world of goods. Freud (1930) suggests that at the height of being in love, the boundary between self and object appears to dissolve and creativity often involves the eroticization of activity. With this in mind, the observations of our respondents emphasize the degree to which the entire process of gift giving is privately cathected among consumers. In his review of various theories of love, Berman (1989) has argued that love may be the one last mystical or ecstatic experience, the only truly enjoyable counterculture, and last expression of inwardness available to Western consumers. This experience is akin to idolatry, and its significance has only recently been explored in consumer research (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989). That so many of our respondents' narratives exhibit a romantic tone—ranging from the level of a Harlequin romance to that of Byronic poetry—is not surprising. Hedonic impulses excepted (Campbell, 1987), we rarely risk the "vulnerability," "folly of strong feeling," and "innocence" that the romantic sensibility demands (Roszak, 1972/1989, p. 278). Through these imaginative fantasies, respondents are able to liberate what cultural ideology (and conventional research design) represses: the love/hate relationship that the moral economy of gift exchange enjoins upon consumers.

Several kinds of business research might be profitably undertaken. A detailed understanding of the types and categories of gift objects (and their meanings) in expressing and avoiding problems is clearly needed. Additional research into sub-cultural dimensions of gift giving would reveal the ways in which particular social groups experience and manage aspects of the dark side of the gift. More sophisticated kinds of gift counseling (indeed, the development of gift "clinics") should also be explored. The use of gifts to alleviate the variety of tensions expressed by our respondents could be encouraged through appropriate marketing interventions. Advertising vignettes that foster awareness of these tensions and suggest potential resolutions could stimulate demand for such gift clinics. Finally, a simple recognition and honest admission that gifts are sometimes used as interpersonal weapons designed to wound significant others should lead to innovation in all areas of the marketing mix, whether in new product design (witness the growth in popularity of "insult" greeting cards, for example) or promotional appeals (where in-laws might reveal and negotiate their truly dangerous selves).

The "bond" between consumers and objects is imperfectly understood and all too infrequently investigated by researchers. What is apparent is that our respondents have incorporated gift objects into something akin to what Money (1988)

has called a "lovemap." A lovemap is a personalized mental template depicting one's idealized lover and a correspondingly idealized program of sexuoerotic activity with the lover, whether projected in imagery or actively pursued (Money, 1988, p.127). Depending upon local ideological norms, lovemaps can be either nomophilic (acceptable) or paraphilic (deviant). To push beyond conventional notions of normalcy and aberrations, perhaps a term such as "metaphilia" might be used to describe the bonding dynamic that occurs in the larger universe of consumer erotics, between people and things. In this sense, advertising in general and mail order catalogues in particular can be considered a kind of commercial literary genre categorized as erotography. The desire stimulated by this literature and indulged from search through disposition, is a local, historical manifestation of a cultural-evolutionary process by which people make themselves (Childe, 1951). By extension or incorporation, stuff becomes selves in both dispassionate and romantic keys.

Our respondents provide folk models of gift giving that emphasize the importance of sacrifice and labor value. Following Sherry's (1983) model, the investment of effort in gestation becomes the focal point of the hermeneutic quest that is the psychodrama of prestation, and a principle determinant of the quality of reformulation. Search becomes, in Da Matta's (1984, p. 216) sense, "ritual travel:"

In the ritual world, or rather in the dislocated world of ritual and consciousness, there is a fundamental difference: it is the travel that becomes important. In this context the leaving and arrival are less important than the movement itself, which becomes the ritualized element, and, for this reason, is raised to consciousness. We have, therefore, a continuum that goes from the most unconscious and banal travels (such as our frequent rush hours) to the quasi-epic journeys, the wanderings of a pilgrimage, where the fundamental thing is to travel and progress. Daily travel is functional, rational and operational, since it has a specific aim: work, shopping, business, or study. But in ritual travel, or rather in the conscious travel of ritual, the aim and the travel become more or less the same. Thus the normal daily dislocation is inverted since one no longer concentrates only on the goal but also on the travel itself. In ritual travel, what one looks for at the point of arrival is neither concrete, palpable, or quantifiable, but instead blessings, cures, and signs of faith.

But, as we have seen, an ambivalence attaches to this ritual. The ritual is sedimented in the gift. The negativity is available for inspection through such oblique or indirect avenues as projective analysis; it is often repressed entirely in service of a relationship. Neither donor nor recipient can ever be certain that it's really the thought that counts. Managers can learn to mediate this doubt, but only once they have recognized its potency.

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