Giving Gifts to Ourselves:
A Greimassian Analysis Leading to Testable Propositions

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Abstract
Although researchers have noted that consumers occasionally give gifts to themselves, empirical research devoted to this topic has only recently appeared. The existing work has been predominantly phenomenological, exploratory, and descriptive in nature. This paper adopts a semiotic approach in order to interpret self-gifts more thoroughly and derive a set of empirically testable propositions. In doing so the paper seeks to demonstrate the value of semiotics in establishing useful groundwork for theoretical, confirmatory marketing research.
Advertisements for Sybaris fragrance products invite men to join "The Culture of Pleasure" while those for McDonald's restaurants beckon customers with "You deserve a break today." Initially these two promotional messages appear quite dissimilar. The first suggests consumer indulgence for its own sake whereas the second implies that consumer indulgence is earned. In fact, however, the Sybaris and McDonald's slogans share a common underlying objective similar to many other advertising slogans: to encourage consumers to engage in self-gift behavior (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b).

While a few researchers over the years have noted that consumers occasionally acquire gifts for themselves (e.g., Levy 1982; Mick 1986), empirical research has just recently begun to clarify the nature of self-gifts. For example, according to Mick and DeMoss (1990b), self-gifts can encompass products, services, or experiences and they tend to be context-bound based on cultural conventions and calendar (e.g., to reward oneself for a personal accomplishment; to cheer up oneself when feeling down; to celebrate one's birthday).

One of the essential functions of interpersonal gift-giving is the communication of thoughts and feelings which, in turn, serve to define and redefine human relationships (Belk 1976, 1979; Schwartz 1967). In addition, interpersonal gift-giving is also recognized as a culturally constituted phenomenon that reflects broadly dispersed ontological beliefs and values (Belk 1984, 1987; Kopytoff 1986; Sherry 1983). By analogy, self-gifts are a form of self-communication expressing messages of personal identity and self-esteem (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b), e.g., a reward that reflects self-perceptions of individual discipline. Self-gifts also appear to signal adherence or aspiration to particular cultural values, which are partly expressed through advertising, though this aspect of self-gifts has not been thoroughly examined. In this sense, like interpersonal gifts, self-gifts may represent a potent form of cultural communication (see Hanson and Hanson 1981).

In sum, self-gifts are a category of consumption that functions as a form of communication at and between the micro (individual) and macro (cultural) levels of society. This view positions self-gifts within the marketing research domain that focuses on the cybernetics of culture and individual consumption (see McCracken 1988). An added benefit of this perspective is that it facilitates a semiotic analysis of self-gifts since se-

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1) Other examples of self-gift slogans include "The perfect little thank me" (Andes candies), "To celebrate the moments of your life" (General Foods International Coffees), and "The Reward" (Ruger wafer bar). See also Mick and DeMoss (1990b) and Durgees (1986).
miotics concentrates on the structures and processes of communication and meaning (Sebeok 1976). In recent years the semiotic doctrine has played an influential role in the evolution of marketing research (Mick 1986, 1988, 1989; Pinson 1988; Umiker-Sebeok 1987).

The primary purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how a semiotic tool (the Semiotic Square) can be utilized to analyze a marketing topic (self-gifts) and aid the theoretical development of that topic through the derivation of empirically testable propositions. To begin, prior self-gift research is reviewed which establishes this phenomenon as an emerging consumption category within marketing research. Next Greimas's Semiotic Square is introduced and illustrated for its value in understanding the nuances of semantic categories. Then the Semiotic Square is applied to the self-gift concept and four general types of self-gifts are identified and differentiated. Finally, based on this structural semantic analysis, an initial bank of propositions about self-gifts is created.

Self-Gifts

Initial phenomenological studies of self-gifts by Mick and DeMoss (1990a, 1990b) have mainly involved interviews and written self-reports. They have defined self-gifts as personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context-bound (Mick and DeMoss 1990b). Although much remains to be learned about self-gifts, the following points can be highlighted: 2

a) Self-gift behavior appears to be a widely occurring activity in the United States, though not everyone engages in it. Anecdotal comments made to this author by European colleagues suggest that self-gifts may be common in other Western countries as well.

b) Self-gifts can be products, services, or experiences (e.g., a walk in the park).

c) Self-gifts are not restricted to certain classes of products, services, or experiences, e.g., the costs of self-gifts vary widely.

d) Self-gift behavior tends to be context-bound. Some of the contexts most often cited by past researchers and consumers include:
   1) Rewarding oneself for an individual or shared accomplishment
   2) Cheering up oneself when feeling down

2) These insights apply specifically to consumers in the United States where self-gift research has been completed. Whether the same findings would arise in other cultures, especially non-Western cultures, remains to be determined.
3) Celebrating a social or personal holiday (e.g., Christmas, birthday, arrival of spring)
4) Relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event
5) Indulging oneself when one has extra money to spend
6) Indulging oneself just to be nice to oneself, as in self-affection (e.g., "I like me")
7) Establishing an incentive to achieve a goal (i.e., acquiring a self-gift in advance of goal attainment)

Variations as well as combinations of these contexts have been noted. This is not a completed list, since more contexts will likely be uncovered in future research. Examples of actual self-gifts related to the seven contexts above appear in Table 1.

e) Although self-gifts are a form of personal indulgence, characteristically they are not mindless acquisitions; rather, they tend to be consciously acquired, like most gifts chosen for interpersonal gift-giving.

f) Since self-gifts are self-determined, they represent an especially flexible and strategic activity in terms of impacting self-directed cognitions and affect. As noted earlier, self-gift rewards may sustain an identity based partly on discipline. Or, self-gifts just to be nice to oneself may endorse an identity founded on empathy or cheerfulness.

g) In their study of American consumers (n = 287), Mick and DeMoss (1990b) discerned three related dimensions between interpersonal gift-giving and self-gifts: communication, exchange, and specialness. Table 2 summarizes those parallel dimensions.

Table 1
Examples of Seven Self-Gift Behaviors
(Consumer Quotations from Prior Qualitative Research)

Reward

"I had been working on a weight control program and reduced from 199 to my 179 pounds goal. I purchased a digital pedometer -- a usable reward... I felt great accomplishing the goal and the reward was the concrete evidence." (male, dentist, age 45)

Cheering Up

"I often buy products in order to cheer myself up because I am feeling down. Most often the product is some article of clothing. By buying a
new outfit, I provide myself with a different clothing option, perhaps even a "new image." New clothes make me excited and eliminate depression." (female, communications director, age 22)

Relieve Stress

"... I treated myself to compete in a horse show which I could not really afford. My thinking behind it was that I had worked hard enough over the summer to earn my spending money and worked as hard as I can on my exams and that it was time I did something for myself. Something that I wanted to do and it would relax me -- get some fun." (female, student, age 21)

Birthday

"It was a trip to the Canadian Rockies and Lake Louise. I went on the trip because at my late stage in life there won’t be too many more opportunities for such experiences nor abilities to do so. It made me very happy.” (female, retired, age 75)

To Be Nice to Oneself

"I was at work [at a clothing store] about a month ago and we just received some really cute new shorts, tops, and shoes. I didn’t need a new outfit, but decided that since I was going away for the weekend, it would be nice to wear ... The “gift” was the entire outfit (shorts, top, shoes, and socks!” (female, student, age 21)

Incentive

"I bought an excercise suit because I had lost weight and I wanted a new suit as an incentive to lose more. It made me feel as though I was being rewarded and made me want to keep going.” (female, bank teller, age 21)

Extra Money to Spend

"I realized that after paying my bills I had some extra money. I bought a box of pistol bullets... I receive a sort of natural high from shooting and, although it doesn’t last long because I run out of shells, I thought that was a purchase I could enjoy immediately after purchasing them,
instead of having to wait to gain satisfaction.” (male, social worker, age 21)

These conclusions drawn from preliminary self-gift research suggest that self-gifts represent a consumption category through which consumer behavior can be perceived in some of its most dramatic and personally meaningful forms. It is also apparent that this consumption category is complex and that self-gifts differ in form and function (e.g., reward, cheering up) in ways that have as yet not been thoroughly understood.

Greimas and the Semiotic Square

Greimas’ (1966/1983) *Structural Semantics* is arguably one of the most significant treatises on semiotic philosophy and methodology ever produced. In it Greimas seeks to establish a method for analyzing and accounting for meaning by drawing from the structuralist movement generally, the semiologist Saussure particularly.

A fundamental semiological premise is that meaning emerges through differences (or oppositions) among signs as they are used and interpreted in society. For example, in a clothing/fashion context the meaning communicated by a brightly colored bow tie with regard to its wearer is a function of its difference from (or opposition to) other types and colors of neckties that could be conceivably worn. This emphasis on sign relations and differentiation led linguists like Roman Jakobson (1932) to develop the concept of markedness as a way to discuss the asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between the two poles of any opposition. Eventually the concept of markedness became a cornerstone of Greimas’ work.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the Semiotic Square, the concept of markedness is worth further consideration. In the grammatical opposition of past tense versus present tense, as it appears in most European languages, the past tense is marked and the present tense is unmarked. The past tense indicates time that has already occurred in terms of the speech context (e.g., “I wrote this paper”) whereas the present tense indicates neither past, nor present, nor future, but—in many cases—conveys all three simultaneously (e.g., “I write papers). In this example the opposition is between the presence of the past tense (the marked element) and “the non-necessary presence (presence or

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3) This illustration is drawn from Waugh (1982).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Interpersonal Gifts</th>
<th>Self-Gifts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Symbolic messages between giver and receiver (thoughts and feelings), including the giver’s impressions about the identities of both parties</td>
<td>Personally symbolic self-dialogue concerning affective self-regard and self-concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>Social obligations to give, receive, and repay, predicing and optimizing human behavior</td>
<td>Indulgences justified by effortful behavior and performance behavior propelled by self-bargains for indulgences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialness</td>
<td>Extra meaningfulness facilitated by the conjoining of the giver, receiver, and gift through culturally established rituals, shared values, and deep emotions</td>
<td>Extra meaningfulness based on the uncom- monness, particularity, or sacred aspects of self-gifts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

absence or even non-pertinence)” of the past tense, which is the un-marked element or present tense (Waugh 1982, p. 301). The asymmetry of the opposition is evident in a more focused conceptual basis of the marked element as compared to its unmarked counterpart. It is also apparent in the higher prevalence of the present tense, a result largely due to the many situations where temporality is in the background, not foregrounded as it is when past tense is used (e.g., “The capital of Denmark is Copenhagen” versus “I once lived in Texas”).

The example above characterizes the unmarked element in what Jakobson (1932) called a “zero-interpretation,” i.e., where the presence or absence of the information conveyed in the marked element is generally irrelevant. The “zero-interpretation” is most typical when it comes to comprehending marked and unmarked elements. Yet, there is an-
other relational form of markedness, this being the "minus-interpretation" in which the unmarked element is defined by its absence of certain information that is characteristic of the marked element. In this case the unmarked term is a direct contradictory of the marked term. An example drawn again from verb phrases would be the oppositional relation between "We can meet now" and "We cannot meet now." The first phrase is marked because it conveys an ability or opportunity that is missing from the second, unmarked phrase.

Greimas (1966/1983) recognized these two important ways of characterizing differentiation and he explicitly incorporated them into his so-called Semiotic Square. Its theoretical value is a capacity to display the subtleties of meaning in a semantic category by organizing its oppositional elements.

There are two types of oppositions at work in the semiotic square: contrarity and contradiction, more technically known as qualitative and privative relations. Contrarity is the markedness relation involving the zero-interpretation of the unmarked element while contradiction concerns the minus-interpretation of the unmarked element. In Figure 1, S1-S2 and S̅1-S̅2 are qualitative relations where the units are equal and opposite on a continuum. S1-S̅1 and S2-S̅2 in Figure 1 are privative relations formed by the absence of some information or quality. In a Semiotic Square for a given semantic category, S1 and S2 represent opposing meanings that presuppose each other as well as their own absences (S̅1 and S̅2). Also, the two contradictory elements S̅1 and S̅2 each imply a respective contrary element: S̅1->S2 and S̅2->S1.

A brief example drawn from Greimas and Rastier (1968) will serve to illustrate these basic ideas further. The authors begin with the opposing dimensions of culture and nature which readily appear in human societies and they go on to construct a model of sexual relations within traditional French society. Figure 2 shows the qualitative relationship
(contrarity) between culturally prescribed “normal” sex (S1), such as matrimonial relations, and forbidden abnormal sex (yet found in nature), such as homosexual relations (S2). The respective privative relationships of S1 and S2 (their contradictories) are with non-prescribed, non-matrimonial sex (S1), such as adultery by a woman, and normal non-forbidden sex (S2), such as adultery by a man. The S1-S2 and S1-S2 qualitative relations are examples of a zero-interpretation of markedness while the S1-S1 and S2-S2 privative relations each represent a minus-interpretation. Also, each contradictory element implies a contrary element; thus, for example, normal non-forbidden sex (S2) implies a permissable, prescribed relationship (S1).

It is possible to develop semiotic square analyses even further (see Greimas and Rastier 1968) by combining the elements themselves with other perspectives (e.g., economic, psychological), though the basics of the square are sufficient to suggest its potential as an interpretive tool. To date, the semiotic square has not been widely applied in published marketing research (but see Floch 1988; Verba and Camden 1987).

Applying the Semiotic Square to the Self-Gifts Consumption Category

According to Greimas, S1 and S2 of the semiotic square represent contrary semantic units or, as Armstrong (1981) puts it, opposing systems of meaning. These can be seen as the major value systems in opposition
within the self-gifts consumption category (see Figure 3). Their terminology and conceptualization are drawn from an insightful sociohistory of Western consumption (Campbell 1987), positioned as the upper points of the semiotic square in Figure 3. Briefly, Campbell (1987) has argued that the the pleasure goal of modern consumerism evolved from the conflicting but co-influential ethics of Puritanism (or Protestantism) and Romanticism that arose during the 18th and 19th Centuries.

In Figure 3 Puritanic self-gifts (S1) harbor values that stress rationalized indulgence through control, diligence, and delayed gratification. Puritanic self-gifts are pleasurable, though the pleasure is reasoned and usually postponed. From this it would appear that three types of self-gifts are Puritanic: rewards, stress releasers, and incentives (see Table 1). Reward self-gifts are most clearly Puritanic, occurring after some project has been completed. Stress releasers are Puritanic in that they are acquired in situations where there has been a test of personal endurance (as in a grueling day at work). Incentive self-gifts include the feature of control, an intention of diligence, but not always the delay of gratification since the gift is acquired prior to goal attainment. However, sometimes the incentive self-gift is not truly consumed until after the goal is reached (e.g., a new dress in a slightly smaller size to encourage motivation during a diet). Overall, incentive self-gifts are bargains with oneself that incorporate Puritanic values (see Table 2, Exchange Dimension).

Romantic self-gifts (S2) involve values indicative of purer hedonism: uninhibited, affective, and imaginative indulgence. These self-gifts are associated with seizing opportunities “to create desire, not just satisfy it” (Campbell 1987, p. 222). Two types of self-gifts apparently fit this genre: when one is just being nice to oneself and when one has extra money to spend. Sometimes these conditions go hand-in-hand. Both are emblematic of immediate pleasure for pleasure’s sake.

The contention in this article is that Puritanic self-gifts are the unmarked element of the consumption category, in a zero-interpretation relation to the marked Romantic element. In contemporary Western societies Puritanic values persist as a foundation on which much acquisition and consumption takes place, especially in the United States. The most basic Puritanic beliefs – people get what they deserve (or earn) and deserve what they get – continue to be variously propagated, through oral histories and myths (see Belk, 1987, on Santa Claus) as well as the popular press (see Hirschman, 1990, on the ideology of affluence). Lears (1983) has argued – in non-semiotic terminology – that many advertisers are attempting to reverse the markedness relation between Puritanic and Romantic values, so as to make the latter less noticeable and more
acceptable as the norm. Nonetheless, Puritanic ideals have remained strong for a variety of reasons, including the fact that free market economies promote incentives and rewards commensurate with individual effort. As the unmarked element, Puritanic values bear a zero-interpretation to Romantic values insofar as the qualities of imagination and affectivity are irrelevant.

Each bottom point of the semiotic square can be identified as a contradiction to either Puritanic or Romantic self-gifts according to the absence of some quality. These bottom points are each involved in a minus-interpretation of a markedness relation. Success is a dominant underlying quality of Puritanic self-gift scenarios where accomplishments and endurances serve as situational backdrops. The absence of this quality is non-success. Self-gifts that involve non-success (or failure) include those acquired to cheer up oneself. Cheering up is typically sought because of loneliness, depression, boredom, etc. In short, success is missing from some part(s) of the person’s life: social connections, an interpersonal relationship, career, etc. Since the individual seeks healing or comfort through the self-gift, these are called Therapeutic self-gifts (S1). They are contradictory to Puritanic self-gifts because they reflect non-success in some aspect of life.

An important underlying quality of Romantic self-gift scenarios is that the behavior is rather whimsical. Unlike Puritanic or Therapeutic self-gifts, Romantic self-gifts are more likely to be unplanned, momentarily self-constructed indulgences. The contradictory of the whimsical quality is non-whimsical. Nonwhimsical self-gifts arise when there are conclusively, socially established occasions for gift-giving. Examples include self-gifts on celebration days such as birthdays, Christmas, Ha-
nukkah, etc. These self-gifts are called Holiday self-gifts (S2). Referring to them as non-whimsical is not to imply that they are not enjoyed or that they are necessarily non-frivolous. Non-whimsical means that Holiday self-gifts generally lack the spontaneous, imaginative qualities associated with Romantic self-gifts.

Finally, as the semiotic square suggests, Therapeutic self-gifts imply Romantic values because they are relatively unrestrained, here-and-now acquisitions. Similarly, Holiday self-gifts imply Puritanic values because the indulgence does not occur until an appropriate time, as governed by dominant social rules.

Propositions

The foundation for a semiotic framework of self-gifts has now been established. If the model is viable, then various aspects of Puritanic, Romantic, Therapeutic, or Holiday self-gifts should be predictable based on other measurable variables drawn from social science and/or reasonable intuition. The following discussion leads to several propositions about self-gifts which are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Propositions

**Personality Factors**

P1: Individuals with higher achievement needs have higher propensities to engage in Puritanic self-gift behavior.

P2: Individuals with lower self-esteem have higher propensities to engage in Therapeutic self-gift behavior.

**Life Cycle & Demographic Factors**

P3: Older individuals have lower propensities to engage in self-gift behavior.

P4a: Compared to individuals who have more available intimate interpersonal relationships, individuals with less available intimate interpersonal relationships have higher propensities to engage in self-gift behavior.

P4b: Among individuals with less available intimate interpersonal relationships, the propensity to engage in Holiday self-gift behavior will be higher than for Puritanic, Romantic, or Therapeutic self-gift behavior.

P5a: An individual's financial condition is positively correlated with the propensity to engage in self-gift behavior.

P5b: An individual's financial condition is least correlated with the propensity to engage in Holiday self-gift behavior, especially when interpersonal holiday gifts are not anticipated.
P5c: An individual's financial condition is most positively correlated with the propensity to engage in Romantic self-gift behavior.

Self-Gift Qualities

P6: Compared to Puritanic and Holiday self-gifts, Romantic and Therapeutic self-gifts are less likely to be selected for perceived utilitarian qualities.

P7: Compared to Romantic and Therapeutic self-gifts, Puritanic and Holiday self-gifts are more likely to be selected for perceived temporal durability qualities (physical or mental).

P8: Compared to Romantic and Holiday self-gifts, Puritanic and Therapeutic self-gifts are more likely to be selected for perceived inspiring qualities.

Personality Factors

McClelland (1961) has argued that the Protestant Reformation enhanced self-reliance which, together with the growth of capitalistic economies, led to increasing achievement needs among business owners and workers. Since then psychological research has demonstrated that people with higher levels of achievement motivation experience greater satisfaction in doing things well and tend to delay gratification (Morgan 1966); they are also more likely to seek out and tackle challenging activities (Trope 1975). Based on the semiotic square analysis of self-gifts, proposition one (P1) states that people with higher achievement needs are likely to exhibit higher propensities for Puritanic self-gift behavior (i.e., self-gifts as rewards, incentives, and stress releasers).

The semiotic framework also suggests that Puritanic and Therapeutic self-gifts are differentially pervaded by either a sense of success or non-success. Psychologists have suggested that people with low self-esteem, i.e., negative attitudes toward themselves, tend to have histories of self-interpreted failure regarding varied life activities (Higgins, Strauman, and Klein 1986). If this is true, then a negative self-attitude may well be associated with continued perceived non-success in the sort of personal situations that were mentioned before as indicative of Therapeutic self-gifts. Hence, there is a potential inverse relationship between self-esteem and the propensity for Therapeutic self-gift behavior (P2).

Life Cycle and Demographic Factors

Belk (1986) has found that purchases made for oneself based on motivations beyond basic needs are negatively correlated with age. He has subsequently argued that the reason older persons are less acquisitive is that their identities are well-formed and, with death increasingly immi-
nent, they focus more on their memory-laden possessions for confirmation and continuity of life (Belk 1988). Since self-gift behavior does not appear to involve acquisitions based solely on need (Mick and DeMoss 1990a), a negative correlation ought to exist between age and the propensity to engage in all self-gift behavior (P3).

Schwartz (1967) has suggested in his short discussion of self-gifts that this phenomenon may be the by-product of a growing non-intimate community in the 20th Century. In other words, people are more mobile, family members tend to be living farther apart, divorce is more prevalent, etc. The idea of a non-intimate community implies that people are experiencing more extended periods in their lives when they are devoid of former close interpersonal relations, i.e., the kinds of relations that promote and sustain interpersonal gift-giving. People without these intimacies may compensate for lost opportunities of gift-giving and engage in increased self-gift behavior (P4a). The propensity for Holiday self-gifts may be most impacted during non-intimacy stages in life since those are the gifts most publicly sanctioned in societies and which, through social learning, people especially come to anticipate (P4b).

Although some self-gifts are free (e.g., a walk in the park), most require some discretionary income. Thus, a positive relation should exist between a consumer’s financial condition and his or her propensity to engage in any self-gift behavior (P5a). However, due to the fact that holiday gifts may be the most socially sanctioned and anticipated, it could also be expected that the self-gifts least impacted by financial condition are Holiday self-gifts (P5b). Even a person with a comparatively diminished financial condition will feel that holidays such as Christmas or a personal birthday should not pass without some kind of gift for oneself, particularly when interpersonal gifts may not be forthcoming. On the other hand, Romantic self-gifts are conceptualized as the most unplanned and the least anticipated, and therefore this category may be the most positively related to a consumer’s financial condition (P5c).

**Self-Gift Qualities**

Self-gifts themselves are likely to vary in terms of their perceived qualities based on their respective values and meanings. For instance, a common dichotomy is drawn between the symbolic function of products (e.g., social- or self-expressive) and the utilitarian or instrumental function of products (as means to ends). Most acquisitions have both aspects, though it can also be argued that many acquisitions tend to have a preponderance of one function over the other. For example, a pencil
is primarily utilitarian whereas a piece of jewelry is mainly symbolic. If the symbolic and utilitarian functions are characterized as endpoints on a single dimension, then the question could be asked as to whether any self-gifts might be reasonably expected to reside more often in a particular range of that continuum. Based on the prior Semiotic Square analysis of self-gifts, it could be expected that Romantic and Therapeutic self-gifts tend to be less utilitarian (P6). The reasoning for this is simply that Romantic self-gifts are considered rather whimsical in nature (less rationalized, more emotional, more spontaneous) and Therapeutic self-gifts are related to one’s short-term emotional or mood state, not a practical need as typically addressed by utilitarian acquisitions.

The temporal durability of a particular self-gift, which may be an indication of its overall significance to the individual, is also likely to vary across self-gifts. By temporal durability I mean how long the self-gift will physically exist in the person’s life or remain mentally salient. Compared to Romantic or Therapeutic self-gifts, Puritanic and Holiday self-gifts may be strongest on this dimension (P7). This proposition is based on the intense deservingness that accompanies Puritanic self-gifts via effort and accomplishment, hence highest involvement is likely in these self-gift acquisitions which will lead to a concomitant care devoted to them (e.g., a new dress bought as a reward for losing weight) or their fond remembrance (e.g., a vacation taken after a lengthy work project is completed). In essence, people who earn a Puritanic self-gift are probably more likely to choose something that will physically or mentally endure for at least some period of time as a testament to their efforts. Again, given the social sanctioning and anticipation of holiday gift-giving, people who acquire Holiday self-gifts are also likely to choose something that befits the special occasion, whether Christmas, birthday, etc. This fact should also lead to the selection of a more lasting self-gift, at least in memory if not in reality.

Finally, Puritanic and Therapeutic self-gifts represent consumers’ attempts to uplift themselves (self-esteem, moods, etc.) whereas Romantic and Holiday self-gifts appear less so. Hence, it could be proposed that inspiring qualities would be more likely sought in selecting Puritanic or Therapeutic self-gifts (P8). For instance, the purchase of a book, a visit to a movie theatre, or a walk in the park may be more likely selected if the consumer is engaging in Puritanic or Therapeutic self-gift behavior (assuming a given consumer perceives these examples as inspiring) as opposed to Romantic or Holiday self-gift behavior.
Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to provide further evidence of the merit of semiotics for marketing research through a more refined understanding of implicit oppositions among the values and meanings of self-gifts. Several propositions were developed as a result of combining current findings on self-gifts with Greimas’s Semiotic Square.

Empirically testing these propositions could be approached in various ways, including a survey. Measurement scales for variables like self-esteem already exist (e.g., Rosenberg 1965) whereas measures of variables such as age and financial condition are more straightforward. Assessing qualities of self-gifts could be done using adjectives (practical, lasting) judged for their relative applicability to different self-gift contexts. Propensities for different self-gift behaviors (reward, therapeutic, etc.) could be estimated through subjective estimates of past relevant behavior.

The theoretical and practical benefits of applying semiotics to marketing topics are becoming increasingly evident, though it remains a slow process due to the widely differing histories, purposes, and perspectives of the semiotic and marketing domains. This paper has sought to contribute to the continued evolution of these recent developments by demonstrating how semiotics can aid in the formulation of empirically testable marketing propositions.

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