Gift Giving:
A Research Anthology

edited by

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Self-Gifts

David Glen Mick

Personally, I should like to be always making gifts—to everybody as well as to myself.
—Paul Tournier, The Meaning of Gifts

Ask anyone if he or she gives gifts to other people, and the answer will be—as other chapters here indicate—a resounding yes. Ask then about giving gifts to oneself, and the response will often be just as emphatic and affirmative. The answer to the second question may surprise some, but in all likelihood people have been giving gifts to themselves since the early beginnings of self-indulgence. The Oxford Universal Dictionary, 3rd ed., defines indulgence in its reflexive form as “to give free course to one’s inclination; to take one’s pleasure.” If in today’s world there is “a militancy about self-indulgence” as Popcorn maintains (1992, 39, her emphasis), the role and importance of giving gifts to oneself may be unparalleled (see also Belk 1995; Yankelovich 1981).

Understandably, most gift-giving research over the years has focused on interpersonal or dyadic gift giving due to its sociohistorical prominence (e.g., see Belk 1976, 1979; Caplow 1982; Cheal 1987; Sherry 1983). Although the gift-to-self phenomenon was recognized 30 years ago (Schwartz 1967; Tournier 1961/1966), it was not until the 1980s that researchers began to discuss self-gifts (Levy 1982; Mick 1986; Sherry and McGrath 1989), also known as monadic gift giving (Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1995). Since then, a small but growing stream of empirical research has contributed increased understanding of self-gifts. Although many questions remain unanswered, the giving of gifts to oneself is emerging as a theoretical and empirical domain in its own right. The purpose of this chapter is to review current conceptual and substantive knowledge about self-gifts, and suggest future research directions.

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Recognition and Conceptualization of Self-Gifts

Before the late 1970s consumer researchers paid little attention to dyadic gift-giving behavior, though its substantial social and economic impacts were suggested years earlier (e.g., Belshaw 1965; Mauss 1901/1967). However, seminal research by Belk (1976) and Ryan (1977) was soon followed by further empirical work (Belk 1979; Clarke and Belk 1979; Heeler, Francis, Okechuku, and Reid 1979; Scammon, Shaw, and Bamossy 1982) and new conceptual models (Banks 1979; Sherry 1983). Several of the early empirical works sought to describe and understand dyadic gift giving by drawing a distinction between goods selected for giving to others versus those selected for personal use (Clarke and Belk 1979; Heeler et al. 1979; Scammon et al. 1982). For example, empirical researchers were asking such questions as: Does the search for the purchase of a gift involve more effort than the search for a good intended for personal use? (Clarke and Belk 1979). While the dyadic gift/personal-use dichotomy has face validity at first glance and served as a legitimate starting point to identify differentiating characteristics of dyadic gift giving, the empirical research produced inconsistent results.1

Soon some consumer researchers asserted that the personal use category was too broad for meaningful comparisons and that a portion of such purchases might actually be gift-like. Levy (1982, 542) pointed out that the study of Scammon et al. (1982) on flower purchasing overlooked the possibility of “personal use as a form of gift giving to the self—I owe it to myself. I as subject reward me as object.” Mick (1986, 200) also noted that consumer researchers were continuing to focus single-mindedly on dyadic gift giving, while ignoring “various consumer inducements to ‘reward’ the self for past behavior,” that he too perceived as a form of gift giving to oneself. Both Levy’s and Mick’s comments were important in awakening researchers to the self-gift phenomenon, though their sole emphasis on reward motivation was, in retrospect, delimiting.

Sherry and McGrath’s (1989) exploratory ethnography of two gift stores provided the first qualitative data (verbatim) reflecting on-site self-gifts (154):

This [expensive piece of jewelry] is a present from me to me.

I’ve decided that nobody is worthy of this [Gabby Gorilla doll] but me. I’m giving it to myself.
People send other people in here rather than buy for themselves all the time. It seems less frivolous. You feel guilty buying non-practical things for yourself, or, you say that you’re “collecting.” That way, you’re not really indulging yourself.

From such remarks as these, Sherry and McGrath suggested that self-gifts have a dialectic of ambivalence, merging delight and fantasy with guilt.

Around the same time Mick and DeMoss (1990a) used a critical incident technique to explore the phenomenology of self-gifts among 54 college students. Each survey respondent wrote a detailed description of the last time he or she had acquired a self-gift. The remaining pages asked respondents to list additional circumstances and motivations that applied to their self-gift behavior. Content analyses revealed that the dominant motivations and circumstances mentioned were (a) to reward oneself for a personal accomplishment, (b) to cheer oneself up when feeling down, (c) to celebrate a holiday (e.g. Christmas, birthday), (d) just to be nice to oneself, (e) to relieve stress, (f) to maintain a good feeling or mood, (g) when there is some extra money to spend, and (h) to provide an incentive toward a desired goal. A wide variability in goods, services, and experiences was also apparent. In addition, the critical incidents showed that the self-gift experience is at times mysterious and ecstatic, and occasionally involves preparatory self-sacrifice—each of which is a property of sacredness often inherent in special or out-of-the-ordinary consumption phenomena (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Several accounts also suggested that self-gifts may have important roles to play in the consumer’s self-definition and self-esteem.

Given the circumscribed sample in their first study, Mick and DeMoss (1990b) conducted a larger-scale follow-up survey of 123 nonstudent adults and 164 college students. The critical incident technique was used again (392 collected), though the word “self-gift” was not used in the introduction because their earlier study revealed that a few respondents interpreted the word loosely, as anything acquired for oneself. Instead, Mick and DeMoss (1990b) used four self-gift contexts prominent in their earlier study to evoke new self-gift stories. These contexts were a reward for an accomplishment, to cheer oneself up when feeling down, for one’s birthday, and when there was extra money to spend. Each respondent was presented with two contexts to write about and after each account was recorded, respondents turned the page and answered two structured questions. One asked whether the acquisition just described was determined to be a reward, a cheering up, etc., either before or after it was acquired. The second question asked them to indicate on a 9-point scale their level of regret after the acquisition (0 = not at all, 8 = very much).

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Primary Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication:</td>
<td>Self-esteem, Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personally symbolic self-dialogue concerning affective self-regard and self-concepts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange:</td>
<td>Deserving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indulgences justified by effortful behavior, and performance behavior propelled by self-bargains for indulgences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialness:</td>
<td>Perfect Thing, Escape, Discovery, and Deserving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context-bound. Self-gifts are personally symbolic in that their meanings are arbitrary and culturally constituted, but also very specific to the individual (e.g., an expensive post-work-week dinner in which the consumer orders alcohol and an expensive entree: notably, a favorite whiskey sour cocktail and New York strip steak). The communication facet recognizes that gift giving is dialogic and self-gifts often reflect this characteristic too, as in congratulating or consoling oneself. The specialness of self-gifts is reflected in their uncommonness (i.e., infrequency), particularity (as suggested in the cocktail-and-steak example above), or sacred aspects (as suggested in Mick and DeMoss 1990a). The tendency toward premeditation is included in the definition because none of the respondents' accounts indicated nonintentionality or mere post-acquisition rationalization of the self-gift. Though self-gifts may have been unplanned in some cases, they never appeared as mindless acquisitions (as dyadic gifts rarely are either). Finally, self-gifts tend to be highly context-bound in the sense that their descriptions show a remarkably limited variance in the set of circumstances and motivations mentioned. This aspect of self-gifts also parallels dyadic gifts, with gift-giving contexts based on well-formed cultural norms (see Sherry 1983) that correspond to calendrical events (e.g., holidays, vacations), life stages (e.g., graduations, retirement), or certain emergent antecedent states (e.g., career promotion, illness).

Mick and DeMoss (1990b) concluded by admitting that they had emphasized the positive aspects of self-gifts, and that a darker side may exist that needed further examination (e.g., related to narcissism or materialism). They also pointed out that indulgent self-gift behavior is especially facilitated by the individual-centered ideology of Western cultures, self-gifts may be less evident among Eastern group-centric cultures. Mick and DeMoss (1990b) also noted that by using a survey methodology (including structured questions about premeditation and regret) they might have drawn conclusions that overly dwelled on the rational features of self-gifts. Thereby, they recommended an expansion of methodological approaches to self-gift research (e.g., projective techniques, semiotic analysis, experimentation). Their findings were also based on four specific self-gift contexts, which future research needed to expand upon as well.

Subsequently, Mick (1991) interpreted several self-gift contexts in more detail through the application of A.J. Greimas's (1966/1983) Semiotic Square. While semiotics focuses on the structures and processes of communication and meaning (Mick 1986)—with the concept of opposition or difference regarded as a key to meaning—the Semiotic Square seeks to understand the nuances of meaning in a semantic category (e.g., fashion, transportation, sexual relations, self-gifts) by organizing its oppositional elements. The result of Mick's (1991) analysis appears in Figure 1. Its incremental insights were twofold. First, the various contexts or types of self-gift behavior identified in prior research were organized prescriptively through four general categories that are positioned at each corner of the Semiotic Square (Puritanic, Romantic, Therapeutic, and Holiday). Second, based on comparing and contrasting the four categories according to Greimas's notions of contrariety and contradiction, propositions were developed that related personality traits, life style and demographic characteristics, and self-gift qualities to the four categories. As noted in the following discussion, some of these propositions have been tested in subsequent research.

Drawing also from semiotics, Pandya and Venkatesh (1992) addressed expressive consumer behavior and gift giving, including self-gifts. They adopted Leach's (1967) approach to distinguishing signs from symbols and they argued that self-gifts are principally symbols that are used in self-communication. Since symbols have strictly arbitrary referents and meaningaccording to Leach (1967), Pandya and Venkatesh's (1992) perspective coheres with Mick and DeMoss's (1990b) conceptualization of self-gifts.

Further Exploration and Description of Self-Gifts

Given the nascent stage of self-gift knowledge, most empirical work following the earliest studies has remained exploratory and descriptive in nature. Mick, DeMoss, and Faber (1992) intercepted female shoppers in the perfume area of a department store and engaged them in a thematic apperception test. This projective method asked informants to create an imaginary self-gift story for each of four specially-prepared drawings with headlines (an example appears in Figure 2). Interpretive analysis of the audio-taped stories revealed again that self-gifts seem to play crucial roles in molding and sustaining self-concepts as well as self-esteem. For instance, some stories indicated that self-gifts were used symbolically mark important passages in life (e.g., new job, the break-up of a relationship). Results also showed that the affective outcomes of self-gift purchases were positive in 71% of the stories. The principal exception was a birthday context in which a few women expressed resentment over the need to acquire their own birthday gift (e.g., because their husbands had forgotten). Thus, while self-gifts still appeared predominantly positive with respect to their hedonic
dimension, one situation in which negative affect appears likely is when the individual has expected, or would otherwise prefer, a dyadic gift.

Collecting critical incidents through a survey, Williams and Burns (1994) studied spring-break vacations among college students. They observed that these trips were uniformly viewed as reward self-gifts, that the self-gift dimensions of communication, specialness, and exchange from Mick and DeMoss (1990b) were widely evinced, and that the feelings experienced were again considerably positive (e.g., carefree,

### FIGURE 1

Self-Gifts as a Consumption Category and the Semiotic Square

**PURITANIC**
- S1
- Rewards
- Relieve Stress
- Incentive

**HOLIDAY**
- S2
- Birthday, Christmas, etc.

**ROMANTIC**
- S2
- Nice to Self
- Xtra $ Spend

**THERAPEUTIC**
- S1
- Cheering Up

Solid lines indicate presupposition and broken lines indicate implication.

- **Puritanic self-gifts:** rationalized self-indulgence through control, diligence, and delayed gratification, typically based on a perceived successful task completion.
- **Romantic self-gifts:** uninhibited, whimsical, affective, and imaginative self-indulgence, typically just to do something pleasing for oneself.
- **Therapeutic self-gifts:** self-indulgence to remedy negative behavioral or psychological states, typically based on physical illness or a feeling of non-success in some aspect of life (e.g., social connections, career, etc.).
- **Holiday self-gifts:** self-indulgence based on public and private holidays (Christmas, Hanukkah, Valentine’s day, birthday).

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exhilaration, relaxed, delighted). While there was some evidence of negative affect, feelings of remorse were actually highest among those who played and shopped less during their vacation, suggesting that self-gift indulgence in these cases resulted in little guilt.

Compeau, Monroe, and Ozaa (1994) interviewed six women in depth and found that shopping, as opposed to buying, can also serve as a self-gift. When this occurred among their informants, they found that the self-communication, specialness, premeditation, and context-bound characteristics of self-gifts were readily discerned. Reward and cheer-up self-gifts were the main types observed and, as in prior studies on self-gift purchases, shopping-as-self-gift appeared to be a major activity by which some informants developed and maintained their identities and self-esteem. For example, shopping was an activity that one woman believed she did exceptionally well, giving her a strong sense of accomplishment when she found what she wanted at a price she was willing to pay.

Sherry, McGrath, and Levy (1995) used projective techniques (sentence completions and imagined dreams) in a survey of adult women who were customers at the gift shops studied in Sherry and McGrath (1989). Several of their findings replicated Mick and DeMoss’s (1990b) work, including evidence of the premeditation aspect of self-gifts, the

Mary rewards herself with a purchase of perfume.

[Figure 2. Example of a Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test from Mick, DeMoss, and Faber (1992).]
singularity of selected self-gifts (the “perfect thing” theme in Mick and DeMoss 1990b), and positive hedonics. However, compared to prior studies, Sherry et al.’s (1995) revealed more of the possible experiential ambiguity of self-gifts, which they characterized as a struggle between desiring and deserving. For example, some of their respondents reported feeling “silly” in giving gifts to themselves and/or they pampered themselves only after meeting the needs of their family. These tensions are partly understandable, as Sherry et al. (1995) explain, in view of the competing domestic and professional goals that many women strive for today, and in view of the paradoxical ideologies of the consumer culture and the work culture wherein immediate versus delayed gratification is a central, repetitive decision.

Mick and DeMoss (1992) reported new quantitative findings on the classes of self-gifts consumers acquire, the qualities of self-gifts across different contexts, and the socioeconomic correlates of consumer self-gift propensities. In their first set of results (based on previously unreported data from Mick and DeMoss 1990b), clothing was by far the most often mentioned product in self-gift acquisitions (18%), with fast food/grocery food second (9%), non-fast-food from restaurants third (8%), and music products and personal care services tied for fourth (both 6%). Compeau et al. (1994) and Sherry et al. (1994) also found clothing to be a very common self-gift. This replicated finding is reasonable, given clothing’s symbolic qualities and important role in self-definition and self-esteem (e.g., see Solomon 1985). Mick and DeMoss (1992) also found that clothing, non-fast-food from restaurants, recreational products, and travel were more likely to be acquired as reward self-gifts than as cheer-up self-gifts, whereas music products, fast food, personal care services, and entertainment were more likely to be acquired as cheer-up self-gifts. The desiringness embodied in most reward self-gifts (making them more involving and expensive) and the need for expedient relief through cheer-up self-gifts may account for these differences. Mick and DeMoss (1992) also found that some self-gift qualities differed across four contexts. For example, reward self-gifts tended to be more inspiring, memorable, and lasting (as Mick 1991 proposed) and less unusual or silly. Therapeutic (cheer-up) self-gifts were also seen as more inspiring and relaxing, and less practical. Birthday self-gifts tended to be perceived as more memorable and lasting but less inspiring (as Mick 1991 proposed) as well as less inexpensive and less relaxing. Self-gifts in contexts where there was extra money to spend were seen as more inexpensive.

Mick and DeMoss (1992) also reported the results of a random-sample telephone survey of 398 consumers who reported their frequencies of eight self-gift behaviors on a 9-point scale (0 = never, 8 = very often). Each of the eight self-gift propensity estimates were then regressed onto a set of sociodemographic descriptor variables. The results showed that for all eight self-gift propensities, age exhibited a negative association and, as Mick (1991) proposed, current financial condition tended to exhibit a positive association, but this relationship was not strongest for Holiday self-gifts as he proposed. Also, women had higher propensities for cheer-up self-gifts and for self-gifts just to be nice to oneself (Therapeutic and Romantic self-gifts respectively), whereas men had a higher propensity for self-gifts as an incentive toward a goal (a form of Puritanic self-gift). There also was minor evidence that people living alone (who have no immediate dyadic gift partner) are more likely to acquire reward and cheer-up self-gifts, which partly supported another of Mick’s (1991) propositions. Parallel to this latter finding, Ottes, Zolner, and Lowrey (1994) found that recently divorced individuals are apt to approach a holiday context such as Christmas considering the possibility of buying their own gift(s).

In the lone study to date on self-gifts and ethnicity, Rucker et al. (1994) compared self-identified Asian students with self-identified White students with respect to self-gift experiences and preferences for self-gifts versus dyadic gifts. Across both groups the results showed that the immediate and long-term hedonic effects of self-gifts were mostly positive, with only occasional negative feelings such as guilt or stress. Asians were more likely than whites to favor experiences (e.g., watching TV or listening to music) over buying products or services in their self-gift behavior. However, self-gifts were not less acceptable than dyadic gifts among Asians, contrary to the proposition put forward by Mick and DeMoss (1990b) and Sherry et al. (1995) that individuals from group-centric cultures (such as Asians) might be less inclined toward self-gifts. A stronger test of this proposition in future work should include samples of consumers who are still located and thoroughly embedded in their native cultures (unlike Asian students in the United States).

McKeage and her colleagues (McKeage 1992; McKeage, Richins, and Debevec 1993) have focused on addressing the relationship between materialism and self-gifts. They have argued that materialism and self-gifts should be linked because, compared to nonmaterialists, materialists are more likely to be self-centered, to define themselves through their possessions, and to believe that purchase and consumption lead to happiness. Adapting Mick and DeMoss’s (1992) measures of self-gift propensities, McKeage (1992) found that college students scoring higher on Richins and Dawson’s (1992) materialism scale had higher propensities to engage in birthday self-gifts, cheer-up self-gifts, and
nice-to-self self-gifts. Higher scorers on the materialism scale were also more prone to mention expense in describing self-gift behaviors, with price serving as an index of self-gift value. In a follow-up study, McKeage et al. (1993) found that summed scores from eight self-gift items were negatively correlated with age and positively correlated with materialism scores. In addition, women showed a higher tendency overall to engage in self-gift behaviors. Individual item analysis showed that materialism scores were again positively correlated with the propensity to engage in cheer-up self-gifts and nice-to-self self-gifts, but not birthday self-gifts in this study. Both McKeage (1992) and McKeage et al. (1993) replicated the finding that clothing is a leading product class for self-gifts.

So far there has been only limited research that examines the ramifications of self-gifts for marketing management. Consistent with some of Mick and DeMoss's (1992) and McKeage's (1992) results, Mick et al. (1992) found that in six of the projective stories their informants created, the price of the self-gift (perfume) was higher than normal. This was especially true in reward and birthday contexts where the higher price seemed directly indicative of the special indulgence taking place. In addition, Mick et al. (1992) found that in 20 (38%) of the perfume-related stories the specific brand had not been predetermined before arriving at the store and that typically customers were engaged in an exciting self-gift discovery process with respect to brand choice. This insight translates into an opportunity for the salesperson to serve as a self-gift purchase advisor. In fact, several stores revealed that the salesperson was perceived explicitly as a friend or foe, either facilitating the consumer's self-gift motivation or thwarting it. Based on those insights, Mick et al. (1992) recommended more intensive selection and training processes in retail settings where self-gifts are apt to occur (e.g., in clothing, jewelry, and other specialty and luxury-item stores). They encouraged retailers to train sales staff for better listening skills through role playing and simulation techniques and to educate them in ways to qualify customers for possible self-gift motivations (e.g., querying customers about what brought them into the store rather than what they are looking for). Mick et al. (1992) also suggested how the development of point-of-purchase displays and advertising themes as well as more profitable pricing strategies could benefit from considering self-gift motivations.

A preliminary study of self-gift themes in advertising was also undertaken by two marketing research classes (Mick 1993, unpublished data). One class performed a longitudinal analysis by examining all the ads in three issues of Ladies Home Journal, Esquire, and Time magazines for each of seven years (1935, 1945, 1955, 1965, 1975, 1985, and 1992). Three students independently coded each magazine's ads for self-gift themes based on earlier descriptions of Puritanic, Romantic, Therapeutic, and Holiday self-gifts (Mick 1991; refer to Figure 1 here). Results showed that the percentage of self-gift ads across the magazine issues ranged from 3% to 6%, with Romantic self-gift themes being most frequent (e.g., do something nice for yourself, indulge yourself for no other reason). Although one might expect the highest level of self-gift themes to have occurred during the "me decade" of the 1980s (i.e., the 1983 ads), none of the four categories of self-gift themes peaked in 1985 or showed a clear rising pattern over the years covered in the study. The second class performed an identical coding analysis on three issues each of ten different magazines for 1992 (e.g., Money, People, Ebony, Sports Illustrated, Cosmopolitan). Results showed that the percentage of self-gift ads for the majority of the magazines ranged between 2% and 10%, with People magazine highest at 23%. Again, Romantic self-gift ads were most prominent. Though most of the percentages derived from these two studies are low in an absolute sense, they demonstrate more definitively that advertisers use self-gift themes occasionally and that, in actual numbers, across all magazines these themes probably appear in hundreds of ads annually. Nevertheless, these studies are quite provisional for a variety of reasons, and thereby a more thorough and rigorous analysis of self-gift themes in advertising is needed in the future, including a focus on other media (radio, television, billboards, etc.).

Explanatory Research on Self-Gifts

A few researchers have taken the first steps toward a theoretical understanding of self-gift behavior. Olshavsky and Lee (1993) have argued for an information processing explanation of self-gifts based on the concept of metacognition. Metacognition refers to the knowledge and awareness of one's own cognitive processes, i.e., cognition about cognition in a sort of self-dialogue. Olshavsky and Lee (1993) maintain that if one is aware of one's cognitive state, then one can also be aware of the need to maintain or enhance the cognitive/emotional integrity of one's information processing system (i.e., the self) to achieve desires related to life goals (including subgoals related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs). Self-gifts are a special case of desire formation that occur as a result of a discrepancy observed after comparing the desired state of one's information processing system and the perceived actual state. A drive is formed for the means to reduce the discrepancy, including the possible purchase or use of a good (e.g., clothing, TV) or engaging in an
activity (e.g., walking in the park). Oshavsky and Lee go on to explain how the self-communication, exchange, and specialness dimensions of self-gifts and their related themes (see Table 1) are each accounted for in their metacognition view of self-gifts. They conclude that a separate theory of self-gifts is unnecessary because, from their perspective, information processing theory and the concept of metacognition can explain self-gift behavior.

According to Mick and DeMoss (1990b), two of the most frequent contexts of self-gifts are rewards for accomplishments and cheer-ups for disappointments. This insight points to achievement outcomes and their interpretations as potential precursors of self-gifts. Hence, Mick and DeMoss (1990b) suggested that attribution theory might be useful in explaining reward and cheer-up self-gifts because it focuses on the way in which individuals try to make sense of their world. Faure and Mick (1993) elaborated on this idea by linking Weiner's (1962) attribution theory of motivation and emotion to the likelihood of self-gift behavior following a success or failure in achievement situations. Weiner has identified three primary dimensions of causal attributions (internal/external, controlled/uncontrolled, and stable/unstable). For example, Faure and Mick (1993) hypothesized that successes lead to greater self-gift likelihood than failures in achievement settings due to the strong achievement needs and “I earned it” attitude in certain cultures (America especially). They also hypothesized that reward self-gifts are more likely following a success if the success is attributed to an internal cause (personal responsibility) rather than an external cause (e.g., someone else's assistance), due to the self-pride felt in the achievement. In contrast, a cheer-up self-gift is more likely after a failure if the failure is attributed to an external rather than an internal cause, due to self-pity and the lack of responsibility for the negative outcome. These particular hypotheses were subsequently tested in an experiment (Mick and Faure 1995) that manipulated task outcomes and causal explanations for achievement outcomes by way of four different scenarios (e.g., taking a test, giving a speech). After each story subjects reported their likelihood of self-gift acquisition. Consistent across each scenario, the results confirmed the hypotheses discussed above.

DeMoss's dissertation (1993) developed a theoretical viewpoint maintaining that there is an increasing level of personal ego involvement in a purchase as one goes from buying for oneself based solely on need, to buying a gift for a distant other, to buying a gift for a close other, and to buying a self-gift. She argued that in most cases the buying for close other and the buying of a self-gift will be similar insofar as the close other is usually part of one's extended self (see Belk 1988). She contended that these latter two purchases should show systematic differences from a gift for distant other and a purchase for self based on need, with respect to such variables as amount of information search in purchasing, the existence of a price range prior to purchase, and product qualities sought. Contrary to her specific hypothesis, the most information search took place in the buying for self based solely on need, though the other three conditions showed the ordering of search she expected (self-gift > gift for close other > gift for distant other). As she hypothesized, a prior price range was more likely to exist in purchases for distant other and for self due to need than in the other two conditions. Also, six of twelve product qualities showed statistical and/ or directional support for her hypotheses, e.g., products bought as a gift for a distant other or for self based on need were seen as more practical, less satisfying, less exciting, and less unusual than those bought as a gift for a close other or as a self-gift. Although some of her other hypotheses were not confirmed, DeMoss's (1993) study is the first to theorize differences among varied forms of dyadic gifts and products purchased for oneself (including self-gifts), and then link those differences to variables such as information search and pre-purchase price ranges.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Self-gift behavior has probably existed for a long time, but researchers have only recently given it direct and sustained attention. This brief review has, hopefully, sparked the reader's interest in self-gifts and demonstrated that a valuable corpus of related insights is emerging. Nonetheless, self-gift knowledge is still in its early developmental phases and many issues remain unresolved, if not unexplored altogether.

Several studies subsequent to Mick and DeMoss (1990b) have supported various elements of their basic conceptualization of self-gifts. Overall, the most authentic self-gifts are strong forms of personally symbolic self-communication, are special indulgences, are premeditated, and are embedded in a discrete context according to cultural norms. These contexts in American culture are highlighted in Figure 1.

Admittedly, the definitional component concerning a tendency toward premeditation is still being debated. By premeditation Mick and DeMoss indicated that self-gifts tend to be recognized as special indulgences prior to or at the time of acquisition/consumption. This does not mean that all self-gifts are rational, calculated, or planned, only that the consumer is at least minimally aware of an intrapersonal gift-like event is at hand. Note that this aspect of self-gifts conforms to the vast majority of dyadic gifts; i.e., there is rarely confusion between giver and
recipient about the fact that gift-giving behavior is unfolding. Self-gifts can be planned or spontaneous, cognitive and/or affective, without foregoing the premeditation factor as Mick and DeMoss (1990b) conceived it.

Does this then mean that self-gifts cannot be acquired impulsively or compulsively? It certainly seems that self-gifts can be acquired impulsively—when a consumer experiences a sudden, powerful, and persistent urge to buy something immediately, with diminished regard for its consequences and involving occasional conflicting emotions (Rook 1987). But just as most dyadic gift-giving is not impulsive by Rook’s definition, impulsive self-gifts have rarely been observed in the various self-gift studies conducted to date. Unlike impulse purchases, most self-gifts have an aspect of control, insofar as they are mentally connected to the context precipitating the self-gift (e.g., having a birthday, being down, accomplishing a task) and/or in their particularity and singularity (e.g., amber jewelry, heavenly hash ice cream, a round of golf). The emotional conflict in impulsive buying may explain the ambivalence perceived among some self-gift experiences of upper-class women at the high-priced gift shops that Sherry and his colleagues have focused on in their research. Whether such ambivalence should be extrapolated to all other self-gift experiences remains an open question that only further empirical research can reconcile. The premeditation and the positive hedonics observed in the studies reviewed here (several based on different methods) suggest that most self-gifts are not acquired impulsively.

Compulsive buying behavior involves “an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads the individual to repetitively engage in a behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or others” (O’Guinn and Faber 1989, 148). Authentic self-gifts tend to have an aspect of control, they are not highly repetitive in a compulsive sense, and, so far, empirical research has not uncovered harmful effects of noteworthy magnitude (financial, psychological, or otherwise). Thus, it is unlikely that authentic self-gifts occur as compulsive consumption. Note also that authentic dyadic gifts are not highly compulsively either. If a husband bought his wife flowers or candy each and every day, soon she would not consider them authentic gifts, partly because their specialness would be ruined and the husband’s thoughtfulness would be suspect. Hence, compulsive gifts are pseudo-gifts (cf. Belk 1995b; Mick and DeMoss 1990b).

Several of the studies reviewed also provided various support for the three dimensions of self-gifts (communication, exchange, specialness) as well as their six related themes from Mick and DeMoss (1990b). The exchange dimension, however, appears most associated with Puritanic self-gifts in which the indulgence is pre- or post-earned through sacrifice, i.e., physical labor and/or psychological effort. Belk and Coon (1993) have recently suggested that the exchange paradigm is inadequate to explain many gift-giving relationships and that a paradigm based on agapic love is needed to account for gifts that are especially spontaneous and affective. Belk in this volume relates the ideal of agapic love to the perfect dyadic gift. Several of his criteria for identifying a perfect dyadic gift suggest that Romantic self-gifts are the purest form of self-gift in terms of the agapic love paradigm: a wish solely to please oneself, a gift of some luxury, unique appropriateness of the gift, surprise, and delight. The surprise and delight factors point to the spontaneity of Romantic self-gifts that particularly distinguishes them from the other three major self-gift categories in Figure 1. Altruism, another feature Belk (1995b) discusses, is less clearly germane to self-gifts since it involves motivation by self-transcendent needs, and most self-gifts are inevitably egoistic, which is to say self-directed and self-focused. Whether it is possible for a person to engage in Romantic self-gifting in a manner consistent with altruism and/or simultaneously with altruistic dyadic gifting (e.g., when a woman secretly purchases a weekend get-away package for herself and her significant other) remains to be explored. Altogether, Belk and Coon (1993) and Belk (in this volume) provide new theoretical foundations and a number of useful empirical directions for forging new insights on self-gifts. Among other things, their work suggests that Romantic self-gifts may be among the most expressive and least utilitarian consumer behaviors in daily life, and giving them more attention will assist the field in breaking free of the strong instrumentalist orientation that still dominates consumer behavior models.

More research is also needed to clarify the findings that age is negatively correlated with self-gift propensities and that women and men differ in their propensities. The age-related correlation could suggest that as people grow older they place less value on acquiring and consuming products (see Belk 1988) or that older generations at this time (as an historical cohort) are less indulgent. So far the empirical evidence is equivocal with regard to either of these explanations. Also, findings on gender differences in self-gift behavior have been inconsistent. One might expect men (or masculine-oriented individuals) who are conventionally more aetic to show a higher tendency toward Puritanic self-gifts. On the other hand, women (or feminine-oriented individuals) who are conventionally more communal, more willing to express
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emotions, and more involved in the gift giving culture, should show a higher tendency for Romantic and, perhaps, Therapeutic self-gifts. More research is needed to identify and understand gender differences in self-gift behavior.

More work is also needed to comprehend the role of moods as antecedents to and consequences of self-gifts, especially the Romantic and Therapeutic categories. Also, the potential of fore-planned Puritanic gifts to encourage higher levels of task performance is suggested in Bandura's (1982) work, but as yet the evidence is anecdotal by way of critical incident reports (see also Belk 1995). Some evidence suggests also that consumers who have deficient dyadic-gift relationships may be more likely to acquire self-gifts, but these findings are tentative at this stage and need further consideration.

Across all types of self-gifts, cross-cultural and cross-ethnicity research should be a high priority since self-gifts seem inevitably linked to self-concepts and self-esteem that, in turn, are embedded within and structured by sociocultural milieu (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988). Also, little is known as to how consumers choose which goods, services, or experiences they will acquire as self-gifts. Economic mental-accounting theory (Thaler 1985, 212-213) suggests that when people engage in authentic self-gift behavior they will acquire goods, services, or experiences that they normally do not acquire for themselves, and will spend more than they typically do, i.e., they release their budget constraints. Olshavsky and Lee's (1993) metacognition theory of self-gifts proposes that self-gifts are chosen for their applicability to subgoals in life and, as a result, they restore integrity to the information processing system that has observed a recent discrepancy between desired and perceived states. These theories and other relevant ones (psychoanalytic, behavioral, attributional) should be articulated and tested in future self-gift research to elevate self-gift knowledge to a higher plane of understanding. In concert with such efforts, more exploratory, descriptive, and grounded-theory research is needed as well. The ultimate goals of self-gift research should be to determine why and how consumers decide to engage in self-gift behavior, which products and brands they consider, how they choose self-gifts, and the experiences and meanings of self-gifts in everyday life—any or all of which could be moderated by such factors as sociocultural context, financial condition, availability of dyadic gift partners, age, gender, and so on.

For many years consumer research adopted a strongly cognitive and utilitarian focus, and aimed it principally at explicating brand choice behavior. Then important changes swept over the field and encouraged

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more attention to the emotional, symbolic, experiential, and macro-cultural aspects of consumer behavior (see Belk's 1994 review). Among these changes included new research on self-indulgent consumer behavior, though a sizeable share of this work has centered on the darker side of self-indulgence (e.g., compulsive buying, addictive behaviors, shoplifting). It must be kept in mind, however, that self-indulgence has both unhealthy and healthy manifestations, and that our current Western attitudes toward pleasure—prefigured by John Calvin and his followers—are heavily based on sublimation and denial (Tiger 1992). Authentic self-gifts are a sincere personal attempt to rectify the persistent urge to say "no" to ourselves in daily life. Adapting Tiger's (1992, 299) adaptation of James Joyce's symphonic closing to Ulysses; let us consider: Self-gifts as guide, self-gifts as proof, self-gifts as tonic, self-gifts as festivity, self-gifts as fun and as triumph. There's no choice. We have to have self-gifts. Yes.

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Notes

1. See DeMoss (1993) for a thorough review of the related findings.
2. Some respondents mentioned need as another self-gift motivation. Mick and DeMoss (1990a) discussed it in light of the full range of their data and concluded that need motivation was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a self-gift.
3. Since Greimas's approach is complex, and steeped in traditions of philosophy, linguistics, and sociology, a fuller description of the Semiotic Square is beyond the scope of this article (see Greimas 1966/1983; Mick 1991).
4. For example, since Therapeutic self-gifts involve a perception of nonsuccess in some aspect of life (which the self-gift attempts to salve), it was proposed that individuals with lower self-esteem (who typically interpret repeated failures in their lives) will have higher propensities to engage in Therapeutic self-gift behavior.
5. One of the magazine issues was always December since that would be the main time for Christmas Holiday self-gifts to be promoted. The other two issues were chosen randomly from other times of the year.
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