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Consumer self-gifts in achievement contexts: the role of outcomes, attributions, emotions, and deservingness

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Abstract

Research on consumers' gifts to themselves has been mainly exploratory and descriptive. Toward more theoretical understanding, we conducted an experiment on self-gift behavior as it is precipitated by everyday achievement tasks. We manipulated (1) achievement outcomes (success/failure) and (2) consumers' explanations for those outcomes (attributions) to examine their effects on self-gift likelihood. We also measured emotions and deservingness as potential mediators. Results showed that self-gifts are more likely following successes; however, depending on whether the attribution is to an internal versus external cause, the levels of self-gift likelihood within successful and failed contexts are reversed. Also, happiness, pride, confidence, and deservingness mediated a substantial amount of these effects. Discussion focuses on implications for self-gift theory, attribution research, and the marketing management of consumer self-gift behavior. © 1998 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Historically, gift-giving research has focused on interpersonal or dyadic giving (Sherry, 1983), occasionally contrasting goods chosen for giving to others with those chosen for personal use (e.g., Scammon et al., 1982). However, a few researchers argued that this comparison may be obfuscating (e.g., Mick, 1986). They pointed out that some personal purchases are gift-like, that this phenomenon is relatively common, and that consumer researchers knew little about it. As a result, research on self-gifts

began to evolve (see the review of Mick, 1996). Up to now, empirical inquiries have been chiefly exploratory and descriptive, relying on qualitative data analysis or correlational approaches (e.g., McKeage et al., 1993; Mick, 1991; Mick and DeMoss, 1990, 1992; Mick et al., 1992; Sherry et al., 1995). Consequently, as expected for a nascent area of research, current knowledge on self-gifts is generally pre-theoretical.

Based on numerous first-hand descriptions of self-gifts, Mick and DeMoss (1990) defined self-gifts as symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context bound. Popcorn (1991) (p. 39) has observed that self-gift behavior has increased among contem-

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porary Western consumers: "There's a militancy about self-indulgence now, a strong sense of entitlement. It's not 'Oh, what I would give for [insert your fantasy here],' it's 'I want it. I will have it. And I deserve it.'" Among the most common entitlement contexts are achievement situations that result in relative successes or failures, potentially leading to reward or therapeutic self-gifts respectively (Mick, 1991).

Not surprisingly, marketers are drawing on evocative achievement situations to encourage self-gifts. A televised ad by the floral industry has portrayed an arm wrestling match between a diminutive man and a football star which results in an ambiguous outcome off-camera, leading the announcer to recommend the buying of flowers following either personal successes or failures. McDonald's venerable slogan 'You deserve a break today' and the Ruger wafer-bar package emblazoned with the words 'The Reward' offer subtler, but similar, self-gift enticements. In general, the kinds of achievement-oriented contexts that pervade daily life (e.g., career and home tasks; leisure sports) appear to readily precipitate self-gifts. Moreover, a thorough understanding of such situational and personal influences on buying behavior is crucial to competitive advantage in the marketplace (Ratneshwar et al., 1997). Unfortunately, the psychological mechanisms by which reward and therapeutic self-gifts come about are not well established. The purpose of our study is to refine and test some of the ideas recently put forth by Faure and Mick (1993) who advocated the attribution paradigm for advancing theory on self-gifts, as proposed by Weiner (1986). Specifically, we look at the effect of achieve-

ment outcomes and the reasonings for those outcomes (attributions) on self-gift likelihood, as potentially mediated by key emotions and a sense of deservingness.

2. Conceptual foundations

Attribution theorists presume that people search for understanding in daily life, looking to determine why events happen as they do (Heider, 1958). The search for an explanation—constructing a causal attribution—is most likely when an outcome is unexpected or important. Since the number of perceived causes for an outcome is limitless, a crucial step in attribution research has been the development of a taxonomy of causes based on underlying properties or dimensions. Weiner (1986) has been particularly responsible for developing not only the structure of individuals' causal attributions for outcomes in achievement contexts, but also linking emotional responses to outcomes and attributions. He has distinguished among three principal dimensions of attributions:

- locus of causality*: refers to the location of a cause, internal or external to the actor;
- controllability*: refers to the possible volitional alteration of a cause, controllable or uncontrollable;
- stability*: refers to the temporal duration of a cause, consistent over time or subject to change from one period to another.

In Weiner's taxonomy, certain combinations of attribution dimensions are known to result in particular patterns of thinking. For instance, a successful out-

Table 1

Examples of perceived causes of achievement success and failure on the basis of a locus \times controllability \times stability classification scheme

	Success	Failure
Internal–controllable–stable	Always tries hard	Never tries
Internal–uncontrollable–stable	High ability	Low ability
Internal–controllable–unstable	Strong effort	Weak effort
Internal–uncontrollable–unstable	Positive mood	Illness
External–controllable–stable	An evaluator is biased positively	An evaluator is biased negatively
External–uncontrollable–stable	Easy requirements	Difficult requirements
External–controllable–unstable	Assistance from another person	Interference from another person
External–uncontrollable–unstable	Good luck	Bad luck

Adapted from Weiner (1986).

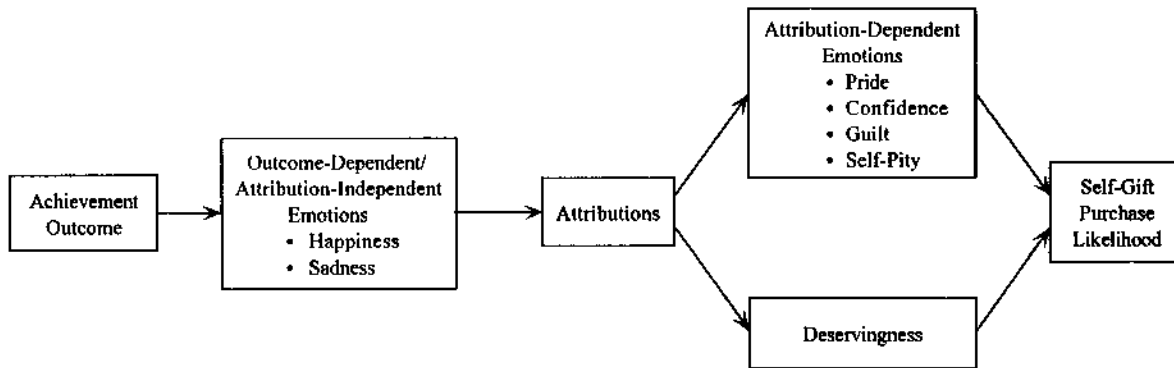


Fig. 1. Self-gift purchase likelihood as a function of achievement outcome, attributions, emotions, and deservingness (adapted from Weiner, 1986).

come ascribed to personal effort reflects an attribution to a cause that is internal, controllable, and unstable. Alternatively, a failure ascribed to bad luck represents an attribution to a cause that is external, uncontrollable, and unstable. Table 1 categorizes attributions arising in the eight-cell matrix formed by the three causal dimensions, as applied to achievement contexts.

In further detail, Weiner (1986) has developed a multi-stage attributional model of the cognition–emotion–action process in achievement contexts. Following a successful or failed outcome, the individual first evaluates the outcome and typically experiences happiness or sadness in response to the goodness or badness of the outcome. Hence, this primary emotional response is outcome-dependent, but attribution-independent. In the next stage the individual makes an attribution for the outcome (e.g., to effort or luck) which results in further emotions that are attribution-dependent (e.g., pride, guilt). For instance, a successful outcome followed by an internal locus attribution (e.g., strong personal effort) will generate more pride than an external locus attribution (e.g., someone's assistance). On the other hand, a failed outcome followed by an internal locus attribution (e.g., weak personal effort) will generate more guilt than an external locus attribution (e.g., someone's interference). Weiner also proposes that varied outcomes, attributions, and emotions lead to different behavioral consequences. Following Faure and Mick (1993), we seek to refine and evaluate Weiner's framework as it relates to self-gift behavior by considering not only an affective route to self-gifts

(emotions), but also a cognitive route related to a logic of deservingness. Fig. 1 depicts the basic framework of Weiner (1986) as we have adapted it for this self-gift study.

3. Achievement outcomes and attribution effects on self-gift likelihood

3.1. Achievement outcomes

Mischel et al. (1968) found that children who experienced success in an achievement task were more likely to indulge subsequently in self-gratification than non-successful children. However, self-gratification following failure is not unusual, as it has also been found that non-successful children were more likely to indulge subsequently in self-gratification than a control group (Underwood et al., 1973). The greater likelihood of self-gifts following success, as compared to failure, should also apply in Western adult samples—especially among American consumers—due, in part, to the Protestant work ethic and its strong underlying achievement values (McClelland, 1961). That is, large segments of Western adult consumers appear to believe that achievement successes in life should lead to material comforts, some self-given, as implicated in the sociological analysis of the Santa Claus myth by Belk (1987) (p. 107):

We [as children] learn to expect a reward when we are good (i.e., doing things that would please our

parents). Then as we learn that *we* are Santa (parallel to believing that God is in us), we realize that we should reward ourselves for doing well by buying ourselves things.

Following similar reasoning in their conceptual paper, Faure and Mick (1993) developed the following hypothesis, which we test in our study on young American adults:

H₁: In achievement contexts, successful outcomes will lead to greater self-gift likelihood than failed outcomes.

3.2. Locus of causality dimension

Over the years attribution theorists have tended to view the locus of causality dimension as the most fundamental (Folkes, 1988), and we similarly expected this dimension to have a significant influence on self-gift likelihood in achievement contexts. In general, people tend to monitor their behavior as a consequence of the attributions they make for their actions and outcomes (Bandura, 1982). Empirical evidence suggests that internal attributions after successful outcomes lead to higher self-esteem than external attributions (Weiner, 1986). Also, people often give themselves rewards when they attain their goals and are proud of it.

In contrast, people engage in self-criticism when they fail to obtain their goals, especially if they feel responsible. They experience guilt and are less likely to engage in self-gratification because their behavior would not be socially acceptable (Bandura, 1982; Weiner, 1986). Alternatively, when failed goal attainment is due to external causes (e.g., bad luck), people are more apt to feel self-pity (Weiner, 1986). In those cases, the individual may be more inclined to engage in therapeutic self-reinforcement through material goods.

Combining these insights above, Faure and Mick (1993) developed the following hypotheses which we also test in our study:

H₂: Achievement outcome and the locus dimension of causal attributions interact in their influence on the likelihood of a self-gift. In particular:

H_{2a}: Following successful achievement outcomes, attributions to internal causes lead to greater self-gift likelihood than attributions to external causes.

H_{2b}: Following failed achievement outcomes, attributions to external causes lead to greater self-gift likelihood than attributions to internal causes.

3.3. Controllability dimension

Following successful outcomes, people should be more inclined to value controlled as compared to uncontrolled causes. Weiner (1986) suggests that successes attributable to an internal controllable cause (e.g., personal effort) result in a higher sense of personal responsibility and self-esteem as compared to an internal uncontrollable cause (e.g., good mood). He has also noted that successes attributable to external controllable causes (e.g., someone's assistance) tend to generate higher self-esteem than successes attributed to uncontrollable causes (e.g., good luck) because people believe that the assistance received was triggered by their own likable nature.

Following failed outcomes, the pattern may be reversed. Basically, when failed outcomes are attributed to uncontrollable causes (e.g., illness, bad luck) as compared to controllable causes (e.g., poor effort, someone's interference), self-gifts may be more likely because gift-giving norms suggest that in such cases the person's humanity and survivability should be endorsed (cf. Sherry, 1983). Consolidating these insights, Faure and Mick (1993) developed the following hypotheses which we also test in our study:

H₃: Achievement outcome and the controllability dimension of causal attributions interact in their influence on self-gift likelihood. In particular:

H_{3a}: Following successful achievement outcomes, attributions to controllable causes lead to greater self-gift likelihood than attributions to uncontrollable causes.

H_{3b}: Following failed achievement outcomes, attributions to uncontrollable causes lead to greater self-gift likelihood than attributions to controllable causes.

4. Emotions and deservingness

In addition to achievement outcomes and attributions, we also followed Faure and Mick (1993) in developing an additional focus on the roles of emotions and deservingness. Specifically, emotions should play a mediating role on the route from achievement outcomes and attributions to self-gift purchase likelihood. As our prior discussion indicated and as Fig. 1 suggests, happiness and sadness are the two outcome-dependent, attribution-independent emotions, i.e., they are strictly associated with achievement outcomes, prior to any attributions. Since they stand alone as the emotions that immediately follow achievement outcomes, these emotions should fully mediate the main effect of outcomes on self-gift likelihood. That is, the greater likelihood of a self-gift following a successful outcome, as compared to a failed outcome, will depend on the extent of happiness (more) and sadness (less) felt in reaction to the outcome. Thus, our fourth hypothesis is:

H₄: The emotions of happiness and sadness completely mediate the effect of achievement outcomes on the likelihood of a self-gift.

According to Weiner, other emotions are attribution-dependent and specific to particular attribution-dimensions and their combinations. For example, consider the most important attribution dimension, locus of causality. In relation to a successful outcome, an attribution to an internal cause (e.g., personal effort) should lead to a higher intensity of pride and confidence than an attribution to an external cause (e.g., luck, someone's help). Furthermore, given a successful outcome, the greater likelihood of a self-gift following an internal attribution, as compared to an external attribution, should depend on the greater degree of pride and confidence felt as a function of the internal attribution. However, as Fig. 1 suggests, there may be more than just affective reactions that mediate the effect of attributions on self-gift likelihood. Faure and Mick (1993) and Mick and DeMoss (1990) also pointed to the role of a cognitive reaction that may follow causal attributions, namely whether the consumer thought he or she deserved a self-indulgence. Hence, as Fig. 1 implies, attribution-dependent emotions may only

partially mediate the effects of attributions on self-gift likelihood. Therefore:

H₅: Following successful achievement outcomes, the emotions of pride and confidence will partially mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood.

Following a failed outcome, an attribution to an internal cause (e.g., lack of personal effort) should produce a higher intensity of guilt than an attribution to an external cause and, thereby, deflate the likelihood of a self-gift. Alternatively, following a failed outcome, an attribution to an external cause should produce more self-pity than an attribution to an internal cause and, thereby, inflate the likelihood of a self-gift. Thus, decreasing guilt and increasing self-pity should facilitate a self-gift after a failed outcome. Therefore:

H₆: Following failed achievement outcomes, the emotions of guilt and self-pity will partially mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood.

As noted, Faure and Mick (1993) argue that, subsequent to either successful or failed achievement outcomes, consumers consider whether they deserve to self-indulge themselves. In successful conditions, consumers should feel more deserving after an internal, as compared to an external, locus of causality attribution. In contrast, in failed conditions, consumers should feel more deserving after an external, as compared to an internal, locus of causality attribution. Thus, in both cases, deservingness will serve also to partly mediate the effects of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood. Hence:

H_{7a}: Following successful achievement outcomes, deservingness will partially mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood.

H_{7b}: Following failed achievement outcomes, deservingness will partially mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood.

Finally, since Fig. 1 posits that the effects of attributions on self-gift likelihood are mediated in a dual manner through attribution-dependent emotions and through a sense of deservingness, the combination of these affective and cognitive factors (H_5-H_{7b}) should fully mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood. Hence:

H_{8a} : Following successful achievement outcomes, pride, confidence, and deservingness will fully mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood.

H_{8b} : Following failed achievement outcomes, guilt, self-pity, and deservingness will fully mediate the effect of the locus dimension of attributions on self-gift likelihood.

As the hypotheses above indicate, in our study we especially focused on the role of emotions and deservingness in mediating the effect of achievement outcomes and the locus of causality attribution dimension. We did not have definitive hypotheses about the same issues in relation to the controllability dimension of attributions, as it has received less emphasis in prior research compared to the locus dimension. This aspect of the study was more exploratory.

5. Method

5.1. Sample and design

Subjects were 96 undergraduate students recruited in exchange for course credit. Students were deemed a legitimate sample in view of prior research indicating that self-gift behavior occurs among college students and non-student adults (Mick and DeMoss, 1990). Moreover, since the costs and types of self-gifts vary widely (e.g., food, music products, clothing), students' financial means are not a barrier to self-gift purchase behavior.

The study was designed as a digram-balanced Latin square experiment (Wagenaar, 1969). Three independent variables were manipulated for each of four achievement contexts to assess the robustness of our results ($2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4$). The independent vari-

ables were achievement outcome (success or failure) and the attribution dimensions of locus (internal or external) and controllability (controlled or uncontrolled). Each subject received one of eight possible booklets of stimuli and measures. The specific Latin square design constituted a repeated-measures, within-subjects design which ensured that the combinations of independent variables were counterbalanced across the four achievement contexts, with each subject seeing each achievement context only once.

We controlled for the stability dimension of attributions by ensuring that all outcome attributions were tied to relatively unstable causes. A principal reason for this tactic stems from the warning of Weiner (1983) that internal stable causes of achievement outcomes cannot be readily manipulated in attribution experiments because subjects already have firm beliefs about their skills for certain achievement tasks that may be evoked in a specific study (e.g., playing chess). The achievement contexts were selected for their relevance and importance in the students' lives: taking an exam, participating in an individual-oriented competitive sporting event, interviewing for a post-graduation job, and giving a speech in class. Eight versions (scenarios) of each context were constructed, corresponding to crossing each of the three two-level independent variables. Although the use of simulations or scenarios have distinct limitations, their strengths in early theoretical work include the ability to control and fully operationalize independent variables (and their combinations) in search of systematic and heuristic findings. The use of scenarios to operationalize independent variables has prior precedence in situational research (Ratneshwar et al., 1997), gift-giving research (Tesser et al., 1968), and attribution research (Feather, 1992). An advantage of scenarios over critical incident reports in attribution research is that the experimenter has better command over the different types of attributions evoked in the study. Weiner himself has employed scenarios to manipulate outcomes and attributions to examine the linkages in his theory (see Weiner, 1986).

5.2. Stimuli preparation and pretesting

The scenarios underwent several revisions based on insights from formal manipulation checks with

two separate and independent groups of subjects similar to the experimental subjects. These checks involved the same design as the main experiment; however, in place of the measures that followed each scenario in the experiment, the manipulation-check subjects rated the scenarios using the causal dimensions scale of McAuley et al. (1990). The scale is designed to assess the locus, controllability, and stability dimensions in a given causal attribution. Subjects also rated each scenario for its outcome in terms of relative success or failure. Results from the second manipulation check were encouraging. Only two of 56 pairs of means did not indicate the intended directional differences in the manipulated variables; accordingly, the two relevant scenarios were further modified prior to the experiment. For illustration, one of the scenarios from our study reads as follows (speech situation: successful outcome with an attribution to an internal, controllable, and unstable cause):

Imagine you are taking a course in public speaking and have just given your first speech of the semester. At the end of the class the professor gave you a written evaluation, including a grade of A. Thinking about your grade, it seems to you that you received an A because you thoroughly researched your topic, you made a detailed outline of your speech, and you practiced several times before you gave the speech.

To test the convergent and discriminant validities of our manipulations we conducted three ANOVAs using two of the sub-scales of McAuley et al. (1990) (the summated locus-dimension items and the summated controllability-dimension items) and our achievement-outcome item (success/failure) as dependent variables. The independent variables were the three manipulated variables. Evidence for the convergent validity of the manipulations was found, as the main effect for the manipulation being analyzed in each of the three ANOVAs was statistically significant (p 's < 0.001) and the corresponding effects sizes were substantial (achievement outcome, $\eta^2 = 0.98$; locus of causality, $\eta^2 = 0.87$; controllability, $\eta^2 = 0.51$). Ideally, these three main effects should be the only significant effects in their respective ANOVAs, otherwise their discriminant validity is diminished. Unfortunately, given the difficulty associated with manipulating and separating attribu-

tions via scenarios (Weiner, 1986), the ANOVAs also had other statistically-significant effects (e.g., controllability in the check of the locus manipulation). However, none of the other significant factors had an effect size greater than 50% of the main effect being checked; also, the sum of those factors in each of the three ANOVAs did not equal the main effect being examined (both positive indications of discriminant validity; Perdue and Summer, 1986). Finally, the stability-dimension scale showed, as planned, that the causes for the outcomes were seen as relatively unstable. No attributed cause in the eight scenarios of each achievement context was rated above the theoretical midpoint of the stability scale.

5.3. Procedure

Subjects participated in groups of 10-20. The randomly distributed booklets contained an instruction sheet, one scenario for each of the four achievement contexts, and the measurement scales. The instructions described the study as focusing on the fact that people sometimes buy things for themselves as a result of events that have happened in their lives. However, they were not informed that these events were achievement oriented or that their reactions to the events may be crucial to their buying decisions.

The instructions asked the subjects to visualize themselves in different situations that they would read about, after which they would be asked some questions. The cover sheet emphasized, "It is very important for you to picture yourself in each situation. So, please read each situation carefully and imagine it happened to you." These instructions were intended to encourage the subjects to project themselves into each situation, internalize the facts, and, to the extent possible, experience each situation as if it actually happened.

Subjects then turned the page and began responding to the scenarios. All subjects first read a scenario related to the exam situation, and below it indicated their self-gift purchase likelihood based on the situation. On the next page subjects re-read the same exam scenario (to avoid reliance on memory) and then, paralleling studies reported by Weiner (1986), they recorded the degree to which they would feel

certain emotions based on the situation. On the following page subjects read the same exam scenario a third time, and then recorded the degree to which they deserved to buy something for themselves. Then, in an identical three-step format, subjects responded to one version (scenario) for each of the sport, job interview, and speech contexts. At the end there was a blank page for subjects to record any ideas they had about the purposes behind the study (a demand check). Finally, subjects rated how difficult it was to imagine themselves in the situations and how believable the situations seemed.

5.4. Measures

Three items were used to assess self-gift purchase likelihood on 11-point scales (0-10) anchored by Not at all likely/Completely likely, For certain/No chance at all (reverse scored), and Not probable/Completely probable ($\alpha = 0.98$). These items were summed and averaged. The opening sentence for the page of emotion measures read: "Now think about the emotions you might have experienced in this situation." Then, as Weiner (1986) and others have done in attribution research, the six emotions were measured following the sentence stem "How much _____ might you have experienced?," with each emotion listed above a single-item 11-point scale (0-10) anchored by None/A great deal. The deservingness variable was measured by four items that emphasized two aspects of deservingness: a sense of having earned the self-gift and a sense that the self-gift is justified (cf. Feather, 1992; Sherry, 1983). The earning aspect was comprised of two 11-point scales (0-10) anchored by None/A great deal ("To what extent have you earned the opportunity to buy something for yourself? To what extent do you merit buying something for yourself?"). The justification aspect was measured by two 11-point scales (0-10) anchored by None/A great deal ("To what extent are you justified in buying something for yourself? To what extent is it fair and fitting for you to buy something for yourself?"). A principal components analysis revealed a single factor on which all four of the items strongly loaded (all loadings > 0.91). Thus, the four items were summed and averaged as a measure of deservingness ($\alpha = 0.89$). At the end of

the measures booklet, subjects also reported their experiences of responding to the situations through two single-item, 11-point scales (-5 to +5), with the anchors Very difficult/Very easy and Not believable/Very Believable.

6. Results

6.1. Demand check and subjects' responses to the scenarios

A review of subjects' written comments revealed that some mentioned event outcomes as a possible focus of the study. This result was anticipated since relative success or failure was transparent (refer back to the example provided), especially after seeing all four contexts. Importantly, however, no subject surmised that explanations for outcomes (attributions) were a focal point. With respect to experiencing the scenarios, the mean level of ease in imagining themselves in the scenarios was 3.35 (SD = 1.79) and the average level of believability of the scenarios was 3.50 (SD = 1.57). Given that these scales have theoretical ranges of -5 to +5, subjects appeared to find the scenarios believable and easy to project themselves into.

6.2. Self-gift likelihood—effects of achievement outcomes and attributions

Combining the four achievement contexts, analysis of subjects' self-gift likelihoods revealed a main effect for achievement outcomes ($F(1,88) = 277, p < 0.0001$). Self-gift likelihood was higher following successful outcomes ($M_{succ} = 6.91$) as compared to failed outcomes ($M_{fail} = 3.34$), which supports H_1 .

Although not hypothesized, two other main effects were observed. There was a main effect for locus of causality ($F(1,88) = 4.36, p < 0.04$), with internal attributions having a somewhat higher self-gift likelihood ($M_{int} = 5.36$) than external attributions ($M_{ext} = 4.89$). Also not hypothesized, there was a marginally significant main effect for the controllability dimension of attributions ($F(1,88) = 2.81, p < 0.10$), with controlled causes having a

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slightly lower self-gift likelihood ($M_{\text{con}} = 4.93$) than uncontrolled causes ($M_{\text{uncon}} = 5.31$).

Support was also found for H_{2a} and H_{2b} . As generally predicted (H_2), across the scenarios there was a two-way interaction between achievement outcomes and the locus dimension ($F(1,88) = 47.39$, $p < 0.0001$). Simple main effects tests showed that the interaction was due to the expected difference in self-gift likelihood in the successful outcome conditions ($F(1,88) = 41.4$, $p < 0.001$), with internal attributions ($M_{\text{int}} = 7.82$) higher than external ($M_{\text{ext}} = 6.00$), and the expected reversed pattern in failed outcome conditions ($F(1,88) = 8.1$, $p < 0.01$), with self-gift likelihood higher for external attributions ($M_{\text{ext}} = 3.78$) than internal ($M_{\text{int}} = 2.90$). Support was observed for H_{3b} but not H_{3a} . As predicted (H_3), across the scenarios there was a two-way interaction between achievement outcomes and the controllability dimension ($F(1,88) = 6.76$, $p < 0.02$). However, simple main effects tests showed that the interaction was due to the expected difference in self-gift likelihood (H_{3b}) in the failed outcome conditions ($F(1,88) = 8.0$, $p < 0.01$), with uncontrolled attributions ($M_{\text{uncon}} = 3.78$) higher than controlled ($M_{\text{con}} = 2.89$), but there was a null effect on self-gift likelihood in the successful outcome conditions ($F(1,88) = 0.23$, $p > 0.60$), with controlled attributions ($M_{\text{con}} = 6.89$) not sufficiently higher than uncontrolled ($M_{\text{uncon}} = 6.84$) to warrant support for H_{3a} .

To examine further the robustness of the findings, we also tested whether any of the findings reported in relation to H_1 , H_{2a} , H_{2b} , H_{3a} , or H_{3b} were moderated by (i.e., differed across) the four achievement contexts (exam, sport, job interview, speech). We conducted additional ANOVAs, analyzing the achievement contexts as a four-level factor (i.e., an additional independent variable) for its possible main effect and its possible interactions with the three principal independent variables (their main effects and higher-order interactions). The results indicated a main effect for achievement contexts on self-gift likelihood. Not surprisingly, the student subjects apparently found one or two of the contexts more compelling (especially the job interview), and this reaction systematically elevated some self-gift likelihood judgments. However, this finding did not compromise the primary results of the study. Most im-

portantly, none of the findings on the hypotheses reported above evinced a statistically significant interaction with the achievement context factor. This means that the results of testing the previous hypotheses are not conditioned on only one achievement context or a subset thereof (see Arnold, 1982 on moderator analyses); rather, they are consistent across all four contexts.

6.3. Mediation analysis of emotions and deservingness

The rationale and steps underlying our tests of mediation follow Baron and Kenny (1986). To test the mediation hypotheses (H_4 - H_{8b}), parallel treatment effects must first be observed on both the dependent variable and the mediating variables. This means that ANOVAs involving the three principal independent variables (achievement outcome and the locus and controllability dimensions) must exhibit the same effects on the proposed mediators (emotions and deservingness) as they do on the dependent variable (self-gift likelihood). If parallel treatment effects are observed as expected, the next step is to demonstrate that the proposed mediators are correlated with the dependent variable in the manner expected (e.g., pride and self-gift likelihood should be positively correlated). If these conditions are met, then a series of ANOVAs and ANCOVAs is implemented, with the mediators serving as covariates. When the covariates are each entered into the model, the percentage change in ω^2 (omega-squared, the effect size related to the effect being mediated) indicates the magnitude of mediation attributable to a particular covariate. Partial mediation is suggested when only a portion of the ω^2 statistic is reduced after a covariate is introduced in the model, whereas full mediation is suggested when the ω^2 statistic is reduced to zero or near zero. For brevity below, we only report the final stage of each mediation analysis, and not the statistics for the prior requirements when they were met by the data (i.e., parallel treatment effects and correlations). When the requirements were not met, we note that fact and suspend the mediation analysis.

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the mediational analyses. Due to unexpected and unsolvable computational demands on the mainframe computer,

Table 2
ANOVA and ANCOVA results with happiness and sadness as covariates

Covariate	Statistic	Achievement outcome effect (success/failure)				Row
		Exam	Sport	Interview	Speech	
None	$F(1,88)$	19.8	83.9	56.3	105.5	1
	p	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	0.0001	2
	ω^2	0.089	0.302	0.224	0.352	3
Happiness	$F(1,87)$	0.07	0.05	0.12	1.38	4
	p	0.79	0.82	0.73	0.24	5
	ω^2	0	0	0	0	6
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-100	-100	-100	-100	7
Sadness	$F(1,87)$	0.16	14.94	14.11	27.16	8
	p	0.69	0.0002	0.0003	0.0001	9
	ω^2	0	0.068	0.064	0.12	10
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-100	-77.5	-71.5	-66	11
Happiness and Sadness	$F(1,86)$	1.05	0.04	0.90	3.43	12
	p	0.30	0.85	0.35	0.07	13
	ω^2	0	0	0	0	14
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-100	-100	-100	-100	15

F -ratios are for the achievement outcome effect.

the following analyses had to be completed on a per-context basis. Based on a three-way ANOVA (achievement outcome \times locus dimension \times controllability dimension), the first three rows of Table 2 report the F , p , and ω^2 values for self-gift likelihood as a function of achievement outcomes. The remaining rows present the residual F 's, p 's, ω^2 values, and percentage change in the ω^2 statistic, respectively, as a result of using happiness, sadness, and the combination of happiness and sadness as covariates.

Row seven of Table 2 shows that, by itself, the emotion happiness mediates 100% of the achievement outcome effect on self-gift likelihood, reducing all four of the F -ratios to chance levels (p 's > 0.23). Row eleven of Table 2 shows that, by itself, sadness does not mediate the achievement outcome effect as thoroughly. It completely mediates the effect in only the first scenario where the F -ratio is reduced to chance level ($F < 1$, $p = 0.69$), while in the following three scenarios the F -ratios are still significant and residual variance attributable to the achievement outcome effect remains. For completeness, the last row of Table 2 shows that together the emotions of happiness and sadness fully mediate the outcome effect. Thus, H_4 is supported in the sense that happi-

ness and sadness completely mediate the achievement outcome effect on self-gift likelihood, though this finding is driven entirely by the happiness emotion.

Based on a two-way ANOVA (locus dimension \times controllability dimension) in successful outcome conditions, the first three rows of Table 3 show the F , p , and ω^2 values for self-gift likelihood in each context as a function of the locus dimension. The fourth through nineteenth rows show the residual F 's, p 's, ω^2 values, and percentage change in the ω^2 statistic when using pride, confidence, and deservingness as separate covariates, and then as simultaneous covariates. Table 3 shows that, when examined alone, the emotion pride mediates 52%, 100%, 100%, and 54% of the locus dimension effect on self-gift likelihood, reducing three of the four F -ratios to chance levels (p 's > 0.15). Table 3 also shows that the emotion confidence, by itself, mediates 100%, 100%, 65%, and 35% of the locus dimension effect on self-gift likelihood, reducing three of the four F -ratios to chance levels (p 's > 0.10). Table 3 also shows that when pride and confidence are entered together as covariates, the effect of the locus dimension is mediated 100% in the first three situations and 55% in the fourth. Thus, H_5 is partly

Table 3
ANOVA and ANCOVA results with pride, confidence, and deservingness as covariates within successful outcome conditions

Covariate	Statistic	Locus dimension of attributions effect (internal/external)				Row
		Exam	Sport	Interview	Speech	
None	$F(1,44)$	3.42	11.53	6.16	17.54	1
	p	0.07	0.002	0.02	0.0001	2
	ω^2	0.025	0.099	0.051	0.147	3
Pride	$F(1,43)$	2.13	0.02	1.33	7.88	4
	p	0.151	0.89	0.256	0.008	5
	ω^2	0.012	0	0.003	0.067	6
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-52	-100	-100	-54	7
Confidence	$F(1,43)$	1.06	0.83	2.77	11.15	8
	p	0.308	0.37	0.103	0.002	9
	ω^2	0	0	0.018	0.096	10
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-100	-100	-65	-35	11
Pride	$F(1,42)$	1.03	0.03	1.49	7.79	12
	p	0.32	0.86	0.23	0.008	13
	ω^2	0	0	0	0.066	14
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-100	-100	-100	-55	15
Deservingness	$F(1,43)$	1.69	3.45	2.24	1.18	16
	p	0.20	0.07	0.14	0.28	17
	ω^2	0.007	0.025	0.013	0.002	18
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-72	-75	-75	-99	19
Pride, confidence and deservingness	$F(1,41)$	0.99	1.36	2.11	0.33	20
	p	0.33	0.25	0.15	0.57	21
	ω^2	0	0	0.01	0	22
	$\% \Delta \omega^2$	-100	-100	-80	-100	23

F -ratios are for the locus dimension of attributions effect.

supported to the extent that pride and confidence are shown to be mediators of the locus attribution effect in successful outcome conditions. However, it is full mediation in three situations, whereas H_5 predicted that the mediation by pride and confidence would only be partial.

Line 19 of Table 3 shows that across the four achievement contexts, deservingness mediates 72%, 75%, 75%, and 99% of the locus attribution effect, reducing three of the four F -ratios to chance levels (p 's > 0.13). Thus, H_{7a} is mostly supported in the sense that deservingness does mediate the locus dimension effect in successful achievement conditions, and the amount of effect mediated is partial, as predicted in H_{7a} , with the one exception of the fourth context where mediation is virtually full. Thus, when pride, confidence, and deservingness are all considered simultaneously as covariates (H_{8a}), the

locus dimension effect is entirely mediated in three contexts, mostly supporting H_{8a} (see the last four rows of Table 3).

Unfortunately, the testing of the mediation hypotheses in H_6 and H_{7b} proved infeasible with our data. While the effect of the locus dimension on self-gift likelihood in failed outcome conditions was supported when the analysis proceeded by looking across all four achievement contexts simultaneously (i.e., the prior results that supported H_{3b}), the effect was not consistently obtained when analyzed on a per-context basis. Three of the F -ratios were less than 1.6, with p -values greater than 0.22. We suspect that these dissimilar findings are due to lower power in the statistical tests when performed at the level of each context individually (in failed outcome conditions). Since the mediational analysis could only be conducted on a per-context basis (as noted

earlier), the lack of a locus dimension effect in the failed outcome condition of three achievement contexts means that there is no effect to be mediated and, thereby, no mediational analysis to be conducted. We did, however, conduct the mediational analysis for the one scenario (the speech context) in which the locus dimension effect was observed. However, since guilt, but not self-pity, was correlated with self-gift likelihood in failed outcome conditions, only guilt could be explored as a mediator. The results showed that the *F*-ratio for the locus dimension effect barely changed when guilt was added as a covariate, and the covariate itself was not significant ($p > 0.75$). Thus, guilt played no role in mediating the locus dimension effect in the failed speech context where the locus effect was observed.

Similarly, in relation to H_{7b} , we also tested whether deservingness might mediate the locus dimension effect on self-gift likelihood in the failed speech context. The results showed, however, that deservingness played no role in mediating the locus dimension effect in the failed speech context. Taken together, these findings and others reported above suggest that there is a locus dimension effect on self-gift likelihood in failed outcome conditions (H_{3b}), but the role of emotions and deservingness in mediating that effect is questionable (H_6 , H_{7b}).

As noted earlier, the controllability dimension of attributions had a significant effect, as expected, in failed outcome conditions (H_{3b}), but not in successful outcome conditions (H_{3a}). Therefore, the role of emotions and deservingness as mediators can only apply in the failed outcome conditions. On a per-context basis, the controllability dimension had an effect in only the third and fourth achievement contexts. When we tested for the role of guilt and deservingness in mediating the controllability dimension effect in those two contexts, the results were identical to those found above in which the mediation of the locus dimension effect was investigated in a failed outcome condition. In the mediation analyses, when guilt and deservingness were treated as covariates, neither had any effect on the *F*-ratio for the controllability dimension in the third or fourth context when a failed outcome occurred. Thus, there was again the suggestion that neither emotions nor deservingness play mediating roles with respect to attribution effects in failed outcome conditions

7. Discussion

7.1. Summary of findings and theoretical implications

Combining and extending ideas from Weiner (1986) and Faure and Mick (1993), our study provides new theoretical and process-oriented insights on self-gift behavior in achievement contexts. The results represent new steps beyond prior exploratory and descriptive work through the development and testing of a model of self-gifts within a broad class of everyday situations, namely achievement contexts. In all, eight of twelve hypotheses were partly or wholly supported. The results show that the likelihood of a self-gift within an achievement context is dependent on the nature of the achievement outcome and the causal attributions made for the outcome. Also, key emotions such as happiness, pride, and confidence, and a sense of deservingness, play important roles in mediating the effects of outcomes and attributions, particularly following successful outcomes.

Interestingly, three of the unsupported hypotheses involved failed outcome conditions. Considered in view of the supportive findings in successful outcome conditions, it appears that therapeutic self-gifts may result from a different type of psychological process than reward self-gifts. That is, when people fail and then self-indulge, the self-gift seems to ensue irrespective of emotions, attributions, or deservingness. Perhaps people simply ignore or deny their feelings (e.g., guilt, self-pity) after failed outcomes when they are considering a therapeutic self-gift. Perhaps they disregard the deservingness issue, given that they are a purchase away from salving the wound of failure—no matter whose responsibility it may have been. Of course, these are only conjectures now and require future testing. They are intriguing insofar as they suggest that different self-gift behaviors may require distinctly different types of conceptual frameworks. In short, there may not be a singular theory or model of self-gifts.

Our findings also offer other contributions beyond self-gifts per se. Consumer researchers have typically applied Weiner's paradigm to explain *post-purchase* issues such as customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth behavior (see Folkes, 1988). However, *pre-*

purchase issues (e.g., preferences) have yet to be thoroughly examined through any attribution framework. Thus, in focusing on the likelihood of a self-gift, our project extends Weiner's attribution paradigm further into consumer research by predicting a pre-purchase variable (purchase probability) as a consequence of causal inferences. Moreover, the paradigm of Weiner (1986) identifies attributions as the sole cognitive factors mediating the effect of achievement outcomes on behavioral responses. Our findings also augment his paradigm—at least as it applies to self-gifts—by introducing a non-attribution cognition (deservingness) that may also play a mediating role on the route from achievement outcomes to some consumer behaviors.

7.2. Managerial implications

The findings also suggest implications for marketing management. That managers should pay close attention to situational influences on consumer behavior has been recognized for several years, though research on these matters has remained sparse (see Ratneshwar et al., 1997 for a recent exception). Our work underscores the value of managers giving more consideration to common life contexts that precipitate consumer behavior. Specifically, our experimental scenarios—like many advertisements—were designed as comprehensible dramas or slices-of-life. The findings imply that advertisements for reward or therapeutic self-gifts should carefully depict achievement contexts that the target market relates to, and to supply cues (expressions, body language) that communicate a transparent outcome as well as the appropriate attributions and emotions that guide specific types of self-gift behavior.

For example, when using advertising to encourage reward self-gifts, the cues should clearly signal (1) an internal causal attribution by the consumer in the ad (i.e., the outcome is definitely due to that person), (2) unmistakable feelings of happiness, pride, and self-confidence, and (3) a distinct logic of 'I deserve it' (i.e., 'I earned it and my buying it is socially justified'). The strategic presentation of these combined cues should help to make related ads serve as a model which consumers can emulate in relation to comparable contexts in their lives, including consideration of the advertised brand as an appropriate

self-gift. Alternatively, when using advertising to encourage therapeutic self-gifts, the cues should communicate an external causal attribution by the consumer (i.e., the outcome is definitely not due to that person). However, cues for emotions and deservingness should be portrayed in a limited fashion, as our results suggest that they are not crucial to therapeutic self-gift behavior.

For targeting self-gift ads, recent survey research (Mick and DeMoss, 1992) suggests that younger adults and those with better financial conditions may be more prone to self-gifts, particularly rewards following successful achievement outcomes. Moreover, managers placing self-gift ads should not only consider which media appeal to their markets, but also where and when in consumers' lives the achievement contexts evoked in the ads will be most meaningful (e.g., in vacation locales, during evening rush hour, weekends).

7.3. Limitations and future research

Perhaps the most obvious limitation to our study is the use of simulated contexts and buying likelihood, as commonly seen in conventional experiments and conjoint studies, and occasionally in attribution and gift-giving research. Verbal descriptions of people's attributions for fictitious achievement outcomes are not the same as self-generated attributions, and thereby may hinder valid findings. The best way to limit this problem is to ensure that the subjects are experienced in the given topic area, which we strove for in this research. Future research may seek to overcome this concern by putting subjects in an actual achievement task (e.g., solving a problem) and then manipulating the outcome and providing feedback designed to engender different kinds of attributions. Subjects might then be given the opportunity for self-indulgence (e.g., a bowl of candies), and the decision to self-indulge could be used as a dependent measure of self-gift behavior. However, a caveat must be sounded. Weiner (1983) has warned that most studies using feedback to evoke attributions have rarely verified the nature of the attributions subjects actually constructed. Having subjects use the causal dimension scale of McAuley et al. (1990) following the self-gift decision phase—to record their thoughts about the task outcome—

could serve to corroborate the intended effects of the feedback on attributions.

Second, since subjects were informed that the study was about the fact that people sometimes buy things for themselves due to events in their lives, and since subjects saw four consecutive achievement contexts, the study could be criticized for demand and/or order effects. One essential strategy for addressing these concerns is to show that the principal results hold in the first context alone. As expected, the effect of achievement outcome was revealed ($F(1,88) = 3.83$, $p < 0.0001$; $M_{succ} = 6.36$ versus $M_{fail} = 4.01$). Perhaps most importantly, the interaction between the outcome and the locus dimension was also observed in the first context ($F(1,88) = 3.17$, $p < 0.08$). It is unlikely that these central results could come about from a demand effect or an order effect since subjects had little opportunity as yet, based solely on the first context, to form a confident guess that varied outcomes and attributions were the focus of the study.

Finally, the mediational results should be viewed cautiously. All data were collected in one administration. Also, all of the mediators were measured variables, and their associations with self-gift likelihood are strictly correlational. Moreover, the mediators were measured *after* self-gift likelihood, which is appropriate since the central variable(s) in any study should almost always be measured first. Overall, the mediational analyses are worthwhile as initial insights, but should be interpreted prudently.

From this study a number of other research directions exist for advancing theory-based insights on self-gifts. First, additional dependent variables can be considered. For instance, it is possible that causal attributions, emotions, and deservingness influence the qualities sought in a self-gift or how much the consumer is willing to pay for a self-gift (see Mick and DeMoss, 1992). Second, future research needs to investigate potential moderators of the linkages in the Fig. 1 model to establish boundary conditions (e.g., achievement task importance, discretionary income, proximity and likelihood of other gift-givers). Third, the model could also be extended by closer examination of the third dimension of attribution of Weiner (1986), namely stability (cf. Faure and Mick, 1993). For instance, Weiner has noted that stable causes for successful or failed outcomes (e.g., task

ability or inability) generate greater expectancy for similar future outcomes than unstable causes. *Ceteris paribus*, an expected (unexpected) achievement outcome due to a stable (unstable) cause should be less (more) special to the individual and, thereby, he or she may feel less (more) deserving of a self-gift. If so, then self-gift likelihood should be similarly decreased (increased). The emotions related to the stability dimension (e.g., surprise) need to be incorporated into related research as well.

Finally, other self-gift contexts besides achievement may be better understood by considering the role of emotions and deservingness. For example, Eurotan, a manufacturer of home tanning equipment, has placed December magazine ads urging consumers to purchase their own holiday gift ('Give yourself a tan for Christmas'). These self-indulgent purchases may be quite different from reward or therapeutic self-gifts, perhaps a function of alternative emotions (e.g., thankfulness or loneliness) and a different form of deservingness (e.g., cultural mandate). Overall, more research is needed on self-gifts to advance descriptive and theoretical insights which can improve marketing strategies.

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