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A projective study of motivations and meanings of self-gifts: implications for retail management. *David Glen Mick; Michelle Demoss; Ronald J. Faber.*

Abstract: An analysis describing results from previous research is presented in the context of retail management. Earlier studies show that consumers sometimes purchase products and services to reward themselves. Various motivations and meanings have been established for the concept of self-gift. Analysis shows that foundations of the concept can be applied to managerial concerns such as advertising, store displays and staff training.

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Recent research has revealed that consumers occasionally purchase products and services as gifts to themselves. This article begins by introducing the concept of self-gifts to retailing research. Then an empirical study is reported in which female consumers were intercepted at a retail site and engaged in a story-telling technique that permitted a deeper look at the motivations and meanings of self-gifts. Resulting insights lead to managerial implications for advertising, point-of-purchase displays, pricing strategies, and non-traditional methods of screening and training sales staff in retail settings where self-gifts are apt to occur.

According to social researchers, Western individuals have become increasingly self-oriented in their purchase and consumption behavior (Campbell 1987; Lasch 1979; Yankelovich 1981). In fact, special consumer indulgences--as gifts to oneself--appear to be a prominent American phenomenon in the 1990s (Mick and DeMoss 1990a). If so, it is a marketplace development which neither retailing managers nor retailing researchers can afford to undervalue, overlook, or misunderstand.

Gift-giving plays a crucial and complex role in people's lives (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Fisher and

Arnold 1990; Sherry 1983) and its economic impact is substantial, by one estimate 10 percent of North American retail sales (Belshaw 1965). Prior discussions of gift-giving (e.g., Mick 1986, 1991; Schwartz 1967) and recent research (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b, 1992; Sherry and McGrath 1989) clearly demonstrate that, at certain times, consumers acquire products for themselves much like interpersonal gifts. Mick and DeMoss (1990a) define self-gifts as personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context-bound. Celebration, congratulations, and consolation are among the most typical of these self-directed messages; each is invariably intertwined with self-concepts (how the consumer defines him or herself) or self-esteem (how the consumer feels about him or herself). Frequently cited contexts include holidays (e.g., Christmas, birthday) as well as situations of success (e.g., graduation, weight loss, promotion) and failure (e.g., low exam grade, divorce). Based on a survey of 287 people, Mick and DeMoss (1990a) concluded that self-gifts "provide a window through which consumer behavior can be viewed in some of its most adaptive, dramatic, and personally significant forms."

Knowingly or not, some marketers have already positioned their products to tap into this consumer behavior. Consider the gold industry which has adopted the slogan "When you really want to treat yourself, nothing makes you feel as good as gold." One particular ad depicts a young woman wearing large gold earrings and it reads:

My mother, of course, would be appalled. "You can't just go buy jewelry for yourself. Someone's supposed to do that for you." Uh, mom? There used to be a lot of things I wasn't supposed to do for myself. Like earn a good living. And make decisions. All on my own, if I felt like it. These earrings? Ah, these I definitely felt like. And buying them for that reason, for just that reason, is really the whole delicious point.

Other examples include ads by General Foods inviting consumers "To celebrate the moments of your life" with its international coffees; the Ruger wafer bar packaged in gold foil, with a blue ribbon medal beside the slogan "The Reward"; a magazine ad for Courvoisier XO cognac (\$100 per bottle) that shows a sleeping dog, with a caption "You've been working like one for years, it's time you threw yourself a bone"; and the floral industry's television commercials promoting self-directed flower purchases based on personal accomplishments or dejections.

Despite the intuitive appeal of the self-gift concept and its allusion in contemporary advertising and packaging, little is known about self-gifts in retail settings and their managerial implications have yet to be addressed. So we conducted a consumer-intercept study for the primary purposes of obtaining a closer look at self-gift experiences and deriving valuable retailing implications. In particular, we used a projective technique rather than a direct survey to investigate the motivational and semiotic (meaning) aspects of self-gifts more deeply. An added benefit of this approach was the opportunity to verify or modify prior findings on self-gifts. Our secondary goal was to demonstrate further the potential contributions of the postmodernistic movement (Sherry 1991) for retailing research and practices.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The study focused on women purchasing perfume for their own use. Women were the chosen target group because prior research had suggested that women may have higher propensities than men for some types of self-gifts (see Mick and DeMoss 1992) and, secondly, women may be more open than men to revealing details about personal consumer behaviors (see, e.g., O'Guinn and Faber 1989). Perfume was selected as the product class because it is undeniably a personal and symbolic product. Also, pre-study interviews with consumers and retail sales staff indicated that many women buy themselves perfume.

The study was conducted in a southeastern city of the United States, near the perfume counter in the mall department store of a major national retailer. The study took place over a 10-day period, with data collection occurring on different days of the week, during afternoons and evenings. A female research assistant approached women who appeared 20 to 50 years of age and who were shopping alone in the perfume area. Each was invited to participate in a study about purchasing perfume, for which she would receive a \$5 gift certificate. If she agreed, she was escorted to a quiet nearby room, equipped with an audio-recorder. Once there, the assistant told the informant that the study involved her own thoughts, and there were no right or wrong answers. Informants were given the opportunity to terminate the session if they felt apprehensive about speaking in the presence of the audio-recorder; none exercised this option.

The assistant then told the informant that she would be shown six drawings, one at a time, each depicting a woman

buying perfume. She was told that the basis for each purchase was different, noted by a short title above each drawing. The assistant indicated that we wished to know how she interpreted each picture. To do this the informant was requested to create a detailed imaginary story surrounding the purchase event portrayed in each drawing. To guide her, she was asked to tell stories that had a beginning, a middle, and an end.(1)

The first two drawings/stories were intended as warm-ups; they concerned perfume purchases for other women (e.g., mother). Then followed the four target drawings with self-gift contexts, revealed successively in random order. The assistant avoided prompts or discussion with the informant. After the last story, the informant filled out a one-page survey indicating her marital status, occupation, age, and when she last purchased perfume for herself. Upon completion the informant was paid and the session ended. Each session lasted 20 to 30 minutes.

SELF-GIFT THEMATIC APPERCEPTION TEST (SGTAT)

The story-telling method adopted for this study was a uniquely designed Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). TATs are particularly useful in the investigation of hidden, private, or sensitive topics to which direct questioning may provoke overly rational responses or miss altogether. TATs encourage people to relax their defenses and project their own psychological material onto fictitious characters and circumstances (Murray 1938).

Projective techniques like the TAT enjoyed a heyday in marketing research during the 1950's, but fell out of favor due, in part, to overinflated claims of their value and also misuse (e.g., see the Rothwell 1955 and Wells 1956 debate). Recently some marketing and consumer researchers have professed a humanistic and relativistic philosophy (e.g., Anderson 1986; Hirschman 1986; Mick 1986) that encourages naturalistic forms of inquiry, including direct contact with people in marketing venues and inviting them to speak openly about seller and consumer behaviors (e.g., Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). Concomitantly there has been a revitalization of interests in methods relying on qualitative data, including TATs (Levy 1986; Rook 1985). Sherry (1991) has used the term postmodernism to refer to this broad movement. Ethnographies of a gift store (McGrath 1989) and a flea market (Sherry 1990) represent the earliest evidence of postmodernism influencing retailing research (see also Sherry, McGrath, and Levy 1992).

In this study the four SGTAT stimulus pictures were developed based upon Murstein's (1963) criteria. Each stimulus was an inexplicit line drawing of a young-to-middle-aged woman standing near a perfume counter in a department store, with a female salesperson nearby. Each picture filled an eight-and-a-half by eleven inch page and was professionally matted. The pictures were varied sufficiently to not seem identical, though the differences were carefully developed with the artist so that in-and-of-themselves the variations were largely non-diagnostic for the story-telling task.

The titles above the drawings suggested common self-gift contexts based on prior research (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b). They were:

- 1 Mary rewards herself with a purchase of perfume.
- 2 Jane cheers herself up with a purchase of perfume.
- 3 Barbara purchases some perfume for herself on her birthday.
- 4 Anne purchases some perfume just to be nice to herself.

Hereafter these four contexts will be referred to as reward, therapeutic, birthday, and nice-to-self, respectively. For illustration, two SGAT drawings (reward and therapeutic contexts) appear in reduced form in Figure 1. Together the four depicted contexts were expected to implement Frank's (1948) TAT criterion of involving the informant in "an interpretation of some experience . . . in which |she~ finds a personal meaning or affective significance."

ANALYSIS

The sample of consumers was small ($n = 15$, out of 40 who were approached), in line with typical projective studies in which qualitative richness is prioritized over quantitative, statistical power (cf. Levy 1986). The women varied in age from 18 to 55, twelve of whom were under 40. Six were married and nine were single or divorced. With the exception of two who were unemployed students, all worked at full or part-time jobs. Their occupations included registered nurse, banquet director, production worker, teacher, realtor, and upholsterer. All but one informant reported a past purchase of perfume for herself; seven had done so within the year prior to this study. A preliminary review of the stories revealed that one informant failed to

comprehend the story-telling task and another provided only cursory remarks. Therefore, responses from these two informants were discarded.

Fifty-two usable SGTAT stories were produced (13 informants by 4 self-gift contexts). After the stories were transcribed, they were analyzed first using content analytic procedures (Kassarjian 1977). Nine initial coding categories were created inductively by the first author during a preliminary reading in which commonalities and differences across the stories were recorded; a second reading led to category refinements, including two categories removed due to low frequency of occurrence. The result was seven principal categories, each being fairly easy to identify and code, e.g., whether the salesperson was mentioned and, if so, whether in a positive, negative, or neutral role. Using written definitions of the categories, the second two authors independently coded each story. The overall coding agreement between the coders was high (94%). Disagreements were resolved by the first author.

The seven categories were also organized according to story grammar analysis (see Mick 1987). Stories typically told in Western cultures have structural regularities that, broadly speaking, break down into three sequential components: (1) the introduction of a main character (the protagonist), a setting (often involving a challenge, conflict, or problem), and a preliminary reaction to the setting by the main character; (2) an attempt by the main character (goal setting and actions) to address or resolve the setting issue(s); and (3) an outcome of the try. Other common characters include villains who cause the problem or attempt to thwart the main character's attempt, and helpers who facilitate the main character's attempt. Thus, to aid in the presentation of the content analysis results and for further interpretive analysis, each of the seven specific principal categories was placed into one of three more general categories that correspond to the story-structure components above. Namely, they were (1) pre-store factors (personal situations) precipitating the main character's shopping at the retail site; (2) in-store factors involved in her effort to acquire a self-gift; and (3) outcomes of the self-gift experience.

Beyond the content analysis, each author scrutinized the stories and made notes of further revelations in light of prior self-gift findings as well as relevant marketing and psychological research. Such interpretive analysis is indispensable for a fuller understanding of consumption activities in daily life (Levy 1986; Sherry 1991). To guide this process with the projective data, we followed Karon's

(1981) advice:

One must take the stories one sentence at a time and ask, "Why would a human being say that, out of all possibilities that exist?" If one allows oneself to think clinically, that is, to use all one knows about human beings, from common sense (general information), from life experience, and from one's psychological training, one will be led to inferences.

Through close iterative readings, in pursuit of a holistic grasp of each story's significance, a hermeneutic analysis and interpretive understanding was achieved (see Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988).

RESULTS

The following results are offered as descriptive and interpretive insights on the nature and depth of self-gift experiences in a particular retail setting.

Pre-Store Factors (Personal Situations)

Three of the seven principal categories involved pre-store factors or personal situations that led to self-gifts. The first of these was referred to as liminal states, which can be defined as threshold conditions when individuals are between two statuses, often during significant transition periods in their lives (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). This category appeared in 11 stories (21%), some of which were tied to career events, as this excerpt indicates:

Mary is a new person in the clothing world. She's just entered working in that area. It's been very difficult for her. She's just designed an outfit that the department stores seem to like and it seems as though she's going to make a success with this particular outfit and she's hoping that more will come down the road. So what she's done is gone out and purchased perfume. (40s, reward)(2)

Negative liminal states were also evident. These stories were equally intriguing, as this verbatim shows:

Jane is in her mid-30's and she has been very sad lately because she feels the biological clock ticking and she realizes if she doesn't get married soon that she is never going to have a chance to have children. . . . She decided what she is going to do is start over and try to make herself over, to fit into today, and maybe find a man that she is attracted to and he is attracted to her. So she has gone and bought herself perfume. (31s, therapeutic)

As observed in prior research (Mick and DeMoss 1990a), these stories demonstrate that self-gifts serve to mold and sustain self-concepts as well as self-esteem. However, these projective data also reveal that the value of self-gift experiences can go beyond these functions. Stories with liminal states suggest that self-gifts help consumers to journey through and symbolically mark important life passages.

Work-related matters was another category of pre-store factors. A considerable proportion of the stories (33%) included references to job conditions and careers. A few involved liminal states, as mentioned above, while others did not. Over half of the work-related references were made in reward stories, which makes intuitive sense since the causal link between work and material benefits is a strong ideology in American culture (see, e.g., Hirschman 1988). According to one reward story,

Mary is at work Monday and she has been working her butt off for this company for three or four years. Finally her boss pulls her in his office and says you have been doing a really good job for the company and we want to give you a promotion. . . . She ended up getting her own office out of it and she was thrilled. . . . She went~ out to the mall. . . . She cruised by the perfume counter and she smelled something that caught her attention . . . what the heck, I just got this great job promotion with the company and I'm going to buy this \$60 bottle of perfume. (25m, reward)

The main character exudes the conviction that she has exerted considerable effort and now deserves a self-gift. Mick and DeMoss (1990a) observed this same reasoning in survey descriptions of reward self-gifts. They called it the exchange dimension of self-gifts in which personal endeavor and accomplishment are traded for the justified right to consumption indulgence. In the quotation above, the work-related achievement has led to a powerful, positive emotional state (thrilled) that has carried over into the shopping (cruising) and buying ("what the heck") process.

Work-related matters also appeared in some of the nice-to-self stories. These were occasionally intended to relieve the stress from hectic workdays (in three stories) or, in one revelatory case, to actualize a career-related philosophy:

Anne is a kindergarten teacher. She tries to teach the kids that you have to have a feeling of self-worth or self-esteem.

. . . So she has decided to treat herself to some perfume because you're suppose to be your own best friend. That's what she tells the kids and she's going to be that to herself.... Tomorrow morning she will wear the perfume to school and somehow she knows the kids will realize that she values herself like she wants them to value themselves. (31s, nice-to-self)

On the surface, stories with work-related matters simply support the documented fact that women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers during the last 30 years. However, women are not just purchasing professional clothing and executive paraphernalia due to this trend. More importantly, on a deeper level these stories suggest that women are actively weaving their heartfelt career concerns into their buying behavior, and thus embellishing the motivations for and the meanings of these retail experiences.

A third pre-store factor involved poor or disrupted interpersonal relations, appearing in 10 (19%) of the stories, primarily in therapeutic contexts. Most of these incorporated relationships with men. A core motivation for these self-gifts was the protection or restoration of the main character's self-definition and self-esteem (cf. Mick and DeMoss 1990a). According to one sad story,

Jane's husband left her for another woman, so she was devastated, naturally, and she hid in the house for two weeks and cried and never left. Finally, she decided she had to get on with her life. So she goes up to the mall and buys new clothes and makeup and some perfume because she needs to go out and meet new people and she needs to feel good about herself again. She hopes the perfume will help make her attractive to the opposite sex. Also, just wearing it makes her feel good about herself. (26m, therapeutic)

In such cases the self-gift experience is also an attempt to provide for oneself what cannot be currently obtained interpersonally, usually affection, appreciation, or respect. These are profoundly personal and probably often subconscious motivations that add extra emotional import to the retail purchase.

In-Store Factors

Three important retail-site factors were also coded in the stories. The first concerned the search process for a perfume brand, i.e., whether the brand was undetermined or already determined as the character stood before the perfume

counter. Notably, in 20 stories (38%) the brand was undetermined and the character was often involved in an engaging discovery process. This was not novelty seeking behavior for self-preservation or improved problem solving (Hirschman 1980). Instead, the search for a novel brand highlighted a need to distinguish a life stage or event with a unique symbol that could be used later as a memory activator. In one reward story, Mary is "selecting something different, because she's on a different type of road to success, so she uses this perfume only on special occasions so she can savor that memory" (40s). In another, Mary "is going to get a new fragrance . . . because she has something she is very happy about, maybe she has lost some weight . . . and every time she smells it she is going to feel real proud of her accomplishment" (55m).

A different role for the novel brand was noted in nice-to-self and therapeutic stories where it served as a fresh medium for garnering emotional strength and self-esteem. For example, Jane has

probably had an argument with her boyfriend and she's depressed. . . . Maybe when she sees her boyfriend things will get better with her new perfume. . . . Sometimes when you go get something new that makes you smell better, you feel better about yourself. (25d, therapeutic)

Stories with novel brands suggest that sufficient brand assortments and the interaction of sales staff with consumers are important retail dimensions in effectively linking new brands with motivations to secure a special reminder, endorse a positive self-concept, or recover self-esteem.

Our findings concerning novel brands verify and extend prior research on self-gifts. In Mick and DeMoss's (1990a) study, a theme called Discovery also dealt with the novelty of the self-gift for the particular individual, though the theme emerged in only five percent of the self-gift descriptions. This may have been because the Discovery theme was related chiefly to the product class level of self-gifts (e.g., a vacation trip to a foreign country). In linking this theme to the brand level, the results here suggest that the Discovery theme in self-gifts may be much more pronounced than previously observed. Given that Mick and DeMoss (1990a) related this theme to the specialness dimension of self-gifts, findings here strengthen the assertion that self-gifts are indeed special indulgences.

In 14 stories (27%) the brand was pre-determined and in 18

stories (35%) the brand issue was not decisively mentioned. In stories where the brand was already determined, a few times it was a popular, comparatively exclusive and expensive brand (e.g., Giorgio, Obsession). For instance:

Barbara usually buys inexpensive perfumes in the drugstores. But since it was her birthday, she decided she'd treat herself and go out and buy something more expensive. Some of her friends have that Obsession and she really likes it and she's been admiring it on them, so she decided that she would go out and splurge and buy some nice Obsession for her birthday. (26m, birthday)

In this story the specific brand symbolizes status and helps to secure group membership. However, in most cases the pre-determined brand was not specifically named, rather it was identified as a favorite, previously owned brand. In these stories the brand is a trustworthy tool for dealing with life's challenges, as these verbatims indicate:

|Ann~ has a date with a new guy tomorrow night and she wants to make sure that she has some of her favorite perfume to wear. (32s, nice-to-self)

Jane is a |nursing~ supervisor in a hospital. She has had a very difficult day. She has had to put up with grumbling doctors and nurses and seems as though she can't satisfy anybody and she just needs to cheer herself up. So she went and purchased her perfume that she enjoys so very much and then that next day she wears it to work because it gives her a pleasant memory to hopefully ward off the physicians' and nurses' grumblings. (40s, therapeutic)

In stories involving a pre-determined brand the meaning of the brand in the character's life is a significant force as she stands before the retail counter engaging in her search and purchase behavior. If the retailer does not stock the brand or if there is a temporary stock out, then the likelihood of a purchase may well depend on the ability of sales personnel to uncover the consumer's meanings for the unavailable brand and to associate those meanings with an available brand.

With regard to sales staff, another in-store factor was the role of the salesperson in the stories. The salesperson was mentioned in 13 (25%) of the stories; seven of these references were positive whereas three were negative and three were neutral. Basic positive references included the salesperson volunteering information about a special deal (18s, therapeutic), offering suggestions on brands (30s,

therapeutic), facilitating the sampling of different brands (25m, nice-to-self), or complimenting the character on her appearance (31s, birthday).

Most revealing were the stories that incorporated the salesperson's capability to listen effectively and personally relate to the character's current life situation. In terms of story grammar analysis, the salesperson is potentially a helper or a villain during the main character's attempt to acquire a self-gift. Two of the negative references were made this way:

|Jane~ probably doesn't have anybody, or feels she doesn't have anybody to turn to, to give her anything. . . . She may be telling the salesperson all of her personal problems, but they normally don't listen nicely, and normally smile and agree with whatever is said, like a bartender would do to a poor little guy sitting there complaining about losing his life. (42m, therapeutic)

. . . .Mary feels like the saleswoman knows she has never bought perfume, and that the woman is kind of looking down at her and knows this is a one-time deal so far for her . . . that kind of snooty attitude. (31s, reward)

Similar renderings with positive references to the salesperson appeared when the salesperson was identified as a long-time friend with whom the main character talked freely and felt at ease. In one instance,

Jane has just broken up with her boyfriend and she decided to go to the mall to see if she could at least cheer herself up because she was down and lonely, depressed about breaking up with her boyfriend, Mark. . . . So she went there and one of her best friends was behind the counter. |Her friend~ started asking her about what happened between her and Mark, so Jane told her the whole story. (18s, therapeutic)

These projections of the salesperson as an insincere confidante or sympathetic listener reflect a strong underlying need for genuine human contact. Moreover, they suggest that the product itself can sometimes be secondary to the interaction with sales staff or even irrelevant in terms of the latent benefits being sought in some retail settings (cf. Westbrook 1981).

The third in-store factor concerned the perfume's price, appearing explicitly in 11 stories (21%). In six cases the price was higher than the character's norm, occurring exclusively in reward or birthday stories. The prior verbatim

mentioning Obsession perfume fell into this category. Another one went like this:

It's Barbara's birthday. It's her thirtieth birthday. To her this is an indication that she is going over the hill. So she is sort of not real happy about her birthday. So she decides that she wants to go down to the department store and purchase a real expensive perfume for herself, one that she has enjoyed in the past, but didn't want to lavish on herself and go and spend the money. (44s, birthday)

Price was lower than the character's norm in only two cases and these appeared in therapeutic and nice-to-self stories. In the latter case, Nancy is

wandering through the perfume department. The saleslady is behind the counter talking to her about the new deal that's on her favorite perfume, so Nancy decides to be nice to herself and buy two bottles. (18s)

These data suggest some plausible insights regarding the costs of retail self-gifts. Reward and birthday self-gifts are among the most self-justified purchases that consumers make (Mick and DeMoss 1990a); their prices appear to symbolize the degree to which the consumer feels the self-gift is deserved. Hence, the characters in those stories were willing and, at times, intending to spend above their norm for perfume. Thus, with reward and birthday self-gifts consumers seem more apt to relax their budget constraints and buy a product or brand that has been previously perceived as a luxury (cf. Thaler 1985). By comparison, the occasions for nice-to-self and therapeutic self-gifts seem less pervaded by deservingness and also more transitory and mood-dependent. Thus, a lower price may be preferred as it seems to actualize more readily the nice-to-self and therapeutic motivations. Partial support for these hypotheses appears in Mick and DeMoss (1992). They found that the quality "inexpensive" and "elegant" were less associated with therapeutic self-gifts, as compared to reward and birthday self-gifts.

Post-Purchase Factor

One post-purchase factor was coded in the stories, this being the affective outcome of the self-gift experience. In 37 stories (71%) the outcome was clearly positive; e.g., feeling better, beautiful, happier, pleased, special, proud, etc. In three vivid cases the main character feels "more like a woman" with her new perfume, she "paints the town" with it, and she wears it on a date and "everything turns out

perfect." In 12 cases, other people in the character's life (e.g., husband, co-workers) were also mentioned as reacting favorably to the perfume. The affective outcome was explicitly negative in only two stories (4%); it was not mentioned in 13 stories (25%). These data reconfirm Mick and DeMoss's (1990a) prior finding, namely that authentic self-gifts tend to produce positive, sometimes intense feelings. Moreover, guilt, in any strong sense, appears to be limited.

Two Additional Factors in the Stories

In six stories the character purchased other products or services in addition to the perfume (e.g., clothes, make-up, bath beads). In one case, Ann selects the perfume she likes, next she goes to get a manicure, and then she visits a hairdresser (25m, nice-to-self). Together these multiple purchases form a constellation of symbolic acquisitions jointly connote self-image (see Solomon and Assael 1987).

Also, based on data from this study, the situations surrounding birthday self-gifts appear to have more mixed emotions than previously realized by Mick and DeMoss (1990a). For most characters the purchase of their own birthday presents was acceptable and enjoyable. However, a few birthday self-gifts were symptomatic of negative life factors and, thus, shrouded in sadness, even resentment. In one case the main character is living away from family on her birthday (25d) and, in another, she is disgruntled about the prospect of receiving more "pots and pans" from her husband, so she purchases her own gift of perfume and "keeps it a secret" (24m). In the most striking account, everyone has forgotten the main character's birthday, so she buys her own present of perfume. Later she tells them about it to "make them feel bad" and in "days and years to come she will never let them~ forget the year I had to buy my own birthday gift" (42m). These data show that the motivations and experience of birthday self-gifts are especially complex and may require sensitive management by retail sales staff.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes new insights on the motivations and meanings of self-gifts, several of which are specific to consumers' self-gift experiences at a retail setting. However, the transferability of our findings to other retailing contexts must be made cautiously, based upon an assessment of similarity between the context of this study and any contexts of comparison (see Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Results showed that personal situations related to significant life transitions, work-related matters, and disrupted interpersonal relations are strong provocations of women's self-gift behavior and they establish a variety of motivations and symbolic meanings that pervades the self-gift retail experience. Factors in the retail setting that affected the process and realization of self-gift behavior included the novelty or pre-determination of the brand, the brand's price, and the salesperson's empathy for the buyer's personal situation. The outcomes of the experience ranged in intensity, though most were positive. Also, by using a different method (projective) from prior self-gift studies, converging and augmenting evidence was found for results from past survey-oriented investigations. Overall, the trustworthiness of our findings rests primarily upon the high interjudge reliability in the content analysis, the team approach to the interpretive analysis of informants' stories, and the convergence of several findings with prior results.

Managerial Implications

Advertising and POPs. Retail advertising and point-of-purchase displays (POPs) are among the most obvious marketing tools to which our findings apply. Message themes that emphasize the increasing professional and personal independence of women may serve to heighten the self-gift propensity for some market segments, as seen earlier in the gold industry ad. Still, these themes could be developed further. Our results suggest that many self-gifts--especially rewards--are not just for statements of independence or celebration of positive life events, but to memorialize those feelings and events so they can be rekindled and re-experienced through subsequent product use. Messages that stress this future benefit of certain self-gifts could be extra persuasive. It is worth emphasizing, however, that before implementing any new message strategy, sufficient pre-testing must establish its workability for the given product and the targeted consumer segment.

Our results also suggest that situational contexts (Dickson 1982) and mood states (Gardner 1985) play key roles in consumer self-gift behavior. Knowledge of these factors could be incorporated into computer interactive POPs (see Miler 1990) that, so far, have interrogated consumers about objective consumer characteristics (e.g., the shape of one's face) in order to provide tailored product advice (e.g., what size and shape of earring to consider). With self-gifts, subjective characteristics such as the mood the customer is currently in and/or the prevailing motivational-situational

context (such as reward, cheering up, or birthday) could also be indicated from lists and used to recommend styles and brands of products.

Pricing. Retailers may be able to use self-gift pricing strategies to improve profits or complete a sale that might otherwise have been lost. Price seems less of a concern in purchasing reward and birthday self-gifts, because those situations appear to release budgetary restraints, similar to when consumers are on vacation (see Thaler 1985). In fact, contrary to conventional assumptions about economic rationality in consumer choice models, a higher price may be one of the factors that signals the feasibility of a particular brand as a reward or birthday self-gift. Thus, the opportunity may exist for taking a product with a low profit margin, associating it with reward or birthday occasions, and raising its price (and margin) accordingly.

On the other hand, a lower price may be more congruent with the therapy and nice-to-self contexts since it is less likely to be a barrier in expediting relief to a negative emotional state or in satisfying an urge for self-appreciation. Implementing retail pricing strategies based on self-gift contexts will depend upon research that identifies among market segments the preferability of particular products and brands for different self-gift contexts, strategic advertising and POP themes, and tactful sales management by retail personnel.

Distribution and Retail Placement. Results here also underscore that products that are complementary to self-image, and may be jointly purchased through self-gift motivations, should be marketed contiguously, especially in retail locations where this idea has not been fully implemented (cf. Solomon and Assael 1987). Thus, a product like perfume could be marketed in hair salons or fashion stores. And, within retail department stores, products such as perfume, costume jewelry, lingerie, and bath items could be effectively interspersed where sales staff might promote the combining of purchases in the service of fulfilling self-gift motivations.

Sales Staff. Retail patronage is unquestionably impacted by store image which, in turn, may be more dependent on consumers' impressions of sales staff than any other retail factor (Stafford and Greer 1965; Westbrook 1981). Hiring salespeople who resemble the consumers they will serve (age, appearance, etc.) and building salespeople's product knowledge have both been recommended as means to improving perceptions of sales staff, especially from the

perspective of the growing segment of feminist consumers (Burnett, Amason, and Hunt 1981).

Our findings harbor implications that go beyond those past suggestions and support the need for more intensive selection and training processes in retail settings with moderate to high customer contact. Screening sales applicants based on interpersonal skills remains relatively underprioritized (Hensel 1990), but seems essential for retail settings where self-gifts are likely to occur. However, it would be an exaggeration of our findings to conclude that salespeople should be selected or trained for the roles of counselor or confessor to consumers. Nonetheless, our results demonstrate that it is equally myopic for retailers to ignore the fact that consumers occasionally seek celebration, inspiration, and catharsis from retail experiences, and they may judge the quality of the store based on salespeople's abilities to recognize and satisfy those motivations. In his typically thought-provoking manner, Levy (1990, p. 4) concludes that

Quality Service is providing not only what is needed, but giving the emotional gratification that we more deeply wish for as well. It exalts the receiver, and if only in show, says that both the giver and receiver are highly valued. At Heart, Quality Service is the dream of Perfect Love.

Role playing (Solomon et al. 1985) and simulation techniques through video (Jones and Decotiis 1986) are two methods that could be used to select and train retail staff with respect to adaptive, empathetic sales encounters to which self-gifts are germane (see also Weitz, Sujan, and Sujan 1986). The promotion of active listening skills with the help of clinical psychologists is yet another possibility. Through these methods prospective and current sales staff would be given the opportunity to display, practice, and visualize interpersonal skills in concert with self-gift service encounters. Unfortunately, these methods have rarely been recommended for their advantages in certain retail settings. This study suggests that high potential self-gift retail environments (e.g., specialty and gift shops, store departments involving personal care products and services) are the most fertile areas for these methods to be employed. In effect, these suggestions extend the customized personalization approach beyond such exemplary scenarios as financial and tax consultancy (see Suprenant and Solomon 1987).

The central issue is that each customer is a unique individual with a reservoir of personal situations,

motivations, and meanings that form the basis of self-gift buying behavior and satisfaction. Each is negotiating the unfolding dramas of life (Goffman 1959), within which the retail salesperson is occasionally afforded a role performance (cf. Solomon et al. 1985). Will the salesperson be perceived as a villain, a benign bystander, or a magic helper? Many self-gift experiences at the retail setting represent moments of truth in services marketing (Gronroos 1990), i.e., the time and place that the provider has the opportunity to deliver quality service and build a mutually beneficial relationship. If so, the need for appropriate selection and training techniques in certain retail settings cannot be over-estimated. Outside of the primary benefits to customers, an additional one may accrue to employees and management. Retail job satisfaction has been related to perceived variety on the job and task identity, i.e., allowing the employee to manage all facets of the sale (Dubinsky and Skinner 1984). Treating retail customers as individuals who appreciate personalized quality service may also have the salutary effect of boosting job satisfaction among employees in certain retail settings.

The self-gift contexts examined here also suggest an alternative approach to qualifying retail customers and improving sales encounters. For reasonable purposes, sales staff commonly confront customers with initial questions about brands, styles, or price levels they may have in mind. Answers to these inquiries are then used by the salesperson to categorize the customer and present available offerings. Our results point to an optional tactic when it is feasible. A courteous greeting could be followed with a query of this type: "May I ask, was there any particular occasion or event that brought you in today to look at (perfume, jewelry, etc.)?" Of course, not all customers would be willing or even able to respond. But an astute salesperson may detect a potential self-gift context and then express a sincere response of the variety, "Sometimes I buy things for myself for the same reason." Such a reply could encourage a higher level of rapport that facilitates harmonious sales-related interaction, including insights about the meaning of the potential self-gift in the customer's life and the meanings of pre-determined brands (if any). In fact, this approach conforms to the folk wisdom that a customer buys when he or she finds the right salesperson. However, with self-gifts the "right" salesperson may not only be related to similar physical characteristics such as attire, but also to sharing the same general life experience that led the customer to the retail setting and to engaging that shared experience in a truthful manner.

Limitations

The limitations of this study require acknowledgement. Certainly, the single product class (perfume), the small convenience sample, and the single retail site mean that the findings are not transferable to all product classes, consumer segments, or retail settings. Product classes that tend to be ego involving and highly symbolic seem most relevant, such as cosmetics, fragrance products, bath items, jewelry, fashion clothing, entertainment products, and recreational products (see Mick and DeMoss 1992). Also, given that we focused exclusively on women, the relevance of our findings to male consumers in retail settings is unknown at this time. Finally, the opportunity for any specific retailer to build upon consumers' self-gift motivations will vary depending on the retailer's current marketing strategies and store image, including atmospherics, sales staffing levels, brand assortments, etc. The influence of these various factors on self-gift retailing strategies can only be speculated upon at this stage, until further research is completed.

Methodological Implications and Future Research

This study is one of a handful that has sought to extend the philosophy and methods of postmodernism into the realm of retailing research. In doing so it has also responded to Rook's (1985) call for increased research attention to consumption symbolism through projective techniques. Our study intercepted consumers during a particular shopping activity and then engaged them in a TAT.(3) From this approach we were able to gather some penetrating insights about a particular retail experience (self-gifts) that was relevant to a broad target group (women, 20-50 years of age). Further development and refinement of this approach is needed, including application to other purchase situations, segments (e.g., men), product classes, and retail sites as well as its restriction to those observed buying the product.

Also, the notion that consumers tell stories when they detail their retail experiences is important insofar as it may open up new avenues for conceptual and managerial breakthroughs in customer service. A more complete analysis of the structures of these stories, including the specification of characters, roles, values, and myths (see Greimas 1966/1983; Mick 1987) could substantially advance retailing theory and practice.

A Final Note on Therapeutic Self-Gifts and the Commodification of Happiness

Mick and DeMoss (1990a) concluded that self-gifts in moderation can play very positive roles in people's lives, including therapeutic self-gifts. Nevertheless, in immoderate amounts therapeutic self-gifts can be criticized as manifestations of the materialistic belief that psychic wellness is achievable through purchasing and consumption behavior. Moreover, for individuals whose therapeutic buying motive has become unbridled (see O'Guinn and Faber 1989), therapeutic purchasing behavior can be financially and psychologically devastating.⁽⁴⁾ Hence, in dealing with therapeutic buying motives retailers should be especially sensitive to developing marketing strategies that are ethically sound and in the best interests of all their customers as well as their sales personnel.

CONCLUSION

Self-oriented consumer behavior is widespread within present-day American society. In this article we formally introduced the self-gift concept to retailing research and examined self-gift experiences in a department store through the use of a projective technique. Our empirical study underscored the need for retailers to comprehend more fully the nature and depth of self-gifts in consumers' lives. The results implicated several managerial strategies which can aid retailers who stand to benefit most from embracing the self-gift phenomenon.

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1 The instructions and subsequent comments to the informants were based on Karon's (1981) recommendations for this type of projective technique.

2 The notation refers to the informant's age, marital status (s = single, m = married, d = divorced), and the type of story from which the example or excerpt derives.

3 An in-store intercept technique that uses a traditional survey method has been developed by McIntyre and Bender (1986).

4 Mick and DeMoss (1990a) take the position that true

self-gifts are special to the individual and they note that overdoing self-gifts, including the therapeutic type, tarnishes their specialness. As a result, such purchases lose their status as authentic self-gifts, and they become pseudo-self-gifts.

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