

## Nature and Dynamics of Gift-Giving in India: A Study of Gift-Giving Habits among Youth in Delhi

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### ABSTRACT

*Gift-giving is one of those processes that have undeniable role in the dynamics of an interpersonal relationship. Gifts can be seen as materialistic objects or experiential benefits, as an expression of love or simply an obligation, or reciprocal exchange. Either ways, gifts are intended to please the receiver. This paper aims to explore the nature and the motives behind gift giving among youths in Delhi by analyzing the narratives of 15 boys and 15 girls. The importance of the sentimental value of a gift against the material value is also studied with respect to gender. The findings reveals that agapic love was most prominent than the other factors behind the gift giving habits when the nature of relationship was intimate one. Reciprocity was also implicated as a motive in more casual relationships. Also, girls were more likely than boys to value the sentimental value of the gifts than the material value.*

**Keywords:** gift-giving, youth, love

### INTRODUCTION

The gift giving tradition in India can be date back to as far as the Mahabharata epic which describes the following five motives of gift giving: duty, self-interest, fear, love & pity ; that specifies when, to whom, by whom and how the gifts should be offered (Mauss, 1969). Even today, there's a tradition in India to bring gifts, often in the form of sweets or fruits, when visiting someone's home.

### Concept of Gift-Giving and Interrelated Factors

Gift giving occupies a significant place in all types of interpersonal relationships and the role of gifts in fostering and maintaining these social connections is well established (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Dunn, Huntsinger, Lun, & Sinclair, 2008; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999; Sherry, 1983). Gifts sometimes convey symbolic meaning in relationships and facilitate the expression of sentiments (Belk, 1979). However, it is seen that the process of gift giving itself is influenced by the nature of relationship in which gift giving occurs. In fact, the role of relationships has been central in much of the gift giving research (Bradford & Sherry, 2013; Ruth et al., 2004).

Gift giving can be inspired by variety of reasons, for example, for maintaining social bonds, communicating affection, or expressing gratitude but at the core, gifts are intended to please the recipients (Otnes et al., 1993, Belk & Coon, 1993; Teigen, Olsen, & Solas, 2005).

The concept of gift giving has been long studied not only by consumer researchers (e.g, Otnes & Beltramini, 1996; Belk & Coon, 1993) but also from the perspectives of various disciplines like economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology (Cameron, 1988; Schwartz, 1967; Komter, 1996; Robben & Verhollen, 1994). Owing to the research done in

various disciplines, gift giving can be seen as social exchange, an obligation, or an expression of agapic love (Gouldner, 1960; Mauss, 1925; Belk, 1979; Belk & Coon, 1993).

It was Mauss (1954) who noted how "obligation and economic self-interest" is responsible for "accompanying behavior" though gifts often seem to be generously given. Obligations have two specific forms: reciprocity and ritual. Reciprocity represents the act of giving gifts with the expectation of receiving the same in return. Ritual reflects another aspect of obligation. There are numerous studies that are focused on the Christmas gift ritual (e.g., Caplow, 1982, 1984; Cramer, 1977; Moschetti, 1979). In India, the gift giving ritual is evident in festivals like Diwali, Holi etc and on occasions like marriage, child birth etc. Valentine's day has also emerged as a day when people all over the world confess and express their love and affection to their partners, often through exchanging gifts. However, gift giving can also be voluntary, without the sense of obligation. For example, often people bring their friends some gifts or mementos when they visit some new place or city. Belk and Coon (1993) proposed that the one of the most meaningful gifts received is the one given out of agapic love. Romantic couples often give gifts to each other just to express their love and affection.

The gifts given in a relationship can be broadly categorized as either material or experiential. Material gifts are tangible objects like flowers, books, photo frame etc., that often convey symbolic meaning whereas experiential gifts are benefits that involve experiences that the recipient lives through like movie treat, holiday picnic, date etc. Although recent research indicates that experiences lead to more happiness compared to material purchase (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Nicholas, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), it is seen that consumers are inclined to give more material gifts than experiences (Chan & Mogilner, 2013; Goodman & Lim, 2015). It is argued that a durable gift can leave a lasting impression (Ariely, 2011), simply because recipients might benefit from receiving a tangible gift to keep as a reminder of the occasion and the gift giver.

Another important aspect of a gift is its sentimental value. People often treasure those gifts that are deeply expressive and have emotional significance than gifts with high economic worth. Sentimental value is a highly common phenomenon affecting consumers' daily life (Belk, 1988, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Solnick & Hemenway, 1996; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988), but still, it has yet to be systematically studied and clearly defined in the psychology and marketing disciplines. Drawing from the definition rooted in philosophy, we define sentimental value as the non-feature-related value, derived from the associations with significant others or from the association with special events or time in one's life. For example, an object can have sentimental value if it was given as a gift by a friend, or it reminds about a particular life event (e.g., first anniversary, souvenir from a vacation). It is evident from these examples that sentimental value of an object or gift lies within the association the object or gift evokes with a significant other or a special event or time.

There is a tremendous amount of research on the types of gifts given, the ideal gifts and the motives behind gift giving but most of these researches are based on western context. Acknowledging how culture can influence the nature of relationships and the gift giving process, through this paper, we try to explore the nature and dynamics of gift giving in Indian context by studying the gift giving habits among youths in Delhi.

## METHOD

In order to achieve the objectives, data was collected from 15 boys and 15 girls in Delhi belonging to age group of 18 - 26 years. After getting the consent from the participants, interviews were conducted which were semi-structured in nature. The recording of the interviews was also done and later recordings were transcribed for the analysis of the narratives.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Gift-Giving Motives: Agapic Love vs Reciprocity

Agapic love as a motive behind gift-giving was first explored by Belk and Coon (1993) as an alternative to the exchange paradigm which sees gift-giving as economic or social exchange in which people give gifts out of expectation that the recipient of the gift will reciprocate the gesture and give something in return for the gift. However, the extent to which reciprocity operates in the economic and social exchange models differs significantly. Gifts given under the social exchange model involves reciprocity but not as strictly as in the economic exchange model because of the symbolic value of the gifts given in social exchange model. In contrast, the gifts given out of agapic love are selfless, expressive, spontaneous and doesn't involve reciprocity. In the following excerpt of an interview, 18 years old Vaishali talks about the time when she gifted someone something apart from birthdays, festivals or similar occasions:

*Respondent[R]: I have. ..I gave to my friend. She was ill. So, as a token of love and how much I want to tell her that you need to get well soon and come back and I gave her flowers and a card.*

Vaishali's idea to gift her sick friend was clearly motivated by her love for her friend and not because of any expectation for reciprocating benefits. The flowers and the card she gifted expressed her love and concern for her friend.

However, the tendency to give gifts without any expectations is not always the same in all relationships. Norms of reciprocity functions in exchange relationships whereas in communal relationships, selfless acts are always directed towards the other person (Clark and Mills, 1979). As 19 years old Esha explained:

*Respondent[R]: It depends on the closeness I have with the person. If he/she is my best friend and she doesn't give me something, I would totally gift her but if that person is like some friend...so yeah I won't give.*

*Interviewer [I]: Do you feel obligated to gift someone who gifted you something in the past?*

*R: Again it depends on the relationship I have with that person. Yeah but sometimes it's like degree to which someone gifted me something so I have to match up to the same level. Recently what happened is...one of my friend, it was my birthday in June. He gifted...He planned the whole party, stuff like that and I was really happy and everything but now it's his turn. It's his birthday this friday and he is....he is very you know difficult to surprise him and I have no....I feel like I can't match upto the level.*

In this case, Esha feels obligated to reciprocate the gift with the same level to match upto his friend's expectations. In this type of social exchange, the gifts given are not expressive or selfless but designed and purposive (as evident from Esha's story). It is when people give gifts that are spontaneous and expressive rather than obligatory, that the giver's selfless love is expressed for the recipient (as seen in Vaishali's case).

## A Gift with Sentimental Value

Every gift has values that can be emotional as well as material (Mauss,1969). In economics, the quantification of sentimental value of the gifts to the recipients of the gifts is such that, on an average, the total value derived from a gift by the gift recipient is roughly equal to the sum of half of the material value and half of the sentimental value of the gift (List & Shogren, 1998; Solnick & Hemenway, 1996). However, when the participants were asked to tell about the best gift they ever received and the reasons why they think it as the best gift, the relative importance of sentimental value to material value was highlighted. As explained by Stephen- a 26 year old employee:

*Respondent [R]: Yeah...that's one of my best friend...like someone who I really admire gave me the gift...like it was really remarkable and I couldn't forget it.*

*It was umm...it's very simple but it's very much....it was like I just couldn't forget that you know....since I...just because of the relationship and then this we....we admire....just because of that I couldn't forget. It was like a cart and then something like....I just couldn't explain that. It's something like carton box and then it was like painted...something like that.*

*Interviewer [I]: Why is it your favorite gift?*

*R: Because the one who gave me that gift was like something very special person for me.*

It is evident from this narrative that the sentimental value Stephen derive from the gift (by associating it with the person who is very special for him), plays a very important part in the evaluation of the gift as the best one. In contrast to the economic viewpoint, the material value of the gift seemed completely insignificant here. Similar to Stephen, 18 years old Darshana describes her best gift experience in following way:

*Respondent[R]: Best gift..would be...my friends made me a card..a greeting card..with all the favorite heroes i admire and they gifted me and a photo frame of all the heroes where they asking for me..it was like they were sitting on their knees and i was sitting in between and they had gifted me on my birthday..best gift...it was in class 8.*

*Because friends made it first of all...the subject was very nice.*

It is clear from the above narratives how sentimental value outweighs the material value of the gift when it comes to the evaluation of the gift by the gift recipients. A study by Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) concludes that the most of the favourite gifts are those that provoke strong emotions within the gift recipients instead of the gifts that are monetarily valuable.

This tendency of cherishing the sentimental value of the gift was consistent across most participants. However, it was observed that the participants who talked about the sentimental value in their best gifts were mostly girls. In fact, Stephen was one of the few boys who explained the emotional significance of the best gift they received. Most boys reflected a strong preference for the material value of the gift in the evaluation of best gift. For example, the best gifts for most of the boys were things with high monetary value like computers, books, or 15000 cash. Also, the reasons given by them for the selection of the best gifts were almost never indicated anything to do with the persons who gave the gifts. The table shown below shows the preference for material value or symbolic value of gifts with respect to gender:

**Table 1. Values of Gift, N=30**

	<i>No. of Boys</i>	<i>No. of Girls</i>
Sentimental value	6	11
Material value	8	2
Not Applicable	1	2

s evident from the table, compared to the boys, girls showed a high preference for sentimental value of the gift while boys liked gifts of instrumental worth.

According to Belk & Coon (1993), women are more likely than boys to value the meaningfulness and the symbolic value of the gifts they received whereas boys tends to find the utilitarian value of the gifts as important. Similarly, Margaret Rucker, a consumer psychologist at the University of California, is of view that men seems to be more practical and price-oriented when it comes to gifts they give or receive, while women have the tendency to give and receive gifts that have some emotional significance.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the present paper, the narratives from the interviews of 15 boys and 15 girls in Delhi were analyzed to understand the motives behind gift-giving among youths in Delhi. The relative importance of sentimental value to material value was also studied with respect to gender.

It was found that the motive behind gift-giving involves reciprocity when the relationship was a casual one. However, agapic love was the major factor behind gift giving when the gift giver share close relationship with the gift receiver. Also, girls tends to appreciate the sentimental value of a gift more likely than boys.

The present study was an exploratory one that studied the gift giving habits of youths in Indian context. The need for future research is suggested not only because of it's implication in consumer market and behavior but also to understand the dynamics of youths' relationships in India.

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