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Gift Cards and Gift Giving

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ABSTRACT

Gift cards are frequently located at premium points inside the retail space where stores sell not only their own cards but also other retailers' cards for almost every occasion. Media encouraged practitioners to promote these cards. However, this emerging phenomenon of consumers' preference of gift cards has not been explored thoroughly yet. The objective of the current study is to understand consumer reactions to gift cards in terms of their impact in gift giving and gift receiving relationships. Specifically, this qualitative research seeks to investigate the following research objectives: (1) How gift givers and receivers perceive gift cards; (2) What values gift cards communicate for receivers and givers, and (3) What roles of gift cards play in relationships between givers and receivers. A framework of relationship duration and level of intimacy were used to cross-tabulate all gift giving situations mentioned by respondents. Evidences about five types of values mentioned in the literature were found. Also three new types of values, value of convenience, time and experience were identified. Implications for managers were discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The act of gift giving may be traced at least as far back as the Roman Empire when the Roman emperor was presented with tokens of good luck by his people. Gift giving in the earliest sense was focused on leaders of civilizations, and was, from the start, a way of establishing social connections and superior status.

The earliest study of gift-giving was in 1924 when Marcel Mauss wrote his *Essay on the Gift*, explaining the significance of gifts as "a primary source of social exchange within a society and valuable for the formation and maintenance of bonds in our social networks" (Bruck, 2004). We

give gifts because the act establishes, creates and maintains social bonds. Bruck states that “Once these bonds are formed, we continue to use the gift to inform the status of a relationship.”

The presence of gift cards arose in the early 20th century with gift “vouchers” or certificates (Horne, 2007). Before the U.S. adopted its one, standardized form of tender with the Legal Tender Act of 1862, thousands of different tenders were circulating the country. Because such a variety of currencies was circulating, each with different values, it was not uncommon for Americans to creatively resort to various substitute currencies. “Church money,” for example, was used in the late 1700s and “hard time tokens” of the 1830s were used for both commercial advertising and small change (Zelizer, 2008). More recently, examples of invented currency include food stamps, frequent flier miles, and prison scrip for inmates, money orders, and of course, gift certificates.

Though gift certificates have been available to consumers for decades, gift cards have only shown substantial growth in popularity since the latter half of the 1990s. They went from being negligible in terms of sales dollars in 1997 to grossing over 63 billion in 2005 (Offenberg, 2007). According to National Retail Federation (NRF) 2011 Gift Card Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey, 80.2% of Americans intended to purchase at least one gift card during 2011 Christmas shopping season. They were planning to spend an average of \$43.23 per card, up from \$41.48 compared to 2010 season (NRF, 2012). This growth in popularity may be attributable to multiple factors, including changing trends in personal lifestyles, gift-giving and increased technology.

The top five trends in gift giving for 2008, for example, include “going green,” bringing the family together, physical experiences, “feel good” gifts, and gifts you can “take with you.” The changes in household dynamics as a result of the increased proportion of working wives over the past few decades is a primary factor contributing to this more time-sensitive, “convenience-driven” lifestyle for many.

Additionally, the introduction of the first magnetic stripped gift card occurred in 1995 with the Mobil Oil Company. Cards have replaced the outdated paper certificate because of the convenient advantage of having the amount deducted automatically and of being entirely transferable (Offenberg, 2007). As a result of the demand for convenience by consumers, more and more retailers are making gift cards readily available every year, from large chain stores all the way down to small, local businesses.

Indeed, besides the use of traditional credit cards, nowadays gift cards are becoming an established trend in the marketplace. “Gift cards started out as a paper gift certificate and transformed into a plastic card with magnetic strip during the 1990s” (Hudson 2005). Major retailers initiated “closed-loop” or “retailer-specific” gift cards that are redeemable at a particular retailer in the late 1990s (Horne 2007). Then all major credit card companies followed the suit (Acohido and Swartz 2007) by issuing “open-loop” or “network-branded” gift cards (e.g., Visa gift card or Master Card gift card) (Horne 2007). Gift cards increasingly gained popularity as a holiday gift and they were ranked as the “second-most-popular item after clothing” in 2005 (Yang and Lewis 2006). Nearly three-fourths of consumers in the United States either purchase or receive at least one gift card annually (Promo 2006). Consumers spent \$97 billion on gift cards in 2007, 18 percent up from about \$82 billion in 2006 (Acohido and Swartz 2007; Byrnes 2008), while US gift cards sales was a mere \$45 billion in 2003 (Harris 2005).

Consumers seem to enjoy gift card convenience with more options from self and home improvement, gasoline, air travel to tattoos, “while giving more personalized presents” (Petrecca 2006; p. 1B). Wal-Mart allows consumers to put their photo or a text on their gift cards (Jacobson 2005). Visa now also provides options for consumers to personalize their own Visa gift cards with personal photos or stock images and engraved messages by visiting GiftCardLab.com at a cost of

\$5.95 per card up to \$250 value (Edwards 2007). Merchant gift cards (issued by numerous retailers) and bank gift cards (issued by Visa, Master Card and American Express) are widely in use worldwide and an estimated number for those payment cards is about 5.1 billion (Acohidio and Swartz 2007).

Historic development of gift cards clearly showed that they are a notch above monetary gifts. However, they are perceived somewhat different from cash. Gift giving literature identified monetary gifts are socially unacceptable format of gifts from both receivers' and givers' perspectives. Then what factors can explain the unstoppable growth of gift cards? What types of values consumers obtain from gift cards besides monetary value? What has changed in interpersonal relationships to make gift cards acceptable even sought out gifts? How they are different from giving cash as a gift?

Phenomenon Of Gift Cards

Before reviewing existing knowledge about gift giving, we looked at the developing phenomena of gift cards and researched body of knowledge about various aspects. Literature review about gift cards revealed multiple practitioner oriented normative articles on the probable benefits of gift cards to givers, receivers and retailers. As can be seen from Table 1, authors identified multiple benefits for issuers of gift cards and retailers. Frequently they assumed potential benefits for gift giving and receiving consumers as well. However, these assumptions were not investigated from receivers' and givers' perspectives.

Unexpected and rapid rise of gift card consumption created some unforeseen complexities and problems. Specifically, unredeemed gift cards created accounting and publicity problems for retailers (Horne 2007, Kile and Wall 2008). In order to avoid issues, retailers tried to put restrictions on the cards in the form of expiration dates and maintenance fees that created multiple complaints from consumers. Apparently, the evolving phenomenon of gift cards was one of the hot topics of discussion among practitioners. Consumer research was relatively slow in investigating consumer perspective of this phenomenon.

Roles of gift cards in gift giving literature were rarely studied. One recent study (Tuten and Kiecker 2009) stands out in gift giving literature as it included the gift card phenomenon. Researchers investigated teenagers' reasons of giving and receiving gift cards, social roles played and values associated with gift cards. They also identified a new category of value associated with giving or receiving gift cards, value of choice to be included in previously identified categories, namely economic, social and functional value.

The extant literature in gift giving is rich in terms of roles of participants, social norms and influencing demographics such as family size, gender, life cycle stage and education (Fisher and Arnold 1990; Garner and Wagner 1991; Lowrey, Otnes and Ruth 2004; Liao and Huang 2006). Gift giving happens in multitude of social occasions including interfamily, love or business affairs. Bodur and Grohmann (2005) identified relationship strength and implicit request for reciprocation as important variables in business gift giving. They indicated a need for future studies on the type of gift. Fischer and Arnold (1990) found out that Christmas gift shopping was women's work and they defined it as a "labor of love" (p.343). Women had more gift recipients, started shopping earlier, and spent more time on searching, but less money per recipient. Most importantly, they took it as a serious, real and important work.

Table 1
Use Of Gift Cards: Who Wins Potentially What

Retailers for Creating & Selling	Buyers (Purchasers) for Gift Giving	Users (Redeemers) in Gift Receiving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gift cards cost little to offer. (3) • Consumers spend 40% more than the face value, the value stored on the gift card. (7) • Gift cards generate two trips by buyers and users, respectively, hence retailers discover new customers. (3, 7) • Corporate incentives in the form of gift cards can enhance retailer revenues. (6) • Cross promotion through printed images such as cartoon characters or popular toys. (1) • Holiday season lasts an extra month. (6) • Unclaimed gift cards (about 10%-19% of gift card sales) can be recognized as revenue by retailer in some states. (2, 3, 6) • Gift cards also generate service fees for retailers and/or issuing banks based on dormancy fees and account closure fees. (2) • Time value of money, float associated with unspent balances on gift cards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 50% of recipients hold gift cards longer than one month. - 25% of recipients hold gift cards longer than three months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize search time for gift picking. (3) • Easy to buy for hard-to-buy people. (4, 5, 6) • Reduce risk of poor gift selection. (5, 6) • Personalize card as a thoughtful gift. (5) • Choose packaging as a reflection of your caring. (5) • Buy gift cards online. (4) • Donate a portion of gift card to a charity. (4) • Record your message.(1, 5) • Use dual gift cards to load money when, for example, your child needs more money in college. (3, 5) • Spend \$X to get, for example, 10% of \$X as bonus.(7, 6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gift cards can be perceived as better than cash gifts. (3) • Earn rewards or discounts. (3, 7) • Freely choose what to buy with gift card. (3) • Use gift cards for treats or necessities. (7) • Receive an opportunity to experience new retail environments (3)

(1)Hudson (2005); (2)Bernstein (2006); (3)Weber (2006); (4)Young and Lewis (2006); (5)Edwards (2007); (6)Horne (2007); (7)Brown (2008).

Gift giving in a business occasion is also an important phenomenon as it can be used to build and enhance social ties. Beltramini (2000) reported that business gift giving was an effective part of a marketer's overall marketing communication strategy, as it increased customers' positive perceptions toward products. Business gifts were effective in generating an immediate, positive and sustained increase in customer overall satisfaction, intent to repurchase, and actual sales behavior as predicted by the theory of reciprocity. Similarly, Bodur and Grohmann (2005) suggested standard, impersonalized gifts in the form of actual product (not money) that had hedonic characteristics for business gift giving occasions.

Historic development of gift cards clearly showed that they are a notch above monetary gifts. However, they are perceived somewhat different from cash. Gift giving literature identified monetary gifts are socially unacceptable format of gifts from both receivers' and givers' perspectives. Then what factors can explain the unstoppable growth of gift cards? What types of values consumers obtain from gift cards besides monetary value? What has changed in

interpersonal relationships to make gift cards acceptable even sought out gifts? How they are different from giving cash as a gift? It is difficult to find clear answers to these questions in the literature.

The objective of the current study is to understand, consumer reactions to gift cards in terms of their impact in gift giving and gift receiving relationships. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How gift givers and receivers perceive gift cards; (2) What values gift cards communicate for receivers and givers, and (3) What roles of gift cards play in relationships between givers and receivers.

METHODOLOGY

As the purpose of this study is to discover perceptions and values associated with gift cards, a theory building qualitative research design was used. This type of research designs are suitable for exploring phenomena that we have limited level of understanding (Stern 1980). In such an environment, grounded theory offers rich interpretation and theory building opportunity (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

In order to contextualize the givers' and receivers' perspectives, conditions, and relationships in depth, we preferred to utilize grounded theory approach and interviewed adults who received and gave gift cards during the last Christmas period. In this qualitative research, rich verbal descriptions about gift card usage and gift giving/receiving occasions were reported in the words of informants. Then these descriptions were systematically analyzed to develop theoretical relationships among themes. The settings chosen were voluntary reflections of respondents on gift giving and receiving occasions during Christmas season and after. Open ended, discovery oriented depth interviews were conducted in January, February and March. Grounded theory methodology was followed including flexible research design that enables researchers to adapt emerging findings and situations. Data analysis was simultaneous with the field work.

Participants of the Study

The unit of analysis in this study was individual adult consumer from 25 to 75 years old. The goal was to study a wide range of participants whose ages, genders, races, marital statuses and occupations varied enough from one another to determine whether variation in demographic characteristics of informants relate to perceptual differences among them. We sought no similarities when selecting participants, although the majority resides in the same town. The participants of this study were randomly selected to avoid personal bias or influence and to establish validity within every interview. Our goal was to select participants whose individual circumstances might affect responses and attitudes toward gift cards quite differently from one another. We did not offer a specific incentive to do the interview, but buy their favorite drinks at a local café during the interview.

We have provided a description of each individual participant in terms of his or her lifestyle, hobbies, family life cycle stage, and any other significant information that may have been shared during the interview. To avoid bias, we asked them which age range they were and any personal information they want to give at the beginning of interviews as a warm up. Because participants were assured of their confidentiality in this study, we have identified them with alternative names for our purposes. Participants 6 and 7 are an elderly couple and wanted to be interviewed together due to their long-time marriage and joint involvement in purchase decisions. Their responses were carefully read by each researcher. Even though they shared their experiences, each had different feelings, ideas and interpretations about the occasions that added to the richness our study. (Table 2)

The data analysis process was conducted simultaneously with data collection. We continued to recruit new participants until we reached saturation. Discriminant sampling provided the maximum opportunity to sample among people with different stand in their life cycle, including ages, social status, education and occupation. We decided to stop recruitment, when same concepts emerged in each new interview as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Table 2
Respondent Characteristics

Participant	Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Family	Hobbies
1	Tina	40-45	Female	Professor	Married, 1 Child	Active in community service
2	Tabitha	35-40	Female	Retail Store Manager and Student	Married, 2 Children	Shopping, Cake Decorating
3	Brandon	30-35	Male	Quick Service Restaurant Manager	Single, No Children	Golf, Television
4	Jared	20-25	Male	Computer Expert, Recent College Graduate	Single, No Children	Computers, Bicycles and Coffee
5	Derrick	30-35	Male	Retail Store Manager	Married, 1 Child	Family, motorcycles
6	William	75-80	Male	Retiree	Married, 3 Children	Coach, attending senior Olympics, table tennis
7	Julie	70-75	Female	Retiree	Married, 3 Children	Exercise and getting people involved in a healthy life style
8	Holly	50-55	Female	Secretary	Single, 3 Children	Dogs, reading and grand children
9	Sally	50-55	Female	Secretary	Married, 3 Children	Working with students, crafts, foster parenting, gospel singing
10	Laura	35-40	Female	Small Business Owner	Married, 2 Children	Family, Water Sports

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by specially trained interviewer. The interview process was informal and took place in casual retail settings to make the participant comfortable and to invoke emotions typical of the average shopping experience. Every interview was recorded in its entirety and generally lasted 35 to 60 minutes. Each interview began with an expression of gratitude for willing participation. Next, the participant was given a briefing of the purpose of the interview and overall research. Then a series of questions were asked concerning the participants' past experiences with either giving or receiving gift cards, and in some cases, both.

The questions asked in each interview had the same basic outline, designed by the research team, but varied in that they were built off individual responses. Questions were flexible and open-ended. Participants were able to provide a variety of instances in which a gift card exchange occurred and elaborated on the emotional responses of both the giver and the recipient.

Quality of Research Results

Rigor and trustworthiness of the research process and findings were established by multiple ways. In order to minimize researcher bias and improve the reliability of interpretations, all members of the research team were involved with interviews. Third parties, who were unaware of the research objective transcribed verbatim from audiotapes. Later, all team members individually analyzed transcripts and interpreted independently to ensure credibility and confirmability of the study (Flint, Woodruff, and Gardial 2002; Hirschman 1986).

Interviews were professional, conducted in comfortable settings in retail environments and kept anonymous. Informants were fully cooperative, and never showed signs of resistance or evading questions. Interviews lasted as long as informants wanted to talk about their interviews. These precautions were taken to provide integrity of the research.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

All participants were familiar with gift cards; they received them, gave them or did both. They were also able to talk about retail stores offering different types of gift cards. Almost all of them stated that they liked gift cards in general. According to respondents gift cards have both positive and negative aspects. Givers and receiver should pay attention to situations that favor or discourage gift card giving. Only one respondent revealed aversion towards giving them, even though he received gift cards in different occasions. The following section describes the factor influencing positive and negative perceptions of receiving and giving gift cards.

Factors Influencing Positive Perceptions of Receiving Gift Cards

(1) Catering To Recipient

Receiving gift cards is perceived by many as a positive event due to the fact that the recipient may shop for and select a gift they want. Gift cards are often thought of as a “win-win-win” situation (Offenburg, 2007). In the case of the recipient, it is a win “because they can choose what they want and when they want to buy it.(Tabitha)” A participant, Brandon, agreed and summarized this idea in the following quotation:

“...somebody gave me a shirt and I really didn't like it...I think it's sitting somewhere in a closet...they could have given me a gift card and I could have gotten something I really wanted.”

Brandon apparently did not remember the name of the giver and had a very limited level of intimacy with this person.

Informants also think that if giver knows the receiver's hobbies, then the gift card would be ideal, because it would still be fun to pick out an item they would really want from that store. Derrick mentioned that he recalled an occasion of receiving a restaurant gift card from colleagues as more generic gifts. Receivers of gift cards from givers, who do not really know what the other likes, enjoy freedom of choosing their own gifts.

“It was a hundred dollar Visa gift card, so I could use it anywhere. I got exactly what I wanted. ... I was really happy that I could pick out several different things instead of may be just getting one or two things that I wouldn’t necessarily like. (Tabitha)”

Sometimes givers hint about suitability of gift cards, as Jared received his gift cards for music from his aunt first and he bought and sent her Tractor Supply gift cards later. He did not consider impersonality as a big issue in that situation as he did not have to reciprocate immediately. Because she was his elder, and they exchanged gifts over a long period of time, he did really not have to worry about being misunderstood. William and Julie, as grandparents of many, usually signal that gift cards were acceptable.

(2) Economy (Not Having To Spend One’s Own Money)

Gift cards are often considered useful and welcome to recipients because of economic factors as well. When a person does not have to spend his or her own money for an item or items he or she particularly wants or needs, but has been restricted to a particular budget due to financial constraints, they perceive receiving gift cards as a positive experience. Tabitha summed up this idea in the following quotation in which she is referencing a gift exchange where she gave a Wal-Mart gift card to her mother:

“She was really glad that I had given her the gift card, and now she could go get the fabric that she wanted. She loves to sew. Now she doesn’t have to pay for it out of pocket.”

In reference to an occasion when he received a Starbuck gift card, Derrick added:

“I felt good about receiving it. Starbucks is something I typically won’t go to unless I have a gift card... It’s not like you are spending your own money when you go there and spend a gift card. You don’t feel like you are spending five dollars on a cup of coffee.”

These two exchanges happened between the respondents and their mothers. Both of them did not considered these gift cards as money given/taken from loved ones, but opportunities for unexpected experiences.

Factors Encouraging Givers to Use Gift Cards

(1) Convenience

Positive feelings toward receiving gift cards are largely attributable due to a certain level of convenience felt by the giver or shopper and the high value convenience has been given in recent years. Every participant expressed this sentiment and the following are quotations from each one:

Derrick: “I purchased iTunes gift cards for my nephews birthdays and Christmas. To them it is a big treat”

Tabitha: “If I don’t know what to get somebody I don’t have to struggle through it to figure out what to get them. I can just get them a gift card. It’s so much easier.”

Brandon: “I do like the idea of...giving gift cards because for me it’s so hard to tell what people want for gift for birthdays or Christmas or whatever occasion. It takes a lot of the hassle out of it.”

(2) Economy

Economic factors influence positive perceptions about giving gift cards. When the buyer and/or giver feels that they are helping someone else make a purchase he or she would typically not be able to make otherwise, it enhances the giving experience. Derrick, for example, described the following situation:

“We have a neighbor who we’re really close to and their sister’s house was hit by the tornado. Seeing that they needed some place to go, they moved into her sister’s house while they were cleaning up the aftermath of what was left of their house. Seeing them there with nothing, we bought them a gift card to Target so they could get toothbrushes, toothpaste, clothes for the kids because it took out their whole house.”

(3) Catering to Recipient

The idea that the giver is not pressured to find a specific gift that will be approved of and appreciated by the recipient is also a positive factor on the giving end of the exchange process. The stress is coming from the fact that the gift they picked would make them look like a bad gift giver.

Tabitha: “I wouldn’t want people to think that I’m incapable of picking out a good gift. I want people to think, “She gave me a really awesome gift, which was really nice” or “She gave me a gift card. That’s really cool”

(4) The design of Gift Card

The appearance and packaging of the gift card itself has proven to be a positive factor with gift card perception. Receivers and givers use appearance factor to overcome impersonality of giving/receiving gift cards. They also pick designs that fit to different age categories and personality characteristics.

Brandon: “I would feel better getting the child one of these (Target gift cards) instead of giving them one from Wal-Mart, because they are not going to be as excited about getting one.”

Factors Influencing Negative Perceptions of Receiving Gift Cards

(1) Impersonality

In situations where gifts of social interaction were necessary, impersonality of gift cards were welcomed, even encouraged. However, the same impersonality characteristics make gift cards negatively perceived.

Jared: “Generally gift cards are impersonal, I accept with reluctance. If it is Chili’s gift card, yea thanks I will go there sometime next year.”

He also mentioned disappointment he would feel if he got a gift from important other.

“I’d be disappointed...It is very impersonal...I will feel like...wow!...It’s pretty lame. Unless it were something like a pass or ticket to an event,... like an informal way of saying let’s do that together.”

Receivers look for favorite retailers or cool designs on the card to get rid of impersonality feeling. These factors imply that the giver pays attention to which retailers receiver is frequenting. Such cases were found surprisingly and pleasantly personal enough in social interaction situations.

(2) Uneasy Feelings About Getting a \$-Value

Almost all informants mentioned about the uneasy feeling of getting cash as gift.

Tina: “I feel (that) it is little harder to accept a gift card for me sometimes....It is almost like someone giving you seventy five dollars. It is almost like you were given a cash gift, instead of a small gesture like a ham or just some fruit would make me feel better.”

Brandon: “I wouldn’t want to get a ten dollar gift card and say “Merry Christmas, mother. Here is a ten dollar gift card” I think you should go a little bit extra.”

Even though monetary value of the actual gift is more or less similar to the value of the gift card, informants prefer to receive a small symbolic gift together with the gift card. This type of feeling diminishes if family decides to spend certain amount on gifts for that gift giving season. Then they focus on buying gift cards catering receiver’s hobbies or interests without feeling guilty.

Factors Discouraging Givers to Use Gift Cards

(1) Impersonality

Gift cards were considered as impersonal gifts to give. Although they were accepted in situations like gifts to a business peer who was leaving, where very personal gifts would be scorned, impersonality of them make it unacceptable in close personal relationships. Interestingly, there were no differences between givers and receivers in this regard.

“Jared: They are kind of impersonal. So when you give someone gift card, you are conceding that you did not want to think much about their gift...They may be grateful but not impressed”

(2) Uneasy Feelings About Putting a \$-Value

Some respondents said that they are not very comfortable with giving gift cards because it seems like giving money. This feeling is prominent especially if the receiver is about the same age or older than the giver.

“Tabitha: Getting a gift is not the same as a gift card because getting a gift card is like receiving money.”

“Jared: Just like barely a stuff above giving them some money.”

However, the same respondents mentioned about very positive gift card experiences as well. These results made the researchers to wonder about the reasons for these ambivalent feelings. Respondents did not experience these negative feelings if the receiver is a kid above 7-8 years old or a teenager.

Derrick: “Fifteen dollars to a nine year old is proportionate to what their perception of money is worth.”

Tabitha: I would not get a five year old as much as a fifteen year old because they probably don't need to spend as much.”

As a next step, in order to better understand the value of gift cards and gift giving situations, relationships and role of gift cards were investigated in the data obtained as well as gift giving literature was revisited.

RELATIONSHIPS AND GIFT CARDS

Belk and Coon (1993) summarized three different models in gift giving: economic exchange, social exchange and agapic love. In economic exchange model gifts were commodities with utilitarian value and a balanced reciprocity, preferably with simultaneous exchange, was expected. Both parties of exchange feared dependence and try to be as impersonal as possible (partner commoditization). In social exchange models, gifts carried symbolic value. Exchanges were not simultaneous, but staggered. Reciprocity was still expected, but not “to cancel any felt indebtedness immediately (Belk and Coon 1993 p. 403)”. Gift exchange partners became part of the extended selves. Finally, in agapic exchange model, there was an element of sacrifice in “true” gifts, which only sought to make the recipient happy without any benefits to the giver. They were nonbinding in nature and given to singularize the recipient. As relationships were highly emotional and idealistic, givers sought to express themselves in spontaneous and celebratory ways.

Based on the models of gift giving, Larsen and Watson (2001) identified four types of value that could be conveyed with gifts. The first type of value was economic value, where monetary value or perceived scarcity of the gift is the most important aspect. These types of gifts were utilitarian and functional in nature. Cash, although considered as not appropriate in the Western societies, frequently given in other societies especially for altruistic intentions.

The second type of value was social value. Instead of a purely economic exchange, the value of these gifts stem from their facilitator effect in establishing social relationships between the giver and the receiver. These gifts might also serve as enhancing or maintaining the relationships in question. These gifts symbolized the relationship of those involved in the gift exchange.

Expressive value is the third type identified by Larsen and Watson (2001). These gifts were extensions of the self for givers as they were intended to remind the giver to the recipient. (Belk and Coon, 1993). Agapic model of gift exchange highlighted this type of value involving non-material gifts that could not be purchased from stores, hand-made items or heirlooms. There was a potential risk of losing a part of extended self in case of relationships that went awry, when parties exchanged these types of gifts. Therefore, givers and receiver postpone gifts of expressive value until they were sure of the relationship development.

The fourth value was functional value that came from the gift's function, or physical performance. These gifts were given to meet a specific need facing the recipient, such as baby showers or gift registries for newly married. As monetary gifts were not found appropriate in Western cultures, gifts with functional values were highly appreciated.

The fifth type of value was identified by Tuten and Kiecker (2009), the value of choice. This type of value emerged with the wide spreading use of gift cards, as givers transfer the power of choice to recipients. Specifically, they found out teenagers “associated receiving a gift card with

empowerment and freedom (p.80)”. The value of choice provided them an opportunity to exert their independence.

Interestingly, the same respondents mentioned about both positive and negative aspects of receiving and giving gift cards throughout the study. In some situations, they were suitable gifts and in some others, they became completely unsuitable. This ambiguous nature of the responses made us to investigate gift card giving situations and nature of relationships utilizing models of gift giving and type of value experienced by receivers. A detailed analysis of all incidences of giving and receiving gift cards for each respondent revealed that *relationship duration* and *level of intimacy* seemed to be the most important variables. We organized each incident around these variables in Table 3, consistent patterns emerge.

When relationships are just established and participants want to keep them at a low level of intimacy, gift cards are considered as perfect gifts. Examples of such situations are a new job position in an organization, a client giving a gift of appreciation, tips, and a small business owner giving awards to customers as an expression of organization’s appreciation of past purchases. Economic value was prominent in these exchanges as participants reciprocated immediately and wanted to establish or maintain weak social bonds. All of these situations can be categorized as business gift giving. Neither recipients, nor givers want to receive/give too personal gifts that may signal unwanted levels of intimacy or favoritism among co-workers. At the same time, they want to include a small touch that makes the gift more human by taking into account individual preferences.

Table 3
Relationships And Gift Cards

	LEVEL OF INTIMACY		
RELATIONSHIP DURATION	Low	Medium	High
New	<p><u>Sally</u>: GC from Boss on first holiday, Economic value - business gift. <u>Sally</u>: GC to Boss to reciprocate, Economic value - establish weak ties through business gift, value of choice <u>Laura</u>: GC from a client for Christmas-economic value as a tip <u>Brandon</u>: GC to client- economic value-</p>	<p><u>Tabitha</u>: GC to brother-in-law's girlfriend- social value to establish family ties - (recipients favorite retailer), value of choice (giving the freedom to pick favorites) and value of convenience and time for recipient (not to wait in return line) <u>Julie</u>: GC to baby shower of a distant family member with additional "nick-knacks -" - functional value</p>	<p><u>Holly</u>: GC from boyfriend: (big disappointment, not personal, he should know better, he did not put the effort into looking for something for her)-lack of expressive value <u>Jared</u>: GC from girl friend – (Not Acceptable) - lack of expressive value.</p>
Intermediate	<p><u>Sally</u>: GC to church name-draw event for Christmas – social value, value of choice <u>Sally</u>: GC from distant relatives of her husband as a gift of appreciation – economic value <u>Derrick</u>: GC to a co-worker, generic gift cards - social value to establish weak ties <u>Brandon</u>: GC to employee - functional value to help financially <u>Tina</u>: GC from an acquaintance – economic value</p>	<p><u>Laura</u>: GC from relatives-economic value <u>Derrick</u>: GC and a complementing a small gift to family members who live away,- social value for recipient, value of convenience and time for giver <u>Julie</u>: GC to graduating family member - value of choice</p>	<p><u>Sally</u>: GC and a complementing hand-made gift to grand kids attached to hand made gifts, expressive value. <u>Holly</u>: GC to grand kid who lived far away - economic value for recipient, value of convenience for giver. <u>Derrick</u>: GC to nephews, value of choice for recipients, value of convenience (finding, packing, shipping) for giver. <u>Sally</u>: GC to sons -live away, functional value, value of choice <u>Holly</u>: GC to teenage daughters from where they like to shop- value of choice. <u>Laura</u>: GC to son - functional value and choice value for recipient, value of time for giver. <u>Laura</u> : GC to daughter- economic value as monthly allowance. <u>William</u>: GC to grandchild -economic value and functional value, value of time for giver <u>Julie</u>: GC to distant family</p>

	LEVEL OF INTIMACY		
RELATIONSHIP DURATION	Low	Medium	High
			members – value of choice for recipient, value of time and convenience for giver (cost less time to find and less to ship) Julie: GC from grand children- value of experience.
Old	<u>Holly</u> : GC from coworker-social value <u>Derrick</u> : GC to neighbor whose sister's house is hit by tornado- functional value <u>Derrick</u> : GC to a co-worker, personalized gift cards - social ties <u>Julie and William</u> : GCs from church activity - social value	<u>Holly</u> : GC from a friend to something very special for herself with it- expressive value <u>Tabitha</u> : GC from sister- functional value- to get more than one item <u>Jared</u> : GC to aunt who has horses from farming retailer- value of choice <u>Jared</u> : GC to sister - value of choice. <u>Brandon</u> : GC to sister from her favorite mall - value of choice.	<u>Sally</u> : GC from husband-not acceptable-lack of expressive value. <u>Derrick</u> : GC to wife, acceptable as an additional stocking stuffer from her favorite store - expressive value <u>Derrick</u> : GC from mother, (surprise gift to somewhere he did not go normally) - expressive value, value of experience. <u>Laura</u> : GC to her dad- value of choice <u>Laura</u> : GC to her husband (money was already spent so he would not fuss about the price of item)-value of experience, and expressive value. <u>Tabitha</u> : GC to mom (so she will pick exact fabrics for quilting) functional value and value of experience. <u>Brandon</u> : GC to mom in addition to candles for Christmas - value of experience, expressive value. <u>Julie</u> : GC from daughter - value of experience and economic value (She hinted that she expected a GC from a very specific restaurant). <u>William</u> : GC from daughter - value of choice.

Respondents use gift cards to communicate their appreciation to other acquaintances. Sally received a thank you letter and a gift card from her husband's relatives after a cabin rental. Tina received a thank you card that has seventy five dollars to Red lobster from a friend who hunted on their farm. Tabitha purchased a Bath and Body card for her son's teacher as she "believed that she needed pampering". She liked cards with cute pictures on their front and thought that it was a quick way to say thank you or get well without sending actual flowers.

As Ruffle (1999) stated emotions such as surprise, disappointment, embarrassment, and pride mattered in gift giving. Gift cards seemed to replace traditional "thank-you" notes in social situations where gift givers were not very familiar with each other. These cards pleasantly surprised receivers when they were expecting a traditional thank-you card.

In situations where giver and receiver know each other for some time (relationship duration: intermediate) but they have low level of intimacy, gift cards offer good alternatives. Such exchanges usually happen in church or work place name-draws for Christmas, and among distant relatives and acquaintances. Main observed value category was social value as exchanges happened to maintain social ties. We still see economic value in business gift exchange situations where co-worker gave and receive gift cards. In one situation, small business owner gave a gift card to help a financially struggling employee- functional value.

Everybody agreed that gift cards were a best gift option for businesses to give gifts to employees. These situations were also tricky in terms of emotions. Bosses and subordinates did not want to give and receive personal gifts. Sometimes this was because they did not know the recipient well enough. Sometimes they did not want to signal false favoritism to co-workers. However, business situations required gift giving frequently. Derek preferred to give more generic gift cards such as Olive Garden, or O'Charlie's where recipients can find some food on the menu that they like.

Brandon used them to help an employee, who was struggling financially. His intention was to provide economical benefits to the recipient without making him embarrassed. Similarly, Julie and William send Wal-mart gift cards to their grandchild who got recently married and needed a new tire on their car. Sally felt very honored and proud to receive a gift card of Cracker Barrel as a congratulations gift from her boss. Clearly this card was intended as an orientation gift for socializing, as she was working there for only three months. Jared also received in iTunes card from his boss when he had graduated from college.

For old relationships among co-workers in an organization or church activities where participants know each other for a long time, gift card selections were more personalized. Main value categories emerged as social and functional value. Some givers pay particular attention to personal preferences of givers in retail institution selection.

As level of intimacy goes to medium levels, gift card exchange situations change and different types of values emerge. Establishing a relatively new relationship with moderate level of intimacy, such as a new member to family circle, sister or brother in-laws, baby showers of members of family are suitable occasions for gift card giving or receiving. Participants mentioned about providing value of choice, functional value and social value to the recipients.

In the above mentioned situations, we identified two new categories of value that were not included in the types of value in gift giving literature according to our knowledge yet. They are *value of convenience* and *value of time*. Both of them seemed to work for the receiver and the giver. Value of convenience can be defined as spending as little effort and additional money as possible in finding, wrapping, packing and shipping the gift (for giver) as well as returning the unwanted or ill-fitting gifts to the store (for receiver). Givers did not concern much about the monetary value of the gift. They already had a set amount in their mind when looking for the gift. However, they seemed to resent the additional money they had to spend in shipping the gift.

Value of time can be defined as spending as little time as possible in finding, wrapping, packing and shipping the gift (for giver) as well as waiting in the lines for returning the unwanted or ill-fitting gifts to the store (for receiver).

Value of convenience and value of time were mentioned especially when the receivers live far away and they had new and intermediate duration of relationship and medium level of intimacy with the receivers. In intermediate duration of relationships, some respondents mentioned the need to attach small complementary gifts that are easy to pack and ship to the gift cards they were sending. As relationships get older, such as old friend, favorite aunt, sister living far away, gift cards are also

welcomed. But this time, givers pay special attention to choosing the retail institution to convey expressive value as well as functional value. For example, Jared talked at length her aunt having horses and farm, and the retailer he picked had supplies for specifically horses. Our respondents provided the first evidence of gift cards used to express agapic love in the literature. In Holly's case her girl-friend gave her a gift card to spend especially on herself from a specific restaurant. She ended up going there with her daughters to have some quality time with them. She discussed at length how this occasion was a special treat from her best friend.

At the high level of intimacy category, we included relationships with boy-girl friends, husband-wife, children and grandchildren. In newly established boy-girl friend relationships, giving a gift card was a relationship breaker. It was completely unacceptable for two respondents who were in such relationships recently. Both male and female respondent expected their important other to spend more time and effort to learn and understand their styles, preferences, likes and dislikes, and find a better gift to express their love and esteem. Both used the following expression: "She/he should know better."

In relationships with intermediate duration and high level of intimacy, giving gift cards to grand kids, sons and daughters were common. These cards were given or received to express or experience multiple categories of values, including expressive, economic, functional values as well as value of convenience, choice, and time. We frequently heard about grand children living far away were the recipients of gift cards accompanied by small, sometimes hand made gifts that engage young children and a lump some amount for parents to buy another gift to the child. Some participants try to help sons or daughters economically struggling. For example, if they knew that the son needed a new tire, they gave a gift card from retailer where they could buy hat tire. This was the category where most participants mentioned specialty retailers or restaurants as gift alternatives.

As grandchildren grow older and had their own families, they start sending gift cards to them. As William and Julie said "...at our age we already have all the clothes that we could possibly wear, and stuff. We really liked to eat out and would really like to have gift cards to eat. Why let them waste their money on something you really don't care about?" Even though the economic slowdown negatively influenced the grandparents' financials, they wanted to continue shipping gifts to their grandchildren. Gift cards helped them to economize on shipping costs of gifts.

Parents, on the other hand, gave gift cards from specialty stores that appeal to their children's interests. This finding was in line with Clarke's (2006) research results regarding parents appear to consider gifts in terms of product category first such as dolls, trains, etc. then brand second. For example Laura decided first which interest of his son she was going to buy (dirt bike), then decide how much money she was going to put there (minimum of \$100), last decide about which specialty store's card she was going to buy (Lowe's).

In the parent-children relationship, exchanging gift cards satisfied both parties. Parents were time constrained, and wanted to get a good gift to recipients who were usually not afraid of making fuss. Sally thought her sons were harder to buy than her daughters. Laura's son also made a lot of fuss about the tackle box she purchased the previous Christmas. Holly's daughter returned gifts she purchased for her grandson. Similarly children picked gift cards for their parent to cater their hobbies and interests. Jared picked a Tractor Supply store card for his aunt who had horses. Tabitha gave Wal-Mart card to her mother who wanted to purchase fabric from there. Laura picked a Bass-Pro card for his father so he could go get fishing gear. This finding is in line with Caplow's (1982) results regarding different family members receiving gifts of varying value and type depending on whether the recipient was perceived as easy or difficult.

The last category of old relationships with high level of intimacy included husbands and wives, moms and adult children. Sally mentioned that her husband was an excellent gift giver with really good taste and pick great gifts including jewelry. We asked her what would be her reaction in a

hypothetical situation where he gave her a gift card from a jewelry store. She reacted negatively indicating that this was unacceptable. She “expected him to put a little more effort into it than that.” It seemed that the only time a gift card was acceptable from husband and wife was when one respondent gave his wife as an additional stocking stuffer from her favorite store. But this gift was not the major gift he gave for that Christmas.

We identified another interesting value among gift card exchanges happening in high intensity old relationship category. Givers were gifting their loved ones special occasions to experience novelty where that person might not attempt in their day-to-day routines. This is *value of experience*. It can be defined as “a present of an activity (or bundle of activities) in which the recipient is invited to participate. As such, it necessitates (as a minimum) the consumption of recipient time. (Clarke 2008, p.366)” Many experience gifts were planned as surprises. Old and highly intimate relationships of givers and receivers actually made these types of gifts appreciated and sought after.

Usually experience gifts are related to service organizations. Givers spent time to think and organize these gifts. Since the money was already spent and gift card was prepared, recipient experiences the service without “much fuss”. Givers may share the experience with the recipient. But it did not actually require the physical presence of the donor. Receivers stated that experience gifts were meaningful for them.

DISCUSSION

Due to this increased attention to gift cards over the past decade, it can be surmised, based on the data from the interviews, that those who participate in gift exchanges, generally speaking, have had some encounter with gift cards, either in a giving situation or receiving situation. These giving and receiving experiences were perceived as either positive or negative.

Studies that feature gift giving abound in the literature; however, this study contributes to the literature by exploring the gift cards’ role in gift giving. It also provided evidence of multiple models of gift giving is functional in different levels of intimacy and duration of relationships between givers and receivers. Belk (1979) stated that there were four different functions of gift giving as “(1) a symbolic form of communication between the giver and the recipient; (2) a form of social exchange, aiding in establishing, determining and maintaining interpersonal relationships; (3) an economic exchange (a means of conferring material benefit on a recipient); and (4) a socializer (affecting the self-concept and behavioral patterns of the recipient)” (Laroche et al. 2000, p. 505). During the interviews participants stated that gift cards help givers and receivers to realize all these functions. Also new types of values (convenience, time and experience) were identified. Value of choice mentioned in Tuten and Kiecker (2009) was re-observed.

Respondents used gift cards to send and receive signals about the level of relationships. Depending on the relationship duration and level of intimacy, respondents attached positive or negative meanings to gift cards. For example, all respondents reacted negatively to a gift card coming from an important other. It was a big no-no for a newly established boy-girl friendship, and may cause a break up. It was not desirable between couples that were together for a long period of time as well, as Sally stated “I expect him to put a little more effort into it than that. It is too convenient. I just like the idea that he’s thought about it and went looking for something that would please me.”

This was consistent with the Belk and Coon’s (1993) study about agapic love model where emotions, expressiveness, singularization of the recipient, and selfless sacrifice were important. In new/medium term and highly intimate relationship giving gift card lacks in especially singularization of the recipient. For these relationships, key romantic meaning of the gift had to be that the recipient is unique and special. Apparently, a gift card from a common retailer failed in this regard, even if it had a high economic or symbolic value.

On the other hand, the type of relationship among parents, grandparents, and their children made them to welcome gift cards with enthusiasm. This was especially important, if grand children were living far away from grandparents. Ruth, Otnes and Brunel (1999) mentioned that gifts served as instruments of realignment of relations in the family. However, separate lifestyles made it hard for grandparents to establish and nurture meaningful relationships. While they wanted to send gifts that could be meaningful for grandkids, they did not want to give negligible gifts that might weaken or severe relationship with their daughters, sons or in-laws. So they attached gift cards to small handmade items as Sally said “...of course grandbabies have to get good stuff from granny... I make them stuff and give them gift cards too. I like little things that I’ve hand-made that they can keep. But I feel like they didn’t cost much to make so I like to keep up the difference with the gift card. I don’t want to be cheap”.

This research identified new concepts of value related to gift cards, namely value of time, value of convenience and value of experience for both givers and receivers. It also provided evidence about value of choice concept identified by Tuten and Kiecker (2009). Indeed, older generations enjoyed value of choice as much as teenagers. Value of experience was the last concept identified related to increasing popularity of gift cards. Clarke (2008) mentioned the phenomenon of experiences as gifts for the first time. This research provided further evidence that it was undeniably the preferable gift for those who had “all the clothes they could wear”. Level of intimacy and relationship duration framework helped to identify suitable and unsuitable gifts for multiple age groups.

In conclusion, gift cards already seemed to occupy an important place in gift giving rituals. They carry social risk of a bad purchase and psychological risk of embarrassment in certain situations for specific levels of relationships. However they reduce performance risk of products and provide relief from time pressure for gift givers. Positive and negative factors for gift cards are situation and relationship specific. They are significantly impersonal than traditionally purchased and given gifts. But this impersonal nature makes them great gifts in certain situations. Some differences between males and females were observed during this study. However, further quantitative research is necessary to test these observations as well as the framework developed.

As intended in this study, the role of gift cards in consumers gift giving practices were investigated through in-depth interviews. Sample size was not a concern for this study and additional interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. Increasing the variability was important, so male and female respondents from multiple ages were approached. As such, results cannot be generalized to any populations. This study provided valuable insight for the gift giving literature by clarifying situational variables of relationship duration and level of intimacy and adding new types of values in gift giving situations. Further research was needed to compare and contrast preference differences among these subgroups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

Gift giving is an important part of creating and maintaining social bonding among individuals around the world. Gift cards provide multiple conveniences to gift givers and receivers, so that customers are willing to change traditional gift giving rituals around these conveniences. This way they will be able to establish and nurture social bonds even though lifestyles force people to live far away. This study identified many use situations that gift cards are considered as appropriate. How could managers utilize knowledge gained in this study?

Managers should understand that there were needs for both personalized and impersonalized gift cards. The latter was appreciated when givers and receivers try to avoid building intimacy but social situations require them to exchange gifts. For example, business gift cards are necessary to promote office relationships, reward and surprise employees on their daily performances, or appreciate

retirees. They are impersonal in nature compared to clothing or food items, but indicate that somebody in the office paid enough attention to the employee's preferences.

In personal gift giving settings, the level of relationship is important; especially as level of intimacy and relationship duration increases. For example, gift cards are acceptable among close family members, aunts, grand parents and grand kids. They usually want to give each other value of choice among their favorite stores. In such family relationships, usually humor was welcomed by both receivers and givers. The livelier, brighter and cheerful the gift cards are, the better for the giver and receiver. Frequent changes in art work, colors, and messages are recommended. Some retailers use inexpensive toys like whistles, lights, 3D figures, lip glosses etc. to cater this need.

Gift cards are also suitable mediums to enhance logo and brand awareness. Managers should include brand names and logos in a noticeable manner on gift cards to promote their stores. Consumers keep their cards until they use all the money they contain. This is especially important for restaurants; since the logo on the card will function as a constant reminder of the brand and enhance top of the mind position of the restaurant brand. Respondents stated that they throw away used cards unless they buy reduced priced merchandise such as gasoline with that card. Then they reload it once or twice. Retailers can use gift cards as incentives and promotions. They can give a percentage off to customers if they bring them back for next visit.

This research confirmed once more that consumers usually spent more than what they got in the gift cards. They also were willing to visit restaurants, retailers, or service providers that they usually did not frequent when they received their gift cards. Experience as a gift spreading among consumers, especially who had exchanged multiple gifts throughout their mutual relationships with the receivers and had trouble finding interesting gifts that signal how unique were the receiving party. They believe it was a good way to introduce people to new places. Usually monetary values attached to experience gifts were high, which provided an opportunity to build mutually profitable relationships for new customers.

In such occasions, giver may or may not be present when the receiver is experiencing the gift. Managers of service providers have to build databases to collect information from givers about the preferences and limitations of receivers to ensure memorable experiences. They also have to understand that generating memories instead of dust collectors is a strong attraction for these customers. Gift cards are important to make the gift tangible. Managers should design strategies to reduce recipient anxiety and build positive feelings of anticipation even before the recipient experience the gift. Gift cards' designs, presentation, information included are crucial in that regard. These gifts are very risky for the giver, as they rely on their old and intimate relationships with the recipient. If something goes wrong for the receiver, service providers may also lose givers as well.

There is usually substantial time lag exists between gift purchase, exchange and actual consumption (Clarke 2008). Therefore, expiration dates on the gift cards are critical for the experience. Managers should take the lead to initiate the experience with the recipient. Expiration dates should be long enough to ensure a gift experience that caters to the needs of the recipient. Also, in order to increase the rate of trial, retailers have to think distribution channels of these cards carefully. Selling them only in the original store will not enhance trial by potential customers who are not aware of the retailer. Most of the respondents mentioned that they never thought about going to a specific restaurant before receiving the gift card.

What retailer related factors discourage consumers to give cards? Gift cards issued by unknown retailers, retailers that may go out of business, expiration dates that come too quickly, hidden charges were some identified during this research. As there was both social and financial risk involved in any gift giving situations, retailers should minimize these risks by improving communications included in presentation and use of gift cards. Another concern was about fees

charged to gift cards that reduce the amount of money on the card if not used. Consumers appreciate the option of getting the remainder of the amount after the use of the card, if the amount is less than \$10.

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