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# The role of social power relations in gift giving on Valentine's Day

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### Abstract

*This study investigates motives for gift giving by young males on Valentine's Day and advances previous research on this ritual by controlling for the giving context (occasion and relationship). The study is consistent with previous work by Goodwin et al. (1990) which found that motivations based on obligation, self-interest and altruism do indeed exist. More significantly, however, this study points to the finding that individual motivations for the gift-giving ritual on Valentine's Day may be more intricately intertwined and have deeper manifestations in the perceived social power relationship between the genders. The study recommends that marketers delve beyond the immediate horizon of individual motivations and become even more acutely aware of the 'intrinsic social power messages' that arise from the conjoint influences of motivations. This would have great potential for marketing even more meaningful gift products to both givers and receivers.*

## INTRODUCTION

Gift-giving behaviour has been defined as the process of *gift exchange* that takes place between a giver and a recipient (Cohn and Schiffman, 1996). The giving and receiving of gifts is a ritual that takes place in all societies albeit in different forms. The overriding motivations for these rituals vary according to situations, contexts and relationships (Ruth *et al.*, 1999); however, people give, receive and give back gifts to build and strengthen reciprocal relations, forming bonds of trust and dependence that assist them in their everyday lives (Finlay, 1990; Huang and Yu, 2000; Joy, 2001; Ruth *et al.*, 1999; Yau *et al.*, 1999). It has been suggested, however, that each of the parties in the exchange process in fact may value the specific gift exchange differently (Larsen and Watson, 2001; Ruffle, 1999; Ruth *et al.*, 1999) by offering gifts for different reasons.

It is widely acknowledged that consumers engage in gift selection for others depending on the occasion and context. For instance, there are those occasions that symbolise *rites of passage* such as weddings and others that symbolise *rites of progression* such as birthdays (Ruth *et al.*, 1999). In addition, gift-giving behaviour is subject to context such as socialisation and status hierarchies (Cohn and Schiffman, 1996), 'monadic' giving or 'self-gifting' (Mick and DeMoss, 1990), 'romance' (Belk and Coon, 1993; Huang and Yu, 2000), gift value (Larsen and Watson, 2001), anxiety of giving (Wooten, 2000) and even social power exchange relations and the nature of relationships (Burton *et al.*, 1995; Joy, 2001; Ruth *et al.*, 1999).

What makes the gift-giving ritual of great interest to marketers, especially in industrialised nations, is that gift-giving behaviour has enormous economic consequences. For instance, occasions such as Christmas have accounted for more than 30 per cent of retail sales in the USA and more than 50 per cent of retail profits (Mowen and Minor, 1998,

p. 464). Ruth *et al.* (1999) suggest that in the USA over US\$100bn is spent on gifts each year (p. 385). It is small wonder that retailers recognise the importance of gift-giving behaviour to their viability and take full advantage of the numerous gift occasions prescribed by Western societies. It is also acknowledged that the type of gift situation may influence a consumer's involvement in the purchase. According to Wolfinbarger and Gilly (1996), consumers tend to engage in greater search efforts and buy more expensive, higher quality presents for a *rite of passage* (usually a low-frequency, large-scale event such as a wedding) than for a *rite of progression* (a high-frequency, small-scale event such as a birthday). For instance, a husband might buy more carefully considered and more expensive gifts for his spouse to mark a wedding anniversary than he would for her birthday even though both events occur annually.

Gift givers manage meanings about who the giver is and who the receiver is, as well as the nature of their relationship (Joy, 2001; Mowen and Minor, 1998; Ruth *et al.*, 1999; Yau *et al.*, 1999). It is this strong symbolic quality, demonstrated in the meaning of the gifts, that differentiates the various gift-giving occasions, making each one unique and deserving of special investigation by marketing researchers. One such giving occasion is Valentine's Day, which is somewhat unique because, even though it is a relatively small-scale event, the nature of the ritual has significant symbolic implications for both the giver and the receiver. It is perhaps also worth noting that there is some research which suggests that over-commercialisation of giving occasions, even small-scale events such as Valentine's Day, can result in increased anxiety and pressure on those actively involved in the ritual (Mortelmans and Damen, 2001; Wooten, 2000).

Various writers on gift giving have

suggested a number of motives for the giving ritual. While they all have merit, there is a view that gift-giving behaviour on occasions such as Valentine's Day may be more intricate than previously demonstrated, because this ritual may be governed by the need for relationship development or mutual social power exchanges between the giver and the receiver (Burton *et al.*, 1995; Joy, 2001; Ruth *et al.*, 1999). It might be suggested that under these circumstances gift selection and giving is somewhat different, as the purchaser in this situation is likely to consider the recipients' needs and interests in the context of their own (Burton *et al.*, 1995; Ruth *et al.*, 1999). This is particularly true where the gift products in question also satisfy higher order needs for both the giver and the receiver, particularly if the gifts are luxury items, implying a kind of social power exchange relationship.

Given the discussion presented above, this study attempts to shed more light on the role of social power exchanges as the basis for specific gift-giving motivations. The study specifically examines this phenomenon in the context of young males giving gifts on Valentine's Day.

#### **VALENTINE'S DAY AND YOUNG MALES**

Valentine's Day is traditionally a gift-giving occasion which over the years has become a worldwide phenomenon. Valentine's Day is celebrated in more countries than other broad-based gift-giving occasions such as Mother's Day or Father's Day (Ebenkamp, 1999). As with most gift-giving occasions, Valentine's Day has become extremely commercialised, with retailers seizing the opportunity to market various symbolic goods. More recently, even the internet has been used as a source of mass marketing on Valentine's Day (Maddox, 1999). The increased commercialisation of giving occasions such as Valentine's Day may change the

nature of gift giving associated with these days (Mortelmans and Damen, 2001). Interestingly, this literature search was unable to uncover any studies that directly focus on giving for Valentine's Day, apart from one study by Wooten (2000, p. 85), who indicated that he surveyed respondents in early February 'in order to capitalize on the recency of Christmas gift presentation and the salience of Valentine's Day gift selection'. Wooten's (2000) work provides valuable insights into giving, although it does not present a *comprehensive* discussion of Valentine's Day giving experiences.

What sets the Valentine's Day gift-giving occasion apart from others is that it represents exclusively an occasion when individuals in a romantic relationship express their love and affection through strong symbolic gift giving (Wooten, 2000). The emphasis on the romantic, interpersonal context, perhaps more than any other, serves to bring out the social power relation exchange proposed earlier.

Jackson (1992), Goodwin *et al.* (1990) and Areni *et al.* (1998) all found that, in general, males are more often gift givers and females more often gift recipients. This finding is consistent with Burton *et al.*'s (1995) observation of social power relation exchanges with regard to different genders. According to the latter authors, traditionally and in many cultures women are generally viewed as having less social power than men. Jackson (1992) and Burton *et al.* (1995) both argue that women generally choose mates on the basis of their social power (as a means of elevating their social position). This perspective suggests that men exchange power for beauty, and women use their appearance as a means of enhancing social power (Buss and Barnes, 1986). Such behaviour is reflected in an interesting study of personal advertisements in which it was shown that men were more likely to offer financial security and seek

attractiveness, whereas women were more likely to offer attractiveness and seek financial security (Burton *et al.*, 1995). Thus, the suggestion that males are more often gift givers and females recipients appears to be valid. In relation to Valentine's Day, anecdotal evidence also suggests that marketers often target 'younger couples' and young males in particular. Clearly such observations underlie the significance of a study such as this. Answers to the question of what motivates young males to purchase gifts are not only an important test of theory, they may well represent new viable alternatives to marketing practitioner knowledge and strategy formulation.

#### THE LITERATURE ON GIFT GIVING

The gift-giving literature has taken a number of different approaches to examining this phenomenon. These include exchange theory (Belk and Coon, 1991; Coon and Belk, 1991; Mattson, 1982), social roles and relationships (Joy, 2001; Otnes *et al.*, 1993; Ruth *et al.*, 1999), symbolism (Belk and Coon, 1993; Wolfinbarger, 1990), exploring the 'dark side' of the gift (Otnes *et al.*, 1992 and 1993; Rucker *et al.*, 1991; Sherry *et al.*, 1992 and 1993), anxiety (Wooten, 2000) and the personal value of gifts (Larsen and Watson, 2001; Ruffle, 1999).

In examining the approaches taken within the literature, one gets the impression that the specific motivational drivers of gift giving do not appear to have received much attention. In fact only three works appear to have attempted to deal with this important issue in any useful detail. For instance, Wolfinbarger (1990) analysed the prevalence of three motives: obligation, self-interest and altruism. Goodwin *et al.* (1990) also examined motivations for gift giving, and found that while self-interest and obligation were important, altruistic giving did not appear to be as important. Belk and Coon (1993)

identified economic, social and agapic (romantic love) dimensions of giving in terms of exchange theories, which can be related to motives.

Essentially, where specific motivational drivers of gift giving have been studied, a number of important findings have been made. Overall, the *self-interest* motive has been found to be more prevalent in gift-giving behaviour than any other motivational drivers (Wolfinbarger, 1990; Goodwin *et al.*, 1990). *Obligation* has also been found to be a major gift-giving motive by different studies, however, such as Goodwin *et al.* (1990), Wolfinbarger (1990) and Belk and Coon (1993). For instance, Goodwin *et al.*'s (1990) study suggests that gifts are only purchased with self-interest or obligation motives in mind. Similarly, Wolfinbarger (1990) demonstrates the importance of the obligation motive by suggesting that it is an outcome of the influence of society on peoples' behaviour in terms of the need for compliance with social norms. Arguing along similar lines, Belk and Coon (1993) identify the importance of social constraints and symbolism, utilising the social exchange model based on economic theory. These authors point out that the obligation motive is manifest in *dating* behaviour as an expenditure, which represents an *investment* in the relationship (p. 398) which may *pay off* for the individual(s) incurring the expense.

Although results are somewhat inconclusive, altruism is another motive that has been discussed within various gift-giving studies. For instance, Wolfinbarger (1990) found altruism to be an important gift-giving motive, particularly in the context of romance. This is consistent with the agapic (romantic) love model proposed by Belk and Coon (1993). It is worth noting that other works such as those by Batson (1987) and Goodwin *et al.* (1990) essentially question the very nature and existence of altruistic behaviour.

Apart from the studies discussed

above, the three motives of self-interest, obligation and altruism also appear in general gift-giving literature, particularly in the context of festive occasions such as the Christmas season (Otnes *et al.*, 1992 and 1993; Fischer and Arnold, 1990; Caplow, 1982 and 1984; Sherry and McGrath, 1989). The most commonly identified motive in this regard is *obligation*, which is typically unearthed by confronting questions such as 'would you consider not giving at Christmas' (Lowe *et al.*, 1971). The sense of obligation was also found to be important in terms of certain types of relationship (Joy, 2001; Ruth *et al.*, 1999) and was found actually to impact on the anxiety associated with giving (Wooten, 2000).

Although the above findings present a useful basis from which to understand the psychological motives for giving and receiving, the role of reciprocity (Ruth *et al.*, 1999) remains a somewhat grey area. There is an important question of whether the motivations proposed above are mutually exclusive and therefore represent an exhaustive range of motives. There is a school of thought which views the extent of obligation and altruism as more intricately interwoven than has been demonstrated previously, thinking it in fact may be shaped by situational contexts that create a need for mutual social power exchanges (Burton *et al.*, 1995). It might be suggested that gift selection and giving under such situations is somewhat different as the purchaser is likely to consider the recipients' needs and interests in the context of their own (Burton *et al.*, 1995; Joy, 2001; Ruth *et al.*, 1999). This is particularly true where the gift products in question also satisfy higher order needs for both the giver and the receiver, particularly if the gifts are luxuries, suggesting a kind of social power exchange relationship.

On the basis of the discussion presented above, this study attempts to shed more light on the role of social

power exchanges as a basis for specific gift-giving motivations. Apart from the paucity of studies dealing specifically with gift giving and Valentine's Day, this occasion was chosen for further investigation because it appears to represent a unique situational context for testing the notion of social power exchange relations. The occasion may well encompass a broader range of giving motivations.

The study specifically examines the nature of the motivations which persuade young males to give gifts on Valentine's Day. This paper utilises the three gift-giving motivations of self-interest, obligation and altruism as a template to test their importance and possible inter-relationships further. These motivations are defined as follows:

- *Self-interest*, which involves gift giving to ultimately improve the situation of the giver (Mowen and Minor, 1998, p. 465)
- *Obligation*, which is 'something one is bound to do' (Mowen and Minor, 1998, p. 465)
- *Altruism*, which is defined as gift giving which is 'not directed at gain . . . emitted voluntarily' (Wolfenbarger, 1990, p. 700).

#### METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodology used in this study is based on the previous literature for this area (for example, see recent works by Joy, 2001; Ruth *et al.*, 1999; Wooten, 2000). While earlier studies on gift giving (Belk, 1976 and 1982) used surveys and other quantitative techniques, there was also a call for more exploratory-based research by Sherry (1983). This has resulted in a number of researchers taking a more qualitative approach to examining the issue. According to Patton (1987), qualitative methodology is essentially 'subjective' using an 'interpretivism' approach that incorporates the principles that 'people react to each situation differently and

that they construct their own realities on how the world is viewed in their own context'. In this regard, qualitative research is seen as free from predetermined theories and questions, with questions and theories emerging after data collection rather than being posed before the study begins (Wiersma, 1995; Jacobs, 1988; Patton, 1987). The development of an appropriate research methodology, using gift giving in the context of *symbolic interactionism*, necessarily assumes that qualitative research can be clarified by recognising research comes in many different varieties. Some writers have argued that 'a major source of confusion arises from discussing qualitative research as though it is one approach' (Jacobs, 1988). Indeed, qualitative approaches have frequently involved a combination of interviews, projective techniques and focus groups. For the purposes of this study, the authors argue that qualitative research methods are fundamental for collecting givers' motivational world views of Valentine's Day gift giving. Thus, this research utilises focus groups and in-depth interview techniques. An important additional rationale is that gift giving is a complex phenomenon that generates numerous subtleties of a qualitative nature which are subject to a large degree of individual variation. Hence, surveys or very structured forms of gathering information would be inappropriate for capturing the nuances of such varying and subtle messages (Joy, 2001).

For this study, focus group and interview techniques were utilised. In all, four focus groups of six to eight participants were used to ensure that no 'unique' issues associated with the research context were overlooked. Since the overall themes encountered were consistent with previous literature and hypothesised relationships, they were incorporated into the in-depth interview protocol. In-depth interviews were then undertaken with 61 participants between the ages of 18 and 25, which is

similar to the number used in other recent qualitative research on gift giving (ie Joy (2001) — 35 students; Wooten (2000) — 105 students). These individuals were selected using a mall-type intercept approach undertaken at a major regional university in a central location where most of the student body passed regularly, across a range of days of the week and times to minimise any sampling bias. Given the target population of 18–25-year-olds, the authors believed that this method would result in a representative sample of respondents, in addition, earlier qualitative giving research examined student samples (Joy, 2001). In addition to fitting the targeted age profile, each respondent had to be able to recall a Valentine's Day purchase they had made for their romantic partner within the last two years.

Individuals interested in participating were asked to attend an interview meeting which lasted approximately 30 minutes. The issues identified in the literature review and focus groups were examined in more detail and included: attitudes towards Valentine's Day, perceptions of female expectations and various types of gifts and their appropriateness to the lengths of the different relationships, as well as the individuals' demographic characteristics.

The mean age of the 61 respondents was 20.6 years, 14 of the respondents were part-time students and the remaining 47 were full-time students. Forty-eight per cent of respondents were in relatively 'new' relationships (< 3 months), and the split of longer relationships was generally balanced (3–6 months 13 per cent; 6–12 months 15 per cent; 1–2 years 15 per cent; 2–5 years 8 per cent). The average income of respondents was US\$8,200 per annum.

The moderator created an environment whereby each participant had the opportunity to air their views, in order to obtain high-quality responses. Examples of questions asked

to identify gift-giving motives included the following.

- How long had you been dating your girlfriend at the time?
- Would you ever consider not buying a Valentine's Day present?
- Do you think the price of the gift can be interpreted as a sign of love or commitment to your girlfriend?
- Do you buy a Valentine's Day gift expecting something in return?
- Do you buy gifts just because it is Valentine's Day?
- Do you buy gifts for your partner with yourself in mind?
- Questions related to a scenario were used to help determine if there was a relationship between the motivation for a gift purchase and the length of the relationship.

The data analysis process involved a content analysis of each individual interview session to identify themes within the discussion as suggested in literature relative to the analysis of in-depth interviews (Thompson *et al.*, 1989; Miles and Hubberman, 1984). To ensure validity the interviewer and scribe reviewed the notes of the meeting immediately after it was completed to ensure that appropriate issues were covered; any disagreements were discussed to ensure the validity of responses. Thus, having two researchers present allowed for an accurate interpretation of the data. The overall results were presented as a description intended to identify the most common themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In accordance with the findings of this study, the overwhelming motive for young males to give gifts on Valentine's Day was obligation. In this context, the majority of respondents viewed giving as 'something you just have to do' (RW, 21). Similarly, when respondents were asked to describe what Valentine's Day represents, all 61 respondents believed that giving a gift is necessary when in a

relationship, simply because their partner would be expecting a gift. Respondents were asked if they would ever consider not giving a gift, as was done by Wolfinbarger (1990). Seventy-seven per cent of respondents indicated that they would always give a gift on Valentine's Day. Although the apparent motive appears to be obligation, a latent motive could be perceived in the context of mutual gain, otherwise why would partners expect gifts at all, unless they believed they too contributed to the social exchange process.

Most of the remaining 23 per cent of respondents, however, believed that not giving a gift would be acceptable *as long as* the relationship progressed. There was a view, however, that in the early stages of a relationship a gift on Valentine's Day was seen as essential for the relationship. Once again, this implies that gift giving on Valentine's Day was not always perceived as an obligation. Furthermore, the fact that males attempted to avoid conflict with a partner could highlight a latent self-interest motive combined with what appears to be an obligation motive. For example, 'all hell would break loose' (JD, 21) and 'I hope . . . I'd still have a girlfriend' (HJ, 22). This reaction was interpreted probably to be due to each partner's contribution to the relationship.

Across respondents, the self-interest motive was also prevalent and tended to manifest itself in conjunction with other motives. When participants were explicitly asked if they expected something in return when they gave a Valentine's Day present, 25 per cent of subjects responded positively. Many of the responses appeared to be of a non-material nature, and some appeared to indicate a sexual connotation, which was often inferred rather than stated. For example, in response to the hypothetical question 'if you were to buy lingerie for your partner, would it be for you, or for her?', an overwhelming majority of respondents

(89 per cent) stated that, while giving, they would also be thinking about themselves in the purchase process. Once again this could be interpreted in the context of social power exchange relationships.

The altruism motive was also detected and, like self-interest, was often incorporated as part of the obligation and self-interest motive. Altruism was the most difficult motive to unearth explicitly and was therefore identified from discussions relating to several questions. Some examples include 'you don't need a day to say I love you' (RD, 21); 'Valentine's Day is an opportunity to make her happy' (JN, 20). The element of self-interest was often found to be associated with altruism 'if you do it right, you'll be glad, you know' (HD, 21). The obligation motive was also associated with altruism and centred on societal influences 'its just expected, it's what's done' (GT, 19).

Overall, whereas all three motives were found, the obligation motive appeared to be most prevalent, and all three motives showed a tendency to exist in combination with the other motives. Importantly, the latent motive of social power exchange was also prevalent. This signifies that motives are perhaps more intricately intertwined than previously presented. Furthermore, this intertwining appears to present a social power exchange relation, whereby low to high self-interest and a sense of *volunteering to oblige* by males appear to be aimed at creating a 'mutual exchange' scenario.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In assessing the results overall, there are useful implications for theory and marketing strategy. First, the three motives examined were all found to exist. Secondly, these motives were shown to be part of more complicated interactions than previously presented in the literature. Hence, for practical implementation purposes, marketers are presented with the opportunity to

utilise these motives singularly and/or in conjunction with one another in order to persuade people to purchase specific gifts that bear important symbolisms relating to the ritual under investigation. For example, given that the *obligation* motive for gift giving is so prevalent, marketers may be able to utilise this motive much more by developing more relevant and softer appeals that promote the notion that to give a gift on Valentine's Day is simply to express the extent to which one values a social relationship. However, the *obligation* motive could also be utilised conjointly with *self-interest*, which was also identified as an important motive. This combination would essentially present a scenario whereby *self-interest* is paired with an expectation of reciprocity, suggesting a valid role for the '*social power appeal*' as previously found by Burton *et al.* (1995). Ruth *et al.* (1999) and Joy, 2001 both suggest that there is relational pressure to give, which socially empowers both the giver and the recipient. Wooten's (2000) study found expressions of anxiety among gift givers on the issue of 'appropriate gifts'. On the surface, this may suggest that the recipient has more social power than the giver; however, this observation does not rule out the probability that recipients expecting a gift may be equally anxious about whether or not they receive a gift that is consistent with their perceptions of the strength of their social relations.

The notion of *social power exchange* may also provide an opportunity to highlight how giving may reward the giver and, in so doing, cast a more positive light on the ulterior, darker and negative side of giving uncovered in various studies. Using social power exchange appeals, marketers can target young gift givers, utilising romantic contexts to highlight these 'mutual benefits'. Quite clearly, the idea of emphasising low to high self-interest in the context of voluntary mutual exchange minimises the chances of the



recipient identifying these gifts with an obligation to 'reward' the giver; rather, the giver and receiver are placed in a more or less voluntary reciprocating light.

Another example of the existing complex interactions among motives is explained by the fact that many respondents also associated altruistic motives with other motives such as obligation and self-interest. In practical terms, this gives marketers the opportunity to utilise marketing programmes that include combined appeals. For instance, messages could generate meanings such as individuals should give to make their partners feel special, but also underline the fact that giving will allow the individual to fulfil their 'obligation' and, in so doing, achieve their self-interest of feeling rewarded.

Given the very obvious conjoint nature of motivational gift giving begs the question of why altruism is generally presented as the sole motive for gift giving on Valentine's Day. The fact that this type of appeal is most frequently used for promoting Valentine's Day gifts, despite the above findings, may be a consequence of the notion that an altruistic message might be more effective in impacting on a recipient's perception of the gift and the motivation of its giver. The danger of this one-sided appeal is that it ignores the importance and strength of 'social power exchanges' and the sense of mutual benefit.

Overall, the findings from the research provide a greater understanding of the Valentine's Day gift-giving motivations of young males. Future investigations may also benefit from examining how the length of the relationship impacts on motivations, including the perceived social power exchange relations of givers and receivers. Additional research is also needed on the effectiveness of combining motivational appeals and how those giving and those receiving

the gifts view such messages.

Recipients' perceptions may have significant implications for strategy, as certain types of marketing appeal, or even types of gift, may be more positively perceived by those receiving them. The results of further research could allow successful campaigns to run for longer periods, saving valuable dollars for relevant businesses. Finally, further research could be undertaken to examine the gift-giving behaviour of females on Valentine's Day, as this may provide valuable and more complete information regarding the gift-giving ritual. From a theoretical perspective, clearly the presentation of gift-giving motives as though they are mutually exclusive may need to be revisited and the development of models that are more integrating be given serious thought.

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