

Because I'm Worth It: An Exploration of Consumer Perceived Values in the Self-Gifting Experience

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Background and Purpose. Self-gifting has become a popular consumption practice, with 70% of US consumers reporting that they regularly spend money on purchases for themselves (Rippé et al., 2019). Self-gifts are characterized as pre-meditated and highly context-dependent (Clarke & Mortimer, 2013). Self-gifts can take various forms, including products, services, or experiences, that provide special meanings in certain contexts. Self-gifts are a form of symbolic self-communication that reinforces and rewards accomplishments, reflects self-love, and also can be used for consolation purposes (Park, 2018). Consumers may also indulge in self-gifts to maintain identity, promote self-esteem, or influence self-directed cognitions (Park, 2018). These psycho-social functions of self-gifting can be fulfilled by the values embodied in a product/service self-gift. Thus, consumer perceived values (CPVs) have been detected in studies on self-gifting behavior. For example, self-gifts that are purchased to reward oneself or to make oneself feel better entail positive emotions, and more broadly, hedonic values, such as happiness, pleasure, joy, excitement, delight, and fantasy (Heath et al., 2015). Likewise, luxury self-gifts are likely to pertain to social value, particularly social status improvement or maintenance, as they tend to involve perceptions of newness, specialness, exclusivity, conspicuousness, and uniqueness (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2014).

Although various values have been identified in studies investigating self-gifting behavior, in-depth empirical study of the role of CPVs in self-gifting is limited. Given the context-bound characteristics of self-gifts, the majority of studies on self-gifting predominantly focus on the motivations of self-gifting behavior (Clarke & Mortimer, 2013; Heath et al., 2015; Mick & DeMoss, 1992), and pay less attention to potential CPVs inherent in the self-gifting experience. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of CPVs in self-gifting. Sheth et al.'s (1991) Consumption Value Theory (CVT) provides the conceptual foundation for the study. The theory posits that "consumer choice is a function of multiple consumption values" and that "consumption values make differential contributions in any given choice situation" (Sheth et al., 1991, p. 160). CVT has been used to improve understanding of CPVs in consumer choice behavior (Kaur et al., 2018). As self-gifting involves a sense of deservingness (e.g., deserve a reward) and hedonic motives (e.g., to feel better), consumers may include consideration of such values when purchasing self-gifts (Faure & Mick, 1993). Moreover, CPVs are considered important indicators used to predict purchase intention as well as consumer satisfaction (Yang & Peterson, 2004).

Method. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for exploring CPVs in self-gifting because self-gifting behavior is context-dependent and subjective (Heath et al., 2015). With IRB approval from the researchers' university, participants were recruited using a snowball technique (Chen & Kim, 2013). Virtual one-on-one interviews were conducted via Zoom with a total of 20 participants (5 males and 15 females). Participants were between 23 and 52 years of age (average 37 years). Semi-structured interviews were employed (Bly et al., 2015) and questions were designed to prompt participants to describe their self-

gifting experiences, including *Describe the most recent time you bought a gift for yourself?* or *What made you decide to buy the gift for yourself?* Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the interview data were analyzed iteratively to uncover categories of meaning and identify emergent themes that were then interpreted through the conceptual lens of CVT (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). As a result, seven value-based themes emerged and were used to structure the interpretation: (1) price and quality, (2) feeling happy, (3) social connection, (4) gaining new knowledge, (5) gaining new experiences, (6) security through resale, and (7) work-life balance. Themes were then linked to the CPV literature as part of the CVT to explore the conceptual relevance of the findings. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality.

Results and Discussion. The majority of participants talked about perceived values related to price and quality when purchasing self-gifts. For example, Claire stated that "If it's a self-gift...I will wait for maybe like Black Friday or something like that for a reasonable price." William, on the other hand, looked for quality in a self-gift, and said, "You wouldn't buy like an off-brand bike. [I would] make sure of the quality and good reviews." These examples fit with the concept of functional value found in the CPV literature (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) because the focus is on cost and performance of the product even when it is a self-gift. Participants also talked about the importance of self-gifting to feel better. For example, Amy talked about getting a lift when purchasing a self-gift, and said, "It's just to make me feel better after a hard day." This finding is consistent with the concept of emotional value as a CPV, which is pertinent to feelings and affective states (Sheth et al., 1991). Participants also talked about the role of social identity and interaction through self-gifts. As Madison stated: "For me, self-gifts would involve going out to cultural events or meeting people, or having a coffee with a friend." This finding supports the concept of social value inherent in consumption per the CPV literature (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

Other themes that emerged include a desire for gaining knowledge or experiences through self-gifts. For example, Victoria said, "I expect to learn something. So, when I buy books, [they] would be set in New York, or they might be set in DC or somewhere that I have never lived. You could learn about different places." Participants also mentioned that they purchased self-gifts as special experiences. For example, Victoria also shared: "In Trinidad, we have something called Brazilian carnival. So that's an experience that I would buy for myself because it's so much fun." These examples reflect CPV concepts as they are consistent with epistemic (curiosity or knowledge seeking) and conditional values acquired as a result of specific situations and sets of circumstances (Sheth et al., 1991). Interestingly, two themes emerged from the data that have not been reported in the literature on CPVs: security from the resale value of a self-gift and self-gifts that assist with work-life balance. For example, Sarah purchased gold for herself and explained that "They [the gold] are investments...they hold onto their value. If ever the need comes, you can always sell it and you'll get your value back." In terms of work-life balance through self-gifting, Paul explained that he buys video games as self-gifts and uses them to help him transition from work to his personal life, "Everybody has to find their [approach] that allows them to clear their head. I think that's a very important part of separating your work from your personal life."

Implications and Further Research. This study is among the first to explore the role of CPVs in consumers' self-gifting experiences. A total of seven themes emerged to shape an understanding of values relative to self-gifting. Five of the themes correspond to categories of values per CVT, including functional, emotional, social, epistemic, and conditional CPVs. The two additional themes that emerged (i.e., security through resale value and work-life balance) have not been discussed in the CVT literature or previously

identified as CPVs. Thus, findings provide novel insight, such as indication that consumers care about long-term values like the security of resale, even when buying self-gifts. Results also indicate that consumers see self-gifting as a way to achieve balance in their lives, a value that has not been explored in the CPV literature. As the trend in self-gifting grows, consumers are engaging in buying gifts for themselves more than they are buying gifts for others (Weisfeld-Spolter & Thakkar, 2012). Because CPVs are considered an important indicator of purchase intention as well as consumer satisfaction, more research is needed to examine the role of values within consumers' self-gifting behaviors.

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