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Gift Wrapping is part of a valued ritual of giving that is important culturally, socially and economically. Consumer researchers have studied the process and meanings of gift giving with little consideration for the gift wrapping. The way a gift is wrapped involves a complex range of decisions and meanings. Building on existing literature we propose a model based on existing models of the gift giving process. Our model is based on value, context, relationship, and appropriateness of consumption as perceived by the donor.

Introduction

Wrapping at its most basic is a layer(s) designed to protect an object during transport or storage. But the simple protective role of wrapping is changed significantly when the object being wrapped is a gift. This paper proposes a model of gift-wrapping, which is based on the Sherry (1983) model. This paper explores elements surrounding the gift, the gift exchange and gift-wrapping; the relationship between the donor and receiver, the context, the value of gift-wrapping and the appropriateness of gift-wrapping. The purpose of the model is to provide a theoretical framework for further research into the role of gift-wrapping from a consumer behaviour perspective. This will enable marketers and retailers to understand the value of add-on/incidental elements of a gift such as gift wrapping. The purchase of gift wrapping as part of a gift is under-explored. Yet “most people concede when they receive a gift they prefer to have it wrapped” (Howard, 1992, p.198). If this is the case, the purchase of gift wrapping should be taken into account when purchasing the gift. This model has been developed to understand how people use gift wrapping in the gift exchange process. This paper begins with a brief discussion of Sherry’s (1983) model and wrapping in the gift giving process. The model elaborates and expands the role of gift-wrapping.

The wrapping of a gift is integral to the construct and reception of the gift. In an experiment to test what made a gift; “All 18 subjects in the gift-wrapped strongly agreed that the wrapping made the package look like a gift” (Howard, 1992, p. 212). While Larson and Watson (2001, p. 897) believe that “Wrapping may not merely add value to the gift, but can also be inherently valuable in their own right.” Yet in existing gift literature, there is very little mentioned about the role of gift wrapping, instead focusing on the gift as a function or exchange (Joy, 2001, Belk 1979, Cheal 1988, Sherry 1983). Sherry (1983) describes gift giving as a fascinating field of study that is an important integrator of society. Through the exploration of social, economic and personal dimensions, he has developed a descriptive model of the gift exchange process that consists of three stages: the Gestation, the Prestation and the Reformulation (1983, p.158). This three-stage process has become one of the accepted ways of understanding gift giving. Wrapping appears in all stages of this process but is not discussed in any substantive manner.
Model of Gift Exchange

Sherry (1983) describes gift giving as a fascinating field of study that is an important integrator of society. The exchange of gifts has symbolic and expressive values. Regardless of the motive, the purchase of the gift and associated wrapping is of significance to all cultures and economies. The process of gift giving, as part of consumer behaviour, is reasonably understood with articles written over an extended period including Belk (1976), Banks (1979), Lutz (1979), Sherry (1983), Sherry and McGrath (1989). The research has looked at gift giving as being a basic exchange, either economic or social. Belk (1976, p.161) remarks: “There can be little doubt that gift giving is a pervasive experience in human life and consumer behaviour. Compared to more routine consumer purchases, gift selection is a very deliberate and highly involving type of consumer choice, and should prove a fruitful area for the development and testing of consumer behavioural concepts.”

Despite our understanding of gift giving as an exchange process, we know little about the role of the wrapping in that process. We know that wrapping is important to consumer research as it has an impact on consumer choice and decision making in gift giving literature, branding, and retail. Yet the role of wrapping in consumer behaviour in Western societies has not been investigated. Wrapping has only been seen as a functional device and its forms and features generally presented only as part of the packaging industry.

Sherry explored the social, economic and personal dimensions of the gift exchange process culminating in a descriptive model of the process of gift giving that consists of three stages: the Gestation, the Prestation and the Reformulation (1983, p.158). This three-stage process has become one of the most accepted ways of understanding the gift exchange process.

Wrapping appears in all stages of this process but is not discussed in any substantive manner. We take Sherry’s model and add the processes and discussion of wrapping into the gift giving process.

Model of Gift Wrapping in the Gift Exchange Process

Gift Exchange Process

The gift exchange process is the movement of the gift from the donor to the recipient (Sherry, 1983). The gift in this instance includes the wrapping, card and other embellishments that the donor presents with the gift. Usually this exchange is a voluntary transaction (Sherry, 1983; Belk and Coon 1993).
Donor

The donor selects the gift and the wrapping based on a range of decisions and their perceptions of the recipient and the significance of the occasions (Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1993). This selection can be based on a number of factors, firstly the messages that the donor wants to send to the receiver (Sherry, 1983), for example the choice in gift and wrapping, and the time spent preparing it, can indicate the depth of relationship between the giver and receiver (Larson and Watson, 2001). Secondly, the gift and gift-wrapping selection can be a statement of identity, both self-identity of the donor and the perception of identity that the donor has of the receiver (Sherry, 1983; Hogg and Mitchell, 1999).

Receiver

The receiver is the one who accepts the gift from the donor (Sherry, 1983). The donor is concerned with the receiver’s response, which can be positive, neutral or negative (Sherry, 1983). After receiving the gift, the receiver must decide whether the gift is consumed, distributed, displayed, stored; or rejected, returned or disposed of (Sherry, 1983). The same goes for gift-wrapping. It can be destroyed, recycled, disposed of, displayed, stored for re-use.

Gift

The gift and its wrapping may form the centrepiece of the exchange process. According to Sherry (1983, p.160) “Virtually any resource whether tangible or intangible can be transformed into a gift.” Gifts can represent weakly institutionalised interactions such as love, caring and social interactions (Joy, 2001, Belk 1982).

Gift Wrapping

Hendry (1993) identified a number of reasons why a gift is wrapped. First, wrapping allows for an element of surprise. Wooton and Wood (2004), speaking more generally, add that while the primary focus is on the gift, wrapping intensifies the drama when the gift is being revealed. Wrapping also allows the donor to record the initial response of the recipient as they open their gift, and it is possible for the donor to determine the success of the gift. Second, the wrapping itself may give clues to the occasion of gift giving. Different types of wrapping can be used for different occasions (Hendry 1993). For example, at the birth of a child, gifts may be wrapped in paper with images of babies, while at Christmas; the paper may have images of the nativity or Santa Claus. Wrapping helps introduce festive themes or sense of ritual into the gift giving process. Finally, wrapping may also allow the donor to express his or her own taste or possibly a perception of what they think the recipient’s taste will be (Hendry 1993). The choice of material can connote subtle messages of power in the relationship between the donor and recipient. For example, a lavishly wrapped gift with several layers and adornments could indicate deep respect or love, whereas naked gifts (gifts that are not wrapped) could indicate that the donor does not value the relationship highly (Larson and Watson 2001).

Wrapping, through the element of surprise, may advance a two-way dialogue between the giver and the recipient. Usually this is immediate and is in direct response to the gift, politeness (in most situations) dictates the recipient to thank the donor for the gift. While Sherry states that “gift giving is universal” (1983, p. 157). Hendry (1993) concludes by
pointing out that each culture has its own manifestations of wrapping and this could bring different meanings to the gift exchange process.

These elements discussed above form the actual gift exchange process. It is important to explore some of the intangible qualities that contribute to the gift exchange process. The qualities have been explored in reference to the gift exchange process. In this paper we extend the discussion to the wrapping as well as the gift, commencing with themes of substance and sentiment.

**Substance**

Substance is directly related to the monetary value of a gift (Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1993). Low monetary value gifts and gift wrapping can include ‘pot luck gifts’ which are wrapped without much thought, while high value gifts could include a wedding gift wrapped in a luxurious manner indicating the value of the gift overall. It is when substance is connected to sentiment that the value of the gift can be discovered.

**Sentiment**

The wrapping may have emotional value to the receiver, and this is known as sentiment (Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1993). The sentimental nature of the wrapping can be dependant on a number of factors including who the gift is from, the appropriateness of the gift in context to the relationship, the messages and connotations within the gift and its wrapping (Sherry et al, 1993). Sentiment (emotional value) combined with substance (monetary value) can determine what overall worth the gift has to the receiver. As well as sentiment and substance, there are a number of intangible conditions that can be divided into four distinct themes that affects everything that occurs within the gift exchange process overall. This is why there is an outer ring encapsulating the gift exchange process as they can influence all that is within it. These themes are relationship, context, value and appropriateness.

**Relationship**

“Gifts cannot occur outside of a relationship” (Larson and Watson, 2001, p. 894). There needs to be a connection between the donor and the receiver for the exchange to occur and all gift giving and wrapping must be explored within this relationship (Ruth, Otnes and Brunel, 1989). It is a factor that separates gift giving from other forms of giving, such as charity (Fischer, Gainer and Arnold, 1996). The types of relationship can influence the donor’s motivations and the receiver’s interpretations (Caplow, 1984; Cheal, 1996; Otnes, Lowrey and Kim, 1993; Sherry, 1983). Two different donors may give the same gift wrapped in the same manner to the one receiver, but depending on the relationship the receiver has with each donor, the gift and the wrapping may have different significance.

**Context**

The context within which the gift is given can also influence the wrapping process. Gifts can be divided broadly into two categories (Larson and Watson, 2001). The gifts given at formal occasions or ceremony such as Christmas, weddings and birthdays are ritual gifts, while those given at other times may be spontaneous gifts. Timing and place can also influence context of the gift exchange process. It does not matter if a gift is wrapped and presented beautifully if it is late in being given, unless there is a reason that the receiver finds acceptable. Place can also
influence the reception a gift, no matter if it is wrapped beautifully or plainly. A bunch of flowers brought home for a spouse at the end of a working week might well be received differently to the same bunch presented at an haute cuisine restaurant.

**Value**

Wrapping contributes to the value of the gift exchange process. Larson and Watson discuss several types of value including the economic value, the functional value, the social value and the expressive value. Economic value is the monetary worth; this is perhaps the easiest value to understand (Larson and Watson, 2001). Functional value refers to the “utilitarian characteristics or attributes” (Larson and Watson, 2001, p. 891). Social value of the gift and gift-wrapping is important to consider as it helps establish social ties and maintains relationships (Larson and Watson, 2001). The final value is the expressive value is where the gift and its wrapping “captures some aspect of the giver” (Larson and Watson, 2001, p. 891). This expressive value of a gift and its wrapping can pass on an element of self-identity of the giver to the receiver. A part of the donor’s identity can be objectified and passed on to the receiver (Sherry, 1983). And as such, the expressive value is an indication of depth of relationship that the donor has for the receiver, and this value is difficult to measure, as it is personal and subjective.

**Appropriateness**

The final theme that has influence over the gift exchange process is appropriateness. This refers to choosing the gift and its wrapping that is right for the receiver or that the receiver will like it (Robben and Verhallen, 1994). Appropriateness is perceived as being the key quality of a perfect gift (Areini et al, 1998; Belk, 1996). Appropriateness is based on a number of factors including, the symbol of the relationship, stage of life, occasion and history (Larson and Watson, 2001 p. 899).

**Research Agenda**

The elements of the gift-wrapping model both tangible and intangible have been explored in limited detail in this paper. There are a number of themes that influence each other and the exchange process. We propose a research agenda that extracts the meanings and understanding of wrapping and the process of wrapping gifts. Our agenda is to explore the underlying themes and create a typology of wrapping styles and strategies as informed by donors and situations. We anticipate using an ethnographic approach to extract this information from respondents through observation and depth interviews as part of a number of qualitative case studies. This is based on recommendations made by Sherry (1983). He suggests, “one rewarding approach would be to choose a particular sub culture” (Sherry 1983, 166). Our proposed target group is men and women aged 21-39. This group regularly participates in a variety of gift giving events including weddings, birthdays, baby showers, engagements, as well as annual events such as Christmas, Easter, Hanukah and Valentines Day on a frequent basis, and is easily accessible to the authors for research. It is hoped that the findings will then be used to compare and contrast with other groups in the future.

**Conclusion**

Gift Wrapping is an important but under explored part of the gifting process. The way a gift is wrapped expresses the gift before it is opened. Sherry (1983) developed a model of the
process of gift giving behaviour that acknowledges but does not analyse the importance of the wrapping. Gift-wrapping is listed as part of a group of items intended to elicit a response from the recipient. This response can be influenced by messages transmitted via the selection and presentation of the wrapping. We have created a model that addresses the expected influences on wrapping choices in the gifting process. This model makes an important contribution to the field of consumer behaviour as it allows us to understand how people perceive the gifting process from both donor and receiver perspectives and the thought that goes into the selection and purchase of gift wrapping within the context of the gift. The model includes the donor giving the recipient a wrapped gift that is chosen with consideration of substance and sentiment. This process occurs within an environment that is created by context, value, relationship and appropriateness. We propose to further explore the role of the wrapping in the gift giving process by focussing on group of people who are giving gifts on a regular basis. This will then used to compare and contrast with other groups in our society.
References


