Self-Gift Behaviours of British Ethnic Minority Consumers

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Our understanding of ethnic minority consumers' self-gift behaviours is rather limited and, furthermore, mainly stems from a North American perspective. In this study, diary method and survey were used to investigate self-gift behaviours of ethnic minority groups in Britain. Results of the study show that the propensity to engage in self-gifts is a widespread phenomenon amongst British ethnic minority groups, particularly amongst well-educated young adults. The results provide support for previous findings on demographic variables in that they are good predictors of the propensity for self-gifts. We also discuss how self-gifts prompted by different motivations and occasions impact on the quality of life of different ethnic minority groups in Britain.

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Conceptualisation

The increasing size of ethnic minority groups has attracted researchers and marketers to target these groups to gain a better understanding of how their consumption behaviour might vary from the host markets (McCullough, Tan, and Wong, 1986; Cui, 2001). Much of ethnic consumer research was conducted to see the impact of acculturation on food consumption/preference (e.g., Jamal, 1998; Wallendorf and Reilly, 1983; Xu, Shim, Lotz and Almeida, 2004), on purchasing behaviour (e.g., Donthu and Cherian, 1994; Kim and Kang, 2001; Mulhern and Williams, 1994) and on media consumption (e.g., Khairullah and Khairullah, 1999; Lee and Tse, 1994). However, very few studies have explored the ethnicity and acculturation on self-gifting (e.g., Rucker et al., 1994). Some previous studies suggest that people engage in authentic self-gift behaviour as a means to communicate with one’s self, and to influence one’s self-concept and self-esteem (Mick and DeMoss, 1990b). Thus, studying the ethnic minority groups’ self-gift behaviour may lead to a more refined understanding of ethnic consumer behaviour.

Mick and DeMoss (1990b:328) define self-gifts as “products, services or experiences that are (1) personally symbolic self-communication through (2) special indulgences that tend to be (3) premeditated and (4) highly context-bound.” Self-gifts are partly differentiated from other personal acquisitions by their situational and motivational contexts (Mick and DeMoss, 1990a). People may give a gift to themselves as a reward for the accomplishment of a task, to reassure the self, to cheer up from feeling down or to celebrate public or private holidays (Mick, 1991).

In the study of self-gift and ethnic identity, Rucker et al. (1994) found that Asian Americans prefer to choose self-gifts rather than to receive gifts from others. Their result also showed that this group is more likely than Whites to favour experiences as self-gifts (e.g., watching TV or listening to music) over buying products or services. This finding runs contrary to suggestions by Mick and DeMoss (1990b), Olshavsky and Lee (1993) and Sherry et al. (1995) who indicate that consumers from non-Western societies, such as a group self-identified with Asian cultures, might be less accepting of self-gifts.

While self-gifting is clearly prevalent in western consumer behaviour, particularly in the United States, the question remains whether the propensity to self-gift is a widespread phenomenon among ethnic minority consumers. Moreover, very little is known as to how and why immigrants may choose specific goods, services, or experiences when acquiring gifts for themselves. Very few research has explored ethnic minority groups’ self-gift behaviour in a non-North American context. We, therefore, propose to examine self-gift behaviour of British ethnic minority groups. The study attempts to investigate why these groups may or may not engage in self-gifting and how ethnicity has an impact on their self-gift behaviour in different motivational situations.

Research Method

To comprehensively understand self-gift, Mick and DeMoss (1990a) suggest that it is necessary to apply various types of research methods. Open-ended questionnaire and diary methods were used to conduct this study.

The survey examined the ethnic group’s self-gift behaviour during the Christmas holiday. Forty-four responses were collected from a convenience sample of British ethnic groups, ages 15 to 50, in the North-West area, the UK. These students and non-student adults were asked whether they would buy gifts for themselves, what they would like to buy, how they feel when they buy themselves gifts, and in which occasions they would buy themselves gifts. The demographic characteristics: gender, age, nationality and religion were used to assess the results.

Diary method was deployed to get a picture of the sorts of self-gift activities the ethnic groups are engaged in on a daily basis. The sample consisted of six men and nine women between 21 and 41 years old whose spent between six months and ten years in the UK. The sample limits to educated participants who possess a proficiency in English written communication. In this study, participants completed the measurements of ethnic identity in both objective and subjective approaches and the acculturation level. The respondents were then asked to describe their major activities in relation to reward, for example, to be nice to themselves or to cheer them up with self-gifts during
a period of five days. The questions asked about which kinds of self-gifts they did, why and how they chose to do those activities, and how they felt about them.

The written answers from both survey and diary were analysed by employing matrices and content analysis. Some coding categories were derived from past research and a few were created inductively to seek commonalities and differences across the questions (Mick, DeMoss and Faber, 1992). Prior research has shown that age, gender, education, and current financial situation can also be related to self-gifts. These variables were assessed. The study presents both descriptive and interpretive insights.

Preliminary Findings
This study found that self-gift is a widespread phenomenon among British ethnic groups, although not everyone would acquire self-gifts. The results of this study reinforce Rucker et al.’s (1994) findings that self-gift giving is no less acceptable to those with an Asian cultural heritage than those who grew up in a Western culture. Some commonalities of the propensity to self-gift are shared among Asian British respondents. For example, the respondents enjoy having something sweet to relieve stress. They are also more likely to prefer experiential self-gifts such as cooking, window shopping, watching TV and reading novels to cheer them up from problems at school or work. These self-gift activities make them feel happier and relaxed.

The results also supported prior findings of Mick and DeMoss (1992) and McKeage and her colleagues (1993) that the propensity to give self-gifts was negatively related to age; current financial condition was positively related to self-gift propensity; and clothing was the most mentioned product the consumers would like to buy. While self-gifting for rewarding and holidays was pre-planned, it was shown to be spontaneous when feeling down.

This research makes two main contributions. First, it expands our understanding of the ethnic consumers’ self-gift-giving contexts. It revealed how immigrants use self-gifts to cope with issues that they face in their day-to-day lives. This knowledge will help to extend the existing knowledge on self-gifts to a cross-cultural setting. Second, the study showed the relationship between ethnicity and self-gifting. The evidence provides an indication that British ethnic minority groups may represent a distinct market segment. Some marketing implications can be identified from these groups’ awareness and adoption of products, services and experiences to serve as self-gifts.

References
Voluntary Simplicity, Downshifting, and the Market Mythology of Simple Living
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Voluntary simplicity has been a relatively invisible form of consumer resistance, both in the real world and, perhaps as a consequence, in consumer research. However, the ideology of voluntary simplicity is becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary Western societies under its historical moniker of “simple living”. Celente (1997) predicted that voluntary simplicity would occupy a greater share of mainstream consumer consciousness in the 21st century and evidence to validate this claim abounds in popular lifestyle magazines and television shows.

Furthermore, voluntary simplicity is theoretically important because, unlike other consumer resistance behaviors that target an element of the production, marketing, or consumption process (e.g., brand boycotts), it is a rejection of consumerism en masse. As Ritsin and Dobscha (1999) point out, to consume less, is “the ultimate act of rebellion” (p.159). To date, voluntary simplicity has been conceptualized primarily as a lifestyle (Leonard-Barton 1981; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Bekin, Carrigan, and Szmigin 2005; McDonald et al. 2006; Miller and Gregan-Paxton 2006), but also as a behavioral index (Leonard-Barton 1981; Huneke 2005), and social movement (Grigsby 2004).

This research (1) integrates prior research on the voluntary simplicity lifestyle, highlighting problems of typology; (2) develops a conceptual model of simple living as market mythology that untangles the simple living ideology from the voluntary simplicity lifestyle; and (3) delineates a narratological variance framework of simple living myths.

In the marketplace, the term “simple living” and several variants are frequently used to describe aspects of the voluntary simplicity lifestyle. This paper retains the use of the etic term voluntary simplicity to describe the lifestyle and employs its emic counterpart simple living to describe the popular market-mediated ideology. Voluntary simplicity definitions (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002, Shaw & Newholm 2002, Zavestoski 2002, Grigsby 2004, McDonald et al. 2006) are aggregated into a lifestyle of minimal, ecological, and ethical consumption while simple living is modeled as a market mythology.

Colloquially, the term myth is used to describe that which is generally believed to be true but is actually false. However, in the academic study of myths no veracity or fallacy is implicitly assumed by use of the term. Rather, a myth is defined as a belief or narrative that a group of people accept as true. “The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradictions or paradoxes in natural and social experience” (Levy 1981: p.51). A market mythology is a collection of “discourses that seeks to channel consumers’ identities and lifestyles in a particular ideological direction” (Thompson 2004: p.170).

Using Holt’s (2004) structure of myth markets as a guide, this paper establishes five components of the simple living phenomenon. (i) Upscaling is the upgrading of one’s entire lifestyle or any aspects of one’s consumption to match the more luxurious lifestyles of higher income consumers; it is the hegemonic ideology of consumer culture. (ii) Downshifting describes any (voluntary or involuntary) reduction in earning, spending, work hours, or pace of life, which typically engages the individual downshifter in a re-evaluation of his or her own identity, especially as it pertains to consumption (Schor 1998). (iii) Cultural contradictions arise when downshifting in an upscaling world; individuals experience fundamental identity conflicts whether they seek temporary or permanent respite from the earn-and-spend cycle. (iv) The market mythology of simple living resolves the cultural contradictions by providing the individual with a toolkit of authentic (subculturally-legitimated) myths to counter the hegemonic ideology. (v) The populist world of voluntary simplicity serves as the source material of the simple living mythology.

A narratological framework of the simple living market mythology is delineated by drawing from historic essays, recent empirical literature, and content analyses of three different marketplace data sources: online forums, popular lifestyle magazines, and depth interviews with informants who self-identify with simple living. Less is more (Browning 1855) can be described as the soul of the simple living mythology. The frequently heralded recipe for a good life is less consumption (in economic and ecological terms), less careerism, less needless spending, less stress, and, in summary, “less distractions” (Gregg 1937/1977, Elgin 2000, Craig-Lees and Hill 2002, Shaw & Newholm 2002, Zavestoski 2002, Etzioni 2004, McDonald et al. 2006, and innumerable media articles). In the contemporary marketplace, this message is positioned as a narratological opposition to the more is more promotions of consumer culture. In a similar vein, small is beautiful (Schumacher 1973) captures the preference for human scale in the organization of communities and institutions. Other mythic themes include: the pathology of consumer goods and consumption activities, the ecological and ethical consumer, work-life balance and the demythologizing of money, the myth of individual agency and the myth of community.

The paper concludes with a discussion of how myths in general and the simple living mythology in particular are employed in advertising, entertainment, and corporate communications.

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