“When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Go Shopping”: an Examination of Self-Gifting Behavior
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“When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Go Shopping”: An Examination of Self-Gifting Behavior  A. Selin Atalay, Penn State University Margaret G. Meloy, Penn State University The current work focuses on mood-repair and celebration as motives for self-gifting behavior. A lab study and a field study demonstrate that both lead to self-gifting, with the mood-repair motive being more prevalent than celebration. Individual differences in self-esteem, mood, loneliness, and regulatory orientation were tested with respect to both motives. We also examined the meanings individuals attach to their self-gifts. Only mood and regulatory orientation led to different motives to self-gift, but each of the individual differences uniquely impacted the meanings attached to them. The results provide insights into the mood-management function of indulgent consumption.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12303/volumes/v33/NA-33

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One limitation of this study is the use of convenience samples of American undergraduate students who are normally not overly affluent. Does this factor affect their choice of the risky or safe option in a risky situation involving money? In this study we investigated individuals’ risk taking tendency in a financial risky choice context. In order to maximize the external validity of the findings, future research should examine risk taking tendency under negative mood in other risky consumption situations that involve social, physical, performance, and psychological risks.

In this study, we investigated the effect of mood, which by definition, refers to transient feeling states particular to specific times and situations and are subjectively perceived by individuals (Gardner 1985). Future research should investigate the moderating effects of attachment styles under strong affective states such as disgust, fear, depression.

References

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What motivates the purchase of treats and small indulgences for the self? Do we buy self-gifts when we have something to celebrate or, alternatively, when the “going” is getting tough? Much of the published work has focused on the celebratory side of self-gifts (Mick 1991; Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b). Achievements that are internally attributed are celebrated with indulgent consumption (Mick and Faure 1998), particularly those requiring higher effort (Kivetz and Simonson 2002a; Stevens, Maclaran and Brown 2003). The literature also suggests that self-gifts are premeditated (Mick and DeMoss 1990a). However, the classic saying above suggests that self-gifting may be impulsive and motivated by something darker.

The current work focuses on the use of self-gifts as a mechanism not only for celebration, but also for mood management. Consider the colloquial examples of “comfort-food” and “pick-me-up” bouquets of flowers. In particular, we examine the impact of individual differences in self-esteem, mood, loneliness, and regulatory orientation as moderators of self-gifting behavior, and explore the underlying motivations and needs that are satisfied by self-gifts in both celebratory and mood-repair roles.

Two studies were conducted to explore the different motivations of individuals who buy self-gifts for celebration versus consolation and to explore the impulsive nature of self-gifts. Individual differences in self-esteem (Study1), loneliness (Study2), regulatory orientation (Study2) and mood (Studies 1 and 2) were also measured.
Study 1

Study 1 was conducted with 46 undergraduate students. Participants were asked to think back to their most recent self-gift experience and to explain the motivations and the meanings attached to it. In particular, we asked participants to indicate what gift they had purchased and the occasion that had motivated it. Self-esteem measures were taken.

Results. Both celebration and mood-repair were reported as reasons for past purchases (98%). The last purchase was approximately evenly divided between mood-repair (46%) and celebratory motives (54%). As such, both motivations for self-gifting are prevalent.

What items were purchased? First, we note that the items purchased for mood-repair and celebration did not differ (χ(5)=5.22, p>.30). As such, any difference in motivation was not reflected in the type of product purchased but rather in the meanings participants attached to them. In their last self-gifting experience, participants in both conditions reported having bought clothing (48%), food/beverages (26%), entertainment products (e.g., DVD/CDs) (9%), items for personal enjoyment (e.g., plants) (7%), and hobby products (7%).

The meanings that were assigned to these purchases differed based on motivation for the purchase. Namely, self-gifts purchased for mood-repair were described as less functional (F(1,44)=4.624, p<.05) and less durable (F(1,44)=5.256, p<.05). For celebration, the gifts reflected self-purpose (F(1,44)=5.078, p<.05), individual uniqueness (F(1,44)=5.087, p<.05), and one’s heritage (F(1,44)=4.396, p<.05). Contrary to our expectations, consumers who were higher (lower) in self-esteem did not differ in either their motivations (F(1,44)=.385, p>0.50) or the meanings attached to the self-gift (all p>.10). Mood, however, did. In general, an elevated mood led to an exaggeration of the average meaning attached to the self-gift, regardless of motivation.

Study 2

In order to increase the validity of our findings and examine the impulsivity of self-gifting behavior, we conducted a field study with 195 individuals at a shopping mall. They were surveyed both as they entered the mall and right before they left. Prior to shopping, they made a list of planned purchases. We collected measures of mood, loneliness, and regulatory orientation at that time. At the end of the visit, they provided a list of what they had bought.

Results. Of the 195 participants, 89 (46%) purchased an item as a self-gift, with mood repair twice as prevalent (69%) as celebration (31%) (z=3.08, p<.01). These results reveal that self-gifting is more frequently motivated by mood-repair than self-celebration when the measure is collected at the point of purchase rather than through a retrospective report of the last self-gift purchased. Contrary to the pre-mediated nature of self-gifts described by Mick and DeMoss (1990a), we found that among impulse purchases, 72% were self-treats. Impulsive self-gifting was prevalent.

As expected, the moods of individuals who purchased treats for mood-repair (celebration) were worse (better) (F(1,62)=4.88, p<.05). Loneliness was unrelated to motivation (F(1,62)=0.61, p>.40). Finally, individuals who purchased treats for mood-repair were lower in promotion focus than those who bought treats for celebration (F(1,62)=4.43, p<.05).

The meanings attached to the items were consistent with the findings in Study 1. Self-treats for mood repair were considered less durable (F(1,60)=7.60, p<.01) and less indulgent (F(1,60)=2.70, p>.10). We examined the impacts of mood and motivation on the meanings and found few differences. A promotion focus, however, led to treats that represented an ideal self (F(1,60)=3.40, p<.07).

Discussion

The findings of the two studies suggest that self-gifting behavior is not solely driven by celebratory motives. The mood repair motivation accounted for one-half to two-thirds of all self-gifts. We also found evidence of substantial impulsivity in self-gifting behavior. If the majority of self-treats are purchased for mood repair and purchased impulsively, this may lead individuals to spend beyond their means, deepening their emotional angst, and creating negative impacts on well-being. Future research is currently underway to examine the links between self-gifting, impulsive purchases, and post-purchase regret. What will you be doing when the going gets tough …?

References


