I Would Want a Magic Gift: Desire For Romantic Gift Giving and the Cultural Fantasies of Baby Boomers in Japan

Yuko Minowa, Long Island University, USA
Takeshi Matsui, Hitotsubashi University, Japan
Russell Belk, York University, Canada

Romantic gift giving practices of aging Japanese Baby Boomers are examined. The Boomers’ gift giving orientations are influenced by the genealogy of gender domination, gift experiences, and gender socialization. This leads to different current gift orientations: reality adaptors, nostalgia indulgers, fantasy seekers, and fantasy avoiders.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Age and consumer identity are inseparable. Age cohorts, who grow up with the same sociohistorical context, experience the consequences of historical events in similar ways (Jaworski and Sauer 1985). The Baby Boomers in Japan, called Dankai no Sedai, or the nodule generation, is defined as the people born from 1947 to 1949. Having grown up in the zeitgeist of the post-war economic miracle, they are often characterized as self-expressive and individualistic consumers (Tsuda 1987). They were the first generation who enjoyed American consumer culture such as blue jeans and rock’n’roll music at a mass level, and were considered as the liberated generation who did not experience the economic problems their parents faced after the World War II (Iwama 1995). Influenced by the Western cultures, some of the Baby Boomers revealed these new values through gift giving practices. They experienced such consumer choice dilemmas for the first time. Among the choices they have faced, we examine their gift-giving behaviors with opposite sex, because identity projects are not atomized but social in nature. As such, gift-giving rituals are considered the appropriate context to understand how they create their identity as women or men through consumption.

In the Consumer Culture Theory tradition (Arnold and Thompson 2005), gift giving has been an important research topic. Most of the prior research has dealt with the North American context (e.g., Belk and Coon 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990), and Japanese gift culture has not been much explored in spite of its heightened importance in Japan (Minowa and Gould 1999; Rupp 2003). Investigating the gift giving rituals of aging Japanese Baby Boomers is significant for at least three reasons. First, there has not been a study that explored romantic gift giving of aging consumers in Japan. Second, this study investigates the changing meaning of romantic gift giving and the factors that affect changing gift giving orientations throughout the consumer’s life. By focusing on the Baby Boomers who have accumulated memories of gift giving over the longer life span, we investigate sociohistorical influences on gift giving practices instead of single gift giving occasions. Third, this study explores whether aging and romanticism are considered incompatible in Japan, because older people’s roles are often focused on being grandparents (Kiny and Sivils 2000).

Based on depth interviews with 30 Baby Boom participants, we generated narratives about their experiences of romantic gift giving, gender socialization, memorable gift giving from their youth, and the zeitgeist of historical moments shared by their cohort. All participants were residents of Metropolitan Tokyo. They consisted of 15 males and 15 females, ranging in age from 60 to 65. Occupations varied from a retired former office worker to a taxi driver, a business owner, a college student, and housewives. We also conducted depth interviews with the eight Baby Boom Jr., (age from 37 to 40, four males), and with eight teens (17 and 18 years old, four males) to shed light on the Baby Boomer cohort’s characteristics. Interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. The analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts involved an iterative strategy (Spiggle 1994). Repeated ideas and similarities across the transcripts were analyzed by the research team. We developed a holistic understanding that yielded two factors affecting the gift giving orientations of the informants, resulting in taxonomy of four gift orientation types.

Gift giving orientations were influenced by the genealogy of gender domination – whether participants are from patriarchal or matriarchal families of origin and whether they had euphoric or traumatic gift-giving experience and gender socialization in their youth. A two-by-two cross-classification yielded four types of gift giving orientations: reality adaptor, nostalgia indulger, fantasy seeker, and fantasy avoider (Figure 1). Reality Adapters, who are from matriarchal families who grew up having euphoric gift giving experiences, indicated that they adapt to the changing norms and practices of gift rituals in Japanese society. Nostalgia Indulgers are those from patriarchal families who had euphoric gift giving experiences. Because of the recent post-retirement economic depression, their future prospects are not optimistic and seem to regress toward the past. Fantasy Seekers are those from matriarchal families and who had traumatic socialization experiences. They expressed a strong desire for their dreams to come true through gifts from her romantic partners. Fantasy Avoiders are those from patriarchal families who had traumatic experiences and avoid gift practices that would lead to passionate romantic relationship.

Our study reveals that the intra-cohort variation in romantic gift giving orientations for aging consumers is related to factors beyond historical change. While the fundamental components of romantic love – attraction and attachment - are primarily, panhuman rather than Western emotions, behavioral manifestations of love and emotional expressions are socially cultivated and culturally construed (Jankowiak 2008). As Jaworski and Sauer (1984) argue, cohorts carry the imprint of early socialization forward in time. We found that in regard to romantic gift giving, the socialization factors consist of gender and gift giving socializations. The meanings of romance and romantic gift giving are not static but changing, reflecting transformations in the consumer’s life course (Otnes, Zelner, and Lowrey 1994).

Another significant finding from the present study is that intra-cohort variation in gift giving orientations is strongly associated with the genealogy of gender domination of the family in which the consumer grew up. The socially structured nature of family life has a lasting impact on consumption patterns. Japanese consumers from patriarchal families observed their fathers’ domination as a reflection of anae or emotional dependency. A married woman may allow her husband to behave like teishu kanpaku, or “petty tyrant” but...
demand that he indulge them with gifts, services, and attention. From these women’s perspective, performing as an inferior wife is insulting by today’s standards and seems to have left them resentful as manifested in their giving practices. Finally, the conceptual link between romantic gift giving practice and sociohistorically constructed emotions is partly explained by the deployment of cultural fantasies for aging consumers while the meanings of gift giving rituals are renewed and have evolved through the cultural media (Bell 1997).

REFERENCES


