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This interpretative research sought to identify symbolic dimensions of gift-giving linked to jewelry. We conducted in-depth interviews involving 25 Brazilian women. The results showed differences between categories that reflect symbolic dimensions related to giving, receiving and self-gifting jewelry.

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing research on gift-giving was demarcated in the 1980s by the works of Levy (1982) and Sherry (1983), who built on Marcel Mauss's seminal work involving tribal societies (Sherry et al., 1995). Mauss (1988) addresses three obligations related to the gift: giving, receiving and reciprocating. The meanings of the gift are associated with status and power, in which the giver assumes a superior position, whereas non-reciprocation implies inferiority and subordination. Not accepting the gift is an offense, a refusal of fellowship, friendship and alliance. Furthermore, it is a matter of building a mutual network of obligations: the giver generates an obligation on the part of the receiver. Thus, the gift per se may be seen as a symbolic, ceremonial or ritual exchange (Mauss, 1988; Caillé, 2002). However, obligations and the form of reciprocity may vary in different societies, on different occasions, and depending on the roles played by the giver and the receiver.

For Sherry (1983, p.158), gifts are "tangible expressions of social relationships." The practice of gifting occurs mainly among family members and between generations (Belk, 1979) and the female gender is generally responsible for its management (Garner & Wagner, 1991). Nevertheless, the breadth of the relationship network and the obligation to give gifts vary from one society to another. In the United States, spending on gifts is associated with romantic relationships (Nguyen & Munch, 2011), the emotional characteristics of the gift giver (Pillai & Krishnakumar, 2019) and egocentric reasons (Givi & Galak, 2020), or even with materialism and status, as is also seen in India (Sharda & Bhat, 2018) and Brazil (Miranda et al., 2017).

But which objects cannot be given, but must be kept? This question led Godelier (2001, p.53) to investigate so-called "inalienable" objects, i.e., those that follow "the paths of transmission and rooting in time," those that can only be given to a small group such as children, relatives or initiates. Mauss himself (1988) speaks of objects that remain in the family. They are objects that must be kept because of their value or their meaning, which makes them almost sacred. For Baudrillard (2009, p.83), "the old object is always, in the exact sense of the term, a 'portrait of the family'."

Levy (1982) was possibly the first marketing scholar to point out the purchase for oneself as a self-gift. The self-gift is a symbolic act that can have rewarding, therapeutic properties, or have the purpose of celebrating passages or transitions (Mick & Demoss, 1990a, 1990b), usually in categories of high ego involvement and entailing a strong symbolic component, as in the case of jewelry (Mick et al., 1992). Several motivations may be behind the self-gift: rewarding oneself, celebrating, remembering (or forgetting), feeling loved and enjoying life, in addition to the therapeutic dimension, or compensating for something negative (Heath et al., 2015). Individuals with certain characteristics such as anxiety and insecurity (Rippé et al., 2019) may be more likely to self-gifting. In addition, in individualist cultures there may be a greater propensity to self-gift than in collectivist cultures (Suzuki & Kano, 2018).

This study investigated jewelry as a gift, identifying symbolic dimensions that differentiate the categories of giving gifts, receiving gifts and self-gifting. The peculiarity of jewelry is that it is a luxury item, which, in the literature, is related to the issue of distinction

(Bourdieu, 1984) and status consumption (Beverland, 2004; Eastman & Eastman, 2015; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

METHOD

We conducted in-depth interviews with 25 young women (between 23 and 38 years old) from the upper middle class, living in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. All the interviewees had a university degree, were employed and were financially independent. The interviews were mediated by a semi-structured script, recorded and transcribed afterward. The names used in this paper are fictitious. We identified preliminary categories that emerged from the field, which were then grouped and compared with each other. The categories were subsequently refined, reaching a final concise relationship. Lastly, we compared the categories obtained with those mentioned in the literature.

FINDINGS

Jewelry received as a gift

Jewelry received as a gift appears in the context of family relationships and romantic love. It appeared as a link between generations, as a chain of continuity for the family, giving it connotations such as "tradition" and something "special" that can dignify the relationship with loved ones who have already passed. Leticia considered the jewelry that she inherited from her grandmother to be "emotionally valuable," something that enables her to "take her father's family" with her. Jewelry comes to symbolize a sacred relationship, one that transcends each life: "When you receive jewelry as a gift, it eternalizes the person who gave it".

Jewelry is also a symbol of familial love ("special, because my mother gave it to me"; "it was proof that my brother loved me"). The first piece of jewelry may also mark the passage to adulthood. Alice received from her grandfather "an adult's gift, a woman's gift." Sometimes, it refers to the giver's sacrifice to express love and to the receiver's worthiness. Lorena said that her father "was in no shape to buy that bracelet, [which he had bought with] a little money that he had saved up," thus an expression of fatherly love. Secondly, jewelry was also associated with terms such as "sweetness," "beauty" and "glamor." The gift of jewelry also symbolizes the romantic love between a man and a woman. It was described by Sarah as a kind of amulet against the possibility of the relationship falling apart. When it comes to definitive commitment, jewelry takes on a wider range of meanings, in that it reaffirms love, commitment and responsibility; it makes a rite of passage tangible, and it spells out romantic values in the relationship.

Jewelry as a self-gift

Jewelry as a self-gift was associated with simplicity of the object, something meant solely for daily use. When it is a "pricey piece of jewelry," explained Erica, it does not serve for such purpose. For those who self-gift, it may not have "the same charm," as Verônica observed: "Buying it for yourself isn't the same thing as getting it from someone else." The self-gift of an item of jewelry can mark passages and experiences. For Lorena, it suggests "showing yourself" how mature you are. Buying jewelry whenever "you can," takes on the character of being a "reward" and is a way to manifest one's

fulfillment in life. Isadora emphasized meanings of achievement and merit, bordering on a feminist viewpoint: "My mother always said that you should buy your jewelry with your own money." For Isadora, if, on the one hand, there is "a great feeling of independence; you worked for it." Sara agreed; she saw the self-gift of jewelry as a reflection of women's achievements in independence. Veronica, on the other hand, saw the self-gift as a symbol of femininity and gender demarcation: "Jewelry helps to comprise the female status." It can also take on the meaning of compensation. Erica was "feeling a little down" so she bought a necklace to cheer herself up. The self-gift of jewelry also appeared as a hedonistic manifestation.

Jewelry given as a gift

For those who give it as a gift, jewelry marks out passages and materializes the discussion about "giving the gift and staying with the object at the same time" (Weiner, 1992; Godelier, 2001). Lorena explained: "To this day, I still have the first gifts [of jewelry] that I gave to my children; they mean a lot more to me than to them." When the gift is meant for younger people, the ideas of a link between generations and tradition reappear. As Claudia stated: "I gave a Our Lady of Fatima necklace to my niece because the whole family has one." Claudia said that the gift meant "I care about you." Paula emphasized the value of perpetuity: "When you give, it means that it's forever." For Paula, the financial sacrifice implicit in the purchase adds value to the gift. Luana, on the other hand, felt that remembering the recipient and spending time on the choice make giving jewelry as a gift something special.

Gifts to individuals who are not familiar with jewelry may represent a display of status, good taste, or wealth. Lorena stated that she will gift someone who "means a lot" to her, and when she "can't think of anything more valuable to give," or when she wants to "show-off," or "feel important." Gabriela explained: "I care more about what the person expects than what I'm giving," indicating concern about giving the "right" gift.

DISCUSSION

The meanings raised in a first analysis movement were grouped together, taking underlying symbolic dimensions into account.

Gifts as a symbol of passages

People use jewelry to make life passages tangible throughout their lives (such as the engagement ring and wedding ring). The symbolic character of jewelry as the demarcation of passages runs through civilizations. Turner (1974, p.157) believes that "all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual" in his or her new status. There are secular and religious rituals in noteworthy passages. In general, dating and engagements are secular public or private rituals. Marriages are public rituals and can be performed in secular or religious ceremonies. In consumption studies, ceremonial celebrations and rites of passage are probably the most commonly studied occasions of gifting (e.g., Schmidt, 1995). In the case of the self-gift, however, the commemoration of passages tends to be private and secular.

Gifts as a symbol of the eternal

A piece of jewelry is something that lasts, representing the eternal, and transcending individual lives; a link between the past and the future on a timeline that must not be broken. It is possible to theorize that the impact of gifts with the meaning of intergenerational transmission is greater for those who receive them than for those who give them. Givers are freed from an obligation to transmit the "the portrait of the family" (Baudrillard, 2009, p.83) to following

generations. Whoever receives the object that embodies the family's perpetuity assumes the responsibility of maintaining and transmitting it. By this same logic, jewelry as an eternal link with loved ones appears much more in jewelry received than in jewelry that is gifted, since the symbolic and emotional content is more intense when jewelry is received as a gift. Sometimes the meaning of the piece of jewelry became clear only after the death of the one who gave the gift. As Baudrillard (2009, p.88) observed, the object is "fetishized" and transformed into a "relic," which enables it "to hold [...] the soul of the dead." It thus becomes a sacred object, involving "transcendent experiences of extraordinary significance to the individual" (Mick & Demoss, 1990b, p. 327).

In both cases – link between generations or link with loved ones – what lies behind it is the idea of perpetuity, of eternity. The same idea arises when the object is a symbol of love. Garner and Wagner (1991, p.370) called attention to the importance of gifts for maintaining "networks of love." Jewelry received in adulthood symbolizes the love relationship between partners, making tangible the romantic ideal of eternal love. The engagement ring carries coded "fidelity expectations" (Sherry, 1983, p.159) and commitment (Nguyen & Munch, 2011). As for jewelry given at other times in a couple's life, it is a reaffirmation of the commitment or a "realignment of the giver/recipient relationship" (Ruth et al., 1999, p.385).

Gifts as "emotional nutrition"

The two categories of meanings – deserving and compensating – appear strongly in the self-gift, with similar characteristics. Individuals allow themselves to buy a self-gift, either as a prize or a reward for a meritorious deed, or as compensation for something negative. Both situations require "emotional nutrition" (Mick & Demoss, 1990b, p.325). Jewelry as something that is merited is associated with passages (Mick et al., 1992), both as a gift received and as a self-gift. However, jewelry as compensation appears only in the self-gift.

Gifts as a symbol of reaffirmation of female roles

Two distinct meanings deserve attention. One, which we did not find in the literature, is that of jewelry as a symbol of female emancipation, and which is linked to the self-gift, symbolizing that the woman is not dependent on anyone to buy jewelry for her. At a time when the role of women is changing, it is possible that this is an indicator of new perspectives in the purchase of luxury items. However, jewelry also appears as a symbol of femininity, associated to elegance, beauty and glamor, highlighting the traditional role of women in society. The two views are not antagonistic since they coexist in the social environment.

Gift as a status symbol

A specific meaning appears in the case of jewelry given as a gift: jewelry as a status symbol, or as a mechanism of ostentation. The gift is given to acknowledge both the status of the giver and of the recipient. This is rather curious, because, in general, the search for status is referred to in the literature as the main reason for luxury consumption. If jewelry is a natural object of ostentation, why has the search for status been so little reported? It is possible that it is related to the understanding of jewelry as something sacred, a symbol of the continuity of the family or of love, and therefore, far above the purpose of ostentation. Or perhaps this quality – a status symbol – is not considered relevant when receiving the gift or self-gifting, but only when the object is worn.

Other meanings

One meaning that only appeared in the category of self-gift is that of jewelry as a hedonistic symbol, that is, something that has to do with the intrinsic pleasure that one experiences with the acquired object (Mick and DeMoss, 1990b). Jewelry also entails a financial sacrifice, both in the case of jewelry received, as well as jewelry given as a gift to someone else. Sacrifice adds value to jewelry; it is a display of affection.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research contributes to the literature on the consumption of luxury items by showing a range of meanings in addition to the display of status. Moreover, we found striking differences between jewelry received as a gift, given as a gift and as a self-gift. The most significant differences, however, were found between the gift and the self-gift, perhaps because the ritualistic behaviors are quite different in the two situations. We arrived at a set of six symbolic dimensions, which differ in part (and agree in part) with the existing literature, both in bringing some new dimensions, and in relation to the form and intensity with which dimensions that had already been identified in the literature appear. We found no study that mentioned the eternality dimension in the gift giving literature, although this dimension appears to be related to ancient objects in the anthropology of consumption. Nor did we identify any references in the literature connecting the self-gift with the issue of female emancipation.

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Table 1. Symbolic Dimensions of Jewelry as a Gift

Symbolic Dimensions	Meanings		
	Jewelry received as gift	Jewelry as self-gift	Jewelry given as gift
<i>Symbol of passages</i>	Marker of passages (secular or religious, public or private)	Marker of passages (private and secular)	Marker of passages (secular or religious, public or private)
<i>Symbol of the eternal</i>	Link between generations, perpetuity; tradition; sacred bonds; familial love; romantic love, fidelity and commitment.		Link between generations, perpetuity; tradition.
<i>Emotional nutrition</i>	Recognition of one’s merit	Reward; Compensation	
<i>Symbol of reaffirmation of female roles</i>	Femininity	Female emancipation, Independence; Femininity	
<i>Status symbol</i>			Ostentation, taste, distinction
<i>Others</i>	Financial sacrifice	Hedonistic symbol	Financial sacrifice

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