

### No Regrets?

#### An Exploration of Consumer Experiences with Impulse Self-Gifting

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**Background and Purpose.** Self-gifting refers to a consumption behavior in which an individual buys goods for him or herself rather than someone else (Clarke & Mortimer, 2013). According to Mick and Demoss (1990), self-gifts are “(1) personally symbolic self-communication through (2) special indulgences that tend to be (3) premeditated and (4) highly context bound” (p. 328). Self-gifting differs from other consumption behaviors because it is highly motivational and situation dependent (Mortimer, Bougoure, & Fazal-e-hasan, 2015). Despite the unique characteristics of self-gifting, the concept is typically viewed as a sub-category of gift-giving. Thus, its application to, or combination with, other types of consumption have yet to be fully explored. Although Luomala (1998) proposed potential linkages between mood-driven self-gifting and other consumption behaviors, including impulse buying, little research has been done since that time to explore the link between self-gifting and behaviors like impulse buying.

Impulse buying refers to “a sudden, immediate urge to purchase with no pre-laid intention or plan to buy the product” (Ozer & Gultekin, 2015, p. 72). In impulse buying, consumers are unable to contain the irresistible urge to buy because emotions are dominant in the purchasing situation (Huang, 2016). Indeed, the literature indicates that the effects of impulsivity on actual purchase behavior are enhanced by the individual’s emotions (Chen & Wang, 2016; Dholakia, 2000). A consumer’s emotional state and irrational desire greatly affect both self-gifting behavior (Luomala & Laaksonen, 1997) and impulse buying (Youn & Faber, 2000). Thus, it is plausible that consumer emotion leads to the combination of impulse buying and self-gifting, or impulse self-gifting behavior (ISGB) (Luomala & Laaksonen, 1997). However, the associations between self-gifting and impulse buying have not been empirically examined. Because both consumption behaviors share emotion as a key driver, the present study focuses on self-gifting behavior in combination with impulse buying.

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which impulse buying plays a role in self-gifting consumer behavior. The theoretical framework of Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) provided the conceptual basis for the study. The S-O-R model has been applied in consumer studies to explain the impact of environmental factors on consumers’ behaviors through their cognitive and emotional processes (Morrison, Gan, Dubelaar, & Oppewal, 2011). In ISGB, multiple contexts stimulate self-gifting motives (stimulus), which prompt an internal process (organism), and lead to ISGB (response). Based on the purpose, as framed by the S-O-R model, the objectives of the study were: (1) to explore the experience of ISGB before, during, and after purchase, (2) to investigate the internal and external factors that influence ISGB, and (3) to understand the extent to which consumers seek to control ISGB.

**Method.** A qualitative approach was employed to examine impulse self-gifting because both self-gifting and impulse behaviors are highly subjective and context-sensitive (Heath, Tynan, & Ennew, 2015). With IRB approval from the researchers' university, in-depth interviews were conducted over a three-month period during early 2019. Participants were recruited in the Southeastern region of the USA using a convenience sampling strategy and snowball technique. In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 20 individuals, comprised of 5 males and 15 females. Semi-structured interviews were employed because this form of interview is deemed appropriate for an exploratory study (Richter, Kraus, Brem, Durst, & Giselbrecht, 2017). The interviews prompted participants to describe their impulse buying experiences and the situational circumstances and emotional states before, during, and after the time of purchase. Interviews were recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. The data were analyzed iteratively to identify categories of meaning, which were then grouped into themes (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Three primary themes were used to examine ISGB through the lens of the S-O-R framework, including (1) motivations for the purchase, (2) factors important to the purchase, and (3) post-purchase outcomes.

**Results and Discussion.** Drawing on the S-O-R model, results revealed that various contexts (stimuli) promoted self-gifting motivations in an impulsive manner (organism), which, in turn, resulted in ISGB (response). Some of the motivations of ISGB were similar to that of self-gifting in general as found in the literature: *to feel better* (Park, 2018) and *to reward oneself* (Heath et al., 2015). For example, Mary purchased a self-gift to feel better, stating: "I would say after a long week of stress with school and then working two jobs and then at that time my grandmother passed away. So, it [self-gifting] was just like a getaway for me at that time." Mia, on the other hand, engaged in self-gifting to reward herself: "If I have worked really hard, then surviving and achieving a high grade or just achieving a desirable grade...sometimes I will self-gift as a result of that." Other motivations less frequently found in the literature include: *to celebrate* and *to look nice*. For example, some participants reported that special occasions (e.g., holidays) are motives to self-gift, as illustrated by Vickie: "I was looking for a gift for my boyfriend (for Valentine's Day). I did get him a shirt and then I also got a dress that's pretty." Participants also expressed a desire to look nice in public by self-gifting fashion items. Finally, a motivation rarely mentioned in previous self-gifting studies also emerged: *to collect*. For example, Nick is a video game collector and when he was in the store he made unplanned purchases for himself to add to his collection. According to Belk (1988) individuals collect items for distinction and self-definition and self-gifts are common among avowed collectors (Mick & Demoss, 1990).

Self-gifting is typically understood as pre-meditated; however, respondents impulsively engaged in self-gifting in all cases and were influenced by a variety of factors. Most of the participants reported that their *mood* (internal factor) has a strong impact on their ISGB, particularly the tendency to buy something unplanned for themselves. Emily stated, "I would probably buy it, if I'm really happy" and Donna explained that "When I feel sad, the shopping mall is like a therapy for me." Moreover, the majority of participants identified that external factors, such as *sales and coupons* influenced their ISGB. Most participants indicated that they frequently

try to talk themselves out of buying and seek to resist the impulse to self-gift (*self-control effort*). However, few participants reported that their attempts were successful. Lucy stated, “If it's a small item, I won't win.” Likewise, Tina remarked, “I have a big collection of panda items. If I find a very rare panda item, I have to have it.” Regarding post-purchase satisfaction, more than half of the participants (55%) expressed satisfaction after ISGB, while the rest (45%) articulated that they have experienced an emotional change from positive to negative in regards to ISGB purchase outcomes.

**Implications and Further Research.** This study is among the first to empirically examine the potential link between impulse buying and self-gifting behavior and to consider this link within the S-O-R framework. In so doing, the results highlight the role of motivations as well as internal and external factors in the context of ISGB. A recent survey conducted with US consumers revealed that approximately 20% said they planned to spend more money on gifts for themselves in the future (Thomas, 2017). By combining impulse buying with self-gifting, findings offer insight for marketers as self-gifting becomes increasingly prevalent in the marketplace. Future research is needed that considers consumer ISGB relative to other types of behaviors, such as compulsive consumption, compensatory consumption, as well as travel and recreational shopping.

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