Gift Giving: A Community Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

To date, the marketing literature on gift giving has focused on two approaches or paradigms—economic and relational exchange. This study adopts a different perspective, proposing a community paradigm to provide a holistic view of gift giving. The data (based on 20 in-depth interviews and 2 group interviews) suggest that, on the Internet, social networks of relationships cohere into gift-giving communities that influence the purchasing of gifts. Findings about online gift giving are presented according to three community themes: (a) shared rituals and traditions, (b) shared values, and (c) shared responsibilities. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed. © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
ing self-identity, emotions, expressiveness, and self-sacrifice. This study suggests a third paradigm, using a community gift-giving model, which focuses on gift-giving networks facilitated through the Internet.

The first paradigm of gift giving, focusing on traditional, face-to-face contexts, explores decision making, purchasing, and exchanging behaviors. Early studies in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology emphasize the importance of reciprocity in social relations (Mauss, 1954; Schwartz, 1967). Building on this foundation, Belk (1976) associates gift giving with consumer behavior, using cognitive consistency theories. His gift-giving model focuses on achieving balance among an individual's cognitions during gift selection and perceived evaluation of the gift. In addition, his model predicts the amount of satisfaction that a gift provides the giver after the exchange. Succeeding studies examine the type of gift chosen, the effort extended during the gift purchase, and the amount of money spent on the gift (Belk, 1979; Cheal, 1988; Garner & Wagner, 1991). In this first paradigm, gift-giving behaviors revolve around economic exchange.

The second paradigm of gift giving focuses on gifting as a vehicle to realign relationships. This paradigm, introduced by Sherry (1983), deemphasizes economic and social exchange in favor of a significant relational interactions perspective. These relational interactions revolve around the gift, donors and recipients, and situational conditions and are depicted as a three-stage exchange process. In the gestation stage, the giver searches internally for information as it relates to the self, the recipient, and the gift and then externally searches for appropriate vendors. The presentation stage involves the actual exchange with respect to time, place, and means of transaction. In the reformulation stage, the gift is evaluated by the receiver, impacting social bonds.

Working within this paradigm, Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim (1993) describe recipients as “easy” or “difficult” with respect to making an appropriate gift selection, and these perceived characteristics impact the enactment of social roles during the gift exchange. For example, gift givers use different selection strategies, depending on whether the recipient helps or hinders the enactment of social roles. Additional studies have also noted the relational importance of gift giving in terms of agapic love for others (Belk, 1996; Belk & Coon, 1993; Polonsky et al., 2000), relational intimacy (Cheal, 1987; Mauss, 1925), relationship with self (Mick & Demoss, 1990; Mick & Faure, 1998), and relational stages (Belk & Coon, 1991, 1993).

Although the exchange and relational paradigms have been central to advancing marketers’ understanding of gift giving, these paradigms focus on gifting from an interpersonal perspective. This study proposes a third, community-driven, paradigm for gift giving. Under this view, gift givers are participants of gift-giving communities, comprised of social networks. The gifts exchanged within these communal networks are cyclic in nature, meaning the gifts are not viewed solely between two
people. Rather, from this perspective, gifts are shared among network members and these social networks play an important role in the giver’s purchase decision.

The World Wide Web provides an excellent context for studying community’s impact on gift giving for several reasons. First, the medium has formalized many gift-giving behaviors. For example, a consumer can register on certain Web sites to create a wish list that others can view for purposes of gift purchasing. Second, the medium facilitates the access of gift-related information on a group level. Any member of a social network, for example, can view an individual’s wish list. Third, marketers have observed community and its effects on consumer behavior in other on-line contexts (e.g., Granitz & Ward, 1996), making it a well-accepted forum to study gift-exchange behavior. On-line shopping provides the optimum context for studying gift giving because it highlights and formalizes the dynamics between community and gifting on both an individual and group level.

The original purpose of this study—to analyze consumer gift shopping in an on-line context and to interpret their experiences and behaviors—provided entry into this complex system of cultural meanings that revealed a community-oriented method of gift giving. Rather than finding a unified, culturally dominant viewpoint of gift giving, as the exchange and relational paradigms, the researchers found that on-line gift giving typically takes place among a community of givers. Furthermore, gift-giving centers around common community characteristics, such as gifting rituals and traditions, gifting values, and gifting responsibilities. The first emergent goal of the research consisted of analyzing the culturally established meanings manifest in gift-giving communities. What kinds of rituals and traditions take place within a gift-giving community? Second, the authors examined the commonly held values among community members. What Web site features do community members value? Third, the authors interpreted the common responsibilities that community members uphold. What gifting traits do community members feel responsible for? By exploring these issues, the authors aim to extend prior gift-giving research that has not sufficiently theorized the community effects of gifting. In this article, a brief overview of the community literature that is relevant to on-line gift giving is reviewed, followed by a description of the research methods (primarily based on 20 in-depth consumer interviews and group interviews). Next, the research findings are outlined and the article concludes with a discussion of managerial implications.

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF COMMUNITY

Early definitions of community tended to be geographical (Gilchrist, 2001, p. 108), examining patterns of interaction between individuals in
communities of particular regions (Crow & Allan, 1995). Tonnies (1887) is recognized as the first sociologist to theorize about community. His conception of community, or what he called Gemeinschaft, is a geographically bound, tight-knit, folk, agrarian group of people. Building from this conception, early studies of community examine family and kinship rings (Young & Willmott, 1957) and focus on social relationship patterns (Wellman, 1979). This literature emphasizes the physical connections (i.e., social networks) of community within geographical domains (Bell & Newby, 1972; Reiss, 1977). The idea of a social network was first developed by Boissevain (1974) to analyze how societal advances are developed and proliferated among community members.

As researchers explored concepts of social networks, the definition of community broadened to include collectives of individuals that cohere around a shared spirit. For example, Bender (1978) and Selznick (1992) view community as a united group of individuals having social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds, including shared activities, beliefs, interests, values, and commitments. The expanding definition of community, combined with the introduction of the Internet, led to the idea that mediated social networks form the collective spirit that leads to community (Howard, 1997; Rheingold, 2000; Wellman, Salaf, Dimitrova, & Garton, 1996). Members of such on-line communities share not only network ties, but also information, emotions, communion, identity, and a sense of belonging (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Kozinets, 1997; Okleshen & Grossbart, 1998; Tambyah, 1996). The idea that media fosters communities was proposed as early as 1978 by Bender.

In addition to the creation of on-line communities, the Internet has also facilitated community within preexisting physical networks, such as families, work groups, religious organizations, or neighborhood communities, by making them more flexible, durable, and ubiquitous than in the past. Communities of the twenty-first century have an ongoing availability of resources and a continuous process of multileveled communication through Web-based connections. Thus, as argued by Shumar and Renninger (2002), the Internet provides an innovative medium for building community through symbolic gestures.

This inclusive definition of community, as a social network that coheres around shared cultural and social meaning systems (Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997), allowed the construct to proliferate into the marketing literature. The Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) seminal work on brand community in marketing takes exactly this view. A brand community is “a specialized, nongeographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships,” that has three distinct characteristics: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Consciousness of kind captures the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another. Rituals and traditions revolve around participation in consumption experiences with other community members. A sense of moral responsibility means that commu-
nity members feel a sense of duty to the community and other individual members. The idea that communities are nongeographically bound provides the context for community building in virtual contexts. It is within this perspective that on-line gift giving is examined.

With the use of the three characteristics of community, as outlined by Muniz and O'Guinn, the researchers in this study identify on-line gift-giving communities as social networks that share common rituals and traditions, values, and responsibilities. These commonalities are fostered in a virtual environment, posing the Internet as a vehicle for community building. This new perspective of gift giving situates gifting as a new, communal phenomenon.

METHOD

Two complementary qualitative data-collection methods, in-depth interviews and group interviews, were used to gain depth and insight into gift-giving behaviors. Interviews served as the primary source of data and were used as an exploratory approach to on-line gift giving. During interviews, informants discussed their gift-giving experiences with ease and the interviewer probed to fully understand the phenomenon at hand. This part of the data-collection process employed phenomenological research methods, focusing on participants’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). The group interviews provided a flexible environment for recipients to jointly express their communal gift-giving behaviors (Nevid & Sta Maria, 1999).

Interviews

Informants were recruited via personal contacts and referrals from other informants; the sampling procedure was purposive (Patton, 1990). Two criteria were used in selecting informants: each consumer had experience with on-line shopping, and each consumer had purchased gifts on-line and sent them to recipients without ever having physically seen the gift. Additionally, the sample reflected maximum variation, in that interviews represented a diverse set of participants on the basis of age, race, and gender. Maximum variation was the goal for the sample in order to discover and connect descriptions from persons with unique perspectives. Informants ranged in age from 16 to 65 and were engaged in a wide range of occupations. All participants had at least a college degree, or planned to earn one in the future. Moreover, participants were from middle- and high-income families with at least one computer in the household. These educational and income characteristics are consistent with the general Internet user population (cf., Siegel, 2004, p. 54), as well as with the Swinyard and Smith (2003) description of on-line shoppers. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of informants. Informants pur-
Table 1. Donor Sample Demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Interview Minutes</th>
<th>Gifts Purchased Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Healthcare professional</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Gift certificates, food, flowers, clock, school memorabilia, clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>General manager</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>CDs, jewelry, clothes, toys, DVDs, computer accessories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>Technician</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Clothes, jewelry, perfume, patio furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dudley</td>
<td>Retired school teacher</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Clothes, digital camera, computer accessories, toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Music director</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Jewelry, gift certificates, clothes, toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>School counselor</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Exercise equipment, books, cooking accessories, hair supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Account executive</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Gift certificates, books, clothes, art, sporting equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Books, CDs, DVDs, sunglasses, cooking accessories, furniture, computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherrie</td>
<td>Instructional designer</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Concert tickets, books, cards, pottery, bedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Market researcher</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Gift certificates, books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Books, gift cards, digital camera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie</td>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Microbiologist</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Silver, CDs, steaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Serviceman</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Clothing, music supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>Marketer</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Baby gifts, wedding gifts, books, CDs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>MIS educator</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Food, condiments, mementos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>IT developer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Gift certificates, CDs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Stay-at-home mom</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Books, cooking accessories, wedding gifts, furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittney</td>
<td>High school student</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>CDs, books</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
chased various quantities and types of on-line gifts, including gift certificates, jewelry, furniture, food, clothing, and computers.

The first author interviewed the on-line gift givers. Individual in-depth interview sessions ranged from 30 to 120 minutes in length and were conducted as one-on-one dialogues between the interviewer and the participant. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the interviewer; the transcriptions were typed verbatim with silences, laughs, and pauses noted. Informants were encouraged to elaborate on their Internet gift-purchasing experiences. All informants were assured of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and statement accuracy though member checks (Merriam, 1998). Each informant received a final copy of the data analysis to review and verify the findings.

Group Interviews

Once the initial findings were reviewed by participants, two group interviews were conducted. Two of the 20 original participants were asked to participate in a group interview with other members of their gift-giving community in an effort to produce a more holistic account of community-gifting activities. Participants in the first group interview consisted of a family, with 5 out of 11 family members present. Participants in the second group consisted of a group of coworkers, with six out of eight departmental members present. Informal sessions lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted. The group interview sessions were audiotaped and transcribed.

The first and second authors analyzed and interpreted the transcripts from both the in-depth and group interviews according to the protocol for phenomenology suggested by Moustakas (1994). A constant comparative method was used to create categories of information by likening individual incidents (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Significant statements taken from the informants’ reported incidents were combined into broad meaning units (Creswell, 1998, p. 15) with an accompanying description and supporting quotes to allow for elaboration. Finally, the first and second authors developed an interpretive description for each meaning unit as it related to the stated research questions, personal responses, and previous research. The third author reviewed and critiqued the analysis to provide insight into the interpretation.

FINDINGS

Community Effects on Gift Giving

A gift-giving community is defined as a social network comprised of individual consumers supporting one another through symbolic gestures. Gifts tend to be given and received following a common cycle within a communal network of relationships, such as family members, coworkers, neigh-
bors, or friends. Thus, within these communities, gifts are shared among network members, and these communal networks play an important role in shaping givers’ individual purchase behaviors. Although the interview informants were never explicitly asked about the role of community in shaping their on-line gift-giving behaviors, 19 out of 20 participants in the study discussed on-line gift shopping in the context of a gift-giving community. One outlier in the research purchased more self gifts than community gifts when shopping on-line. Three key themes emerged from the data—shared rituals and traditions, shared values, and shared responsibilities—that together capture the effects of community with regard to gift giving in an on-line context. The group sessions were used to confirm data analysis and provide further insight into virtual community building.

Shared Rituals and Traditions: Shopping from Common Web Sites

One of the most interesting findings of this study emerged when informants were asked about their loyalty to various Web sites. Informants indicated that their community networks, based on family members, friends, or coworkers, tend to give each other gifts from common Web sites. In addition, community members typically remain loyal to only a few select Web sites. Community network members informally agree on the Web site accessibility, product quality, and brand preferences of these common sites. Dudley, for instance, is a 65-year-old Caucasian male who refuses to buy gifts from Web sites that are not shared within his family:

Joanne [his wife] and I like to search the Web together for gifts for our family members that live in other states. It sure beats flipping through magazines—that is how we used to do it. We used to use the same magazines every year to buy for our family. Our kids would circle the items that they wanted for Christmas or birthdays. Joanne and I would then pick out our favorite items from the ones that they had circled. Now we do the same thing, but instead of using magazines, we use the Internet. I ask my kids to register for gifts on-line and they will pick out certain things from our designated family Web sites. The whole family gets to decide what Web sites we use. We pick Web sites that let us send things back if we don’t like something. Also, it is nice when you can use discount cards to get lower prices or personal accounts to keep up with all your past purchases. My son wanted to send back a flannel shirt that we bought him for Christmas. And, we just printed off our list of past purchases and he used that to send his shirt back. It is so much easier than using magazines.

Community members use common Web sites for gift purchases, even if physically buying the gift is more convenient, because these sites have become habitual and symbolic resources within the social network. Remaining loyal to a few Web sites corroborates previous studies exploring identity construction in virtual communities (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh,
In order to maintain one’s identity as a group member, he or she must adhere to accepted norms within the group. The group acts as a guide by helping members select gifts from preferred, group-approved Web sites. David, a 32-year-old Caucasian male, illustrates this idea. David prefers to purchase CDs for his college friends through their commonly used Web site, rather than walk across the street from his work to purchase a CD for the same price:

> It may be easier to get a CD from a store that I can walk to, but I’d rather buy it on-line through a Web site that all of my friends use. We all use this one site that has great deals on CDs. We have been buying CDs for each other for the past 3 years. It is just something we do. I don’t know who started doing it first. I guess Ray bought the first CD and sent it to me and then I bought from the same Web site and sent one to Kenny. And I guess that is how it started. We all love music, and CDs are things we can buy for each other and it never gets old. If I find some new music that I really dig, I can buy it on-line and send it to my one of my buddies in New York. We used to be together all the time in college and this is a way we can keep in touch. We all buy from the same Web site because it’s familiar to us and it’s just how we do it.

Network members become loyal to Web sites that symbolize and embody their community’s rituals and traditions. When positive experiences with particular Web sites occur, such as being able to return an unwanted item easily, this information is shared within the community. The sharing of Web sites makes the gift exchange a more harmonious experience for all parties involved and ensures continued usage. In addition to the ease of gift returns, the maintenance of personal account records for purposes of information sharing within the group, and special member discount cards that benefit the members of the collective, guarantee regular usage.

Another valuable feature within communal networks is the wish list, through which others in the community can register for desired items. Wish lists take the guessing out of gift giving and ensure that the right gift is given on that special occasion. This feature on Web sites allows all members of the community to be familiar with the desires of others in the network, simplifying gift shopping among family and friends who want to send the perfect wanted or needed gift. Using the wish list to ensure that the receiver will be satisfied with the item helps to formalize and centralize communication within the network and maintains social harmony within the community.

Eddie, for example, shops on-line at the Web sites that are agreed upon within his family. He discovered that the wish-list feature helps to prevent the disappointment that his wife shows when he purchases the wrong gift. After such an incident, Eddie’s family created a tradition of using the wish list on several agreed-upon Web sites to communicate gift preferences within the network. Interestingly, this practice is explained by community theory, which suggests that historical and social instances often form the unwritten rules about the rituals and tradi-
tions of a community. Eddie, a 54-year-old male, explains how his family tradition was first established:

I used to go and buy my wife gifts from Lord and Taylor because I knew that she shopped there and I thought I was safe buying things from there. But, that was not the case 2 years ago. I bought her some lingerie from there and she was not impressed at all. I didn’t know that she only liked lingerie from Victoria’s Secret. And I just feel uncomfortable going in that store. I mean there are all these women in there and I am the only man and everybody is staring at me. I’d just rather go on-line and shop there. So now it has become a tradition with us. Every year she registers for some things on-line, and it is still a surprise because she doesn’t know what I am going to buy. But, I’ll go on-line to some of her favorite Web sites and buy some gifts and she does the same for me. I get to register for gifts for myself too.

When communities share common Web sites, the monetary value of each item is known (or that information is easily accessible). Similar to the economic-exchange model, members of a community evaluate the gift in terms of economic worth. However, the economic worth is not determined by only one or two people; rather, the entire community engages in the economics of the gift. Via networks, community members can gauge the level of exchange at which other members operate. Furthermore, knowing the level of exchange allows members of the network to register for gifts that fall within the accepted expense ranges. Annual (sometimes obligatory) events, such as birthdays and holidays, are maximized through common Web sites by preregistering for gifts that other members can later purchase.

Jennifer, a 30-year-old Hispanic female, talks about her “family Web sites” as being particularly important because they have become part of the gift-giving tradition within her communal network. Jennifer’s family uses the Barnes and Noble and William Sonoma Web sites for the majority of their family gift giving:

We all know that everyone in the family loves gifts from those sites. It makes shopping for my Mom, Dad, sister, and brother so easy, and I am sure they find it easy to buy gifts for me too. I call them our “family Web sites” [referring to Barnes and Noble and William Sonoma]. It has become a family tradition to use these sites because we all have our wish list on each Web site. Everyone in my family loves to read and cook so buying something from Barnes and Noble or William Sonoma is always appreciated. I only spend about 20 to 25 dollars on my brother or sister, and they spend the same amount on me. Shopping at our family Web sites makes it easy when trying to fit our price range. There are so many things we can register for on these sites that fit our budget. I usually spend a little more on my mom or dad. But nobody in my family spends more than 40 dollars on an on-line gift unless it is a really special occasion, like my brother graduating from medical school. So I register for items that range anywhere from 10 to 50 dollars.
Jennifer’s quote is particularly powerful because it shows that Barnes and Noble and William Sonoma are the traditional Web sites used for gift giving within her network because they overlap with the interests of the collective (i.e., reading and cooking). In addition, these sites have the ever-desirable “wish list” feature that formalizes communication about individual preferences. But, more important, Jennifer emphasizes that she likes the idea of registering and purchasing preferred items that fit within the family’s predetermined budgets for particular gift purchases. In other words, shopping on these sites helps Jennifer ensure that she is spending the same amount on her brother or sister that she knows each of them will spend on her, equalizing the exchange and maintaining social harmony within the community.

**Shared Values: Quality Is Important**

All of the participants in this study emphasized the importance of “quality” in their decisions to purchase gifts for community members. Informants explained that purchasing the gift from a high-quality Web site ensures a gift of good quality, whereas a gift ordered from an unreliable or unknown Web site is perceived as cheap, poor quality, or inferior. Hence, the importance of Web-site quality stems from a desire to please a recipient or reinforce a relationship by giving a desirable item. Because a recipient, in most cases, receives a gift directly from the company managing a Web site, the point of origin is particularly symbolic of gift value (Davis, 1972).

Informants’ interpretations of a “quality” Web site are grounded in the values of their communities. This finding resembles Shoham’s (2004) discussion on image management and enhancement. In order to optimize one’s self-presentation, community members must maintain their status as members by purchasing quality gifts. As stated by Shoham (2004), the community (i.e., chat-room community or gift-giving community) becomes part of the extended self, and this motivates consumers to adhere to the norms and rituals of the group. When asked to define a quality Web site, informants often referred to their networks (e.g., family or friends) when describing sites that are “reliable, speedy, user-friendly, easy to navigate, credit-card savvy, and visually appealing.” These features are common to the marketability of any Web site that sells products (Burke, 1997), but what is important in this context is that the informants spun their answers around the desires of the community. Across the descriptions of quality, the commonality appears to be that a community creates its own sense of style—a style that must be reflected in the design of the Web site that is chosen for gift purchase.

For example, Natalie, a 45-year-old Caucasian female, uses only quality Web sites for her gift purchases even if purchasing the gift somewhere else was more convenient. According to Natalie, her gift-giving community believes that particular Web sites are more reliable than others and deliver better-quality gifts. Natalie is motivated to use “group-
approved" Web sites in order to adhere to social norms and maintain her membership status. When Natalie was asked if she would consider other Web sites for gift purchases, she responded skeptically:

Well, if the Web site looked professional and reliable, I would probably [pause], well, I may try it if my family liked it. If it looks like it is kind of sketchy my brother would not want me buying something for him. If it wasn’t set up like how the other Web sites are set up—like the ones that I have purchased from before—how they do things, then I would be hesitant to purchase from them. My family values a Web site with certain features.

Researcher: Can you describe those features?

Just [pause] the way that it looks. Good pictures and easy access. Takes all types of credit cards. They may have some comments or some feedback from some people that have used the Web site before that you could read to find out if it is reliable. Maybe even do a little bit of research on that particular company that has that Web site. I would probably ask my friends and family. The Web site would need to be easy to navigate. If it was just something for me, I would probably be open to trying new Web sites. But, if I were buying a gift to give to someone, I would be more skeptical and do more research on it. Because if I am giving a gift for someone special, I want to make sure they get it and I’m not getting gypped or you know, that kinda thing. If it is for me it wouldn’t really matter, but if it is for someone else I want to make sure it is what it says it is. So I usually just stick to the Web sites that my family uses.

Choosing quality Web sites for gift giving corroborates Mauss’s (1925) view that gift giving is an optimizing behavior grounded in social norms. As Natalie suggests, choosing a quality Web site is important to optimizing relations within a social network. In fact, 17 informants indicated that Web site quality directly reflects the quality of the relationship between the giver and receiver. Clearly, this link motivates buyers to use certain Web sites when purchasing gifts for community members. Features such as straightforward navigation, clear images, personalized accounts, password access and protection, and credit-card acceptability communicate the reliability of the firm that is sending the gift on behalf of the giver. A more reliable firm ensures that an appropriate gift will be sent to the receiver, contributing to the stability of the relationship and, in turn, the harmony within the community.

Essentially, a quality Web site alleviates much of the apprehension associated with purchasing gifts in a virtual context. This is the case for Amy, a 52-year-old Hispanic female, who avoids using Web sites that lack graphics and/or those with complicated navigation because she feels that Web-site quality accurately predicts gift quality. Amy does not want to be embarrassed within her community by giving cheap gifts or items that could not be returned:
You can usually tell the quality of a gift by looking at the Web site. If the Web site is not easy to use, then the gifts are probably not going to be good gifts. I’ve become loyal to sites that are easy to use. I really like Web sites that have personal accounts and passwords. I feel like this ensures my privacy and it makes me feel like an important customer. It also makes it easy to purchase gifts because it saves time when your mailing address, phone number, and other stuff are saved in the computer. You don’t have to keep typing that stuff into the computer over and over. Pictures are also important to me. I like to use pictures to see different colors of clothes [pause], and I like to see the item before I purchase it. If the pictures are good, I don’t have to see the items in person. I avoid Web sites that are not easy to navigate and customer friendly. I don’t want to worry that my friends and family will have to send bad gifts back. Really, I don’t want to be humiliated with my family and friends because I gave them bad, ugly gifts.

What Amy is implying is that if an individual fails to give a gift of high quality, his/her social status within a gift-giving community is diminished. According to Mauss (1925), the giver evaluates the circumstances of each individual transaction and selects the appropriate gift to enforce or support the expected social norm. The authors also found that social norms play a similarly important role in gift-giving communities, as in Karl’s situation. Karl is a 52-year-old African American male who only shops on Web sites that gain the approval and meet the expectations of his family because he is particularly sensitive to the social norms of his community. He feels that it would be futile to purchase from Web sites that are not common to his social network because his family has an understanding of what specific gifts to purchase from certain Web sites. As Karl explains, if he decided to purchase a gift from an unfamiliar source that was of low quality, the informal social contracts within his community network could be disrupted:

I don’t buy anything for my wife that is not from her Web sites. She is not gonna go for something that is on sale or cheap in any way. You know, I have to be careful when I buy gifts for her or my daughter, but especially my wife. We have an understanding that I buy things for her and she buys things for me that we know we want and we know that we will use them. So I would never shop on a Web site that is not good, you know. I need to buy things for her that’s of good quality and I only buy things from good-quality Web sites for her. And my daughter too, I can only buy certain things for her. If I buy things that are on sale or just convenient, it won’t do the trick. I have to buy things that are special and I can only find those special things at certain Web sites. And when I buy them something, the Web site has to be reliable.

Karl acknowledges that a tacit understanding exists about gift-giving behaviors within his community. He describes a sense of balance among the gift-giving activities in his family. (Similarly, Poe [1977] emphasizes the importance of balance in interpersonal gift-giving relationships.) Going outside the boundaries of the expected community norms could potentially cause dissension within the community. Furthermore,
within Karl’s family, the perceived value of the gift directly reflects the perceived value of the relationship, and the Web site from which the gift was purchased is a reflection of gift quality. Thus, to Karl, the gift depicts the importance of his role as a husband and father within the family, and thus, he has certain communal values to uphold. Because of the standards of the collective and the relationships that he holds within the community, Karl places strong emphasis on selecting quality Web sites in order to purchase acceptable gifts for his family members.

Shared Responsibilities: Communicating Thought behind the Purchase

Sixteen participants conveyed that their gift-giving community had a sense of social responsibility to one another. In other words, there is a shared understanding of an appropriate gift, the right timing for a gift, and how the gift should be presented. Responsibility to adhere to these preconceived ideals ensures the thoughtfulness of a gift. Neisser (1973) suggests that the thoughtfulness of a gift emphasizes a relationship’s importance and meaning. Extending this notion, the authors found that thoughtfulness is a responsibility shared by all community members rather than a commitment existing solely between two people. Being a responsible gift giver ensures a member’s commitment to the community. The authors found that men and women equally uphold their commitment to the community and that members demonstrate their gifting responsibilities through gift presentation. Both men and women in this study expressed a desire to give gifts that provided communal acceptance.

Gift giving is characterized by a high level of socialization, and a gift that is acceptable to community members includes maximizing its presentation. Upon receiving a gift, recipients process the exchange and evaluate the giver in terms of acknowledgment and thoughtfulness. Thoughtfulness is communicated through gift presentation. Just as community members are loyal to certain Web sites, whole communities are more likely to be loyal to Web sites with gift-presentation options. Web sites that offer distinctive features for gift presentation are preferred by gifting communities because gift presentation expresses special thought, thus ensuring responsibility on behalf of the giver. Community members will often pay additional fees for wrapping and expedient delivery services because these features express the meaningfulness of the relationship. For example, Jennifer conveys the thoughtfulness of her gifts by paying more for trendy gift wrapping:

I buy gifts all the time and I always make sure they have some type of special wrapping. Some Web sites let you pick out your own wrapping and bows. My family will not buy gifts on-line for special occasions unless the company offers special wrapping features. One time my brother sent a gift to my mom without paying the extra three dollars for wrapping. My mom was kinda hurt because the wrapping means something. It is just
what we do as a family and my brother knew that. My mom told me and then I told my brother how thoughtless that was. My brother never did that again.

Participants in this study preferred to buy gifts on-line because it saved time and eliminated the hassle of gift wrapping at home, but at the same time it upheld community values regarding gift purchases. This notion extends the Peterson and Merino (2003) research on consumer search behavior on the Internet. Peterson and Merino (2003) suggest that moderators, such as the type of information being sought, the nature of the product or service, and the purpose of the information search, affect consumer information search behaviors. Similarly, this study found that the community acts as a moderator on search and purchase decisions via the Internet. For example, Mike, a 44-year-old African American male, conveys that he will not purchase gifts on-line for his coworkers unless there are gift-wrapping options. Mike emphasized the importance of gift presentation among his coworkers because it communicates a sense of dedication and responsibility to the group. Mike chooses to buy gifts on-line because it evades the time-consuming but necessary obligation of wrapping the gift, and at the same time, it upholds his social responsibility to the group:

We exchange gifts at my office every year by drawing names at Christmas and everybody brings a wrapped present. I am too lazy to wrap gifts and I don’t want to have to buy wrapping paper, ribbons, a card, tissue paper, scissors, tape, and all of the pomp and circumstance associated with a gift. I don’t have room to store all of that. I am a horrible wrapper anyway, and I get frustrated when the paper is cut too short or when the pattern is mismatched. I think it takes away from the gift, even if it is expensive or heartfelt. And my girlfriend doesn’t want to wrap my co-workers’ gifts, so I just buy them on-line and have it sent straight to the office…it is my sly way of buying gifts because I get out of wrapping but I’m still a responsible, thoughtful coworker.

Gift giving is based on an exchange, which implies that something is given in return for something received (Belk & Coon, 1993). The community members involved in an exchange wish to fulfill the expectations of gift reciprocity, thus creating what Sahlins (1972) calls “balanced reciprocity.” The authors found that balanced reciprocity is evident not only between two people, but also within a gift-giving community. Gift presentation communicates a sense of responsibility, harmony, and balance among community members. Mike explains this idea in relation to his coworkers:

Gift presentation is important in my office. If you don’t bring a pretty gift to the annual Christmas party, nobody wants your gift and you feel kinda stupid. I really didn’t understand how important the look of the gift was my first year, so I brought a gift in a brown paper bag. It was a nice gift I thought because I brought an expensive bottle of wine and two wine glasses. But nobody wanted my gift because it was ugly. I felt like an
oddball. Now I know how the game is played and I bring attractive gifts and fit right in.

Symbolic encoding of the gift occurs during and after gift reception; thus, the appearance of the gift contains connotative meaning. Simple embellishments, such as wrapping paper, cards, and bows, symbolically articulate a sense of responsibility to the gift community by conveying gift value and giver thoughtfulness. Therefore, on-line gift giving becomes more altruistic and the giver maximizes the recipient’s pleasure by decorating the gift with distinctive accessories. These views are consistent with indications that communal factors affect the social construction of consumption (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Gift presentation is a form of social responsibility, and Web sites that provide channels for community members to express their social obligations (through gift presentation and other social sine qua nons) will likely gain a community’s loyalty.

Combining the Paradigms from a Theoretical and Managerial Perspective

Theoretically, this study provides an impetus for research on gift giving within three distinct paradigms. Prior gift-giving studies explored gift-giving strategies within two commonly accepted paradigms: economic exchanges and relational partnerships. Here, the authors examine gift giving in a new context, Internet gift giving, and discuss an emergent form of giving from a communal perspective. Table 2 illustrates how gift giving can be viewed from the exchange, relational, and communal perspectives in terms of gift meaning, gift selection, gift value, gift perception, and self-image. These three paradigms are demonstrated from the donor’s perspective; however, analogous comparisons can be made from the recipient’s perspective.

The natures of gift meaning, gift selection, gift value, gift perception, and self-image change as these concepts are viewed in light of the different paradigms. The economic exchange paradigm emphasizes the value of the gift in terms of time and money; the relational partnership paradigm emphasizes companionship and intimacy; and the communal commitment paradigm emphasizes social bonds to a community of givers. In order to gain a holistic view of gift giving, academicians and managers alike must understand the behavioral implications associated with each perspective.

The paradigms represent a typology of relational stages and can overlap and interact with one another. Consistent with Lotz, Shim, and Gehrt (2003), relationships determine the dimensional aspects of gift-giving behaviors. A donor, as well as a recipient, can move from one paradigm to another in accordance with dimensional relationships. For example, a mother and daughter may begin their gift-giving behaviors in the economic exchange paradigm. At this stage, the mother is the provider for
her daughter and the emphasis is on time and money. As the daughter matures, the mother–daughter relationship also matures, and gift giving begins to resemble a relational partnership. At this stage, gift giving symbolizes relational longevity and intimacy. Once the daughter gets married and forms her own family, mother–daughter gift-giving behaviors may begin to resemble a communal commitment where the entire family is involved in gift-giving rituals and the emphasis is on connectedness to the family.

The Internet adds another element and provides a holistic understanding of gift giving. In this study, the Internet provided a unique venue for studying gift giving, which revealed gift-giving strategies from a communal perspective. Although empirical data from only one paradigm is presented, Internet influences for all three paradigms can be presumed. For example, the Internet has the potential to make it more or less convenient for donors to emphasize the economic exchange in terms of time and money. Likewise, dyadic relational partnerships may need to adopt new gift-giving rituals in order to utilize the conveniences of the Internet. The complexities of the Internet inevitably influence a manager’s decision-making when marketing to on-line gift givers.

From a managerial perspective, the communal paradigm for gift giving suggests that marketers should expand their view of gift giving beyond an individual or dyadic perspective. For instance, the research results suggest that a gift can be valued because of how the collective, or larger social network, views the object and its symbolic associations. Extending the Ruth, Brunel, and Otnes (2004) research on emotion-laden marketing for gift recipients, this research suggests that marketers might

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Table 2. Gift-Giving Paradigms: Donor Perspective.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gift meaning</td>
<td>Reflects the value and benefit of the gift itself</td>
<td>Reflects the nature of the relationship</td>
<td>Reflects the commitment to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift selection</td>
<td>Donor relies on notion of fair exchange</td>
<td>Donor relies on the level of intimacy</td>
<td>Donor considers the value of being a community member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift value</td>
<td>Donor applies cost accounting (e.g., in terms of time and money)</td>
<td>Donor considers relational longevity</td>
<td>Donor considers social bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift perception</td>
<td>Emphasis on monetary budget and budgetary expenditures</td>
<td>Emphasis on companionship</td>
<td>Emphasis on connectedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self image</td>
<td>Perception of self as a provider</td>
<td>Perception of self as a partner</td>
<td>Perception of self as a social member</td>
</tr>
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want to consider positive or negative emotions within a gift-giving community. For example, gifts could express the level of involvement, commitment, and gratitude within the group. A communal perspective suggests that marketers might understand gift-giving communities by focusing on socially networked consumers.

As indicated in the data, certain Web sites gain symbolic, habitual usage within communal networks. These collectively agreed-upon Web sites are determined to be of high quality—a direct reflection of the community’s values. On-line retailers could improve the atmospherics of their Web site (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003) as they relate to communal, rather than individual or dyadic, needs and wants. This could possibly involve a simple revamping of Web-page designs to emphasize collective or communal features, such as wish lists, past purchase lists, gift wrap, suggested gift items that match certain price ranges, and featured items that coordinate with those on a wish list. However, it could even be as complex as creating sophisticated algorithms for those searching for gifts in order to provide recommendations that match preferences of community members. Essentially, if most people in the social network prefer unique gift wrap, a retailer could remind the purchaser that this is an important consideration when sending a gift to someone else within the community.

Finally, marketers could implement promotions that resonate with the community of gift givers, rather than individuals in a gift-giving dyad. This notion builds upon the Bodur and Grohmann (2005) concepts of business-to-consumer relationships, but here the community context is emphasized. In other words, businesses could target communities and create a loyal body of consumers. For example, retailers could create more communally oriented pricing schemes, such as group discounts or discounts from purchasing a certain number of items on someone’s wish list. These strategies could mirror the activities of cell-phone companies, such as MCI’s Friends and Family plan or Sprint’s PCS to PCS that play off of network effects. In addition, marketers could involve various types of communities in more collective gift-giving programs. For example, marketers could target the work place, universities, religious groups, fraternal organizations, or even families in an effort to build from the public spiritedness of the collective. If a consumer is part of a community, he or she is more likely to participate in its bandwagon effects (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) and thus purchase according to the socially accepted norms of the collective. The results of this study suggest that these bandwagon effects could have an important impact within social networks, according to the communal paradigm for gift giving.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study advances the existing knowledge and understanding of gift-giving behaviors in three distinct ways. First, communal gift-giving
behaviors are identified. Prior studies on gift giving focus on a dyadic exchange between individuals, whereas this study focuses on gift-giving behaviors that are community driven. Understanding gift giving from a communal perspective provides new theoretical and managerial insights. Whether it is in-store or on-line purchases, the communal perspective, along with the exchange and relational aspects of gift giving, must be considered.

Second, this study expands the theoretical understanding of gift giving by identifying three distinct paradigms. The economic-exchange paradigm is based on budgetary expenditures, the relational partnership paradigm is based on relational intimacy, and the communal-commitment paradigm is based on interconnectedness within a community of givers. These three paradigms provide a holistic description of gift-giving behaviors in terms of gift meaning, gift selection, gift value, gift perception, and self-image.

Third, the findings suggest that the Internet influences gift-giving patterns. The Internet serves as a medium for gift giving within the three paradigms and it provides an important venue for community gift-giving. Marketers may focus on marketing to (or with) potentially loyal, gift-giving communities that seek to utilize the advantages and conveniences of the Internet. For example, the Internet provides an outlet for peer-to-peer marketing. In this study, community members educated one another about important Web-site attributes and persuaded members to use certain sites. Peer-to-peer marketing leads to group loyalty and is a major advantage for companies that target gift-giving communities.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should examine the impact of the Internet on the exchange and relational paradigms. In addition, the community paradigm should be examined in “physical” contexts. After reviewing the results of this research, it is predictable that community-based findings would exist in face-to-face contexts; then again, certain Internet features may be central to community-gifting development. For example, the wish-list feature available on many Web sites formalizes the communication of wanted items between community members. In a physical context, the same dynamic may occur, but an individual may have to create a wish list and pass it along to a family member, who then distributes it to the rest of the community. The authors hypothesize that this informal form of communication within the community would affect gift-giving behavior; however, the process may take more time and may not be as influential.

The researchers in this study employ two qualitative research methods (Cohen, 1999; Hall & Rist, 1999; Nevid & Sta Maria, 1999): interviews and focus groups. Future studies could incorporate observations and
document analyses, as well as quantitative forms of research. According to Calder (1977) exploratory qualitative studies are effective precursors to quantitative methodologies.

The sampling method in this study is a potential limitation. The small sample utilized in this study is well suited for exploratory, qualitative research; however, many of the findings should be reexamined with the use of a large probability sample of on-line gift buyers. In terms of future research, it is also important to compare customer satisfaction with attribution behavior to determine the extent to which these constructs determine individual versus communal gift giving. Key research questions include: Is it easier to return gifts on-line? Does one feel less guilt in returning that unwanted gift, if it was purchased on-line? Or, does one search for the price of the gift received to decide how much to spend in return?

When conducting the in-depth interviews for this study, one interviewee reported more self-purchases on the Internet rather than communal gifts. Self-gifts via the Internet represent a new area for future research. For example, do consumers feel more comfortable purchasing self-gifts or gifts for others via the Internet? What makes a company Web site more conducive to self-gifting versus purchasing gifts for others or vice versa? How should managers market to self-gifters?

In addition, the authors found that both men and women equally shop on-line for gifts due to virtual conveniences. This brings into question the Areni, Kiecker, and Palan (1998) suggestion that women tend to devote more time and effort to giving gifts. Subsequent studies should explore how the Internet influences gender roles in gift-giving communities. The Internet could change the concept of traditional male–female gift-giving profiles, especially when viewed through the lens of a gift-giving community. Within a community, males may take on more expressive, leadership roles. Finally, this study clearly shows that community has an important influence on on-line gift giving. Thus, the authors suggest that this community paradigm is a useful lens for understanding on-line consumer behaviors and may provide a productive perspective for marketing managers.

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