Giving Gold Jewelry and Coins As Gifts: The Interplay of Utilitarianism and Symbolism
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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the practice of giving gold jewelry and coins as gifts through a qualitative research conducted in Ankara, Turkey. We seek to understand the occasions of gift giving and the motivation behind this practice of gift giving. We aim to contribute to the existing literature not only by extending our understanding of the dynamics of gift giving behavior in non-Western contexts but also by questioning the tenability of the distinction between functionally and symbolically motivated gift giving. We argue that gift giving behavior is guided by interplay of utilitarian and experiential motives, whereby the economic values of gifts play a significant role along with symbolic values.

INTRODUCTION
Gift giving is a behavior with important social, personal, and economic implications. Given its significance and prevalence as a universal ritual an extensive literature addressing various aspects of gift giving exists within the consumer behavior field. Drawing from anthropological, sociological and psychological literatures these studies explore the underlying motivations, functions, occasions, and participants of gift giving behavior. We aim to contribute to the existing literature by examining the practice of giving gold jewelry and coins as gifts in the Turkish society. Through our study we hope to extend our understanding of the dynamics of gift giving behavior in non-Western contexts and also question the tenability of the distinction between functionally and symbolically motivated gift giving. Guided by these concerns, we first briefly review the literature and state our objectives. Then we explain the methodology of the study. We conclude by presenting main findings and discussing the contributions and future research areas.

MOTIVATION

Many of these studies also explored why people give gifts, and indicated that gift-giving motivations may range from altruistic to agonistic (Sherry 1983; Sherry and McGrath 1989; Wolfinbarger 1990). The commonly discussed motives include compliance with social norms (e.g. Belk 1976; Garner and Wagner 1991), marking and communicating social relationships (e.g. Belk 1979; Ruth et al. 1999), and altruism (e.g. Belk and Coon 1993). When giving is perceived as obligatory, gifts tend to be less symbolic, less likely to communicate feelings, and more practical (Goodwin et al. 1990). On the other hand, when gift giving is an “expression of love” (Cheal 1988), great deal of thought and effort goes into selection, and givers try to select gifts that are likely to communicate the nature of the relationship and the feelings.

However, it appears that there are two assumptions underlying the gift giving literature. First, there is a distinction between utilitarian and experiential gift giving, and a tacit understanding that either utilitarian or experiential motives underlie gift giving and that they cannot operate simultaneously (for an exception see, Wolfinbarger and Yale. 1993). Second, it seems that the symbolic value of the gift has more importance than its economic value. Because most of the value of the gift stems from the thought and effort put into its selection, gifts of cash or gift certificates appear as inappropriate, impersonal and too materialistic unless they are given in certain contexts such as weddings.

This study aims to extend the literature by examining a gift giving behavior in which the distinctions between utilitarian and experiential motives, and economic and symbolic values are blurred: giving gold jewelry and gold coins as gifts. There are several reasons for our focus on gold. First, gold and gold jewelry seem to share many aspects of a gift identified by Belk (1979) including communication, social exchange, economic exchange, and socialization. Jewelry is often characterized as a favorite, popular and traditional gift item (Wolfinbarger 1990; Belk and Coon 1991). It is a highly communicative product (Holman 1981) that carries social cues (Belk and Zhou 1987). Gold and gold jewelry also facilitate social exchange. Jewelry is perceived as expressive of social connection (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) and symbolizing relationships in rites of passages (Noble and Walker 1997). Gold, on the other hand, serves as a symbol of continuance and merit, and signifies attainment of high standards (Clark 1986). It is also a medium of exchange that can function as a store of value, and therefore, has an economic value.

Furthermore, gold is a major investment, adornment and gift item in the Turkish society. In fact, Turkey constitutes one of the world’s biggest gold consumption markets, ranked as fifth in demand (Turkishtime.org 2003). In Western markets gold jewelries are usually low carat and they are bought primarily as items of adornment. In Asia and Middle East, on the other hand, most of the gold jewelries are high karat, which can be easily converted back into gold. In Turkey, the main karat marks for gold jewelries are 14, 18 and 22. The 14 and 18 karat jewelry are usually considered as modern designs, whereas the 22 karat gold jewelry is perceived more as an investment tool. The gold coins, on the other hand, come in five different sizes. In Turkey, gold jewelry and coins are traditionally given as gifts in ritualistic occasions. Receiving gold also plays an important role in the empowerment of Turkish women (Sirman 1991). The gold items the bride acquires in her wedding are considered as her property and wealth, and serve as a safeguard against misfortune. In Turkey, gold jewelry and coins are given as gifts, and discuss the underlying motives and meanings as well as the functions gold gifts serve.

METHODOLOGY
Given the exploratory nature of the study we adopted qualitative research methods which are deemed better for obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) and capturing consumers’ own perceptions and subjective apprehensions (Berg 1989). The study was conducted in Ankara, Turkey in the summer of 2003. In the light of previous studies suggesting that women are more involved in gift exchanges (Fischer
and Arnould 1990; Otnes, Lowery, and Kim 1993) we selected twenty female Turkish respondents through purposive sampling (Maxwell 1996). The age of the informants ranged from 24 to 55, allowing us to explore gift-giving behaviors of women at different life cycle stages. They belonged to high and middle-income groups, and hence, constituted a heterogeneous faction. Income was defined in terms of monthly household revenue, and classified based on an updated edition of Prime Ministry State Institute of Statistics 1994 (Sommez 2001).

Data collection procedure included projective techniques of free associations and picture associations followed by semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Projective techniques have been frequently employed in consumer behavior research to overcome social desirability bias and bring into light the latent and unconscious components of individuals’ personalities (Levy 1985; Rook 1988). The informants were first instructed to right down whatever comes to their mind when they hear the word ‘gold’, and then the same procedure was repeated for the word ‘gold jewellery’. After they accounted how these associations came to their mind, they were given six pictures of females and were asked to describe the women’s use of gold jewellery. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 30 to 120 minutes. These were designed to elicit stories of giving and receiving gold jewellery/coins as gifts.

We followed the general procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990) in our data analysis. The interpretation of the verbatim interview transcripts involved focusing both on individual case analysis to gather comprehensive and in-depth information about each informant, and across-person analysis to explore variations among the informants. First, we sought to identify conceptual categories and themes, and discover their properties and dimensions. Then, we established relations among the emerging patterns and identified how they relate to pertinent theoretical constructs through the constant comparison method using axial and selective coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

**FINDINGS**

**Giving Gold Jewelry/Coins As Gifts**

Gold jewelry and gold coins are given as gifts in various ritualistic and special occasions. In Turkey, it is customary to give gold jewellery or coins as gifts to women getting engaged or married, to newborn babies, and to boys who get circumcised. In these contexts, the gift operates as a ritual artifact marking the role transition. While traditional ritualistic gift giving is still prevalent and commonly practiced, our informants also mention that they give gold jewellery and coin as gifts in Western originated special occasions such as Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day and New Year’s Eve. Additionally, gold can be an appropriate gift item for celebrating occupational events such as retirement or promotion and personally symbolic days such as birthdays or wedding anniversaries.

Given the multitude of occasions that gold items are given as gifts, how people choose between gold jewellery and gold coins and how they decide on the monetary value of the gift emerge as important questions. Our analysis indicates that the decision depends of three factors: the existence of a traditionally appropriate gift item for a particular ritual, the intimacy of the relationship, and the taste of the giver and the receiver. While in certain situations one of these factors dominates the others, in other situations the decision is a result of the interplay of many factors. For some rituals there are strong and unchallenged traditions. For example, if the gift is given to a newborn baby, it is always a gold coin. The choice in this case is not between jewelry and coin, but the size of the coin. The decision on the appropriate size of the coin, hence the monetary value, depends on the intimacy of the relationship. The intimacy of the relationship between giver and receiver conveys information about appropriate gifts (Wolfinbarger 1990). As Sherry argues “[g]ifts are tangible expressions of social relationships” (1983, p.158) and they signify the strength of the relationship between the gift-giver and receiver. Typically, the closer the relationship is, such as gift giving between family members or close friends (Joy 2001), the bigger the size of the gold coin is. Giving monetarily more valuable gifts to relationally close recipients is such a strong cultural norm that even the informants with lower income levels go well beyond their means to fulfill this obligation.

The knowledge of the recipient’s taste also plays an important role in the selection of the gift. Most of the informants express their wish to buy something that the recipient will like. Aylin, for example, believes that it is appropriate to give gold jewelry than gold coins to those that she has intimate relationships with because she knows their taste:

"...for example if your sister is getting married you don’t give gold [coins] because you would know what she likes; you would give her a jewel, you can give [an ornament with] diamonds, it can be silver if she likes silver or gold if she likes gold, something crafted or at least you can ask your sister, I mean you can give jewelry only to your close ones..."

However, even when the giver is not sure about the recipient’s taste but has close relationship with her, gold jewelry can still be preferred. Since gold is a malleable metal, its physical appearance can be greatly enhanced by the art of the goldsmith. Moreover, gold jewelry has fashion; while some designs become trendier and are considered as contemporary, there are designs that are perceived as classic. Consumers prefer more classic and simple designs if they do not know the tastes of the receiver:

"...I try to buy more general things for them because I don't know their tastes.” (Hamide)

"...when I buy jewelry I prefer plain, simple ones so that she can use it daily.” (Aylin)

Informants also aspire to reflect their taste in the items they purchase. They consider not only the personality and taste of the recipient, but also their own tastes and preferences. They seek to purchase a jewelry that they themselves would wear. This observation supports Schwartz’s argument that the “act of giving is self-defining” (1967, p.2), that one may confirm his/her identity through objectifying it in the form of a gift.

Gold coins, on the other hand, are especially preferred when the recipient’s taste is not known. One of the symbolic meanings attached to the gift of gold jewelry is its uniqueness, which is absent in the case of gold coins since these are standard items. Many of our informants state that they prefer to purchase gold coins for people whom they do not know very well. In this case, the gift does not communicate much about the giver but rather represents compliance with social norms. As Goodwin, Smith and Spiggle (1990) argue rituals are associated with the notion of reciprocity. This kind of obligatory gift giving is guided more by traditions and is less personal and simple:
Gold also has long lasting or even eternal quality (Renfrew 1986). This attribute arises from the durability of the metal gold. When gold jewelry or coins are given as gifts, they maintain their physical existence eternally, unless of course they are lost or sold by the recipient. However, gold items are also symbolically enduring gifts as they represent the eternal character of the relationship between the receiver and the giver. They are often given with the expectation that they will be cherished by the receiver even after many years of possession. When gold items are given as gifts for special days, they become remainders of major events in the lives of the recipients and take the character of an heirloom (Curasi 1999).

“...for instance when we look back with my married daughter, [she says] 'mom you gave me this one, my aunt gave this one, this one is from my uncle, and this one is from Tayfun's birth'; it makes a lasting gift.”

(Ulku)

“...usually buy gold [jewelry] for my sister, I always prefer gold presents for my mother and for her [sister], because I believe that it lasts forever.”

(Beyhan)

“The data reveals that the informants attribute three qualities to gold jewelry and coins: they are precious, long lasting, and flexible items. These qualities render gold jewelry and coins as suitable gifts, and help consumers explain and justify why they prefer to give gold items as gifts. Interestingly, however, all of these attributes are double-coded; they carry both utilitarian and symbolic connotations. As our analysis indicates, the motivation behind giving gold jewelry or coins as gifts entails the interplay of utilitarianism and symbolism.

"Gold is also a flexible gift item. In essence, gold coins are equivalent of money, and in this regard, they are considered as practical gifts especially when the recipient's needs are undefined. As Schwartz (1967) suggests, "money, unlike a particular commodity, does not presume a certain life system: it may used in any way and thus becomes a more flexible instrument of the possessor's volition" (p. 5). The easy conversion of gold coins into money provides flexibility and control to the recipient.

"...if people have needs for instance they can sell it [gold coin], for example you want to buy something for her but she needs something else, she can exchange it for cash and use it for that purpose, so it can be an investment tool in terms of fulfilling the person's needs, it can also serve as money that's what I want to say, giving money would be rude but gold, do you know what I mean, if she wants she can change it and buy what she wants, it can stay as gold if she wants to...”

(Ilgim)

Flexibility of gold coins renders the process of gift selection easy and time efficient. Since these are standard items, gift selection does not entail a laborious and time-consuming search. As the only decision that the giver has to make is regarding its size, gold coins are perceived "easy" gift items.

"...it makes life easier when buying a present, there's nothing else. When buying a present, instead of thinking if she likes it or not we buy a gold coin, we think she can at least change it to cash and buy whatever she wants.”

(Ilgim)

Not only coins but also gold jewelry is deemed as a flexible gift item. This characteristic applies especially to those designs that do not contain craftsmanship, which are usually 22 karats of gold.

"...sometimes it's obligatory, for someone who works with you, for example one of my husband's assistants, there is nothing much you can do, so you have to buy gold [coins]; it has become a tradition.”

(Beyhan)

Furthermore, giving gold coins serve pragmatic purposes; there is no danger of giving duplicate gifts, and the recipient can sell the coin or exchange it with something that suits her taste:

"...I buy gold jewelry only for my closest ones but I buy gold coins for people whom I don’t know very well, for example I can buy gold jewelry for my mother because I know her taste more or less, and for my sister but besides them, I would probably hesitate to buy gold jewelry for a friend...”

(Asuman)

"...when I don't know what present to buy, I buy it [gold coin] because it has monetary value and she can buy something she wants with it, because of that purpose and reason, when a child is born or when someone gets married there can be many of the same presents so I think like that and I prefer it [gold coin]...”

(Diler)

"...when I don't know the tastes of my friends who are getting married, I buy gold [coins] because she can make some other use of it, sell it or she can buy a jewelry that she likes.”

(Burçin)

The Interplay of Utilitarianism and Symbolism

"...when her daughter gets married ... she gives jewelry as a keepsake to last for a long time. Why does she give that? So that she doesn't sell it, I mean so that she doesn’t let go of the memory.”

(Cagla)
These can be easily converted to cash without any loss of monetary value or exchanged with another piece of gold jewelry later if the receiver is not happy with that particular model. Consequently, the giver does not need to identify what the recipient needs or likes; instead he/she provides her with freedom to decide on the precise nature of the gift.

"...I buy ray bilezik [22 karat plain bracelet] for a wedding because that is the non-rafted type, then she can sell it for the same price and buy something she wants, if she wants, she can buy earrings"

(Aylin)

In Western societies, gifts of money are generally considered as inappropriate and impersonal (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Webley et al. 1983; Zelizer 1994). Giving money as gift can be interpreted as placing monetary value on the relationship (Cheal 1987). Furthermore, the real value of the gift stems from the effort went into the selection (Belk and Coon 1993) as the amount of care invested in finding the right gift reflects the intensity of the relationship (Joy 2001). Cash type gifts, therefore, are more often presented when the needs and wants of the recipient are not well known (Cheal 1988). However, there are some exceptions to this restriction, such as intergenerational transfers (Waldfogel 1993), wedding gifts in certain cultures (Cheal 1988), and gift giving to catastrophe victims (Sayre and Home 1996). The Turkish case presents another exception. Gold coins and jewelry are perceived as abstract forms of money. They provide flexibility to the recipient but do not appear artificial as gift certificates. Furthermore, they are not restricted to distant relationships. While they provide practicality to the giver when she needs to present a gift to someone that she does not know intimately, they are also frequently exchanged among family members and close friends among whom the relationship ties are strong. In parallel to Joy’s (2001) observation regarding the preference for functional gift giving practice among family members in Hong Kong, gold items are preferred for their utilitarianism in the Turkish society as well.

"Instead of buying a present that I’m not sure she would like or not and instead of buying something that takes up space, I buy gold. If she needs money she can sell it and use the money, if not she can keep it. She can use it for future needs after all it has a value. For example Ebru [her sister-in-law] lives abroad, if they cannot buy a present or if they don’t know what to buy, they put some money in an envelope and send it. It is a little bit artificial but gold is a precious thing and it doesn’t feel like you are giving money..."

(Anıl)

However, while the flexibility of gold renders coins and jewelry as utilitarian and practical gift items, their flexibility also connotes symbolic meanings. Wolfinbarger and Yale suggest that wedding gifts are often given with the intention to support the "creation and regeneration of households" (1993, p.3). Similarly, gold coins and jewelry given in ritualistic occasions such as weddings, birth or circumcision of a child function as means to provide support for the newly wed or born, signaling concern shown for the recipient. People give gold items as gifts to support the future financial needs of the receiver and express how much they care about his/her well being.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Most of the scholars studying gift-giving behavior emphasize the symbolic meanings of the gift and focus on how gift giving maintains and enhances relationships. The results of our study, however, indicate that utilitarian and symbolic motives simultaneously influence the decision to give gold jewelry and coins as gift items, and that the distinction between utilitarianism and symbolism can be rather blurred. Gold jewelry and coins are interesting gift items because they can be both tangible and intangible. The receiver has the option of keeping the gold jewelry and coins, or converting them into money.

In gift-giving rituals, the giver attributes meaning to the gift and hopes for it to be interpreted similarly by the recipient. Our findings suggest that when the cultural meaning carried by consumer goods is not specifically stated, although clearly recognized, as in the case of gold jewelry and gold coins in Turkish society, there is less chance of misinterpretation in the flow of meaning. The gold jewelry and coins are also capable of reinforcing the message conveyed by the giver about the relationship for a long period of time. However, as Schwartz (1967) argues in rites of passage, gifts do "not only serve the recipient as tools with which to betray more easily his or her former self but symbolize as well the social support necessary for such betrayal" (p. 2). Having the option of converting the gold jewelry or coins into money extends Schwartz’s argument by illustrating how gold jewelry and coins also serve as economic support.

The economic dimension of gift giving centers on the notion of reciprocity. Although the act in itself does not establish obligations for exchange, to avoid feeling inferior the recipient must reciprocate. The evident economic value of gold coins seems to make the obligatory nature of gift-giving easier. If one receives a small size coin as gift, she typically reciprocates with a similar size. While gifts of money are perceived to be improper gifts in many cultures, coins and certain types of gold jewelry overcome this negative discernment. Partly due to their perception as abstract forms of money and partly due to their flexibility to be framed as both functional and symbolic, they are considered as rather reasonable gift items.

Overall, our study develops the current theoretical understanding of the interrelationship between utilitarian versus experiential motives for gift-giving and symbolic versus economic value of gifts. By focusing on various ritualistic occasions and the factors that play into the selection of appropriate gift, our study also highlights the ways in which consumers activate object meanings, create and stabilize cultural categories, and communicate culture specific meanings through gift-giving. However, given the restricted size and gender bias of the sample, further research is needed to extend these initial results. Specifically future studies that include male informants’ views and research on different product categories are needed. Furthermore, studying the practice of giving gold items as gifts in other non-Western cultures can contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of gift-giving behavior.

REFERENCES


