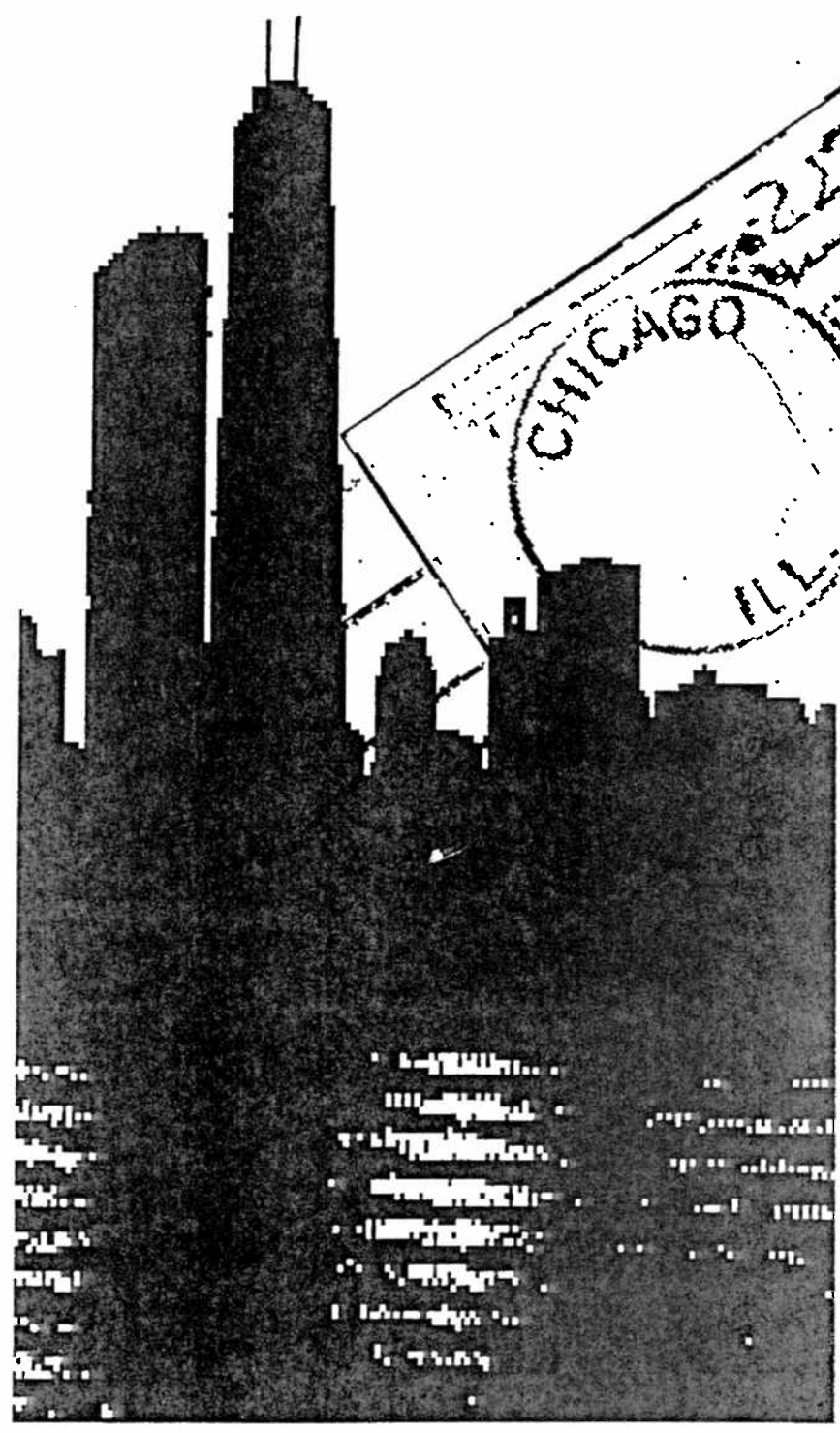


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Symbolic Communication Among Consumers in Self-Consumption and Gift Giving: A Semiotic Approach

Anil Pandya, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago
A. Venkatesh, University of California, Irvine

Using Leach's (1976) communication framework, this paper explores how products symbolically communicate in different consumption contexts. It examines the non-verbal role products play when consumers communicate through purchase and consumption, to clarify the symbolic differences between products like clothing when used for personal and visible consumption and products like silverware used for gifts. It examines how expressive consumption communicate symbolic meanings and makes two key points: first, consumers use different types of symbolic communication in different contexts; and second, an analysis focusing on communication instead on objects leads to a richer understanding of consumer behavior.

Consumers use products to seek distinction, self-definition, identity extension; and communicate these to others (Belk 1988, 1990). Objects have being or movement in human society only by the significance men give them (Sahlins (1976). Consumer behavior would be difficult to fathom without understanding the meanings consumers attach to possessions (Belk 1988). This centrality of product symbolism in consumer behavior was first recognized by Levy (1959) and Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) and has been extended by Levy (1981) and McCracken (1986, 1988) on consumption anthropology; Hirschman (1985) on ethnic consumption; Holbrook (1986) on consumption of aesthetics; Belk, Bahn and Mayer (1982) and Belk, Mayer and Driscoll (1984) on symbolic decoding; Belk (1979, 1981) and Sherry (1983) on gift giving; Holbrook (1985), Holman (1983), and Mick (1986) on the semiotics of consumer behavior.

While, this literature has made major contributions, some important and unexplored areas remain to be investigated. It has mainly examined a consumer's relations with the objects of purchase (Belk 1990). The symbolic role of products in mediating relations among consumers as yet, remains an unexplored area. The mechanics of product based communication also remains unexplored. Leach (1976) maintains that cultural artifacts function as a nonverbal language system, with the important distinction between artifacts that work as *signs* and those that work as *symbols*. This terminology differs considerably from that of Charles Peirce. For a comparison see Barthes (1983 a).

Signs communicate by making reference to a shared code (Leach 1976). A code affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages (Douglas 1972). In a sign a part refers to a whole, to which it belongs -- like a cross for Christianity, or a crown for royalty. This part/whole mechanism of sign includes two relations: metonymy and synecdoche. Metonymy juxtaposes contiguous terms that occupy a distinct and separate place within a single semantic or perceptual domain. "You will read in Homer," the

agent (Homer) replaces the act (Iliad) (Sapir 1977). Synecdoche draws its terms from a single domain but one term always includes the other. The presence of a term refers to the absent whole as in crown (part)/royalty (whole).

Symbols on the other hand, communicate metaphorically to explain complicated ideas or emotions. Metaphors equate terms from different domains (Sapir 1977) like, "Put a tiger in your tank." Metaphors are meaningful only in particular contexts because equivalence can work only on the presumption of shared knowledge of one domain of experience to explain something quite different. Communication occurs through analogies and parallels.

The paper first defines *signs* and *symbols*, and discusses four categories of communication -- *self-consumption* as a *sign* or *symbol*; and *gift* as a *sign* or *symbol*. *Self-consumption* as a *sign*, is illustrated by the example of the clothing system; and gift-giving as a symbol is illustrated by consumer self-reports. The two remaining categories-- *Self-consumption*, as a *self-gift* and obligatory or unauthentic gift as a *sign*, are briefly discussed. The final section summarizes the contributions of the paper.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

A culture is a complex of significations created by non-verbal sign systems (Leach 1976). People give meaning to things by using them. When artifacts are patterned in sets of coded information, products in use become elements of a non-verbal, symbolic language. Understanding such a language requires knowledge of its constituent elements and its grammar which organizes the elements in a coherent system of meaning producing structures; and accordingly, the information coded in styles of clothes, architecture, and automobiles are similar to coding implicit in sounds, words, and sentences with the important difference that the syntax of non-verbal language is simpler than that of natural language. Unlike the more dynamic natural languages, non-verbal communication tends to be customary and conventional (Leach 1976 p.11).

Leach (1976) uses a simple communication model consisting of a sender and a receiver. A sender sends a message bearing entity to a receiver who in receiving the entity, interprets the message. Thus Leach separates the message bearing entity (A) from the message (B), the entity carries. A is the "signifier" and B is the "signified." This act of separation is called opposition. The relationship between A and B is represented as A/B and is called a "structure." The relationship between an entity and the meaning it carries is represented by the equivalence model: Signifier/Signified :: A/B. A is the signifier and B is the signified. A product can function either as a sign or as a symbol. Signs and

symbols are produced when the message bearing entity A through cultural or causal associations stands for a message B.

SIGNS

In a *sign* the A/B correlations are cultural such that A (the signifier) stands for B (the signified) as a part stands for a whole. The receiver infers the whole B by observing the part A. A crown is a sign of royalty because in our minds it is a part of a royal costume. Only an arbitrary convention can explain this inclusion. There is no natural necessity for a crown to be a part of royal regalia. The repetition fixes the associative relationship between objects like a "crown" and a message like "belonging to royalty." This strong association causes royalty to be evoked by the mere observation of a crown.

The part/whole relationship is always contextual. In London a man's striped tie may suggest affiliation with a prestigious public school like Harrow or Eaton or the man's regiment. By implication, the tie may also indicate his standing in the British class system. But in the United States striped ties may have no such meaning. In Boston however, a Harvard tie would perform a similar social function, making signs context specific.

A sign is always a member of a set of contrasted signs. For instance, to infer from a school tie a person's wealth and status requires the tie to be observed along with clothes, car, accent and so on. This characteristic of signs is metonymic where contiguity of other signs helps the observer to interpret the message. A married Hindu woman puts a red dot on her forehead, wears red and green bangles on her hands, and wears a string of black and gold beads. The presence of all these signs testify to her married householder status in Hindu society. The absence of the dot alone on a woman's forehead may indicate she is a non-Hindu, but the absence of all other signs may suggest an unmarried Hindu woman. The absence of some and presence of the other signs together convey contextually specific messages. Each sign has more or less precise meaning only in relation to the other signs.

SYMBOLS

In a symbol the relationship between the signifier A and the signified B is also culturally and/or causally determined. But instead of a part/whole relationship of a sign, a symbol represents a whole/whole relationship. When A as a signifier is a whole and it stands for B the signified as a whole, then A symbolizes B. A zigzag road sign symbolizes the curvy character of the section of the road ahead. But this interpretation calls for an act of imagination. The interpreter must imagine that A represents B.

Symbolic representations can be of two kinds, "arbitrary" or "planned." Leach uses "arbitrary"/planned opposition to distinguish between different types of symbolization (Leach 1976). Symbols are "arbitrary" when the relation between the symbol and the message is relayed through repeated cultural assertions, as in the choice of an apple to represent temptation, or in the choice of the serpent to represent

evil. Here the symbols are "arbitrary" because there is no inherent relationship between the symbol and the message. The correlation is learned through repetition. Symbols are of "planned" similarity when some salient attribute of the message resembles the chosen symbol or its attribute as in the zig-zag road sign. Here the choices of symbol is planned to be similar to the intended message.

Leach (1976) further categorizes these two types of symbols as standard symbols, which most people in the culture understand, and nonce or private symbols which cannot generally be understood by most people. Symbols either become standard symbols by public discourse, as in the case of the frequently advertised Merrill-Lynch corporate symbol, or remain private as in poetry and can be understood through a deliberate contextual effort.

A TYPOLOGY OF EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

A typology of expressive communication is organized as a two dimensional matrix shown in Figure 1.

The first dimension dichotomizes the context: self or the other. A product can be expressively used either for the self or for a significant other. The second dimension contrasts the expressive function of the product: the product can function as a sign or as a symbol. This results in four categories of communication: self-consumption as a sign in quadrant A; gift to others as a metaphoric symbol in quadrant B; self-gift where a person gives gifts to one's self which functions as a symbol in quadrant C; and obligatory gift giving where the gift to the other functions as a sign in quadrant D.

Self-consumption as sign (A) and gift to others as symbol (B) occur most frequently. These two types of communication, along the left-to-right diagonal are discussed first in greater detail. This is followed by the discussion of communication in (C) and (D) along the right-to left diagonal. These occur less frequently and are derivatives of (A) and (B); and their discussion is less exhaustive.

COMMUNICATION IN QUADRANTS A & B

The role of signs in self-consumption is discussed, using Sahlins (1976) work on American clothing as an illustration. The discussion on the role of symbols in gift exchange based on consumer self-reports, follows.

SELF-CONSUMPTION

The tendency to make inferences about others based on their choices of consumption objects is a universal cultural phenomenon. Research on coding and decoding confirms a considerable congruence between images of the self and images of the acquired products and that consumers communicate information about social status, life style, personality, age, sex, type of occasion, education and profession by making visible consumption choices (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982, Holman 1980, 1981a, 1981b). Children, college students, and adults make remarkably

FIGURE 1
Typology of Expressive Communication

| | | CONTEXT OF PRODUCT USE | |
|------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| | | Self | Other |
| COMMUNICATION FUNCTION | SIGN | A Expressive Self-Consumption | D Obligatory Gift |
| | SYMBOL | C Self-Gift | B Authentic Gift |

consistent inferences and judgments about status and non-status based on peoples' ownership of houses and cars which improve over time (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982, Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1984).

Taken together, six conclusions emerge from this research on visible consumption or expressive self-consumption, as it is called here: (1) consumers make inferences about themselves and others based on their possession and use of a variety of goods; (2) these products tend to be visibly used; (3) as experience with the use of these goods increases, the ability to make inferences also increases; (4) certain product attributes are more important for symbolic communication than others; (5) a product does not continue to convey the same information forever; and (6) consumers strategically use the fact that products communicate life styles and status. This literature does not answer how consumers attach meanings to things or how they decode such meanings. These gaps are addressed here.

QUADRANT A: SELF-CONSUMPTION AS A SIGN

Clothes convey a variety of messages and illustrate the role of sign in self-consumption. Sahlins' (1976) analysis of the clothing system, based on a master distinction between leisure and work, illustrates how sign based communication occurs. Sahlins (1976) uses the sign characteristics of clothing to reveal the structure of the dress code. It shows how products acquire meanings through the operation of a socially shared code where each type and style of clothing, when worn at different times and occasions, communicate specific things about the people who wear the clothes.

Deconstruction of the American Clothing System

The American clothing system, according to Sahlins (1976, p.179-209), is a complex scheme of semantic production of cultural categories in which women's slacks are evaluated in opposition not only to skirts, dresses and men's pants but also to other slacks on attributes of color, patterns, texture and cut. The outfit as a whole, made by particular arrangement

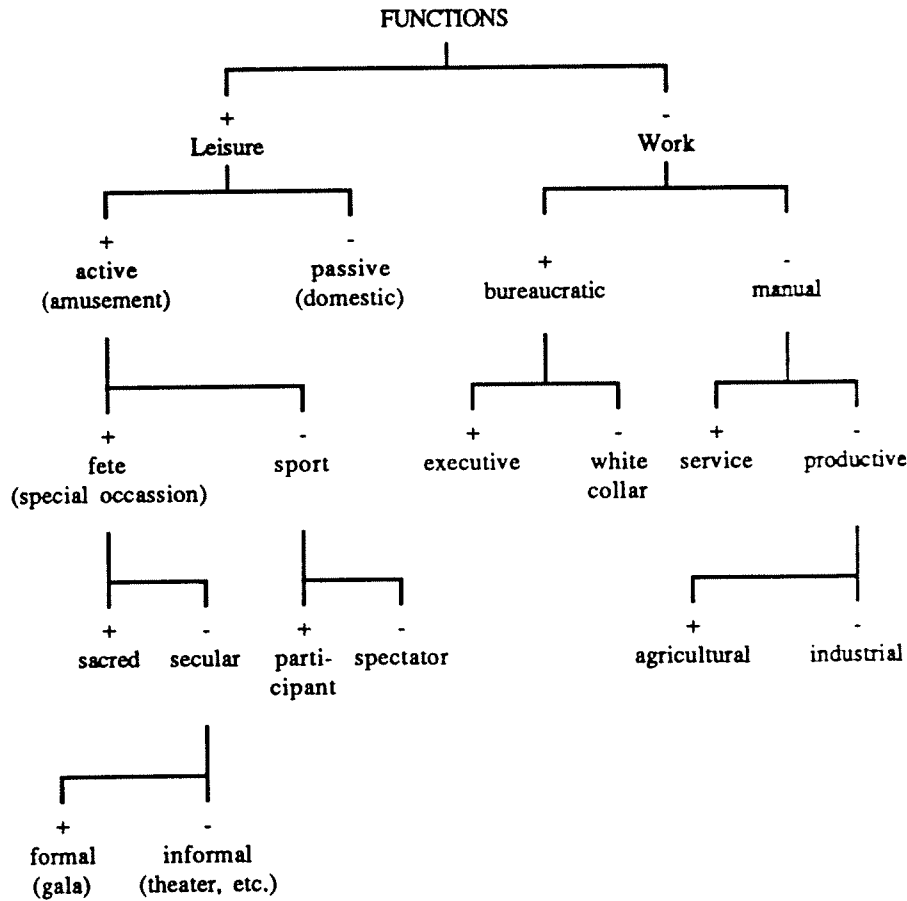
of parts and contrasted to other outfits makes a statement. The differences in clothing for men and women, for day and night wear, for around the house and in public, for adults or children reveal the underlying syntax: categories of time and place signify classes of activities and status to which people are ascribed. These notional coordinates of clothing mark the basic cultural notions of time, place and persons. Order of things correlate to the order of culture. When these correlations get disturbed, events appear as incongruous and out of place, as for example, the incongruity of seeing men in dress suits or women in evening gowns at work. Figure 2 illustrates this deconstruction.

At the top of the tree, the pair of functions, Leisure/Work form the master opposition. At the next level, work is subdivided into bureaucratic work and manual work. Bureaucratic work is further categorized into executive work and white collar work. Manual work is further divided into manual service and productive manual labor. The latter is further bifurcated into agricultural and industrial labor.

Leisure in Figure 2 is classified into active leisure where people go out and seek activities that provide amusement and domestic leisure which has no defined project like staying home and taking it easy. Active leisure is divided into special occasions and sports activity. Special occasions are subdivided into secular and religious occasions. Secular occasions are further subdivided into formal occasions like going to a concert or informal occasions like going to a movie. Sports activity is further categorized into participatory sports or spectator sports.

In Figure 2 the (+) sign represents leisure related activities and is placed on the main left branch and the (-) sign represents work related functions and is placed on the main right branch. At each subsequent level of the tree within each main activity-leisure/work, the left branch is marked and is considered more ceremonial and privileged and the right branch is unmarked and considered more workmanlike and less ceremonial and privileged. Thus beginning with the master opposition of leisure/work, the diagram at each level reveals a series of functional oppositions like active leisure/passive leisure,

FIGURE 2
Schema of Function Signified in American Clothing



Notes: 1. Adopted from Sahlins (1976)

- | | |
|------------|-------------|
| 2. (+) | (-) |
| marked | unmarked |
| or | or |
| ceremonial | workmanlike |

bureaucratic work/manual work, executive work/clerical work, agricultural work/industrial work and so on. The tree of oppositional pairs thus reflects the logic of clothing differentiations and allows Sahlins (1976) to identify two systematic, observable regularities- one, the rule of ceremonial correspondence and two, the rule of ceremonial exaggeration.

According to the rule of Ceremonial Correspondence, the terms of any oppositions correspond to the terms of any other, such that the ceremonial costumes of any two classes resemble each other by an analogous differentiation from their corresponding non-ceremonial classes. In the-

bureaucratic (+)/manual work (-) and service worker (+)/productive worker (-) opposition the difference in clothing between say a waiter's uniform (color, style, epaulets) and the factory worker's blue overalls is the same as the difference between that of an executive (pin-striped suit) and the clerk (sports jacket).

The ceremonial clothes of the leisure functions, according to the rule of Ceremonial Exaggeration, will be more marked than those of the workmanlike functions. The uniform for an active sport like skiing has more color and dash than the uniform of a waiter. The clothing for special occasions is more exaggerated than executive suits in the bureaucratic function. The rule suggests that ceremonial

oppositions are exaggerated in the opposite directions. Spectators at a game wear more casual clothes than the clothes industrial workers wear to work. The exaggeration occurs in both directions: more ceremonial at its marked (+) and less workmanlike at its unmarked (-) poles.

The physical contrasts in clothing appear as differentiations reflecting differentiations in classes of time (day/night) and place (home/outside); and relate to classes of activities (leisure/work); and situations (formal/informal) and ascribe persons (male/female, adult/child) to classes of status (high/low). Products reflect the social order to indicate social status, activity and situation, realizing their utilities through the meaning attached to them in consumption. Barthes (1983 a) and Baudrillard (1981) extend these insights to explore how people express individuality, taste and style and how they manipulate the code to their advantage.

A dialect modifies the way some people pronounce vowels without changing the linguistic structure such that the language remains intelligible to all speakers. Barthes' (1983b) model for generating different utterances in clothing fashions consists of a combination of values taken on by an object (O), the object's supports (S) and a variant (V). Thus: a Sweater (O) With An Open (V) Collar (S) can take combinatorial values: the variant (V)- the state of the collar- can assume values (open/closed, high/low) in relation to the support (S)- the collar- or the object (white/color, pattern/plain), giving rise to many possibilities for expressing individuality.

People constantly manipulate the code to their strategic advantage. Business students dress up for job interviews and conform to corporate norms. Teenagers dress down in funky and bizarre outfits to distance themselves from their parents' world (Baudrillard 1981).

GIFT GIVING AND RECEIVING IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR LITERATURE

Researchers have given gift giving considerable attention (Banks 1979, Belk 1974, 1979, 1982, Clark and Belk 1978, Gronhaug 1972, Heeler, et al. 1979, Pandya 1985, 1987, Ryans 1977, Scammon, Shaw and Bamossy 1981, Shapiro 1970, Sherry 1983). A gift is not a free good and in the anthropological sense it is the basis of a reciprocal system of exchange in a network of households (Mauss 1974, Polanyi 1957, Sahlins 1972). Only this sense of gift is retained here. The meanings of gift as bribery and gift as donation are excluded.

The empirical research on gift purchase describes it as a complex social activity, a form of expressive consumer behavior for communicating feelings, gratitude, emotions and closeness or distance in relationships (Belk 1979, Sherry 1983). Gift selections depend on the giver's ideal self-concept, the nature of the occasion and the relationship to the recipient (Belk 1979) and consume a lot of time in selection. Obligatory gifts on the other hand, tend to be less personal, less time consuming and simpler (Scammon, Shaw and Bamossy 1981). Gifts giving

normally involves at least two people but one can also give gifts to oneself (Levy 1981, Mick 1986).

Consumer involvement in buying products for one's own self (for self-consumption) and in buying gifts for others, differs. Consumers search for more alternatives, shop in more stores, seek more advice and get more information while buying silverware as a gift for others but are more cursory in their search when buying silverware for themselves (Gronhaug 1972, Clark and Belk 1978). For the purchase of small appliances as gifts consumers go to high status stores but spend less time in selecting a gift but while buying for themselves they go to discount stores and spend more time in selecting small appliances (Ryan 1977, Heeler, et al. 1979). Belk (1982), also found that gift situations varied substantially and other factors like expectations attached to gift giving played a confounding role and "Involvement" as a mediating variable could not explain the observed differences.

GIFT GIVING AS COMMUNICATION IN A RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE NETWORK

Gift giving is a form of reciprocal exchange where members of a network are obliged to give and receive gifts (Mauss 1974, Polanyi 1957). The obligation to give or receive gifts is usually implicit (Harris 1978). Gifts are exchanged among friends and relatives and rarely among strangers, and the closer the relationship the less explicit the rules governing the transactions (Sahlins 1972). Gift giving is more than a system of material exchange supplementing or substituting markets or hierarchies. It is also a system of communication (Bourdieu 1979) binding a community and yet allowing individuals and groups to retain independence and maintain individuality (Sahlins 1972).

Gifts are exchanged in a network of households and maintained by a regular flow of gifts (Bourdieu 1979). In urban communities the network consists of both relatives and friends with whom frequent contacts are maintained through gifts of food, hospitality, goods and services to strengthen the bonds of the network. A strong network becomes a system of support and a source of strength and comfort in times of need in an uncertain world. The maintenance of such networks, representing commitments of rights and obligations, requires substantial material and symbolic effort. Time becomes the most precious of gifts because the value of symbolic effort can only be defined with reference to the time spent on the maintenance of alliances (Bourdieu 1979).

Gift functions as a communication symbol precisely because its message is ambiguous (Sahlins 1972). The giver must match intentions and feeling with what receivers would appreciate in a given context. On the other hand, a meaningful gift makes the interpretation of the message imprecise. This ambiguity allows contradictions of economic and social interests to coexist and fuse and allows the expression of individual and social values and prevents their coming into overt conflict. Social and self-interest exist in what Sahlins calls a "diplomatic truce." The ambiguity of the gift exchange makes

allowances for unintended assumptions and permits a retreat from them.

QUADRANT B: GIFTS AS SYMBOLS

In over one hundred self-reports collected for this research, consumers support the contention that products operate symbolically in gift giving, where respondents describe their personal experience with gift giving and receiving. Two typical self-reports illustrate that gifts act as metaphoric symbols. Exchange of Gifts create ambiguity and tension and bring richer interpretations to the relationship. The self-reports illustrate the importance of concepts of time, obligation, ambiguity and the coexistence of economic and social interest.

SELF REPORT 1

"A high school friend whom I had not seen for many years was going to have a baby. When the baby was born I bought a baby ointment with a plant in it as a gift and went to see her. The gift was very inexpensive. I was a little nervous, a little anxious. When I entered the room she was so overjoyed that I almost forgot to give her the gift. She said that it was thoughtful of me to visit her and bring her the gift. Seeing her happy was the best part of the visit. I feel that if you give someone something it is not what you get out of it that matters. You are giving a part of yourself."

The narrator feels tension and anxiety prior to the encounter with the friend because it has been a while since the two have met. People change and forget old friendships. The uncertainty is real. The narrator knows that frequent contacts sustain relationships. But it has not been the case here. Moreover, the encounter is emotionally charged by the birth of the child. The choice of the event is strategic; but the gift is inexpensive. It is quite possible that the narrator's true gift, the gift of time, may not be appreciated. But the anxiety is dispelled by the warmth of the greeting and the friend appreciates the true gift, the visit. The gift now symbolizes this reunion and speaks metaphorically with its own voice as a *nonce* symbol.

Self Report 2

"When I was two my father became an alcoholic, and in the next few years lost his business, became bankrupt and left the house. Our family dropped from a comfortable middle class status to below the poverty line. The year my father left I was told that he had to leave for a while. But as time passed I realized that he was not coming back. Soon December 25th arrived. There were a few packages under our pine tree. As my brothers and I started unpacking the gifts I saw my mother looking very unhappy. The suspense of what was in the package was burning inside me. I wanted to unwrap the package, yet I felt this strong urge to be close to my mother. I ran to her and kissed her. She embraced me and began to

weep. I don't think my mother has ever held me tighter in her arms than on that day in year 1965. Since then our family has progressed. Nevertheless I will never forget that day in my mother's arms. We gave each other something we will never be able to purchase in a store. We gave each other a hug that brought love and security."

The gifts symbolizes the absence of the father, and the need for the mother and daughter to be close to one another. The narrator reciprocates the mother's gift and responds to the mother's need by hugging her, strengthening their bond. The gift now symbolizes the absence of the father and the bond between the two women, and a determination to face the future. The daughter recognizes the mother's sacrifice and pain and accepts the father's permanent absence. The family's need for security and closeness is fulfilled by gift giving. The gift speaks within the context and becomes a *nonce* symbol.

These self-reports substantiate Belk's (1979) findings that gift selections depend on the giver's ideal self-concept, the nature of the occasion and the relationship to the recipient. These considerations make gift giving a more complex choice act than the selection of comparable products for personal consumption. Gifts mediate the relationship between the self and the other in specific contexts. The context makes the giver aware of the need to make an effort to select an appropriate gift to symbolizes the occasion, the relationship and the emotions. It makes the participants anxious and creates feelings of ambiguity. The gift succeeds if the recipient appreciates it. The context provides opportunities for meaningful communication. The interpretation of this communication requires that the gift giver and the receiver both simultaneously and reciprocally interpret the gift through a shared knowledge of circumstances making the gift choice difficult and time consuming.

COMMUNICATIONS IN QUADRANTS C & D

Self-consumption normally functions as a sign. But sometimes it functions as a symbol when we give a gift to ourselves (C). Similarly, gift normally, functions as symbol. But sometimes it can become a sign and refer to a code (D).

QUADRANT C: SELF-GIFT

Normally a gift involves two people: the giver of a gift and its receiver. But sometimes a person can also give a gift to one's own self (Levy 1982; Mick 1986). As symbols of self-dialogue such gifts differ from self-consumption of products. An individual can give a gift to the self as a reward for the accomplishment of a task, to reassure the self, or to assert personhood. Thus what may appear as self-consumption (a sign) indicating social function, position or status, may in fact function as a personal symbol.

In the film "Crimes of the Heart," Diane Keaton, a lonely middle aged single woman, thinks

her family has forgotten her birthday. She gets a cookie for herself, lights a candle on it and sings "Happy Birthday" to herself. She gives herself a birthday party the others forgot to give her. Her gift to herself accentuates her loneliness but also affirms her selfhood. There are many such examples of self-gift in real life like the vacations as a reward after a year of hard work. But when families discuss their vacations with their friends these often become signs of their status, competition and success.

Self-consumption thus communicates in two contexts simultaneously. In one, the dialogue is private, with the self, and has a personal meaning. The self-gift becomes a *nonce* symbol (C), but conspicuous consumption is a sign, a part of the code to be interpreted by others in a fixed way (A).

QUADRANT D: OBLIGATORY GIFT AS A SIGN

Obligatory gifts to others function as signs rather than symbols (Quadrant D). Sending obligatory greeting cards and thank you notes to friends is an example, where the cards act as a reminder of events and the self and become a gesture of social mannerism. Scammon, Shaw and Bamossy (1981) found that flower purchase patterns differed for people buying flowers to fulfill obligations and those buying flowers as spontaneous gifts. The obligatory purchase was less personal and simple. Ryan (1977) and Heeler, et al. (1979), found that obligatory gifts were purchased more quickly than products for self use. A thoughtless gift often leaves one feeling cheated. When people without investing themselves give gifts to meet an obligation, the gift becomes a mere gesture, and acts as a sign of unauthenticity. A respondent echoing this sentiment said: "although I enjoy giving gifts on birthdays and other occasions, I much prefer giving something when it is not expected".

Sometimes people assert their dominance and status through gifts. Such gifts are often resented. The hand-me-downs which rich relatives bestow on their poorer cousins is one such example. Once Richard Lee, an anthropologist while working among the Kalahari bushmen announced his intention to present them with a fat ox on Christmas. His announcement was met with ridicule. They said his gift was a poor and thoughtless choice. At the feast however, the ox was devoured with gusto. Lee perplexed at this behavior asked for an explanation and received this response: "Yes, we knew what the ox was like but when a young man kills much meat (and distributes it to others) he thinks of himself as a chief and (looks at) the rest of us as his inferiors. So we always speak of his meat as worthless...(to) cool his heart and make him gentle," (Harris 1978, p.107-108). Gifts such as these assert dominance in relationships and become gestures of power or prowess and may seek to humiliate the recipient. Such gifts violate the spirit of reciprocity and the norm of equality in close relationships. Eskimos have a proverb: "[Such] gifts make slaves, just as whips make dogs," (Harris 1978).

SUMMARY

Communication in self-consumption is based on a generalized code. A sign activates a set of prior perceptions and attitudes generalized in the code. The character of sign requires that consumers use a set of related products for successful communication. The deterministic character of signs encourages people to manipulate the stereotypes to their strategic advantage. The fixity of the generalized code makes self-consumption easier to interpret.

The gift giver makes gifts unique to communicate the complexity and ambiguity of relationships. Not all gifts are equally complex. The authenticity of the relationship determines the extent of sacrifice of time and money involved in gift giving. Gift communication is harder to interpret. The gift object requires fresh and unique interpretation in each new context. The giver must communicate the investment of time and effort without being explicit. The dynamics of the relationship rather than the fixity of the partners, makes gift giving possible and meaningful.

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