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# To wrap or not wrap? What is expected? Some initial findings from a study on gift wrapping

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**To wrap or not wrap? What is expected?  
Some initial findings from a study on gift wrapping.**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to explore and discuss the expectations surrounding the decision to wrap a gift. Gift wrapping can enable an object to be turned into a gift through the development of meaning that symbolises it as a gift. There are two key expectations surrounding the use of gift wrapping. The first expectation is that receivers prefer gifts to be wrapped and the second expectation is that the gift meets individual and social expectations of what a gift should look like. Data was gathered using three qualitative techniques; observation, interviews and projective workshops. These initial findings form part of a larger research study into gift wrapping.

Key words: gift wrapping, gift exchange, gifts, givers and receivers.

## **To wrap or not wrap? What is expected? Some initial findings from a study on gift wrapping.**

### **Introduction**

Gift Wrapping is often a presumed part of the gift exchange experience and can play a key role as the first contact between the receiver and the gift. The roles gift wrapping can play includes the setting of expectations about the gift, to communicate messages from the giver to the receiver (Banks, 1979; Sherry, 1983; Wooten and Wood, 2004) and to assist in turning an object into a gift through symbolic meaning that has been learnt through previous exchanges as well as other observed exchanges (Cheal 1996; Otnes and Beltramini 1996; Belk 1996). The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss expectations surrounding gift wrapping in the gift exchange process. Two key expectations in particular were found. The first is that it is a receiver's preference to receive gifts that are wrapped, and secondly there is an individual and social expectation of what a gift should look like. Existing literature as well as findings from the research conducted form the basis of this paper.

### **Literature Review**

In existing literature, the link between gift wrapping and the gift is often a presumed part of the gift exchange but there has been limited research into the actual relevance of gift wrapping (Belk 1979; Banks 1979; Sherry 1983; Caplow 1984; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; McGrath 1989; Carrier 1991; Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993; Belk 1996; Howard 1992; and Larson and Watson 2001, Wooten and Wood 2004). The giver has the choice to wrap the gift or give it to the receiver unwrapped. If the giver decides to wrap the gift, decisions are made in regard to how much wrapping, what type and what style to use. These decisions are often dependent on the context of the gift being given and a number of aspects need to be taken into account including; the giver's preferences, the receiver's preferences and expected response, their relationship, previously communicated messages, emotions, the occasion or event, the appropriateness, the timing, if there is an audience and if the gift will be on display prior to opening (Caplow, 1984; Cheal, 1987; Howard 1992). Caplow (1984) highlights an example of how context can play a role in gift wrapping decisions, he found an unwrapped gift at Christmas was not perceived to be a Christmas gift.

### **A gift should be wrapped**

According to the literature, there is an expectation that the receiver prefers to receive a gift that is wrapped (Hendry, 1993; Caplow 1984; Howard, 1992). In a study on gift wrapping and mood, when participants were asked why they prefer to have their gifts wrapped, many replied that "gifts are supposed to be wrapped" (Howard 1992, p.198) thus supporting the expectation that gifts are wrapped for most giving occasions in western societies. In the same research, 96% of the respondents stated that most of their birthday and Christmas gifts were wrapped, and for many this practice had been true throughout their childhood (Howard, 1992). Hendry (1993) goes on to state that gift wrapping is more than unwrapping the gift to see what is inside but that the use of wrapping signals that the gift is actually a gift. When a gift is wrapped, there is no ambiguity about the gift (it is not a payment or trade). This puts both the giver and the receiver at ease because they clearly know the role they are required to play (Caplow 1984). In the typical cultural norms and rituals of gift exchange, the gift is passed from the giver to receiver and although there are no "rules" communicated between the individuals both fall into a role where participants are expected to act in a certain way before, during and after the exchange (Sherry, 1983; Caplow, 1982; Dittman 1972; Wooten and Wood 2004).

### **A gift should look like a gift**

There was limited literature about the expectation of what a gift should look like. But tangible gifts can be presented three ways; unwrapped, wrapped in a non traditional manner where it may be difficult to determine that the gift is actually a gift, for example, through the use of plain brown paper, or the final way is to wrap a gift in a traditional manner where the gift meets expectations of looking like a gift. Daniel Howard (1992) conducted a study to explore how the actual appearance of the wrapping could affect mood. He compared a traditionally wrapped gift with a non traditional wrapped gift (brown paper package) and an unwrapped gift. It was found that all subjects in the traditionally gift wrapping group strongly agreed that the gift wrapping made the package look like a gift (Howard, 1992). All subjects with the plain wrapped gifts disagreed that the brown paper packaging looked like a gift, as did the participants with the unwrapped gift. Subjects who received the traditionally wrapped gift were the least sad, while the subject who received the plain wrapped gift was only marginally less sad than those who received the unwrapped gift (with no major significance between these two variables). The findings highlight that participants were happier to receive a gift that looked like a gift in the traditional sense.

### **Naked gifts**

An unwrapped gift is known as a naked gift (Hendry, 1993; Larson and Watson, 2001). A naked gift can be acceptable in some circumstances and not acceptable in other circumstances, depending on the context of the exchange. For example, a naked gift can indicate the low worth of relationship (between the giver and the receiver) or that the giver has an unwillingness to personally invest in the gift (Caplow, 1984; Larson and Watson, 2001), alternately it can also indicate an intimate knowledge of the receiver's personal preferences to not receive gifts that are wrapped.

### **Method**

This research used a qualitative approach based on an interpretative techniques for analysis and grounded theory techniques for data collection. This approach allowed for an exploration of a field where there is little existing knowledge (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). It also can be used for obtain detail about emotions, thoughts and feelings (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The use of qualitative research is widely adopted in gift exchange literature (Belk, 1996, Caplow 1984; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; McGrath 1989; Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993; Rucker, Freitas and Dolstra 1994). Three methods of data collection was utilised; observation of a Christmas gift wrap stall, twenty in-depth interviews to reflect on gift wrapping and six projective workshops where, in pairs participants were asked to wrap two gifts, one for someone they are close to and the other for an acquaintance, and have a discussion about gift wrapping whilst doing so. This enabled to the participants to discuss their approach to gift wrapping whilst immersed in the activity and this technique highlighted issues previously not raised during observation or the interviews. Participants were selected on their basis to engage and contribute with the research topic. Random selection was utilised to gain understanding of how gift creation and gift wrapping fits into a range of individual's lives, from those who actively participate in the phenomenon, to those who do not give much attention but still have been involved in gift giving and wrapping. The age group of 25-35 years old was deemed suitable due to the high occurrence of gift giving opportunities this age groups comes into contact with including, weddings, birthdays, engagement parties, baby showers, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Mothers Day, and gifts for no reason to name just a few. This age group would also have a higher disposable income when compared to other age groups due to the completion of studies and commencement of career based positions. All participants reside in Victoria, Australia. Other demographic, socio-economic, hygiene and environmental factors

are open to ensure a wide cross stream of Australian society. The skew in gender is toward females due to their higher involvement in gift giving and gift creation (Areni, Kiecker and Palan 1998; Belk and Coon 1993; Otnes, Lowrey and Kim 1993). Specific demographic, psychographic or attitudes were not sought, the only parameter beyond age, was behaviour, that is, that they wrapped gifts.

### Findings

During discussions with the participants in both the projective workshops and interviews, it was found that most of the participants preferred to receive a gift that was wrapped and that there was an expectation of what a gift looked like. This reinforces research conducted by Howard (1992) and confirms assumptions made in existing research (Belk 1979; Banks 1979; Sherry 1983; Caplow 1984; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; McGrath 1989; Carrier 1991; Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993;; Belk 1996; Howard 1992; and Larson and Watson 2001, Wooton and Wood 2004). Key questions discussed in research included, do you prefer to receive gifts that are wrapped or unwrapped? In what instances do you wrap/ not wrap gifts? And, have you ever been embarrassed by a gift you have given? While in some instances the responses were fairly uniform, in other instances they were as varied as the participants themselves. Participants ranged from individuals who love gift wrapping to others who did because they felt they were expected to, to those who avoided gift wrapping and gift giving in general. Findings were also confirmed by the observation of the Christmas gift wrap stall where non-gift wrappers paid to have their gifts wrapped and made into something that meets social expectation of what a gift looks like.

### Gifts should be wrapped

Gift wrapping was presumed by most participants to be part of the gift. This supported existing findings from the literature. All the participants except one preferred to receive a gift that was wrapped, and in most cases it was unconditional:

*I prefer wrapped. I like the reveal. I think all gifts are good, don't get me wrong, I like a gift under any circumstances, but it does mean somebody's taken a little bit of extra time and put extra thought into it (Tammy).*

One participant felt that it was acceptable so long as it was environmentally sustainable:

*Probably I enjoy receiving gifts that are wrapped but I know that less paper gets wasted if they're unwrapped. So it's a bit of a toss up. Environmental factors aside, I prefer receiving them wrapped (Laura).*

In most instances, as givers, they felt embarrassed when they gave a gift that wasn't wrapped:

*I'd be more embarrassed by a gift that was unwrapped than no gift at all (Katya).*

*I feel like it's a little bit under done like it's not quite complete so even if it's a last minute rush job I sometimes even go to the extent of finding newspaper to wrap it in (Emily).*

Although in one instance, one giver felt it was acceptable to give a gift and its wrapping separately as he was uncomfortable with wrapping the gift himself:

*I remember giving a friend of mine a book and I had been told that I had to wrap it and I didn't wrap it and I ended up giving him the book and the wrapping paper separately so that he got all of the things that he was supposed to have and everyone thought that that was a bit weird (Ned).*

Tradition to wrap a gift can also influence givers to wrap:

*People have always received gifts that are wrapped and therefore I think a lot of people would do it without even thinking about it... it's a tradition in our society where you give me a gift there's an expectation that you'll wrap it therefore signifying that it is a gift (Martin).*

This confirmed Hendry's point that one role of gift wrapping is to tell the receiver that the object is a gift, and it enabled the giver and the receiver to enter into their defined roles in the gift exchange (Hendry, 1993).

### **Gifts should look like gifts**

As discussed in the literature there was a preference for a gift to look like a gift (Howard, 1992):

*My wrapping is such a cliché. (Why?) Just like so traditional and it just looks like a present (Natalie).*

As well, of the gifts created in the projective workshops, 24 in total, all of them looked like a gift using either traditional wrappings, decorative bag with ribbons, bows and other embellishments and confirms findings and assumptions found in existing literature (Howard 1992, Sherry 1983, Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1989). This could indicate certain personal and societal expectations of what gifts should typically look like, what has come to be expected:

Fig 1.1-1.5 A sample of the gifts created in the projective workshops.



This was particularly important for gifts that were given to acquaintances where less was known about the receiver. The givers felt they should play it safe so as not to offend the receiver in any way:

*It was harder for the acquaintance than for... With my niece or my sister or close friend you just know, I can just pick things up and be confident that that's screaming my sister, that blue one or she doesn't like red, she likes pink or jelly beans are happy. But then when it's an acquaintance you've really got to take a step back and make it appealing to a wider group or community and just think ok I can give this to my nanna, my next door neighbour, lady up the shops, my personal trainer, whatever and it's a bit more could suit everyone, a bit safer, yeah safer. I don't want to offend anybody (Rachel).*

However, there was one exception to this, when an informal and impromptu gift was given, where the giver has seen something small and thought of the receiver even though there was no occasion to give the gift, there was no pressure to wrap the gift and it was usually accompanied with a statement along the lines of “I saw this and thought of you...”:

*Like a last minute present, you'll be at a counter and you see something and you think 'oh someone will like that' or someone was feeling down and you bought them a chocolate. Or just I guess it's probably to do with monetary value in most cases for me, so if it was just a few dollars or something or if you just wanted to brighten somebody's day and the act of buying that was enough as opposed to wanting to formalise it with a present that was wrapped (Alana).*

Overall, these findings indicate that there are certain expectations about the use of gift wrapping in the gift exchange process. Even though gifts do not have to be wrapped when given there was a strong preference that it should be wrapped as stated succinctly by one of the participants ( and this sentiment was shared by quite a few participants):

*What's the point of giving a gift if you're not going to wrap it? (Karmen)*

Gifts that are wrapped make it easier for the exchange to occur because they enable the giver and receiver to fall into their roles without any confusion as to the purpose of the exchange. When asked to wrap gifts in the projective workshops, effort was made by the participants in their role as givers to ensure that the gift met expectations of what a gift should look like.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this paper explored and discussed the expectations surrounding the wrapping of a gift. These expectations include the preference that gifts should be wrapped, and they should look like traditional gifts. This paper also exhibited that gift wrapping is more than frivolity by demonstrating that expectations can influence and be influenced by a number of individual, relationship based and social meanings to reinforce communication of messages expressed through the wrapping (Hendry, 1993). This research makes a contribution to the field of consumer behaviour by assisting us to better understand the role of gift wrapping plays in the gift exchange process through the understanding of some of the key expectations surrounding the use of gift wrapping. Specifically it gives a starting point to delve further into some of the findings where wrapping is used to create symbolic meaning and communication in a defined consumptive relationship. This paper could be significant to practitioners as it offers insight into the consumer's mindset into the importance of gift wrapping. Findings can be learned from, applied and adapted to a variety of retail and marketing organisations. Decisions regarding product, service and expectations by consumers could mean that gift wrapping is used as a differentiator in the marketplace, particularly for luxury goods and stores. A limitation of this paper is that it focuses on a sample of consumers within the 25-35 year old age group. This could offer an opportunity for future research to expand into other age groups to compare and contrast findings (which is outside of the parameters of this study). Whilst literature on the broader field of gift exchange is sizeable, literature surrounding gift wrapping is still developing and therefore this makes the topic suitable for further study from a wide range of perspectives. This paper assists in the confirmation that gift wrapping is an important part of the gift exchange process and that further research is required should be undertaken to further clarify and understand its importance.

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