

## THE 'PERFECT GIFT' AND THE 'BEST GIFT EVER': AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR TRULY SPECIAL GIFTS

### Abstract

Scholars and practitioners often consider the 'perfect gift' to understand the qualities of the most cherished gifts or to encourage givers to choose such gifts. Whilst useful, this represents a utopian view of gift-giving. This study explores the concept of 'best gift ever' through 35 in-depth interviews in order to understand the properties of significant gifts as defined by givers and receivers. Findings reveal that the 'best gifts ever' are often associated with *unforgettable* and *life-changing* experiences. These properties are compared with those of the 'perfect gift' to produce an integrative framework for *truly special gifts*. Specifically, this paper: 1) identifies the properties of 'best gifts ever' as distinct from 'perfect gifts'; 2) uncovers insights into the 'perfect gift' beyond the existing conceptualization; and, 3) integrates the 'best gift ever' and the 'perfect gift' into a unified framework capturing what makes a gift successful.

Keywords: gift-giving, gift-receiving, perfect gift, best gift, successful gifts.

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## 1. Introduction

A recent John Lewis Christmas advert showed that “some gifts are more than just a gift”. John Lewis, a leading British retailer, shows how one particular gift inspired and influenced the course of a little boy’s life. This is because they know that advertising that “connects with people on an emotional level” makes gifts truly powerful, especially at Christmas (Marketing Week, 2018).

Early anthropological and sociological studies draw insights from archaic or tribal societies and view gift giving as a form of reciprocal exchange (Mauss, 1954; Lévi-Strauss, 1969), fulfilling important functions in the development and continuity of societies (Giesler, 2006). According to these studies, unwritten rules of reciprocity are used by givers and receivers to regulate their bonds with others and convey status, identity and control (Schwartz, 1967; Lévi-Strauss, 1969). This is said to happen in a “skillful game of exchange” consisting of complex maneuvers aimed at procuring security and strengthening identities within relationships (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p.78). Describing it as “one of the processes that integrates a society”, Sherry (1983, p.157) combines anthropology and consumer-research scholarship into a comprehensive model of gift exchange.

A contrasting view on gift-giving focusses on spontaneously and selflessly expressing sentiment to the recipient. Carrier (1990, p.19), who favors a Maussian, anthropological view, refers to this as the “ideology of the perfect gift”, which he presents as the view generally held amongst Americans as to what a gift *should* be. Belk (1996a) provides a detailed theory of the ‘perfect gift’ that fits within and expands upon this ideology, placing the expression of agapic love (Belk & Coon, 1993) at the heart of a ‘perfect gift’.

There is less empirical evidence that these conceptions of the ‘perfect gift’ are shared by the general public. As such, the ‘perfect gift’ metaphor has been challenged for failing to reflect

givers' motivations and experiences (Otnes, 2018). We address this by investigating what made concrete gifts particularly special for our participants.

The practical relevance of the topic and the lack of phenomenological understanding of consumers' viewpoints require attention. Understanding the underlying characteristics of the most cherished gifts for consumers is of great importance for retailers, who encourage consumers to find the 'perfect gift' (Intel, 2015), and use this theme extensively in their marketing appeals (Otnes, 2018). Indeed, even if rarely fulfilled, such an idealization imbues gift giving and associated rituals with considerable influence (Belk, 1996a; 2010). Further knowledge on such cherished gifts should help develop scholarship on truly special or successful gifts as opposed to gift failure (Roster, 2006; Sherry et al., 1993). Finally, greater understanding of these gifts should illuminate concerns and tensions within other types of gifts (Carrier, 1990).

Beyond the utopian 'perfect gift' (Belk, 1996a), this study is concerned with gifts that informants identified as their 'best gift ever' and attempts to elucidate their lived experiences thereof. Through analysis of actual gift-giving events, we uncover "natives" constructs of cherished gifts (Sherry, 1983). Drawing on participants' retrospective accounts of their 'best gift ever', we shall define this as a treasured gift giving (or receiving) experience, which is perceived to be more significant than any other because of its experiential, memorable, or life changing symbolism for the giver and/or the receiver. As we shall clarify, the 'best gift ever' differs from the 'perfect gift' in that the nature of the former is reflective, and the latter represents a utopian ideal. This distinction conforms with calls for research based on differentiation to identify complexities and incorporate deeper thinking (MacInnis, 2011).

This manuscript is structured as follows. First, we review the gift-giving literature, focusing on perfect, or otherwise special, gifts. We then introduce the methods of data collection and

analysis. Afterwards, we analyze and discuss our findings, before drawing conclusions and suggestions for further studies.

## **2. Theoretical background**

This study combines literature from anthropology, sociology, and consumer research to explore the gift as a key element of giving gifts (Sherry, 1983) and the factors that make them successful. Anthropologically, anything, tangible or intangible, can be a gift (Sherry, 1983), becoming a unique, inalienable object that conveys the giver's identity, bestows upon the receiver symbolic properties that the gift contains (McCracken, 1988), and signifies the giver-receiver relationship (Carrier, 1991; Mauss, 1954).

Consumer studies, influenced by Sherry's (1983) foundational model, have typically viewed gift giving as dyadic gift exchange rituals, whilst overlooking equally important sociological and systemic dimensions of the behavior (Giesler, 2006). These are fundamental as shopping for others can reveal, create, and reproduce crucial aspects of relationships, and the sacrifices endured to honor them (Miller, 1998). Indeed, gifts and the rituals of gift exchange (McCracken, 1986) communicate important, private meanings symbolizing the links between giver and receiver (Carrier, 1991). Such meanings arguably underlie most lay and scholarly understanding of the perfect gift. As such, Belk (1996b, p.13) sees gift giving as a "highly symbolic, highly emotional, interpersonal medium that helps to say things that we find difficult or important to say in words".

Several studies have considered what makes a gift perfect or especially treasured. According to Carrier (1990), the ideology of the 'perfect gift' stresses its immaterial value: it is the sentiment that the gift embodies that counts. This idea that the "thought counts more than the material manifestation" (Belk, 2010, p.718) is further connected to giving altruistically, "without constraint or interest, to express feeling rather than to seek a return to bind the

recipient” (Carrier, 1990, p.20). Thus, the ‘perfect gift’ is described as “unconstrained and unconstraining, [...] a pure expression from the heart that does not bind giver and recipient” (Carrier, 1990, p.21). This voluntarism, along with spontaneity, define ‘pure gifts’ for Parry (1986). These qualities can only reside in the first gift given between a pair (Parry, 1986) as this gift, itself, creates an expectation of reciprocity (Malinowski, 1922). Carrier stresses the ideological nature of such gifts and reflects on the tensions that this ideology conveys, e.g., “How can the giver freely give in a relationship of mutual obligation?” (Carrier, 1990, p.22).

McGrath et al.’s (1993) participants classified ‘perfect gifts’ as wanted, needed, deserved, appreciated, rigorously selected, difficult to find, and surprising. These overlap Belk’s (1996a) properties of the ‘perfect gift’, namely, sacrifice, altruism, luxury, appropriateness, surprise, and delight. Givers *sacrifice* pleasure or resources (e.g., time, money) for the receiver (Belk, 1996a) and this arises from their feelings towards the receiver and a desire to please him/her (Belk, 1996a). Sacrifice is at the heart of Miller’s (1998) theory of shopping and it transforms mundane objects into sacred possessions. Gift rituals, such as wrapping and removing price tags, help transform commodities, whilst adding sacredness (Belk et al., 1989).

Secondly, the ‘perfect gift’ is *altruistic* (Belk, 1996a; 2010). The ultimate example of this would be donating an organ (Bradford, 2018). The ‘perfect gift’ is also a *luxury*, rather than a necessity (Belk, 1996a; Vanhamme & de Bont, 2008), and it should be *appropriate*, i.e., uniquely suited to the receiver (Belk, 1996a; Areni et al., 1998; Bradford, 2018). *Surprise* is a distinctive trait of the ‘perfect gift’, which should not be expected (Belk, 1996; McGrath, et al., 1993). Finally, the ‘perfect gift’ should cause delight as it is something that the receiver intensely desires (Belk, 1996a).

Despite its undeniable contribution to the field, Belk’s (1996a) influential study is mostly theoretical. Subsequent studies often draw on the characteristics proposed by Belk (1996a) to

research issues, such as: the perfect gift card (Tuten & Kiecker, 2009), re-gifting (Swilley et al., 2014), sharing (Belk, 2010), gifts as experiences (Clarke, 2008), the role of emotions when giving the ‘perfect gift’ (Taute & Sierra, 2015), or specific traits of the perfect gift, for example surprise (Vanhamme & de Bont, 2008). As an exception, Areni et al. (1998, p.93) studied the “most memorable” gift experiences and found that some of these are associated with the notion of a “perfect thing”, namely a gift that the recipient wanted for a long time, and perceives as second to none, reflecting the giver’s profound knowledge, and efforts invested, to please the recipient. This idea of perfection as a manifestation of the giver’s knowledge about, and care invested in, the receiver is further explored in Joy’s (2001, p.244) notion of the “right gift” and Ruth et al.’s (1999, p.390) “empathetic gift”. Indeed, for Ruth et al. (1999), gift perfection requires great attention to the relationship between the giver and the receiver.

Although the search for perfection plays an important role in consumer decision making, especially for gifts (He, 2016), perfection is seldom attainable (Arnould & Rose, 2016; Belk, 2016). As Belk (1996a, p.76) concedes, it “remains an ideal more than a reality”. Furthermore, givers do not always aim for a perfect gift (McGrath et al. 1993; Otnes, 2018) and, at any rate, their ideas of what makes a gift ‘good’ may differ from those of receivers (Ruth et al., 1999; Givi & Galak, 2019).

This complexity calls attention to the need for understanding of consumers’ actual experiences of their most cherished gifts. This is especially true since the retail environment has changed considerably since Belk’s (1996a) work. In this study, we consider givers’ and receivers’ experiences of their ‘best gifts ever’ to further understand these very special gifts.

### **3. Methodology and Analysis**

This study explores consumers’ accounts of their best gift experiences to uncover the characteristics of truly special gifts. The exploratory nature of the study calls for a qualitative,

interpretative approach to reveal deep insights about these gifts (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Thus, we seek understanding from participants' own perspectives, attending to the contextual and relational contexts for gift-giving. We look at what makes gift giving special from the givers' and receivers' points of view and capture the meanings they assign to their lived experiences (Kvale, 2006).

Data were collected through 35 in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. We completed our data collection, in 2017/2018, in a medium sized city in the East Midlands of England, after obtaining ethical approval. We collected data over three periods of the year: Christmas, spring into summer, and autumn, in order to capture a wide variety of gifting occasions. We recruited interviewees through a combination of purposive (Shaw, 1999) and snowballing sampling (Bryman, 2016) reaching a broad range of participants in terms of age, gender and background (Table 1). As in other gift studies (Otnes et al., 1993), and reflecting women's greater involvement in gift giving (Cheal, 1987), most of our participants were women: 23 versus 11 men. Participants were UK residents with diverse nationalities (British, German, Greek, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish) and occupations (e.g., lecturers, school teachers, managers, dentists, and unemployed). This is deemed to be a suitable approach to capture a diverse array of experiences and perspectives (Shaw, 1999).

#### TABLE 1 HERE

We asked participants about their best gift experiences ever (as giver or receiver), whilst also focusing on their spontaneous views concerning what makes gifts special or perfect. To capture consumers' accounts in their own words, we did not mention any characteristics of the perfect gift from the literature. Data were professionally transcribed. We began coding by drawing on the categorization of the 'perfect gift' proposed by Belk (1996a). Several themes emerged around the idea of the 'best gift ever' and we adopted an interpretive perspective (Holbrook &

O'Shaughnessy, 1988) to understand the meanings attributed by participants to this type of gift. We used Saldaña's (2016) streamlined codes-to-theory approach (Table 2) to provide an account of the 'best gift ever', which we compared with the current conceptualization of the 'perfect gift'.

TABLE 2 HERE

#### **4. Findings and discussion**

Emergent themes from our data emphasize the importance of the 1) *experiential*, 2) *unforgettable*, and 3) *life-changing* qualities of the best gift experiences for both givers and receivers. After presenting these, we discuss broad similarities that our findings share with Belk's (1996a) conceptualization and propose a framework, which identifies the 'best gift ever' and the 'perfect gift' as two dimensions that illuminate understanding of *truly special gifts*.

##### *4.1. The best gift ever involves an experience*

The experiential character of the 'best gift ever' is fundamental. As we shall elucidate, it is more important than the actual gift and may reveal, upon recollection, ways in which the gift could have been improved.

Most informants emphasized the importance of the gift *experience* over that of the gift. This happened both for gifts of experiences (Clarke, 2008) and for tangible goods. Despite of not always recollecting what the actual gift entailed, participants treasured the experience surrounding it. This is illustrated by Faye, who recounts the following 'best gift ever':

*"I remember when I was probably eight, nine, or ten, something like that, my Dad did like a treasure hunt around the house. First of all, there was a box under the tree that said "to Clara" on it, and I said there is no one called Clara in our house [...] Who is Clara? Then I had to do a whole treasure hunt around the house. He had hidden clues,*

*and there was a little present as a clue and then I had to go and find the next one. In the end, the present for Clara under the tree was for me and it was a doll. And we were going to see the Nutcracker ballet I think the character, the little girl in it, is Clara [...] this present I'd been asking about for days and weeks was actually for me and that was really good, that was really exciting because it was a whole experience” (Faye, 25-34).*

This experiential dimension reinforces the idea that "the gift is only a symbolic vehicle through which gift giver and receiver interact" (Belk, 1996a, p.68) and without this experience, the significance of the 'best gift ever' would be lessened. These experiences seem to be yet more meaningful when they are linked to important others. This speaks directly to Carrier's (1991, p.132) Maussian argument that "Objects derive identity or meaning from the specific personal relationships in which they are transacted or in which they feature". Likewise, the 'best gift ever' owes much of its character to its ties to loved ones. This is further apparent in Lianne's account below. Lianne's gift became meaningful because it provided an opportunity to share time with her mum:

*“I was playing outside and really enjoying my time with my friend and then my mum... I had a sense that she really needed something, let's go and do something. [...] so she said okay, let's pierce your ears. The two things, first of all I was really happy that she's wanting that and then secondly, I was happy because I wanted that as well, very much. I stopped the most enjoyable play with my friend and we went there. “I remember in the jewelry section we were choosing these earrings and in there, there were all the stones you choose depending on your astrological sign. The one for me, the specific one for my own sign wasn't available and we were kind of choosing and we chose a secondary one for my sign. I really liked it. She asked for my opinion as well and the whole experience was very... but I really remember having the feeling that my mum*

*was really going through a difficult few days or something and she really wanted to boost her own positivity through doing this to me, with me” (Lianne, 25-34).*

Belk (2010, p.718) notes that gift-giving is like sharing in that both “bind the giver and recipient”. In Lianne’s case, it is this sharing that makes the gift special. While it is well established that gifts can be products or experiences (Liu et al., 2019) and that the “prestation” stage may increase the impact and value of the gift (Sherry, 1983, p.162), the role of experiences as a fundamental part of gifts has been less studied. This oversight is all the more limiting when the gift *is* the experience. For Ben, the experience of buying gifts for his girlfriend and the surrounding circumstances (first Christmas with a salary) are what made this special:

*“I remember the first Christmas I had, I was working full time after graduation, the person I was seeing at the time [...] it was like a new experience of having somebody special to buy presents for and a reasonable amount of money to do it with, you know what I mean, so it was really fun buying the presents, and thinking about what could, what could I get her so it was really fun getting her a few things and because we were working, we were, we were in love and stuff [...] in my head I know it was lovely and a nice memory and I can’t remember ... even what I bought her [...] it had just been a lovely day” (Ben, 35-44).*

Insights from this study support Miller’s (1998, p.18) thesis that shopping can be “primarily an act of love”, key to understanding relationships. Gifts and the experiences therein are vehicles to reinforce, express, and relive emotional ties. Several participants’ accounts illustrate how the memories attached to gifts infuse them with symbolism:

*“My gran, no longer with us unfortunately, at the time when she was diagnosed with cancer about 20-odd years ago, and she decided that she wanted to buy all her*

*grandchildren a gift to say goodbye .... At the time I didn't really think anything of it. I just thought, as a child, another gift, that's great and funnily enough I chose a Bart Simpson alarm clock. It was like a black base and Bart Simpson character and he held a skateboard [...] It's not very beautiful looking but again it's very... it's very basic but it's got that memory. [...] I've kept it as a little memento because I suppose it was one of the last gifts I suppose she ever bought. [...] That's a really nice gift because it's one that again is the last gift that somebody ever bought me [...] It's something that I'll never sell or get rid of, even if it was worth thousands of pounds as a collector's item, which I don't think it is. [...] Only now... it comes back to what I said before about the gift, I'd call it a perfect gift now, retrospectively because obviously it's not only the product, it's got the memories attached to it and the person who gave it to me is no longer with me as well.” (Joe, 25-34).*

These meanings are sometimes produced over time; thus, a *Bart Simpson* alarm clock, dismissed in childhood, is now a ‘perfect gift’ representing Joe’s deceased grandmother. Reflecting upon their *best gifts*, informants discovered aspects that made them yet more special and attendance to those aspects would have made those gifts ‘perfect’. This adds evidence to the elusive nature of ‘perfect gifts’ as opposed to the pragmatism of best gifts. Stephen believed a holiday spent with his wife at Centre Parks was the ‘perfect gift’ at the time of selecting it, but realizes in retrospect that he could have invested more to make this gift ‘*more perfect*’:

*“The best gift ever? [pause] I think probably as far as my wife is concerned giving her ... I booked a holiday to Centre Parks and she really appreciates, you know, sort of Centre Parks and going away for the week [...] It was [perfect] in my mind, at the time. I suppose, now, reflecting back on it there were one or two things I could have done to make it even more perfect [...] I could have looked at other, other packages, could have been a little bit more... I suppose it wasn't entirely compatible with her availability so*

*we had to make a few changes there and we could have avoided that” (Stephen, 35-44).*

Although the realization that greater investment and sacrifice would have made the gift more perfect (Belk, 1996a), this is, nevertheless, a salient event for Stephen. Carrier (1990) discusses the tension arising from the need for a ‘perfect gift’ to be expressive and personally meaningful in a world of anonymous and impersonal commodities. Indeed, for a mass-produced item to carry private meanings it must be “personalized” in some way (Cheal, 1987, p.158). We argue that the experiential dimension of the gift may resolve this tension by endowing items with meaningful symbolism that links them to givers.

#### *4.2. The best gift ever is unforgettable*

A recurrent theme in our data is that the ‘best gift ever’ is *unforgettable*. This refers to: past gift experiences, especially those from childhood or life turning points; and meanings attributed to the gift experiences that develop over time.

Most of these experiences were deemed as *unforgettable* and, indeed, transported participants many years back in time. This was evident when informants recounted episodes of childhood gifts (given or received). For example, Julie recollected, with surprise, receiving her best gift ever 65 years ago:

*"I can remember waking up when I was four [...] and a doll's pram with a doll in it at the side of my bed on Christmas morning. That was special. That was special [...] I've got an awful long time to go back [...] a lot of years. [This gift was] something really special [...] Yeah, I can remember that one. I remember various things [...] something really special" (Julie, 65-74).*

Other participants described the memorable character of best gifts, which was invariably linked to major events in informants' lives (e.g., losing a loved one, having a child). Participants described ways in which these gifts served as vehicles to communicate symbolic messages (Cheal, 1987; Mick & DeMoss, 1990). For example, Alice gives a passionate account of how she used a box of "*baby things*" to announce her pregnancy to her husband:

*"Well, definitely when I announced that I was pregnant because I made a gift to my husband. So, I think that was the most enjoyable gift that I gave, because I gave him a box full of baby things inside but they were wrapped. But before he reached the baby things, there was like a double cover and there was a card there, announcing the pregnancy and the way that I had written, he had to read it two or three times to guess what it was. So, I think it was, I put a lot of effort doing that and preparing the surprise because it was something I knew he would love to hear, a baby announcement. I think that was one of the most exciting presents that I gave, definitely. I think it was the most incredible"* (Alice, 35-44).

Thus, gifts can be memorable because they symbolize a special event in an individual's life to which they are uniquely linked (Areni et al., 1998). Alice's emphasis on her enjoyment and excitement would render this gift imperfect for Belk (1996a, p.62), since when the giver "overly enjoys the sacrifice" of giving the gift, the principles of the 'perfect gift' are violated.

The symbolic properties that make gifts *unforgettable* are often developed over time, as the nostalgia for past times or deceased loved ones, and an awareness of the sacrifices involved in some gifts enhances their specialness. Martin shows this when reflecting upon a special backpack, which he received soon after his father passed away:

*"When I was a kid, six years old or seven years old, something like that, I saw a backpack that [I liked] ... but that backpack was a little bit expensive, so my mother was*

*at that time not able to do that kind of buying for me [...] One day she came home and she brought a packet to me, it was quite later after I was asking for that, and she said “that is for you, it’s a gift for you”. I opened the packet. It was the backpack. I remember that because I was so happy for the gift [...] Even now I have that backpack, obviously I can’t use it because it’s for kids, but it’s at home and I like it still now. [...] After I was grown up and I was realizing about how things were and how much it cost to her to do that, maybe I appreciate the gift more during the time. [...] It was tough because my father had recently passed away. [...] It was tough because she did do a lot of things by herself with no help and then after that take care of us, my brother and myself, so it was [a] very difficult time in life” (Martin, 35-44).*

Here, sacrifice resonates with Miller’s (1998, p.151) theory of shopping in that it transformed Martin’s backpack from a mere “object of consumption”, into the ‘best gift ever’, which represents an object of devotion for Martin. These unforgettable gifts also speak to Areni *et al.*’s (1998) *most memorable* gifts and may set the bar against which other gifts are henceforth evaluated. Bruno remembers a football that he received as a child. This was for him so extraordinary that any other gift received since pales in comparison:

*“The best gift, gift giving experience ever was when I was six in the first class of primary school [...] my parents came and brought me a football out of the blue. [...] If I have to compare any gift with, you know, the excitement of getting this football, it’s, everything is much less exciting” (Bruno, 25-34).*

Recounting this experience allowed Bruno to recreate a prior state of “bliss associated with childhood” (Belk et al. 2003, p.335). This was evident both in Bruno’s words and in his nostalgic demeanor.

#### *4.3. The best gift ever can be life changing*

Several informants described the ‘best gift ever’ as *life changing* because it fulfilled a desire that seemed to be unattainable beforehand, contributed to change in the giver or receiver’s life, and was associated with ‘magical’ or otherwise mysterious elements.

The life-changing character of the *best gift ever* was evident in several reports in which informants had thought that receiving the gift was a barely attainable dream. For example, Richard received a bike from his parents at a time when such a present was rare:

*“The one gift that did make a difference was when I was a kid and my Mum and Dad bought me a bicycle. It was a brand-new bicycle and my Dad spent a lot of vouchers that he had accrued on that one thing and most of my school friends didn’t believe it was my bicycle because we didn’t have new bicycles. So that was pretty important [...] it was so unexpected. And out of character. And it made me feel very good and look very good I suppose at that age. I was 11 at the time”* (Richard, 55-64).

Another example, which reflects the elusive character of these gifts is offered by Helen. She always loved clothes and felt that her first pair of heels made her look very ‘*modern*’ at a time when she couldn’t afford fancy clothes:

*“I would have been about 10 or 11, and my friend had been out with her parents and she’d bought a pair of shoes with heels on. I was so jealous and I had to have some. And I kept on and on at my mum and she did buy me and I had the most... my first pair of shoes with heels on and I was so pleased. I felt so modern. [...] I couldn’t wait to wear them to school and all my friends to see them because I just felt that I ... I felt that I knew they looked really good [...] I just felt so pleased because, actually... because we didn’t have an awful lot of money as well, my mum used to knit our jumpers, she used to make my school dresses and she wasn’t the best at needle [...] So, it made me*

*feel special because I had a lovely pair of shoes with a heel on that weren't home-made" (Helen, 55-64).*

Unattainability and scarcity are related to desire (Belk et al., 2003), which made those gifts yet more special. When describing the best gift ever, some informants tapped into a transformational aspect of the gift experience, which made them feel independent, more confident or able to change other peoples' lives. Veronica, for example, felt like a grown up when she bought her first gift:

*"I remember giving my mother a... a pair of really cheap earrings from Woolworths and saving up all my pocket money to be able to do it, and I went shopping with a friend from school, it was our first time that we were allowed to go shopping on our own [...] One of the things I bought were some very cheap sparkly earrings for my mother, and thinking "wow these are wonderful, I can't wait to get home to give them to her". I don't know that she was that thrilled, she maintained she was thrilled, but she never wore them. [...] We felt very, very grown up. [...] I often remember back to that day and how we felt and how we were; we felt so grown up doing something like buying, and buying not just for ourselves but other people as well, and it was the first time I think I'd actually bought a gift for somebody" (Veronica, 55-64).*

Despite suspecting that her mother didn't like the earrings she offered her, Veronica still believes that the gift is the 'best gift ever' because it symbolically marked the beginning of her transition from childhood to adulthood. This further demarks the 'best gift ever' from the 'perfect gift', which is suited uniquely to the receiver (Belk, 1996a; Sherry et al., 1993) and fulfills a receiver's desire (Choi et al., 2018).

Some 'best gifts' impacted people's lives in other ways. For example, Lorraine believes her best gift ever was a CD that she gave a friend, which acquired an important symbolic

significance and transformed her friend's travel experiences. Such gifts are sometimes infused with mystery or magic, which makes them all the more special. This is the case of Brenda, who received some expensive dolls from her parents on her twelfth birthday. The dolls seemed to be imbued with magical properties that reassured Brenda of her parents' love at times of tension:

*"I received two, let's say German Barbies, it was something incredible. Foreign toys, it was like... toys from abroad, it was a miracle at that time! I remember and I still keep them. [...] I was really, really, really surprised and I remember the moment how I saw them for the first time. [...] It was my birthday. I woke up and I saw them immediately, right in front of me, they were on my bed. They were sitting on my bed. I was screaming, jumping, going mad [...] I didn't expect them at all, even in my dream. It's like... it's hard to explain but it's like something from abroad. It's hard to imagine it exists, and to have it, it was almost impossible. Almost impossible. My parents were at the time for me like... they were like people from another planet because I still don't understand how they managed it and it's still a secret for me. [...] It's so nice to still have it with me and again, still some kind of magic in my life. It's like I can feel love through it. I had some bad times with my mother and also with my father so when I think maybe... when I'm thinking that things probably can be better I remind myself about that [gift] and all my bad thoughts go straight away [...] because they care about me and they love me" (Brenda, 35-44).*

In Brenda's account we can appreciate how these dolls seem to provide a replacement for more "direct interpersonal expressions of love" from her parents, which is in keeping with our society's materialist values (Belk, 1985, p.266). Although, like Belk (1985), we may question the adequacy of this substitute, this gift provides Brenda with needed comfort. Another participant described how receiving a gift she had longed for, for many years, made her believe

that “*if you really, really want something and if you really want then it can happen*” (Isabella, 35-44). This *life-changing* dimension of the ‘best gift ever’ turns them into active agents of transformation (Hyde, 1979).

#### 4.4. *Integrative Framework for truly special gifts*

Giving voice to our participants (Kvale, 2006), we define the ‘best gift ever’ as a treasured gift giving or receiving experience, which is perceived (at least for a time) to be more significant than any other because of its experiential, memorable, or life-changing symbolism for the giver and/or the receiver. Because they are a result of consumers’ reflections upon actual, lived experiences, ‘best gifts’ are proposed as an alternative to the more utopian ‘perfect gift’ (Belk, 1996a).

Specifically, ‘best gifts ever’ differ from ‘perfect gifts’ in three different ways. First, our findings reinforce the *experiential* dimension of best gifts, which tends to center around these gifts’ links to significant others. This contrasts with the *ideal* character of the perfect gift, which focuses on the properties of the gift, even if these also highlight its interpersonal and symbolic nature (Belk, 1996a; Carrier, 1990). Second, the *unforgettable* dimension of the best gift ever contrasts with the *aspirational* nature of the perfect gift. As Belk (1996a, p.69) notes, “as an ideal, the perfect gift is imperfectly approached by much of our gift giving and, perhaps, is sustained as a fictional script for much gift giving that does not seriously attempt to match this ideal”. Indeed, most givers described the best gift ever based on the recollection of past, memorable experiences, while sporadic mentions of the perfect gift placed this as a fantasy or aspirational daydream. Finally, our analysis suggests the *life-changing and evolving* effect of best gifts as opposed to the perhaps more *immutable* nature of the perfect gift.

The ‘best gift ever’ and the ‘perfect gift’ also share some key characteristics. As we have seen, our participants indicate that some ‘best gifts ever’ were imbued with *delight, sacrifice,*

*altruism* or *surprise*, and they seemed to be generally *appropriate*, thus sharing some traits with Belk's (1996a) 'the perfect gift'. More rarely did participants describe these gifts as luxurious, perhaps because this trait is less virtuous than those that reflect givers and recipients' concerns with others.

As a result of the comparison between the 'perfect gift' and 'best gift ever', we propose a framework (figure 1) for *truly special gifts* by: 1) showing how the properties of the 'best gift ever' are distinct from those of the 'perfect gift'; and, 2) highlighting the shared characteristics (e.g., sacrifice, surprise), which link both concepts. We used a Venn diagram as a useful way to illustrate contributions by both differentiation and integration, thus identifying similarities and differences (MacInnis, 2011) between the 'perfect gift' and 'best gift ever'.

FIGURE 1 HERE

## **5. Final Thoughts**

This paper examines participants' accounts of their 'best gift ever' (given or received) to further understanding of very special gifts. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on gift giving in several ways. Firstly, it proposes the 'best gift ever' as a way to reflect upon successful gifts, which represents an empirical counterpart to the aspirational, utopian 'perfect' gift. Focusing on lived experiences, we reveal the fundamental role of the context and relationships in preferred gifts. Speaking to a systemic view of gift giving (Giesler, 2006), we note that it is often *others*, rather than *the gift* alone, that make these gifts meaningful. Through participants' retrospection of actual gifts, we were also able to appreciate that their symbolic value is neither static nor immutable (as in perfect gifts) but malleable and constantly shaped by evolving memories, relationships and life changes. Thus, individuals may look back and realize that gift

experiences they deemed perfect are no longer so, while other gifts they once dismissed have acquired symbolic value.

Participants' focus on experiences and social ties over tangible possessions provides fresh insights into the value placed on material possessions. These findings challenge the materialistic outlook of western societies, whilst resonating with studies of non-material sources of happiness (e.g., Shankar et al., 2006). Indeed, our findings represent a preference for social experiences over goods, in line with what scholars have judged more fulfilling and better for the environment (e.g., Scott et al., 2014). We do, however, concede that social desirability may have played a part in participants' accounts.

Finally, this study contributes to theory on gift giving by differentiating (MacInnis, 2011) the 'perfect gift' from the 'best gift ever' and integrating them into a framework that informs understanding of what successful gift giving may encompass. 'Best gifts' share some properties with Belk's (1996a) 'perfect gifts' but rarely all at once and some of Belk's properties, like luxuriousness, are barely shared at all.

Practitioners could support customers in creating 'best gifts' by surrounding these with memorable experiences. For example, roses given by a husband to his wife on every wedding anniversary may, one year, become a preferred gift (for both giver and receiver) if extra care is invested in the rituals of gift giving (e.g., personal note, location). By focusing their communication appeals on experiences (and the relations they entail) rather than on gifts *per se* (as in *Tesco's Food Love Stories*), practitioners may be able to assist consumers in fashioning 'best gifts', whilst forging emotional connections with them.

Future research should address the importance that givers and receivers attribute to particular relationships when giving/receiving the 'best gift ever' and identifying the categories of gift associated with each type of relationship. It would also be useful to further scholarship on the

different perceptions that givers and receivers may have of their 'best gifts ever'. Furthermore, communications technology has changed the culture of gift giving (Otnes, 2018), raising questions concerning whether digital gifts can be perfect (Belk, 2013). It would be interesting to study how digital technologies have impacted upon perceptions of what a successful gift entails. Finally, research into 'best gifts ever' in other cultures would be of value both to see how this varies in a non-Western context and to ascertain (as we suspect) whether similar results would be found in the United States, where the classical conceptions of the 'perfect gift' (Carrier, 1991; Belk, 1996a) were developed.

Recently, Otnes (2018, p.225) has highlighted the importance of furthering knowledge about "truly impactful gifts in our lives". In keeping with this, we find that these gifts need not be perfect or immutable. They are, nevertheless, endowed with mysticism and sentiment, whilst reflecting times, ties, or circumstances that individuals may forever treasure.

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Figure 1: Integrative framework for truly special gifts

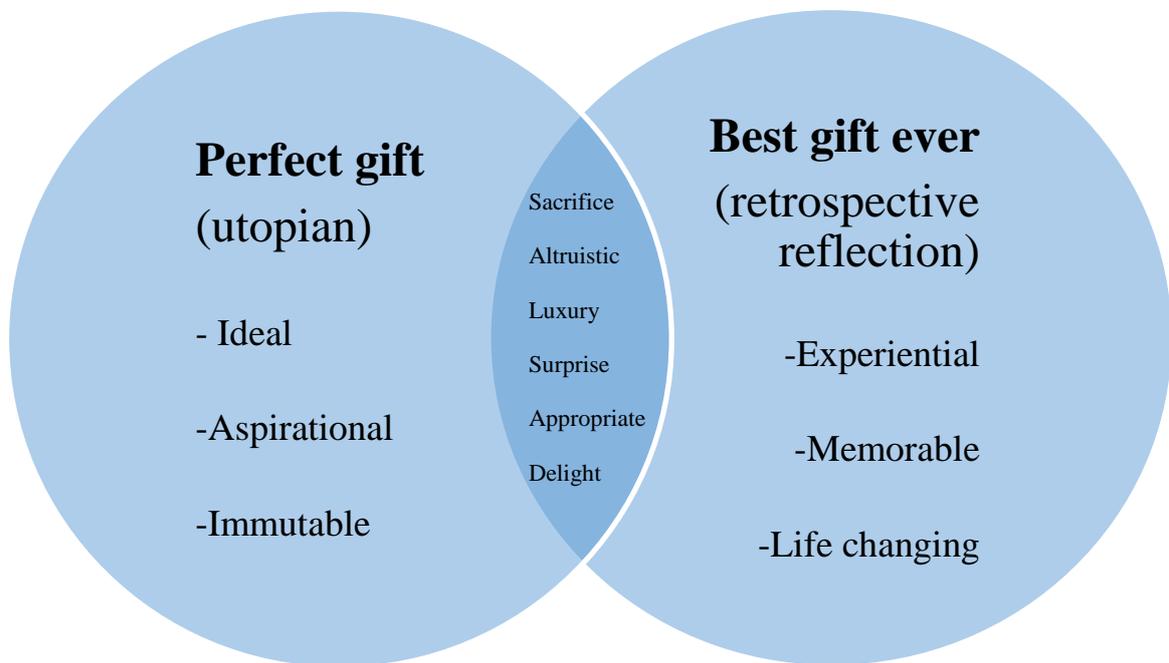


Table 1: Participant sample

Participant	Gender	Age	Data collection season
Sandra	Female	18-24	Christmas
Lorraine	Female	35-44	
Valeria	Female	18-24	
Faye	Female	25-34	
Ben	Male	35-44	
Sophia	Female	35-44	
Janett	Female	18-24	
Monica	Female	45-54	
Vanesa	Female	18-24	
Hazel	Female	18-24	
Aimee	Female	35-44	
Neil	Male	45-54	
Rita	Female	18-24	
Sharon	Female	55-64	
Nicolas	Male	25-34	
Alice	Female	35-44	
Stacey	Female	25-34	
Harry	Male	25-34	
Richard	Male	55-64	
Christine	Female	25-34	
Paula	Female	35-44	
Bruno	Male	25-34	
Julie	Female	65-74	
Lynn	Male	35-44	
Eva	Female	55-64	
Martina	Female	35-44	
Thomas	Male	35-34	
Stephen	Male	35-44	Autumn
Martin	Male	35-44	
Joe	Male	25-34	
Veronica	Female	55-64	
Lianne	Female	25-34	
Helen	Female	55-64	
Brenda	Female	35-44	
Isabella	Female	35-44	

Table 2: Data Structure (streamlined codes-to-theory approach)

RAW DATA	CODE	CATEGORY	THEORY
<i>The experience is described in more detail than the gift itself (e.g. treasure hunt for the gift).</i>	Experience is more important than the gift itself	<b>Experiential</b>	Conceptualization of the best gift ever
<i>Symbolic meaning associated with the experience and evolving context add specialness to the gift.</i>	Experience transforms the gift into the best ever		
<i>Informants identified aspects of the best gift ever that could have been improved upon reflection.</i>	Experience reveals that there is room for improvement		
<i>Memories were retrieved from a distant past (childhood experiences or key moments in the individual's life).</i>	Unforgettable memories around past experiences	<b>Unforgettable</b>	
<i>The symbolic meaning of unforgettable gifts has developed over time.</i>	Meanings attributed to unforgettable memories develop over time		
<i>Informants compare other gift experiences with the best gift ever.</i>	Unforgettable memories set the bar for future gift experiences		
<i>Life changing gifts that were long desired and unattainable (e.g. first bike).</i>	Fulfillment of a desire that seemed to be unattainable beforehand	<b>Life changing</b>	
<i>The best gift ever marked a turning point in the giver and/or receiver's life (e.g. becoming more independent).</i>	Life-changing gifts had a long-term effect beyond the gift event		
<i>Informants attributed mysterious properties to the gift experience.</i>	Life-changing gifts were associated with magical or mystical properties		

## 5.1.