"You *Really* Shouldn't Have!" Coping with failed gift experiences

Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines coping approaches used by receivers to deal with failed gift experiences, thereby dealing with misperceptions between givers and receivers that could affect their relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employs a sequential, multimethod methodology using background questionnaires, online diary method and 27 semi-structured interviews.

Findings – Receivers cope with failed gift experiences through *concealing, disclosing or re-evaluating the gift experience*. These approaches encompass several coping strategies, allowing receivers to deal with their experiences in ways that help them manage their relationships with givers.

Research limitations/implications: Informants described gift experiences in their own terms without being prompted to talk about coping, thus some insights of coping with failed gifts may have been missed. Multiple data collection methods were employed to minimise this limitation and the research findings suggest new avenues for future research.

Practical implications: The present research helps retailers and brands to *minimise gift failure* by promoting gifts that emphasise aspects of the giver-receiver relationship, assists givers in their *learning from gift failure* by making them aware of the receiver's preferences, and *reduces the cost of gift failure* by offering further opportunities to dispose of unwanted gifts.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the emerging topic of consumer coping by providing a novel and rounded understanding of coping in the context of failed gift events; identifying new reasons for gift failure; highlighting receivers' ethical considerations when responding to failed gifts and; proposing new insights for the coping literature.

Keywords – Gift-giving, Gift failure, Gift-receiving, Coping, Relationship Management.
Paper type – Research paper.

Introduction

"'*I didn't like to say anything, but I was sadly disappointed in my umbrella. I told Mother black with a white handle, but she forgot and bought a green one with a yellowish handle. It's strong and neat, so I ought not to complain, but I know I shall feel ashamed of it beside Annie's silk one with a gold top,'- sighed Meg, surveying the little umbrella with great disfavor.*

'Change it,' advised Jo.

'I won't be so silly, or hurt Marmee's feelings, when she took so much pains to get my things. It's a nonsensical notion of mine, and I'm not going to give up to it'" (Meg, the oldest of the four March sisters and her younger sister Jo, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, p.146, after Meg received an unsuitable gift from her mother).

However well intended gifts may be, they do not always please receivers (Cruz-Cárdenas *et al.,* 2015). When they fail, gifts can represent a source of inner conflict, requiring a choice be made about to how to resolve it. This can be seen in Meg's decision not to "give up to" her

desire for a different umbrella in the opening excerpt. A belief that she should be grateful and a desire to spare her mother's feelings are at odds with feelings of disappointment and shame at the gift not showing her as she wishes to be seen.

A gift failure is said to occur when the gift does not meet the recipient's expectations in some way (Roster, 2006). This could happen for a range of reasons, which include giver-receiver differences in perceptions of their relationship (Sherry *et al.*, 1993) and discrepancies in gift preferences (Galak *et al.*, 2016), different evaluations of the gift (Baskin *et al.*, 2014), and giver's failure to focus on the receiver's perspective (Gino and Flynn, 2011; Givi and Galak, 2019).

Research on gift failure has focused largely on the reasons for such failures (Givi and Galak, 2017) and the emotional responses aroused by wrong gifts, such as frustration, anger, embarrassment and hurt (e.g., Sherry *et al.*, 1993). As this literature and the opening quotation indicate, receivers need to cope with such emotions (Ruth *et al.*, 1999), with their effects on subsequent interactions (Sherry *et al.*, 1993), or their relationship (Sherry, 1983) with the giver. However, less is known about how receivers effectively *deal* with failed gift experiences and manage their relationships with givers as a result. Indeed, the ways in which individuals cope with gift failure is a relatively new (Duhachek, 2005; Hamilton and Hassan, 2010; Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2005) and underexplored area (Roster, 2006; Fremeaux and Michelson, 2011) in consumer research.

A better understanding of receivers' approaches to coping with failed gift events and their impact on gift relationships is needed for several reasons. Firstly, it would enable consumers to cope better with the negative emotions aroused by failed gifts (Ruth *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, as gifts are a way for givers to manage their relationships with receivers (Otnes *et al.*, 1993), failed gifts could adversely affect such relationships. From a practitioners' perspective, insights into failed gifts are also useful to reduce customers' discontentment, gift returns and waste. Unwanted gift experiences might create a negative association with the brand for the recipient (which companies may never get to know about), especially if this is their first exposure to that brand. On the other hand, returning a gift can be a stressful process, especially after Christmas when this is particularly common and the choices available are reduced (Westbrook, 2017). Over Christmas 2017, around 36% of people in the UK received at least one unwanted gift that they returned, gave to charity, kept and never used, re-gifted, or threw away (YouGov, 2017). Many of those that chose to return gifts experienced difficulties because they needed a receipt, the retailer did not accept returns or the gift had been purchased online (GoCompare, 2018). Consumers' discontentment is faced by retailers precisely when they are least able to spend worker-hours fixing it, already needing additional staff just to deal with long queues and ensure that return policies are met (Lyons, 2018; Westbrook, 2017). Although the process may be simpler at other times of the year, retailers would still benefit from better appreciating the emotional strain that failed gifts may place on consumers and relationships, so as to design strategies that minimize disappointment. From an environmental point of view, failed gifts create waste. Haq et al (2007) discuss the "carbon cost" of Christmas in the UK, which is to a great extent associated with unwanted gifts. In fact, one in 10 people in the UK throw unwanted gifts in the bin (Recycling and Waste World, 2018).

This paper employs insights from the coping literature (e.g., Carver *et al.*, 1989; Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Skinner *et al.*, 2003) to make sense of participants' accounts and explain how they cope with failed gift experiences in ways that support their

relationship with givers. The application of enabling theories to gift giving is a means to explain and enrich research findings (Otnes, 2018). As the present study will show, recipients use different coping strategies to deal with the emotional anxiety of receiving a failed gift while they positively and proactively deal with the ensuing stress on their relationship. Specifically, this study identifies three coping approaches adopted by receivers, namely *concealing*, *disclosing* or *re-evaluating* the gift experience.

Initially, this manuscript presents the theoretical background of gift failure, the need to understand coping behaviour and relationship management in this context. After examining the research methods, the article reports research findings and discusses three main coping approaches derived from the analysis. Finally, the paper discusses theoretical contribution, proposes implications for practitioners and suggests avenues for further research.

Theoretical background

Taking the perspective of the receivers, our theoretical background combines three research areas to illuminate the phenomenon of failed gift experiences: (1) gift failure in consumer behaviour, (2) consumer coping, and (3) relationship management in gift research.

Gift failure

A gift failure occurs when a gift does not meet the recipient's expectations (Roster, 2006) and thus fails to achieve its intended goal of pleasing the receiver (Roster and Amann, 2003; Sherry *et al.*, 1993). A gift becomes a failure only after it reaches the hands of the receiver (Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2005) causing disappointment or dissatisfaction (Sherry *et al.*, 1993). A great deal of research focuses on the antecedents of gift failure by studying the reasons why gifts are unsuccessful (Schiffman and Cohn, 2009), mostly from the givers' point of view (e.g., Roster, 2006). This literature emphasises that gift experiences are unsuccessful, typically, because givers' predictions of receivers' expectations are inaccurate (Schiffman and Cohn, 2009). Recent research suggests that gift mistakes are not always an accident as sometimes givers knowingly choose something suboptimal, as giving a better gift would make them feel less satisfied with their own possessions (Givi and Galak, 2019). From the receivers' perspective, gifts may fail when receivers have high gift expectations, feel obliged to reciprocate the gift (Lowes *et al.*, 1968), perceive that givers take pity on them by giving a generous gift (Sandstrom *et al.*, 2019), push relationship boundaries (Ruth *et al.*, 1999), or have not made an effort (McGrath *et al.*, 1993; Sherry *et al.*, 1993).

Importantly, gifts may also be unsuccessful because of the giver's and receiver's different perceptions of the gift and its value (Baskin *et al.*, 2014; Galak *et al.*, 2016). Givers imagine the receiver with the gift while receivers envision themselves using the gift; therefore, the psychological distance from the gift is substantially higher for givers than for receivers (Baskin *et al.,* 2014). Thus, unlike receivers, givers construe gifts abstractly and tend to value attributes such as desirability of the gift more than its feasibility (Baskin *et al.*, 2014). In a similar vein, Galak *et al.,* (2016) argue that givers tend to focus on the amazement, delight, surprise and/or other emotions receivers feel on receiving a gift, whilst receivers are more concerned with the value of owning and using that particular gift. Gifts may also fail when the giver and receiver differ in the criteria or "codebook" they use to choose a suitable gift (i.e., rational/pragmatic gifts versus symbolic/romantic) (Schiffman and Cohn, 2009). This discord may create conflict between the giver and receiver because both think the other party broke their gifting rules (Schiffman and Cohn, 2009). Upon receiving a failed gift, receivers often feel great pressure to manage impressions (Roster and Amann, 2003) and to respond in

ways that meet social expectations (Sherry *et al*., 1992; Wooten and Wood, 2004). Receivers enact their responses to gift failure mainly through face-to-face interactions and gift disposition, which we shall address next.

Openly showing disappointment with the gift is normally considered taboo (Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2005). Thus, face-to-face interaction between the giver and receiver may involve a certain level of insincerity from the receiver in order to comply with accepted standards of behaviour (Sherry *et al*., 1992). Receivers follow a performance ritual where they often simulate face-to-face reactions, hiding their true feelings in order to protect givers' face and to maintain the cheerful character of the situation (Wooten and Wood, 2004). Engaging in facework, that is, using verbal and non-verbal social strategies to manage others' impressions during interactions (Ting-Toomey, 1994), is a common coping mechanism used by receivers to protect their public identity (Blair and Roese, 2013). Honest reactions tend to happen mostly in close, non-romantic relationships (Roster and Amann, 2003) amongst younger adults and children, who may feel less constrained in disclosing their true emotions (Kieras *et al*., 2005) and may not know how to cope otherwise with their own disappointment as receivers (Sunwolf, 2006). Second, the disposition of an unwanted gift can involve rejecting, returning, storing (Rucker *et al*., 1992), re-gifting (Ertimur *et al*., 2015) and giving to charities, or failing to display the gift (Roster, 2006). The choice of a particular disposition strategy can be, in itself, a source of emotional distress (Sherry *et al*., 1992) because it reflects the recipient's degree of consideration for the giver (Sherry, 1983).

Whilst the literature highlights the need to understand coping in the context of gift failure (Ruth *et al*., 1999), extant research fails to provide an in-depth account of how gift receivers cope with failed gift experiences by using face-to-face or gift disposition strategies and the roles of coping strategies in managing receivers' relationships with givers. This is particularly important because receivers tend to have difficulty suppressing the negative emotions derived from gift experiences that they perceive as lacking investment in the relationship (Ruth *et al*., 1999).

Consumer coping

Although coping may be an underexplored area in consumer research (Hamilton and Hassan, 2010), it has long been studied in psychology wherein coping captures changes in thoughts and acts when a stressful event unfolds (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1993). Lazarus and Folkman (1984: p.141) define coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person". Coping consists of two main functions: 1) *emotion-focused* coping, aimed at avoiding the source of stress, because it is out of the individual's control; and 2) *problem-focused* coping, directed towards generating solutions to alter the source of stress, because the individual feels it is controllable (Folkman, 1984; Folkman *et al*., 1986; Hamilton and Hassan, 2010; Valor *et al*., 2018). Coping literature proposes an inventory of coping strategies around *emotion-focused coping* (i.e., search for emotional social support, positive re-evaluation of the event and acceptance); *problem-focused* coping (i.e., active coping, planning, and search for instrumental social support); and a third group of coping strategies, arguably less useful, such as venting of emotions and behavioural disengagement (Carver *et al*., 1989). Although most research assumes that *emotional-focused* and *problem-focused* coping are separate, discrete coping approaches, the manner of coping is often multidimensional and complex, combining both approaches in a complementary way to deal with the same situation (Lazarus, 2006). These approaches relate to processes of

human development, such as the search for support and provision of protection of available social resources (Skinner et al., 2003).

It is well understood that, when a situation is stressful in some way, the emotions experienced by an individual require the use of coping strategies (Watson and Spence, 2007). As it is in the psychology discipline, recent studies demonstrate that *emotional* and *problem-focused* coping functions complement each other to deal with consumption contexts (Bui et al., 2011; Tsarenko and Strizhakova, 2013). However, coping strategies to deal with negative emotions induced by consumer experiences are a relatively new area in consumer research (Duhachek, 2005; Duhachek and Oakley, 2007; Hamilton and Hassan, 2010) and understanding life events that require coping is, in itself, an emergent area of literature (Moschis, 2012). In particular, in a gift-giving context, where consumers may experience discomfort (Heath et al., 2015; Sherry et al., 1993), coping is a fertile (Otnes et al., 1997) and underexplored area of inquiry.

Taken together, coping insights from the psychology literature (Carver et al., 1989; Skinner et al., 2003) and consumer research (Duhachek, 2005) can illuminate coping approaches in the gifting context. This theoretical perspective differs from that of most consumer coping studies to date, which focus on the emotions that require coping and the interpretation of situations where those emotions emerge (cognitive appraisals) (e.g., Ruth et al., 2002). Furthermore, coping strategies are linked to individuals' need to manage available social resources (Skinner et al., 2003). This is especially important in the context of failed gift events, where receivers' reactions and disposition strategies are deployed to manage their relationship with givers.

Relationship management

Givers show how they care for the receiver and focus on the relationship by choosing a gift that the receiver wants (Liu et al., 2019). When gifts go wrong, they threaten social ties (Sherry et al. 1999). High levels of anxiety, often resulting from failed gift experiences, create a distressing situation that might affect the giver-receiver relationship (Sunwolf, 2006). This is partly because gift receivers re-evaluate their relationship with the donor after receiving the gift; they interpret the giver's motives in choosing that gift and reformulate their relationship with the giver in response to the gift experience (Ruth et al., 1999). Although failed gifts can threaten relationships (Sherry et al., 1992), in some situations they may lead to reinforcing social bonds (Ruth et al., 1999).

When looking at relationship management, most gift studies adopt a giver's perspective, focusing on how the positive aspects of gifts allow givers to maintain relationships with gift receivers (e.g., Otnes et al, 1993). The experience of negative emotions in gift receiving can also aid the development of social bonds when receivers cope with and control their emotions (Ruth et al., 1999). Thus, consumers need to manage the negativity of their emotions to resolve the conflicts created by unsuccessful gifts (Sherry et al., 1993). Coping approaches should not be separated from the people who are engaged in the relationship and the context in which the coping behaviour happens (Lazarus, 2006). The specific ways in which receivers react to the gift (Kessous et al., 2016; Ting-Toomey, 1994), and any subsequent gift disposition strategies employed, can have an impact on the giver-receiver relationship (Cruz-Cárdenas et al., 2015; Rucker et al., 1992). However, extant research does not explain how coping with failed gifts may help receivers to effectively deal with such gift events and manage their relationship with the givers.

Methodology

This study uses insights from the literature on coping to examine how receivers (1) cope with failed gift events and (2) adopt coping strategies related to managing their relationship with the giver. We employed a three-stage, multimethod qualitative approach using background questionnaires, online diaries and semi-structured follow-up interviews seeking an in-depth account of how receivers cope with gift failure. This methodology overcomes the limitation of solely using questionnaires in a study of coping, since questionnaires alone do not capture the situational context where coping is required or the relational meanings that a person constructs about an emotional encounter (e.g., gift receiving) (Lazarus, 2006). First, this study employed *background questionnaires* with the sole purpose of recruiting participants and enquiring about personal data (e.g., gender, age) as well as obtaining general insights about their gift giving experiences. We collected data in a medium sized city in the UK and aimed to record a variety of gift-giving behaviours. The high level of commitment required from informants for the study (i.e., questionnaires, completion of diaries for a month and a follow-up interview) made it necessary to gain access to a greater pool of participants, thus we employed different means of recruitment. Specifically, we used advertising by publishing a banner in the online local newspaper, distributed posters and leaflets in supermarkets, local business and other public spaces around the city; and requested help from university staff via email and one-to-one conversations. From the initial 48 expressions of interest in our research, 27 informants agreed to take part in the study, 19 women and 8 men, aged between 18 and 74, of diverse personal status (e.g., single, divorced, with(out) children) as illustrated in Table 1. Females are typically more involved in gift exchange than males (Otnes *et al*., 1993) which explains the greater number of women participating in this gift-giving study.

TABLE 1 HERE

Subsequently, we used *diaries* because they offer contemporaneous insights with little retrospection, thus enabling receivers to express their sensations, thoughts and emotions more accurately (Bolger *et al*., 2003). Furthermore, diaries have the potential to capture manifestations of stress and individual coping strategies (Clarkson and Hodgkinson, 2007) in an unobtrusive way (Alaszewski, 2006). The researchers supported participants' engagement in the on-line diary completion process, which also facilitated the development of joint rapport. This reflective process enabled the retrieval of additional failed gift receiving events, which were salient in our informants' memory, but that had happened prior to the diary-keeping period of this study. All informants completed their online diary over a four-week period producing 104 diary entries. Adopting Roster's (2006) notion of gift failure as an incident of gift giving that failed to meet the receiver's expectations, 30 of these were coded as failed events.

We then conducted 27 semi-structured *follow-up interviews* to further explore informants' lived experiences (Elliot, 1997) and to probe for a greater depth of understanding. Researchers also used information from diaries to formulate questions for follow-up interviews providing a rich data source about participants' daily activities (Jacelon and Imperio, 2005). The audio-recorded interviews lasted an average of 53 minutes and were transcribed with pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. We revisited some of these participants at a later stage to clarify details about their lived experiences. The multimethod, qualitative approach facilitated development of richer insights about lived gift-receiving experiences involving negative emotions. Interviews yielded 60 additional failed gift events.

Data from diaries and follow-up interviews were collected at two different seasons: over Christmas (13 participants), which is considered one of the most complex gift-giving occasions (Otnes et al., 1993); and over the summer (14 participants), to expand the range of gifting contexts to include, for example, birthdays and house-warmings. All informants completed the entire three-stage process (i.e., background questionnaire, four-week diary and follow-up interview).

As the unit of analysis was the gift-receiving experience, the *first step* of data analysis was to collate data from diaries and interviews, and organise them around each experience. Diary entries addressed specific gift events and we carefully reviewed interview transcripts identifying further details around each experience to capture a more complete picture for every event. This analytical approach was a reflective way to capture a broader picture of informants' gift experiences by connecting reports from the same experiences and relationships for each participant. The analysis focused on the meaning of the text and the connections between the different data sources (Maxwell, 2012). Neither data source was privileged in the analysis although the depth of insight was greater in interviews because the online diary stage recorded gift experiences in their spontaneous and natural context (Bolger et al., 2003) allowing informants to reflect on their experiences. Following the organisation of the data, the *second step* involved familiarisation with the total of 90 gift failures identified. At this stage, researchers eliminated seven events because they did not provide enough information about how informants dealt with the situation, so the data yielded 83 *usable* failed gift incidents. The *third step* involved coding using Saldaña's (2016) codes-to-theory approach to move from raw data to theorising about coping in the context of failed gift experiences. This was conducted by adopting an interpretive perspective to understand each experience and allowing new themes to emerge from the data (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988). This stage utilised a close and critical inspection of the text describing each gift receiving experience, as used by Ruth *et al.* (1999). Initial codes reflected emergent themes that were based on researchers' interpretation of the data (e.g., concealing thoughts about the gift, clandestine disposal).

During the *fourth step*, these codes were refined using insights from the literature in coping (e.g. Duhachek, 2005; Lazarus, 2006) and integrated into categories (e.g., covert disposition strategies, transparent face-to-face responses). In *step 5* we identified the three overarching coping approaches in our data, which are *concealing*, *disclosing* and *re-evaluating* the gift experience. Each of these approaches was defined and the three concepts were taken together and contributed to a conceptualisation of consumer coping in gift research. Table 2 shows further details on the audit trail analysis comprising the abovementioned steps.

TABLE 2 HERE

The codes-to-theory approach (Saldaña, 2016) was combined with a subsequent content analysis (Kassarjian, 1977; Neuendorf, 2017). We used the definitions from the previous stage (around *concealing*, *disclosing* and *re-evaluating*) to inform the coding of every failed gift experience and obtain information about frequencies for each coping approach. The combination of interpretivist and content analysis allows the understanding of the context where the experience occurs as well as to classify reports into descriptive categories (Gremler, 2004). The three researchers involved in the study undertook this coding exercise independently, undertaking 83 decisions each. From those 249 judgements, 13 were coded differently, resulting in lack of consensus and an overall inter-coder reliability of .89, which meets the acceptable .80 threshold suggested by Kassarjian (1977). Disagreements in the

researchers' interpretations were solved by extensive discussion and asking other researchers to suggest points for clarification and scrutinise the interpretations. Table 3 shows the breakdown of inter-coder reliability.

TABLE 3 HERE

Findings and discussion

We identified three distinctive ways in which receivers cope with the stress and discomfort associated with failed gifts, namely *concealing*, *disclosing* and *re-evaluating* the gift experience. As we will show, these coping strategies helped receivers to not only deal with their emotions, but also manage their relationship with the giver.

Concealing

Concealing was the most common approach adopted by receivers to deal with the emotional conflict derived from a failed gift situation, which was identified in 38 incidents. As in previous studies (Sherry *et al.*, 1992; 1993; Wooten and Wood, 2004), these participants opted for hiding their thoughts or disappointment from the giver.

Most concealing occasions derived from receivers' dislike of gifts received, which they saw as markers of givers' little understanding of their preferences. Informants described failed gifts as *"vaguely acceptable"* (Kim, diary, E11), *"random"*, *"of no use"*, *"a waste"* or *"couldn't think what possessed them [givers] to give it [the gift]"* (Carol, interview, E37). Unexpected gifts were also viewed as failures as they aroused feelings of "owing someone a gift" (Sherry *et al.*, 1993; 229), as Lauren shows: *"I don't want to get sucked into a cycle where I keep buying her [my colleague] things. [...] She bought me a bar of chocolate just for answering her phone"* (Lauren, diary, E17).

Beyond these, our data reveal that not receiving a gift when one was expected also represents a gift failure that required concealment. As Kim says in her diary *"I wasn't expecting anything specific but I expected at least a card* […] *I was a bit disappointed"* (Kim, diary, E22). When subsequently interviewed, Kim elaborates on her experience:

> *"Because I stayed round at my friend's the night before because we went out to a club in Manchester and so I woke up on my birthday and she knew it was my birthday but she didn't give me a present. [...] [I felt] a bit disappointed because I was a bit like expecting that whole morning to be just like... but then, oh well... I probably won't give her a present [the next time]"* {Kim, interview, E22}.

As well as concealing her disappointment, Kim envisions not giving her friend a gift on her next birthday, thus suggesting a lasting impact of this failed gift on her relationship with the "absent giver". This is particularly relevant as the giver may not be aware of the distance that she has just caused in the relationship with the "absent receiver". This absence of a gift as a reason for gift failure extends existing research to date, which defines gift failure around the characteristics of the gift, the relationship of those involved (Roster, 2006) and the different preferences between the giver and the receiver when selecting a gift (Baskin et al., 2014; Schiffman and Cohn, 2009).

Receivers who *concealed* their thoughts as a way of coping, consistently highlighted the importance of their relationships with the giver. Their desire to cherish those relationships shaped their response to the gift. John illustrates this situation:

"I got a present from my grandmother and grandfather, nicely wrapped. And it was a watch, which is a nice thing to get for your twenty-first birthday. And *I just didn't like it.*[1]"[…] I gave my grandad a big handshake and I hugged my grandma, and I showed it to everybody and just said *'it's really nice thank you very much'*. […] *I lied*. I didn't hide my feelings, *I lied*, which is maybe the same thing, I don't know. *But I lied. I hid my feelings*. […] I did what I did, because *I didn't want to affect our relationship by being seen to be ungrateful*, or very picky. You know, some people are never happy with what they get. 'Oh, I got this and didn't like it', you know. *Nobody likes those sorts of people*. […] *I probably overacted a bit.* It may be human nature to *overcompensate*, so the *stakes are higher if there are more folks to act in front of.* So, I maybe *went overboard slightly by saying I love it, I love it, I love it*" (John, interview, E85).

John engaged in active coping by hiding his emotions and exhibiting excessive displays of gift satisfaction, thus he thought about the best way to handle the event and control his emotions (Skinner *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore, by *concealing* his emotions, John avoided any damage to his relationship with his grandparents. This provides empirical support for the notion that emotional control can help in the development of emotional bonds (Ruth *et al.*, 1999). This excerpt further indicates that receivers control emotions and exaggerate their reactions to overcompensate for the perceived negativity of the situation, especially when they feel that neglecting to do this can threaten the relationship with the giver. Importantly for John, and also for James below (and several other participants), concealing their true feelings was often perceived to be the "right thing" to do in order to protect the givers' feelings. Thus, in face of the receivers' relationships with the givers and taking into account the givers' kindness, effort or other particularities (e.g., old age), lying to them was taken to constitute the moral course of action to follow. This speaks directly to care ethics and the moral importance it places on preserving relationships (Held, 2006):

"[My aunt] gave me something [a pair of trousers] and I know she couldn't afford it, she shouldn't have done this [...] *I just accepted it straight away* because *it was the right thing to do*. She did it out of kindness and *it would be stupid for me to say, to make any comment on why she did that* […] *you have to safeguard their feelings* [...] clothes is the worst gift for me […] When you receive a gift it is always something very positive. So, *I never ever, ever, ever show them that I don't like clothes*" (James, interview, E15).

Because participants are aware that their reactions are being assessed (Roster, 2006) and they believe they are being virtuous in hiding their discontentment, their *concealing* strategies involved a great deal of commitment (e.g., exaggerated smiling, trying the gift in front of the giver, hugging the giver), as Martha's account shows:

"The present was a DVD which I have already got. I actually felt acutely embarrassed because she [the mum of my son's friend] gave me that DVD in our living room and the copy of the DVD she was giving me, the copy of the DVD I was owning was actually on the table. So, I *was quite embarrassed* because my main thing was *I must hide the DVD right now so she can't see that something that she has thought about very carefully and is giving me is something that I've already got*. […] *'oh dear*

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[1] Emphasis added to highlight a specific point related to the discussion. Italics in informant's quotations will have this purpose throughout the findings and discussion section.

goodness me, how can I make sure she doesn't realise that I was saying thank you for a gift I already had?' Because that would have been quite, I don't know, offensive, mortifying, embarrassing. So, there was lots of sorts of *shuffling and putting the DVD under a sofa cushion* and then I was going *please let my children not come in the room right now saying 'oh Mommy look we've already got that'*. […] I did some very, *very quick thinking* and I went right okay focus on the positives, so I said *'oh my goodness that's really nice you shouldn't have'* […] When we were in the kitchen I wasn't worried anymore because the evidence had been hidden" (Martha, interview, E62).

As a coping strategy, Martha "concentrated on the ways the problem could be solved" and "on doing something about it" (Duhachek, 2005: p.45). Thus, while aware that she already had that DVD and that there was a risk that the giver would find out, she did some "*quick thinking*" to hide the gift from sight. Then, she was no longer worried. That Martha repeatedly said "*Oh my Goodness… you shouldn't have*" further suggests her stress and commitment to find a way to deal with the situation.

In many of these cases, informants only *concealed* their thoughts from the giver, whilst sharing their failed experiences with a third party, who helped them cope with the situation by listening and giving emotional support. This agrees with psychology scholarship on coping, which addresses the importance of seeking social support (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988). Sally's account illustrates this:

> "He [my husband] went to the local chemist to buy me a present and someone suggested to buy a collection of perfumes so he came in with a box which had got little tiny perfumes in and they were flowery perfumes so, *I put on a brave face and said 'how lovely'* and he never knew but I think there were about two that were reasonable out of about six and again *I thought 'why has he wasted money on those'* but I didn't. I managed to carry that one off and used a couple of them and then threw the others out after a reasonable interval. […] I just said, *'oh that's nice, I've not tried these before,' and I managed to carry that one off very well* and I *don't think he ever knew that it wasn't really suitable.* […] I *needed to get it out of my system*, I *didn't want to get it out of my system at home and upset my husband* so I *talked about it to my friends*. […] *You're better after talking to someone* because they say, 'oh yeah, my husband does things like that,' and *then you feel better* about it. You haven't just got the only one" (Sally, interview, E89).

Sally, sharing feelings about this failed gift experience with her friends to "*get it out of [her] system*", was using an instrumental coping strategy aimed at finding sympathy, understanding and getting moral support (Carver *et al*., 1989; Thoits, 1995). Sally's friends, who had experienced a similar situation, helped her to feel better and cope with an unpleasant incident (Skinner *et al*., 2003). While existing research mentioned only individual aspects of emotional control (Sherry *et al*., 1993), our data provide new insights by introducing the role of third parties assisting receivers in dealing with unsuccessful gifts.

Beyond the face-to-face reactions, the data show that, when *concealing,* receivers used *clandestine gift disposal* and *resignation* as two main disposition strategies to cope with a failed gift event. Previous research has identified that people store, hide, return, trade and re-gift unwanted gifts as a disposition choice (Roster and Amann, 2003) and this conveys their dissatisfaction with the gift (Roster, 2006). Our findings clarify that such disposal strategies procure psychological benefits for receivers by means of reducing the distress ensuing from

the failed gift incident. We discuss, below, *clandestine disposal*, when receivers discretely dispose of an unwanted gift; and *resignation*, when receivers keep the gift but are not happy with it.

We coined the term *clandestine gift disposal* to capture the hidden nature of this strategy where getting rid of the gift without the giver knowing is an effective coping strategy to deal with a stressful gift situation.

> "Somebody [my neighbour] got me some perfume last year, in a horrendous… well if the perfume was nice, it was like a little Aladdin's lamp, *but the perfume was sort of horrible* and I thought *'what am I doing with this?'* I am stuck with a sort of metal object that I *have to recycle with some horrible perfume* in it, so I managed to offload it to a charity shop […] I was very *slightly annoyed that I'd have to get rid of this* large bottle of perfume somehow because *I don't like to see waste* […] I wasn't overjoyed. I just thanked her in an easy going way, you don't want to pass on the disappointment […] You get no satisfaction in two of you feeling disappointed together" (Peter, interview, E34).

Clandestine gift disposal was also used in very complex gift receiving situations within strained relationships, in which coping was crucial. Mary illustrates this when receiving a gift from her ex-partner, shortly after she learnt that he had been cheating on her for years. Mary waited until she got home to dispose of the gift:

> "We had to go to a presentation evening at Lewis' [my son] college and he [my ex-partner] said, 'I've got something for you in the car' and we had to sit in this hallway and then he went off and he came back and said, 'I've left it in the car' and he came back with a plant. […] [I thought] You told me you've been having an affair for many years and then you bring this pot plant, for what reason? I'm on anti-depressants. […] I just said, *'oh thanks very much'*. And *took it off and then slung it in the bin*. In fact, I almost, if there had been a bin on the street, I would have put it in the bin on the street but there wasn't a bin on the street, so I *had to take it, had to drag its sorry arse back to the car and then ceremoniously threw it in the dustbin when I got home*" (Mary, interview, E78).

At another point in the interview, Mary provided more detail about this gift disposal:

> "When I got home, Lewis [my son] was with me and I said *that's going straight in the bin so I took the plant and I took it outside and I threw it in the dustbin* and *I was so incensed I went out and we'd got some big planters, I picked one up and I went bang*! [I broke it]" (Mary, interview, E78).

Mary dealt with the gift situation by thanking her son's father and accepting the gift, thus avoiding confrontation (Mick and Fournier, 1998). At the same time, Mary intentionally regulated her negative emotions and waited for the right time and place to express them (Skinner *et al*., 2003), that is, when she got home and could discard the gift by "*ceremoniously*" throwing it in the bin and venting her anger. When asked why she accepted the gift and waited to discard it covertly, Mary became anxious, as evidenced by the paused and unfinished sentences in her speech, and explained her worries:

> "Because I didn't want… and I'm still like it now, you know, really, I don't know whether I'm a bit… I have thought about it a lot and thought, you were a bit fright… I

wonder if *I am a bit frightened of what he could do*. Not that he would be aggressive or violent, but I just… I don't trust him at all. So, I wouldn't want him to start if he was to say anything to Lewis or, you know, start playing on Lewis and maybe *changing the relationship I've got with him* because I just really do not trust, wouldn't trust him at all. […] *I'm just really worried what he would do with Lewis and I honestly think that he would try and say that I was not a fit mother and I couldn't possibly look after his child*" (Mary, interview, E78).

The concerns about what Mary's cheating ex-partner would tell their son if she confronted him evinced that Mary's reaction was aimed at protecting available social resources (Skinner *et al.*, 2003), that is, Mary's relationship with her son.

A number of recipients who concealed that they were dissatisfied with the gift *resigned* themselves to keeping it. The gift that Carol received from her husband encapsulates the *resignation* disposition strategy:

"My husband bought me a zip-up coat once and they, I think he'd gone to, I'm quite tall and he'd gone to the petite section so the arms weren't quite that, the right length, you know, but I *didn't want to upset him so I kept it*. I kept it, and, you know, when I wore it, well, you know, if I didn't wear it, *I didn't wear it very often but he'd say, "Well, where's that coat?* I don't, I haven't seen you wearing that." And *I'd have to put it on*" (Carol, interview, E36).

Although reluctantly, Carol wore this ill-fitting coat to avoid upsetting her husband, thus resigning herself to the gift as a way of preserving her relationship with the giver. When people expect poor coping outcomes from confrontation, such as upsetting the giver when showing signs of disliking a gift, receivers can feel helpless and reduce their efforts to alter the source of their own distress (Carver *et al.*, 1989; Lazarus, 2006). This led Carol to patiently accept the situation as it was.

From this discussion, we can conclude that, when receivers cope with a failed gift event by *concealing*, they hide their real thoughts in their face-to-face interactions with the giver. The literature suggests that failure to display or use a gift and gift disposition are ways of receivers expressing displeasure, which can have a negative impact on the giver-receiver relationship (Roster, 2006). However, our data further show that receivers used *clandestine* and *resignation* disposition strategies as a concealed coping approach, allowing them to protect their relationship with the giver (or with a third party). From the psychology literature, *concealing* is underpinned by three main ways of coping: 1) rational thinking (Duhacheck, 2005) about ways to disguise their discontentment; 2) emotional regulation to protect social sources (Skinner *et al.*, 2003); and, 3) instrumental support by venting feelings to third parties (Carver *et al.*, 1989). This advances existing research by showing how existing ways of coping can be organised around a particular coping objective, which, in this case, is concealing dissatisfaction to preserve relationships. As we will show in the following sections, in other situations receivers adopt different means of coping with failed gift events.

Disclosing

The second coping strategy discussed by gift receivers, in 21 events, was *disclosing* their discontent to the giver, thus addressing the conflict actively. Disclosing was surprisingly common in a variety of relationships, especially romantic ones. In this situation, participants were open about their negative feelings towards the gift experience. In most cases, they

informed the giver that the gift was not as they expected and even shared with the giver how they disposed of the gift.

Receivers *disclosed* their thoughts mostly as a response to situations that failed to meet their expectations around the gift (e.g., not receiving exactly the gift they expected) and its delivery (e.g., receiving a late gift). Receivers expected givers to possess a deep understanding of their preferences. Givers' failure to meet their expectations drove some receivers to question the strength of the relationship, as evinced by Joan:

> "I only have my husband and my kids who are still very young. I totally rely on my husband to spoil me [for my birthday] […] I went to work and was like *'why isn't he giving me my gift yet?* It must be amazing' […] I asked him and he said, 'oh, it's coming, it's coming' and in the end, at night, 'okay, where's my gift? I want my gift now' and then he said, *'oh it was late so it's not going to come today'. And again, I said, 'what is it Tom, you've already ruined my day because there's no gift and I can only rely on you' [...] we had a massive relationship breakdown because I thought 'you know what, you're the only one I'm relying on. I have no other emotional support here' [...] we even saw a therapist. [...]* He told me that his gift was some golf lessons and a weekend away […] I kind of *hate that gift* and we haven't booked it yet. It's like *I don't really want to go […] if we are going to go, he needs to organise it himself and just take me.* Because he's all like 'oh we need to book the golf lessons' and I'm like *'whatever, you organise it'"* (Joan, interview, E83).

Failure to receive an appropriate and timely gift from someone she was expecting (given the strength of the relationship) caused Joan to be extremely upset and question the relationship.

This coping approach is in sharp contrast to the previously discussed category, in that receivers openly displayed their disappointment, anger or annoyance with the gift incident, which becomes a point of reference and a reminder of what the receiver expected from the giver in the future. Lesley offers an example of this:

> "One year my husband, on my birthday, he wasn't working which was fine and he bought me a book, which would have been fine, but he also bought himself a computer game at the same time and then he let slip that he had bought me the book with vouchers from his previous leaving present and it was only £6. Where he actually spent the money on his game. […] Then he *had to go and make up for that and bought me a really expensive dress to say sorry.* So, that was probably like… that was probably more annoyance than the worst gift but I was quite annoyed with him for not putting any time and effort into thinking what to get me. So, *he never buys me books anymore!* […] *I was very angry with him* because I think he hadn't realised. It was very early on when we had only maybe been together about a year or so and so I *don't think he realised at the time how important presents were for me* because for him presents aren't that important. […] *He's changed a lot. Now he gets it right. Now he always thinks about what to get*" (Lesley, interview, E25).

Lesley coped with the failed gift event by showing her husband how angry she was. In other words, she engaged in emotional venting as a way to deal with her negative emotions by letting them out (Carver *et al*., 1989). At the same time, by expressing her emotions (Skinner *et al*., 2003), Lesley guided her husband on how to choose gifts in future to nurture their relationship. Indeed, the absence of mutually understood guidelines reduces the chances that

the giver and receiver have similar expectations, leading to disparities and frustrations that may affect the relationship negatively (Wooten, 2000).

Furthermore, informants revealed that *disclosing* was essential for the relationship because the giver would realise if they pretended to like the gift, as Lucy shows:

> "When he [my boyfriend] bought me a book, I had already read it [...] I told him okay I have read this book. *Very polite but that is so*. And it was not that I didn't like the gift, even though I had already read the book […] *we kind of live together so it would be more difficult not to be honest, he would realise* […] *it is more important* for me that he, not changes his taste but he manages and *understands what I would like*. And make an *extra effort for me, to find something* in other locations *in the future* that I would really like" (Lucy, interview, E49).

By *disclosing* and telling her partner that she already had the book he gave her, Lucy engaged in problem-focused coping (Carver *et al*., 1989). That is, Lucy took action to resolve the tension of both the current gift receiving experience (in which she might have otherwise been caught being deceitful) and other future experiences (in which her boyfriend will have learned from the present situation). These findings provide novel insights into socialisation through gift receiving by showing how adult receivers aim to socialise the giver to assist the development of their relationship, as illustrated in Lesley and Lucy's experiences. This extends present understandings of gift socialisation, which tends to focus on the givers' perspective, and on the values and knowledge that givers want receivers to learn (Belk, 1979; Otnes *et al*. 1993; Otnes, *et al*., 1995).

Beyond the face-to-face responses to the gift-receiving occasion, recipients adopted one of three disposition strategies by *disclosing*, specifically *asking the giver to change the gift, re-gifting* and *rejecting* the gift. All of them aimed at guiding the giver in future gift behaviour. In most cases, recipients felt secure enough in their relationships to *ask the giver to change the gift*. Sarah illustrates this disposition strategy:

> "Every time my mum comes and visits us, she brings presents as well and it has happened. A jumper that she had bought in Aberdeen and she was excited and I was like, 'oh, *no I don't see me wearing these*,' and she was like, 'well, everyone uses jumpers,' and I was like, 'no, *I'm not a jumper person anymore* and I'm not taking this to work at all and I dress in a different way.' So, I *kind of explained to her and said, 'can you return and swap?* Is that okay or no?' and *she said*, 'Well, if I'm buying things for you or your sister, *I always keep the receipt so I always buy in places I know I can return or get money back.'* So yeah, it happened with my mum and *it was straightforward […] My lifestyle has changed and for her, because she's away, she doesn't see me probably as the same person and she keeps seeing me as the person she saw ten years ago* when I was still living with her. *So, it's sad* but not sad like disappointment, *it's just sad of the situation knowing that she's not around to see how I dress now and sad because obviously she doesn't know me that well anymore. […] Being straightforward might help for the next time* she needs to make a judgement of buying or choosing between A and B" (Sarah, interview, E59).

Asking the giver to change the gift reinforces Sarah's commitment to disclose her discontent and actively remove the stressors (Carver *et al*., 1989). That is, Sarah directly (1) stated that she did not wear jumpers anymore, (2) persevered in her opinion when her mum tried to convince Sarah that "*everyone uses jumpers*" and (3) asked her mother to change the gift.

Although returning a gift is often considered unacceptable, it can also be seen as practical, rational and a sign of honesty (Sherry *et al.*, 1992) or, as in this case, a successful way to cope with a failed gift, which "*might help for the next time*" the giver selects a gift.

Other participants opted to openly re-gift the gift received. In so doing, they informed givers of their future expectations, as evidenced by Ruth:

> "My husband bought me a coffee machine for Christmas, it was a great machine but *it wasn't quite the one I wanted*. […] I *felt really bad* having to tell him but I thought it was an expensive thing and if I wasn't going to use it, *it would be obvious having it on the kitchen counter for years and resentfully looking at it*. […] *Since then, we buy gifts differently so it has actually altered our gift giving experience*, *now he always basically says 'tell me what you want', I will tell him and he will either buy it or I will buy it for myself and that actually makes me feel a lot happier*. […] We used it [the coffee machine] for quite a while and then *gave it to my parents and they bought me the one I wanted* […] I *now have the Nespresso machine that I really wanted, I love it, it's so much better*" (Ruth, interview, E6).

The *rejection of the gift* was the final disposition strategy used by those receivers who coped by *disclosing*. Peter's excerpt below illustrates this strategy:

> "My mother thought she would make me a jumper [as a gift**]**. […] She'd only started half of it at Christmas and she brought it out of the cupboard and it was a chunky one, […] it wasn't quite appropriate and the quality of knitting wasn't high quality either. […] *how I'm going to communicate this without upsetting [her] because I feel upset if she's upset* […] I told her that *it wasn't the fashion* and that I couldn't, I wouldn't, *because it wasn't the fashion*, *I wouldn't be wearing it* […] *She took it fine*. She *didn't complain at all* or try and persuade me that it was the fashion […] this was a *sensitive area that required a little bit more thought*. *It was also helpful having Angela [my daughter] there because it wasn't just a dynamic of two of us*. We'd got my daughter there which *I found comforting* and I find her loving so *I felt comfortable enough to say what I thought* and if it went wrong at least I would have Angela to talk to about it" (Peter, interview, E35).

It seems that Peter used rational thinking, thus analysing the problem before taking any action (Duhachek, 2005) as evidenced by his reflections on "*how I'm going to communicate this without upsetting [her]*" and thinking that the situation "*required a little bit more thought*". Although gift rejection as a disposition strategy can affect relationships (Sherry, 1983; Sherry *et al.*, 1993), by thinking carefully about how to approach the situation, Peter rejected the gift without upsetting his mum, who "*took it fine*" and "*didn't complain at all*". Thus, he protected the relationship. Furthermore, he engaged in comfort-seeking coping by relying on the understanding and support of his daughter (Skinner *et al.*, 2003).

Whilst most of these receivers were quite direct with the giver, in some cases *disclosing* was part of a complex coping process involving different coping strategies. This was the case for Joan, who received a vacuum cleaner as a birthday gift from her husband in front of all her friends:

> "My husband *gave me a Hoover*. […] I *was angry* and I was *ashamed* because everybody else was seeing that. […] I just had a *massive fake smile* on. You know, and *laughed with the jokes* that were being made but, really, I was already six-months

pregnant, so I was in a stage where I didn't care much. I was like 'really?' It was a mixture of *trying to be nice because it was my party*, but at the same time with the hormones and everything, I *could have cried* and maybe if he would have gave it just to me I wouldn't have cried. I think I *would have hit him with the Hoover* […] [At the time] *I tried moving onto another present or eating or talking about something else. Not bothering too much about it* and then just *leaving it to talk to him one-to-one* […] The only reason why *I tried not to dwell too much on it* was so I wouldn't get more upset about it, or *visibly upset about it and ruined the rest of the evening"* (Joan, interview, E81).

Initially, Joan dealt with the stress of this situation by engaging in emotional control (Duhachek, 2005), as evidenced by her reaction where she masked her anger with a "*massive fake smile*" and "*laughed with the jokes*" while she was "*trying to be nice*" because she did not want to "*ruin the night*". At the same time, to cope with the shame and anger, and to avoid becoming more upset, Joan took her mind off the gift issue by moving to another present, eating and talking. This suggests she used behavioural disengagement as a coping strategy to avoid thinking about the gift because she felt helpless (Carver *et al*., 1989). Once the party was over and she was alone with her husband, Joan openly expressed her emotions, regulating her feelings at a perceived appropriate time and place (Skinner *et al*., 2003). Then she disposed of the Hoover as an active coping strategy aimed at removing the source of stress (Carver *et al*., 1989):

"[After the party] I told him [my husband] 'what is this, Tom? What were you thinking?' and he tried to argue, like 'I told you we needed a Hoover. I thought you wanted one?' So, he didn't make it any better […] I never liked it [the Hoover]. So it *didn't last long*. I don't remember what happened to it. But *I remember at the first opportunity I went 'screw that!'* […] I think *we gave it to charity or whatever*. I don't care!" (Joan, interview, E81).

Sometime after the incident, Joan talked about the experience with her friends, which has by then become an amusing story to share: "Since then, I have spoken with friends who were at the party. 'Oh my God, *remember when Nick gave me that stupid Hoover*', so *everyone knows about the Hoover incident now*" (Joan, interview). Venting feelings and searching for understanding further assisted Joan to cope (Duhachek, 2005) with an unpleasant memory.

Whereas previous research on failed gifts has found that displaying honesty is more difficult for receivers in that the giver could be hurt (Roster and Amann, 2003), our findings reveal that in some circumstances *disclosing* may help receivers to protect their relationships and deal with the negative emotions they experience. Receivers' coping by *disclosure* involved: 1) expressing their negative emotions, 2) concentrating on problem solving (Carver et al., 1989), and 3) using rational thinking to analyse the situation objectively (Duhacheck, 2005). As illustrated by Joan, this behaviour will often be part of a complex coping process, which integrates different coping strategies with a common aim of protecting relationships.

Re-evaluating the gift experience

The third coping response that emerged from our data is *re-evaluating* the gift experience, meaning that receivers reinterpret their gift event and re-formulate it as better than initially experienced. This can follow any of the previous coping responses (typically concealing) and is distinct from them in that receivers find a justification for the failed gift that enables them to change their attitudes toward the gift (and giver). This is similar to what Ruth et al. (1999)

call "psychological reframing" (p. 397) and represents an attempt from receivers to resolve their internal emotional conflict, which is potentially damaging for their relationships with givers. When receivers engage in an attitude change, they reduce dissonance and reformulate the gift experience as more satisfactory than initially felt to resolve the psychological discomfort they feel (Festinger, 1957). Informants adopted this approach in 24 incidents.

Receivers reformulated the failed gift experiences mostly by focusing on the positive aspects of the gift event (e.g., recognising the thought or effort invested in the gift) and empathising with the gift giving constraints (e.g., lack of money or time) on givers. Receivers engaged in positive thinking as a coping mechanism to reduce dissonance (Carver *et al*., 1989) and, thus, reconstructed the source of distress (Carver *et al*., 1989; Duhachek, 2005). For example, Robert ended up feeling amused about a prank gift, which he did not initially like:

> *"I once got a prank gift from some cousins of mine that I didn't like. [...] It was something silly and not very special but we were young. I was young. I was young but I still thought it was a pretty, not a great gift but it was funny and it was probably spontaneous. It was thoughtful you know. They got me something. They remembered and I did appreciate all those things"* (Robert, interview, E44).

In a similar vein, Sally, below, coped with disliked gifts from her close family by downplaying the importance of these gifts in comparison to that of her family. Thus, despite thinking that some of these are "*horrible*", Sally sees them as "special":

> "I have got a horrible little, like a pillbox. It's pink and glittery. It sits on the windowsill. Well, Liam *[my grandson]* chose that. I *would never, in a month of Sundays, buy anything like that myself*, but *because Liam chose it, it sits there in a private special place*, you see. And I've got a, a pottery robin which Ken [*my son*] *bought* me when he was about seven from a fair, and again, *not something I would ever buy myself* but because Ken bought it. Although it's really tat [looks cheap], *because he bought it, it's still there*. You know, it sits there. It's special. [...] Although you know *they love you*, it's a demonstration, a *special demonstration of it*, and they've thought of you in this world where people say that young people don't think of older people" (Sally, interview, E53).

Sally's efforts to empathise with the givers' intentions, i.e., her son and grandson wishing to express love, helped Sally to see those otherwise unwanted gifts as meaningful items (Lazarus, 2006).

Sarah, below, provides another example of gift re-evaluation. Having been offered a gift that she utterly disliked by her sister-in-law, Sarah first concealed her discontentment. However, with time and the help of her son, she was able to find an enjoyable use for the gift, which threw a different light on the experience:

> "I get this really *religious angel* [from my sister in-law] but then you twist the base and it shines with a rainbow colour and *it wasn't me at all. So I didn't know exactly how to react* because I think I was a little bit speechless *but if my son loves something,* and he saw shining so we start[ed] playing straight away *so I think, I'm pretty sure I disguised the situation because I turned it to a toy and a funny thing. I left it around during the Christmas phase* because it was a light, not a disco light but a light so *I left it open until the battery died completely. [...] H*e *[my son] didn't understand that it was an angel* and the meaning so for him it was just a shiny light and *I was happy*

because there was no connotation and meaning with religion. [...] My son saw there was a light shining and a rainbow, so I think he helped minimise the impact" (Sarah, interview, E60).

This *re-evaluation* coping strategy is what Tobin *et al*. (1989) calls cognitive restructuring. Sarah looked at the situation in a different way to transform an unwelcome religious symbol into a desired toy for her son. Sarah's reconstruction of this experience allowed her to alleviate the tension (Thoits, 1995) therein.

Receivers also *re-framed* the gift experience by diverting their attention from the failed gift incident. This is what Ruth did to cope with the embarrassment of receiving a gift that she did not reciprocate:

"I was […] a bit embarrassed as I had not got a gift for this person. […] We went out for a Christmas drink in a beautiful hotel in Guernsey. *We had a glass of champagne and chatted for an hour non-stop!* She gave me the gift as soon as we met, and I was very happy, but *we didn't discuss it [the gift] much as we had so many other things to talk about"* (Ruth, diary, E5).

This represents a classic coping strategy where individuals chose to deal with a stressful situation by "denying" it (Lazarus, 1993), whilst engaging in other pleasurable activities (Skinner *et al*., 2003). In this case, this involved chatting with the giver, which helped to minimise the importance of the incident.

Receivers' accounts reflect different ways in which they *re-evaluate* the gift event. Overall, focusing on the positive aspects of the gifts, restructuring their perceptions of the situation or distracting their attention from the source of distress enabled receivers to maintain a positive interaction with the giver. Rose illustrates this:

"I received some pyjamas [from my partner's mum] that were really nice but completely the wrong size for me […] at the time, I was a bit like *'oh do they think I'm this big'? [...] I think she [my partner's mum] would have been really mortified* if I'd have gone down and said, *'oh they are the wrong size and don't fit me'*. I think she would have been more *upset at herself at getting the wrong size* and I think she'd be more *upset that she's upset me* and I'm not upset; I'm not bothered by it. Therefore*, I'm not going to make you worried that you've bought the wrong size* or anything like that. You just think*, 'no it's fine they are lovely pyjamas and I'll make use of them when I can'"* (Rose, interview, E75).

Rose coped with the situation by focusing on the positive aspects of the experience (Carver *et al*., 1989), that, "*they are lovely pyjamas*". This coping strategy aimed to protect the feelings of her partner's mum and addressed the coping goal of maintaining satisfying relationships with others (Folkman, 1984).

Our findings clearly indicate that receivers *re-evaluated* the gift experience and adjusted their emotional and cognitive responses, as well as disposition strategies to cope with failed gift incidents. *Re-evaluating* the experience as a coping approach to gift failure involved three key ways of coping, which allowed receivers to adjust their preferences to the options available. These include positive thinking (Carver *et al*., 1989), cognitive restructuring (Tobin *et al*., 1989) and distraction (Skinner *et al*., 2003). The identification of the specific approaches that help receivers to re-evaluate the failed gift experience extends existing

understanding of consumer coping, by showing how these approaches represent receivers' attempts to preserve their relationships with givers and their own well-being.

Conceptualisation of coping in gift failure

Based on participants' reports, this research presents a framework including *concealing*, *disclosing* and *re-evaluating* the gift experience as three different ways used by receivers to cope with failed gift events. While consumer literature suggests that when facing gift failure receivers often hide their feelings and, less commonly, display honesty (Sherry *et al*., 1992; Roster and Amann, 2003), our findings illuminate these strategies and the receivers' motivations therein, and identify other ways of coping including the *re-evaluation* of the experience.

Throughout the data, receivers reported a number of reasons for gift failure and engaged in particular face-to-face responses and disposal strategies to cope with the negativity of gift failure that allowed them to manage their relationship with the giver. As identified above, receivers' coping approaches speak to specific coping strategies from the psychology literature (e.g. Lazarus, 2006; Skinner et al., 2003). *Table 4* provides a summary of the three coping categories employed by gift receivers to cope with the negativity of unsuccessful gift events including the related (1) relationship objectives, (2) ways of coping, (3) face-to-face responses and (4) gift disposition strategies.

TABLE 4 HERE

Conclusion and implications

The present paper introduces coping with failed gift experiences as an important mechanism for receivers to deal with these experiences in ways that preserve their relationship with givers. In so doing, it proposes a framework of coping in the context of failed gift experiences and highlights the active role of gift receivers therein. For this, we use insights from the coping literature (Carver *et al*., 1989; Duhachek, 2005; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Skinner *et al*., 2003). Our findings contribute to consumer research scholarship in a number of ways.

Firstly, we provide a novel and rounded understanding of coping in the context of failed gift events. We capture this in a framework, involving three coping strategies employed by gift recipients to manage the emotions associated with failed gifts and their relationships with givers, namely *concealing*, *disclosing* and *re-evaluating* the gift event. This work extends current understanding in gift giving in that it illuminates the lasting emotional conflicts of dealing with a failed gift from the receivers' perspective. It shows that receivers actively engage in cognitive, emotional and behavioural effort to forge a response to the failed gift occasion, which preserves relevant relationships and reduces their dissonance.

In addition, our findings suggest the absence of a gift when this was expected or the receipt of an unexpected gift as new reasons for gift failure. Furthermore, we suggest that, by *concealing,* receivers hide their real thoughts about the gift experience and engage in covert disposition strategies, including *clandestine* or *resigned* gift disposition, in order to avoid hurting givers' feelings and affecting the giver-receiver relationship. Importantly, our findings reveal that, in some cases, deceiving (or concealing) springs from a receiver's perceived moral obligation that it is the "right thing to do", in order to protect relationships. This focus on the moral importance of caring for relationships (Held, 2007) is relevant because it sheds a different light onto what was previously perceived as receivers' lack of

honesty (e.g., Roster and Amann, 2003). This extends current scholarship by suggesting the importance of attending to the receivers' ethical considerations when responding to gift giving.

Receivers also cope with failed gifts by *disclosing* how they feel about the gift and employing different disposal strategies (hinting to the giver about their dissatisfaction, changing or rejecting the gift). *Disclosing* was a frequent coping approach in our data, mainly in romantic relationships. This challenges the view that showing disappointment with the gift is often a taboo for gift receivers (Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2005). Furthermore, this study shows that receivers' direct response to gift failure may aim to instruct the givers on receivers' gift expectations for the future. In contrast, by *re-evaluating the gift event*, receivers downplay the importance of the gift in comparison to the relationship and decide to *keep* the gift. The identification of this strategy advances previous literature by identifying the *re-evaluation* of the gift event as a self-reliant way to deal with the situation.

This framework also contributes to the coping literature (Carver *et al*., 1989; Duhachek, 2005; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Skinner *et al*., 2003) by: 1) identifying different ways of coping proposed in psychology literature in the context of gift-giving; 2) showing how receivers' coping mechanisms are typically geared towards protecting relevant relationships; and 3) shedding light onto a new manner of combining existing ways of coping in the literature by identifying complex gift receiving situations. Finally, our findings contribute to existing gift research by demonstrating that recipients treat gift receiving as an experience that needs to be managed proactively to preserve their relationships with givers, in a similar way that the literature recognises that givers do (Weinberger and Wallendorf, 2012). Hence, receivers are not merely interpreters of givers' motivations to give. Equally, they do not simply passively assess whether such gifts strengthen, weaken or confirm the relationship (Ruth *et al.*, 1999). As our findings elucidate, receivers actively employ coping strategies that both reduce their emotional conflict and preserve (or otherwise manage) their bonds with the givers in situations where these are threatened by gift failure. This goes beyond confirming that the gifts influence the giver-receiver relationship (Ruth et al., 1999), and that receivers may mask disappointment to manage relationships (Roster and Amann, 2003).

Practical implications

These findings have important implications for practice. Firstly, retailers could minimise *gift failure* by recommending and promoting gifts that emphasise aspects of the giver-receiver relationship in such a way that receivers are encouraged to *re-evaluate* the gift experience in favour of the relationship while downplaying the importance of the gift. This could be enacted by normalising the use of labels attached to the wrapping with messages emphasising the importance of the shared relationship (e.g., "To the best Mum in the world, from your daughter Poppy, xx"). By so doing, the relationship would be made salient in the receiver's mind before unwrapping the gift, thus predisposing the receiver to value the giver over the gift. Secondly, drawing and expanding Sherry *et al*. (1993, p. 241), retailers could offer online and in-store gift "clinics" to advise on suitable gifts for different relationships and events, thus reducing the number of gift failures. Outlets could also encourage consumers to share their preferences on retailers' wish lists (similar to Amazon Wish List) accessible to nominated individuals chosen by consumers, so that givers would be better informed about receivers' preferences. In addition, marketers could target receivers who *disclose* their dissatisfaction with the gift differently by facilitating exchanges and use the opportunity to upsell and suggest complementary offerings. Concretely, this could take the form of making

sure that shop-floor staff are specifically trained to treat gift returns with sensitivity and attention to finding a replacement that helps heal any relationship damage.

We also suggest that marketing communication themes could be developed aimed at normalising re-gifting and returning gifts, so that *concealers* would not feel anxious about the potential impact of disposal on their relationships. In a similar vein, communication appeals could address unwanted gift donations to charities. This would reduce receivers' potential guilt in disposing of gifts by replacing dissonance with a sense of "doing the right thing". Charity shops and online marketplaces such as eBay and Gumtree already offer a way to dispose of unwanted gifts. For those concealers wedded to clandestine disposal, charity organisations could be especially relevant in providing discrete ways for disposal. This would have a positive impact on society by reducing the waste of unwanted gifts that could be utilised by charities, who currently only receive about 40% of unwanted gifts (Cruz-Cárdenas *et al.* 2015).

Limitations and future research

In this study, we did not provide informants with prompts based on existing literature on coping. Informants were encouraged to describe the gift experiences in their own terms, meaning that we may have missed insights about how coping assists the understanding of failed gifts. We mitigated this limitation by using multiple data collection methods involving diaries and interviews, in order to obtain rich accounts of failed experiences. Our study emphasises understanding rather than generalisation of findings and the methodology used was appropriate to generate in-depth insights within this relatively small sample. Further research should use larger samples to compare between the coping categories identified in this manuscript.

It would be interesting in the future to examine how recipients decide with which givers they *conceal*, *disclose* or *re-evaluate* the gift experience. Future research could also look at the face-to-face and disposition coping strategies from the givers' perspective and compare these in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, an avenue that deserves further attention is the role of receivers' individual differences (e.g., coping styles) in relation to their emotional and cognitive appraisals as well as their coping strategies to deal with failed gift receiving. Also, the prosocial and moral aspects of coping by engaging in strategies that protect the giver-receiver relationship could shed new light on the phenomenon. Finally, as gift giving is often a proxy for relationship interaction, it would be interesting to research how our proposed framework could be extended to other social situations.

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Table 1: Sample profile

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE	HOUSEHOLD SIZE (No members)	PERSONAL STATUS
RUTH	Female	25-34	3	Married, has a child
JOHN	Male	35-44	1	Single, lives on his own
ANNE	Female	18-24	3	Single, only child, lives with her parents
EVE	Female	35-44	3	Single mum, has two children
AGNES	Female	18-24	3	Single, only child, lives with her parents
LESLEY	Female	35-44	2	Married with no children
EMMA	Female	18-24	4	Single, living with flatmates
MARY	Female	45-54	3	In a relationship, has a child
ROSE	Female	18-24	2	In a relationship, expecting a child
SUSAN	Female	18-24	7	In a relationship, lives with flatmates
MARTHA	Female	35-44	4	Married, has two young children
PETER	Male	45-54	1.5	Divorced, has a child (living with Peter's ex-wife)
KIM	Female	18-24	5	Single, lives with flatmates
CAROL	Female	55-64	2	Married, has two children and four grandchildren
JAMES	Male	25-34	5	Single, living with flatmates
SARAH	Female	35-44	3	Married, has a child
JOAN	Female	25-34	4	Married, has two children
ROBERT	Male	25-34	2	In a relationship with no children
PAUL	Male	55-64	3	Married, has a child
LUCY	Female	25-34	2	In a relationship with no children
PENNY	Female	35-44	2	Married, expecting a child
BRIAN	Male	25-34	2	In a relationship with no children
SALLY	Female	65-74	2	Married, has two children and two grandchildren
LEO	Male	35-44	1	In a relationship, with no children
LAUREN	Female	55-64	2	Married with no children
AMY	Female	35-44	3	Married, has a child
ANTHONY	Male	25-34	3	Married, has a child

Table 2: Data Structure and analysis process (codes to theory approach[2])

EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS	THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS	
Gift shows little understanding of receivers' preferences	Reasons for gift failure reflect little knowledge of the receiver	**Concealing** (Deals with the conflict of gift failure by hiding feelings).
Absence of a gift		
Feeling gift indebtedness		
Concealing thoughts about the gift	Hiding feelings in face-to-face responses	
Exaggerating displays of satisfaction		
Resignation by keeping the gift	Covert disposition strategies	
Clandestine disposal		
Avoid hurting givers' feelings	Keep the relationship by protecting givers' feelings	
Not receiving the gift expected	Reasons for gift failure around receivers' high expectations	**Disclosing** (Addresses the conflict of gift failure by showing the giver what is wrong about the gift).
Receiving the gift late		
Expressing emotions and voicing what does not work with the gift	Transparent face to face responses	
Asking the giver to change the gift	Disposition strategies assisting the giver about what to buy	
Re-gifting with the givers' knowledge		
Rejecting the gift		
Educate the giver about how important gifts are for the relationship	Developing relationships by socialisation	
Absence of a gift	Diverse reasons for gift failure	**Re-Evaluating** (Receivers deal with the conflict of gift failure by re-interpreting the gift and identifying the aspects that make them feel positive about the gift experience. Receivers' thoughts about the gift experience change after the re-evaluation).
Receiving a gift that does not match receivers' preferences		
Receiving a gift unexpectedly		
Initial struggle to hide feelings but adjusting preferences and finding justification to reconstruct the gift experience satisfactorily	Disclose a genuine and positive face to face response	
Keep the gift as if they always liked it	Gift disposition as that of a liked gift	
The receiver ends up being satisfied with the gift because of the relationship with the giver	The relationship more important than the gift itself	

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[2] Streamlined codes-to-theory is an inductive approach to move from raw data to theory (Saldaña, 2016).

Table 3: Inter-coder Reliability Scores

	Coders 1 and 2			Coders 1 and 3			Coders 2 and 3		
	%	N agree / N*	Disagree Experience code	%	N agree / N*	Disagree Experience code	%	N agree / N*	Disagree Experience code
Concealing	87%	33/38	E9, E17, E39, E71, E77	87%	33/38	E9, E17, E32, E39, E41	34/38	89%	E32, E41, E71, E77
Disclosing	100%	21/21	-	95%	20/21	E50	20/21	95%	E50
Re-evaluating	83%	20/24	E3, E16, E24, E28	87%	21/24	E3, E5, E48	19/24	79%	E5, E16, E24, E28, E48
OVERALL % of agreement	**89%**	74/83	-	**89%**	74/83	-	73/83	**88%**	-

* Number of agreements (N agree) divided by the number of judgements (N)

Table 4: Coping and relationship management through gift receiving

COPING CATEGORIES	1. RELATIONSHIP OBJECTIVE	2. UNDERLYING WAYS OF COPING	3. FACE-TO-FACE RESPONSE	4. GIFT DISPOSITION STRATEGIES
Concealing	-Avoid hurting giver's feelings, which can have a negative impact on the relationship	-Protect available social resources by using rational thinking and emotional regulation -Use available social sources by emotional venting to third parties and instrumental support	-Emphasis on thanking the giver for the gift and hiding feelings	-Resignation by keeping the gift anyway -Clandestine disposal by changing the gift without the giver knowing
Disclosing	-Guiding the gift giver to make the giver aware of the satisfaction with the gift and expectations for the future that can assist relationship development	-Protect social resources by: ·Expressing emotions ·Concentrating on solving the problem ·Using rational thinking to analyse the situation objectively and avoid the problem in the future	-Expressing emotions and voicing what does not work with the gift	-Assisting the giver about what to buy by: ·Asking the giver to change the gift ·Re-gifting with the giver's knowledge ·Rejecting the gift
Re-evaluating the gift event	-Downplay the importance of the gift over the relationship, which is what matters	-Adjust the preferences to the options available (positive thinking, cognitive restructuring, distraction)	-Initial struggle to hide feelings but reconstructing the gift experience satisfactorily	-Keep the gift as if they like it