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Self-Gifting in Interdependent Cultures: Lonely Mothers and Self-Compassion

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Self-Gifting in Interdependent Cultures: Lonely Mothers and Self-Compassion

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ABSTRACT

Self-gifting consumer behavior, due to its nature of focus on self, its compatibility with interdependent cultures had always been questioned. Still, self-gifting is now prevalent in many interdependent cultures. This paper illuminates that self-gifting plays an important role of self-compassion for Japanese mothers feeling isolated from their family members.

As demonstrated in its name and characteristics, one of the predominant aspects of self-gift consumer behavior (SGCB) is the focus on self. Hence, Mick and DeMoss (1990a) suggested that SGCB may depend on an individually-centered view of self, and questioned its existence in cultures dominant with a group-centered view of self. Thus, the investigation of SGCB in non-Western cultures has become to be one of the research agendas in the self-gift research. However, only very recently, the initiatives of exploring SGCB in the Eastern cultures have begun (e.g., Joy et al. 2006; Suzuki 2011; Tynan et al. 2010). Using the data gathered from the Japanese mothers on their SGCB, we explore how self-gifts play a role in interdependent cultures.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Self-Gifting Consumer Behavior (SGCB)

Consuming goods or services for oneself has been recognized as a common consumer behavior in the Western cultures and is noted by multiple consumer behavior researchers (e.g., Levy 1982). Mick and DeMoss were the forerunners in the self-gift research and built its theoretical foundation. They conceptualized self-gifts as “personally symbolic self-communication through special indulgences that tend to be premeditated and highly context bound” (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, p. 328). Self-gifts can be “products, services, or experiences and that they are partly differentiated from other personal acquisitions by their situational and motivational contexts” (Mick and DeMoss 1990b, p. 6). They are distinguished from other personal acquisitions partly on their relationship with self which may be among the strongest of relationships involving the self and personal acquisitions.

Incompatibility of Self-Gifting in Interdependent Cultures

SGCB’s focus on self questions the compatibility of such behavior in interdependent cultures including Japan. North Americans views the self as autonomous and independent. It motivates people to identify positively valued internal attributes of the self. In contrast, Japanese views the self as interdependent with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The normative imperative is to maintain this interdependence among individuals. The self becomes most meaningful and complete when it is cast in the appropriate social relationship (Lebra 1976). People are motivated to find a way to fit in with others. Furthermore, in Japanese culture, acting in accord with personal opinions is regarded as childish (Hamaguchi, Kumon and Creighton 1985). Self-assertion is not viewed as being authentic, but instead as being immature (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Japanese culture emphasizes self-discipline (Heine et al. 1999) and places importance on restraining the internal attributes that could potentially interfere with the cohesion of the group (Hamaguchi et al. 1985).

The above discussions suggest that self-directed behavior such as SGCB may not be appropriate in the Japanese culture. The evidence from newspaper article supports this proposition. In 1990, To-

kyo Yomiuri Shimbun, a newspaper with largest circulation in Japan, has given a critical comment towards self-rewarding: “I don’t like this word [self-reward] because there’s a sense of untruthfulness in it. [...] Isn’t a ‘reward’ something that we should be receiving from ‘others’?” (November 21, 1990). However, with time, SGCB gained legitimacy and today, SGCB is a common practice in Japan (Suzuki 2011). It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer why SGCB was accepted in Japan. Instead, we aim to explore what important roles self-gifts play for Japanese consumers.

Self-Compassion

This paper argues that, for Japanese mothers, self-gifting is a way to show self-compassion. Self-compassion is defined as responding to suffering or personal failure with self-kindness rather than self-judgment. It involves showing oneself support and warmth in the face of setbacks and disappointments (Neff 2003; Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude 2007).

The origins of self-compassion concept is Eastern philosophical thought, Buddhism in particular (Neff 2003). Buddhism psychology believes that it is essential to feel compassion for oneself as it is for others. It acknowledges that suffering, failure, and inadequacies are part of the common human experience; all humans are imperfect and make mistakes. Thus, all people including oneself are worthy of compassion.

Self-gifting appears to help Japanese mothers accept their sufferings, failures, and inadequacies and to maintain well-being. The role of self-gifting as self-compassion is particularly important for Japanese mothers because there is not much recognitions and complimenting behaviors from the family members (Barnlund and Araki 1985; Matsuura 2004). Japanese don’t offer compliments to their family members who are *uchi* (inside) versus *soto* (outside) of their collective self (Bachnik 1994). Just as self-appraisal is not seen as appropriate in the Japanese society, appraising family members—who are part of themselves—is not culturally appropriate. However, motherhood entails many hardships, and many mothers hope to be acknowledged and appreciated. We illustrate that Japanese mothers are self-gifting to be kind to themselves, to feel that they’re not isolated but are part of the larger human experience, and to hold their painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness—self-compassion (Neff 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological interviewing (Schouten 1991; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Suzuki and Akutsu 2012; Suzuki et al. 2016). This research method allows us to delve into the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of informants and to capture the social and situational contexts of those phenomena. In-depth interviews with ten Japanese mothers were conducted. To recruit appropriate informants, we asked their self-gifting experience within past one year and what they had bought. We selected ten informants based on the age (our sample was composed of various age groups from late twenties to fifties) and the richness of SGCB (see Table 1 for the summary of informant profiles). The long-interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were audiotaped. All were semi-structured; questions included their most memorable self-gifting experiences, why they bought self-gifts, how they felt when they bought self-gifts, and the meanings of self-gifts for their self. The informants were paid 8,000 yen (about \$80) for their participation. The

TABLE 1. Summary Profile of the Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Self-gift	Occupation	Marital Status	Family Composition
Aya	55	Shoes	Care worker	Divorced	Two sons (both above 20)
Hiroko	55	Jewelry	Housewife	Married	Husband, two sons (above 20), mother-in-Law (age 90)
Keiko	49	Harley-Davidson	Housewife	Widowed	Two sons (both above 20)
Kumi	30	Dress	Part-time job	Married	Husband, one daughter (age 3)
Nana	49	Jewelry	Housewife	Married	Husband, one son (age 17)
Noe	35	Hair accessories	Secretary	Single	One daughter (age 4), parents, grandfather (age 100)
Ryoko	29	Jewelry	Housewife	Married	Husband, one son (age 5) and one daughter (age 3)
Saki	28	Handbag	Sales (currently on childcare leave)	Married	Husband, one son (age 1)
Tomoe	44	Aroma diffuser	Housewife	Married	Husband, three sons (age 16, 14, 10)
Yumi	46	Bag	Office worker	Divorced	One daughter (age 10)

data collection process took place from April to June, 2017. All interviews were conducted in the local language (Japanese). Data used in this paper is a part of the large project on Japanese women's SGC.

We analyzed the text, moving from a discussion of the part to the whole (Thompson et al. 1989). We discussed each theme extensively before reaching a consensus, seeking to be open to possibilities afforded by the text (Thompson and Tambyah 1999).

FINDINGS

Cultural Disdain for the Role of Mother

Hiroko. They—raising children or nursing the elderly—may not be huge achievements. But, there are small parts where I want to be complimented.

This theme highlights the cultural meanings of motherhood in Japan expressed by our informants. In Japan, traditionally, raising children and nursing the elderly were women's normal jobs. It was natural for women to retire from work and assume the social life of full-time housewife upon marriage (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Once she has children, she was to pursue full-time motherhood:

Saki. Now I have a child, so I should be only doing child-raising...

Husbands often think that it's normal for wives to do housekeeping and child-raising:

Ryoko. My husband thinks it's natural that I raise kids. [...] He also thinks that if I'm not going to work outside, then it's natural that I do housekeeping.

Furthermore, housekeeping jobs are considered as a free service:

Ryoko. My husband has allowance; but I don't. [...]

Interviewer. [Housewives] should receive allowance too (*laughs*).

Ryoko. It would be nice (*laughs*). I really think so. I'm working so hard with the housekeeping every day.

This manifestation is also expressed by Keiko, who describes that child-raising is not highly evaluated others. In Japanese society, there is a general belief that housekeeping and child-raising is normal for women to pursue; house-guarding is women's role. It is not something that deserves special recognition or payment.

Japanese Women's Limited Agency to Express their Dissatisfaction with Negligence

Keiko. Honestly speaking, I want to be (highly) evaluated. If this were inside the company, someone will evaluate for contributing to the company; but there is no mechanism for evaluating child-raising.

This theme illuminates Japanese women's desire to be recognized. Our informants acknowledge that housekeeping and child-raising are not special and are not worthy of being praised. Still, they work hard for their family and desire to be appreciated by the family members.

Ryoko. If you're a housewife, it might sound awkward, but you don't get recognition. No one praises you.

Japanese husbands and children often do not praise mothers. This is closely related to the Japanese cultural view of *uchi* versus *soto* (Bachnik 1994). Japanese often consider family members as *miuchi* (insider) and feel that compliments are not necessary for insiders (Matsuura 2004). However, Japanese mothers sometimes feel isolated and ignored because there is not much recognitions and compliments from the family members (Barnlund and Araki 1985; Matsuura 2004).

Interviewer. How often are you praised in your daily lives?

Aya. None. I don't get praised.

[...]

Interviewer. You mentioned that you don't get praised, but in your honest feeling, do you want to be praised?

Aya. Yes. If someone praises me or says something similar, I would probably be happy.

The negligence is also reflected in the lack of consideration for birthdays. Many of our informants narrated that her birthdays are not

celebrated or remembered by her family. For instance, Aya feels that birthday is a day to thank mothers and describes birthday gift as a symbol of “being considered by others.” Thus, when her son didn’t give her the birthday gift, she was very sad. She felt ignored by her son.

Nonetheless, Aya cannot ask her son to celebrate her birthday or praise her for the good house-keeping:

Aya. I’m thinking that I’m working hard. But, others may not think the same way. Thus, other’s evaluation would make me happier than my own evaluation.

Interviewer. But, you can’t ask others to “praise me” (*laughs*)?

Aya. (*Laughs*). No, I can’t ask.

Although mothers feel strong desire to be appreciated for what they’re doing every day for the family, they cannot voice that to the family or to the society.

Self-Gifting as Resistance to Cultural Marginalization

Kumi. I was doing only child-raising until now, so I put the meaning of “good job” and bought things I wanted where my husband was not present. [...] When my husband is there, he says things like “isn’t it expensive,” “don’t you already have similar clothes,” “you already have many clothes.”

Third theme of self-gifting represents the agency of marginalized mothers. Spending money on themselves grants mothers the power to care about themselves. Because there is no evaluating-mechanism for mothering in the society, mothers created the mechanism themselves—namely, self-gifting:

Keiko. Evaluating child-raising myself may sound funny, but I deal with my feelings myself. There were many twists and turns, but somehow I arrived here. [...] It doesn’t matter how others see [my self-gifting]. It is one of my own evaluations within my heart.

Self-gifting has several functions for marginalized mothers. First, it allows mothers to accept their hardships and to maintain well-being:

Interviewer. When you bought shoulder-bag for yourself, did your feeling change?

Saki. It changed. I was able to switch my feeling. [...] I was able to think “let’s do my best again from tomorrow.”

Interviewer. Really. Why was that?

Saki. I think it’s because I bought something for me, I had my own time, and I was able to spend money as I like.

Other informants also mention the similar role of self-gifting in their lives, namely healing and recharging marginalized mothers:

Tomoe. I feel motivated and I can work hard again. [...] My feelings are healed, and I can feel that I need to work hard. [...] I tell myself—for me; to the thing I wanted: I bought something that is quite expensive, so I shall work hard.

Because self-gifts are self-centric, they also allow mothers to be selfish. Japanese mothers are normally prioritizing others (e.g., husband, children) than themselves; thus being selfish is uncommon. When Tomoe is asked to describe her self-gift as a person, Tomoe

answered that she cannot because if it’s person, she would pay attention to that person’s needs:

Tomoe. I can’t compare it with person. [With self-gift,] it’s like I want to stay alone. For example, if I compare self-gift to my mother, well, I can’t relax. I consider about her. So, there is no one who I can feel I’m healed. Basically, with people, you pay attention. Any person. Even if you’re really close. Thus, I cannot compare [self-gift] with person.

Finally, self-gifts allow mothers to escape from reality:

Hiroko. I become excited just by watching [my self-gift].

Interviewer. Why?

Hiroko. Why? Well... I can taste the feeling that I can escape from reality a bit.

Escape from reality is related with self-compassion:

Interviewer. What does self-gifting mean for you?

Hiroko. Meaning? What would it be... I think there is a sense of comforting my own feelings.

SGCB is incompatible with traditional Japanese values; however, it is purposely used by Japanese women to resist the cultural marginalization of mothers. It is important to note that this is a passive resistance. Mothers resist the cultural disdain for the role of mother; however, they do not challenge to change the cultural role or society. Rather, they choose to self-gift and accept the negligence. It is interesting because by choosing to self-gift, mothers are acting to go against the traditional Japanese values.

DISCUSSION

The current study has illuminated that self-gifting plays an important role of self-compassion for Japanese mothers. Across the three hours long in-depth interviews with ten Japanese mothers, the narratives about their hardships appeared many times. Japanese mothers are working hard for their family; however, Japanese husbands and children often do not praise mothers. Thus, they self-gift to be kind to themselves, to feel that they’re not isolated, and to hold their pain in balanced awareness.

SGCB as self-compassion is different from self-gift as self-therapy (Mick and DeMoss 1990a). Whereas SGSB as self-therapy focuses on changing negative mood to positive mood, SGCB as self-compassion involves accepting and forgiving one’s suffering. Japanese society traditionally possesses gender ideals of caring mothers. Thus, many of our informants felt guilty when they were stressed from motherhood or faced by their incompleteness as an ideal mother. They self-gifted in order to accept their inadequacies and to move on with their life.

Also, many of our informants felt isolated from their family members—husband and/or children. In interdependent cultures, self is connected with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Thus, when mothers are ignored from their close others, they find incompleteness in their self and become emotionally unstable. Self-gifts serve to fill a sense of missing-self.

This study only assessed Japanese mothers, which is the major limitation. We need to further explore SGCB of mothers in other interdependent cultures such as China and Korea. Nonetheless, this paper extends the past research on SGCB by providing a new role dimension of SGCB in consumers’ lives.

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