

Experiences of Self-Gifting Luxury Fashion During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Consumer behaviour is known to change during trying times as consumption has implications for the self. In fact, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in self-gifting. Adopting a psychological lens, this novel study explored females' experiences of self-gifting luxury fashion during the pandemic. Given the under-researched area, an exploratory qualitative approach was adopted and interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to understand participants' experiences. A homogenous sample of four females were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to elicit rich data. Findings demonstrated that self-gifting of luxury fashion during the pandemic was a complex phenomenon that seemed to contribute to participants' psychological well-being. The discussion links and extends the literature on self-gifting, luxury consumer behaviour and consumption during trying times. It highlights implications for academic research, individuals, brands and retailers.

Keywords: luxury consumption, consumer behaviour, self and identity, self-continuity, terror management theory, psychological well-being, fashion psychology

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INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in self-gifting (ACROSS 2020; Kyrousi et al. 2021), which involves giving to oneself gifts that are typically symbolic. Common self-gifts are clothes (Mick and DeMoss 1990b; Sherry et al. 1995), jewellery, cosmetics, shoes and bags (Luomala and Laaksonen 1999). Self-gifting differs from ordinary personal acquisitions mainly because it is highly self-oriented (Clarke and Mortimer 2013; Mick and DeMoss 1990b). Additionally, a self-gift is typically contextually bound: it is acquired in a specific context for specific motives that the individual has usually considered prior to the purchase. To date, researchers have primarily focused on these motives, emphasizing the use of self-gifting to reward the self, compensate for or cope with negative life experiences, celebrate specific occasions and invest surplus funds (Carnevale et al. 2014; Clarke and Mortimer 2013; Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990b; Ward and Tran 2008). Despite its relevance, however, self-gifting remains understudied and the existing self-gifting literature has not examined the self extensively.

The role of the self in self-gifting

The differences between self-gifting and interpersonal gifting highlight the role of the self. Distinctions are made on three dimensions: communication, exchange and specialness (Mick and DeMoss 1990a). First, interpersonal gifting comprises a symbolic message between the giver and receiver. It also imposes identity as the giver attempts to align the gift qualities to their own personality while matching the receiver's personality (Belk 1977). Indeed, objects can be used to express the self (Dittmar 1992). Thanks to their symbolic value, they can become part of an extended self that goes beyond one's physical body (Belk 1988). Self-gifting can thus be a self-dialogue of symbolic messages since the gifter and receiver are the same person. It may be used to develop, maintain or alter one's self-concept

(Clarke and Mortimer 2013; Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990b). Consumption may help reduce the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self (Richins 1994), which can elicit dejection-related emotions (Higgins 1987). As the symbolic self-completion theory argues, individuals may pursue identity markers to compensate what they lack (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1981). Self-gifts, therefore, may be purchased to enhance or protect self-esteem (Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990a). They may also activate different aspects of the self. Suri Weisfeld-Spolter et al. (2015) found that individuals felt more instrumental and independent when self-gifting, but more expressive and interdependent when engaging in interpersonal gifting.

Second, in self-gifting, individuals exchange their personal efforts or sacrifice with consumption they feel is justified and/or deserved (Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b). Self-gifting, therefore, can be a way of rewarding the self for specific accomplishments. It can also be defined prior to effort in order to incentivize individuals to achieve goals (Mick and DeMoss 1990b; Mouakhar-Klouz et al. 2016). This is evidenced by its pre-meditated nature. For instance, David Mick and Michelle DeMoss found that in 83 per cent of cases respondents defined self-gifts as ‘reward’ or a ‘cheering up’ prior to acquisition (1990a: 238). These authors argue that self-gifting can enhance self-efficacy, which is an individual’s belief in their capabilities to achieve a goal or specific outcome (Bandura 1977).

Third, in interpersonal gifting, specialness refers to the conjoining of the giver, receiver and gift through deep emotions (Belk et al. 1989). In self-gifting, on the other hand, specialness comes from the meaning based on the gift’s function. For instance, a self-gift acquired following an achievement can become a reminder of this achievement (Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990a). Similarly, individuals can attach meaning to therapeutic self-gifts in order to cope in negative situations (Carnevale et al. 2014; Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990a).

The role of affect in self-gifting

Self-gifting is considered a hedonic consumer behaviour linked to affect (e.g. Heath et al. 2015; Luomala 1998; Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b). As mentioned earlier, it can be used for mood maintenance in celebratory or reward contexts (Heath et al. 2015; Luomala and Laaksonen 1997, 1999) and for mood alleviation in therapeutic contexts (Luomala 1998). Nevertheless, findings on its emotional outcomes are sometimes contradictory. While positive outcomes such as joy, excitement, happiness and relief are common (Heath et al. 2015; Luomala and Laaksonen 1999), guilt may also arise when a purchase cannot be easily justified (Burnett and Lunsford 1994). One explanation for these findings is that different emotions may arise at different points in time. Distinguishing between immediate emotions (associated with acquiring the gift) and later emotions (guided by the justification of the self-gift), Teresa Heath et al. (2015) ascertained that outcomes are context dependent. Although therapeutic self-gifts may sometimes provide only a brief initial 'lift' in emotions and elicit guilt or regret in the long run, these authors found that positive affect is lasting even in negative contexts if symbolic meaning is attached to self-gifts (e.g. if the self-gift is purchased to enjoy life after a health issue). Furthermore, in achievement contexts where the intention is mood maintenance rather than repair, guilt or post-purchase regret is minimal and the self-gifts are justified by deservingness.

The impact of the pandemic on psychological well-being and self-gifting

COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 and had negative psychological consequences, primarily contributing to issues such as anxiety (Kwong et al. 2021; Xiong et al. 2020). In general, research on COVID-19 tends to conceptualize mental well-being by the absence of mental disorders or negative affective states (Palcari et al.

2021). However, this absence of psychological distress is just one part of psychological well-being, which can be conceptualized as encompassing hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Keyes 2007). Hedonic well-being concerns the presence of positive feelings, absence of negative feelings and overall life satisfaction (Diener 2009). Eudaimonic well-being, on the other hand, is centred on a sense of fulfilment and meaning, underpinned by self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery (ability to choose or create suitable environments for oneself), positive relationships, personal growth and autonomy (Ryff and Singer 2008). It extends beyond just happy feelings and endorses individuals to reach their full potential, thus reaching a stage of self-actualization (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Frank Martela and Michael Steger (2016) define life meaning based on coherence (how individuals infer their lives), significance (how they perceive their lives worth living) and purpose (having high-value long-term aspirations to strive towards). According to Lea Waters et al. (2022), during the pandemic, coherence was impacted by the disruption of daily routines, predictability and identity. Significance was impacted as individuals felt powerless and could not engage in valued activities and interpersonal interactions during lockdown. Finally, purpose was threatened by impediments to plans and aspirations, severed goals and limited opportunities for self-growth. The loss of normality and grief over the activities that were no longer possible may have led to feelings of emptiness and a diluted meaning in life for some (Berinato 2020). This may have contributed to deteriorating mental health. In fact, research suggests that meaning in life served as a protective factor against anxiety and COVID-19 stress at the beginning of the pandemic (Trzebiński et al. 2020).

The pandemic-driven changes included changes in consumption. When facing demands that exceed their resources, individuals may cope with the resulting stress by focusing on the problem (e.g. eliminating the stressor) or by regulating their negative emotional reactions (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Consumption may serve as a coping

mechanism (Yi and Baumgartner 2004). Yikai Yang et al. (2020) found a significant positive relationship between COVID-19 involvement (e.g. following the news, relatedness of COVID-19 to current life) and the likelihood of purchasing utilitarian products such as hand sanitizers, explained by a tendency to adopt problem-focused coping. Conversely, hedonic products are typically chosen for emotion-focused coping given their ability to provide comfort and positive affect (Strahilevitz and Myers 1998). Furthermore, consumption may enable individuals to engage in a behaviour that they can control, thus regaining some certainty in the face of threat, instability and perceived lack of control (Ballantine et al. 2014). Studying the psychological antecedents of consumer behaviour during the pandemic, Adolfo Di Crosta et al. (2021) found that higher levels of depression were associated with greater value placed on non-necessities. For some people, non-necessities could have represented a compensatory mechanism to manage negative psychological states or restore the sense of self.

Increases in hedonic consumption during trying times can be explained through terror management theory (Greenberg et al. 1986). According to this theory, individuals are instinctively motivated towards a continued existence while being aware of their inevitable mortality. They can attempt to consciously or unconsciously address this threatening conundrum through two key defence mechanisms. First, they may protect their self-esteem and continuity by believing that they have an important role in a meaningful world (Greenberg et al. 1986). Second, they may enhance their world-view by acquiring tangible symbols of value, such as self-enhancing material possessions (Pyszczynski et al. 2004). For example, Naomi Mandel and Steven Heine (1999) found that participants thinking about their own death were more likely to show interest in items such as prestigious watches or luxury cars.

The COVID-19 pandemic arguably led to increased mortality salience. It also threatened individuals' sense of self (Liu et al. 2021). Among other things, it may have disrupted self-continuity, which is the subjective sense of connection between one's past, present and future (Sedikides et al. 2023). Self-continuity results from autobiographical reasoning, a process used to construct a life story as individuals make connections among their life experiences and between these experiences and their sense of self (Habermas and Bluck 2000). The life story is an evolving story which integrates individuals' past, present and imagined future and reflects who they are, what they value and what they wish to achieve (McAdams and McLean 2013). It gives individuals a sense of unity, self-continuity and direction or purpose in life (see Çili and Stopa 2019). Self-continuity is associated with positive outcomes, including physical and psychological well-being, whereas self-discontinuity is associated with psychological ill-being and symptoms of mental illness (Sedikides et al. 2023).

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, the 'past normal' no longer existed, yet the 'new normal' was not yet in existence (Liu et al. 2021: 3). Drawing on Russell Belk's (e.g. 1988) work, Charles H. Noble and Beth A. Walker (1997) postulate that possessions can be used to create and maintain the extended self, preserve the past or facilitate the creation of the future self. This may explain consumption behaviours during the pandemic. A quarter of British adults reported that they planned to purchase gifts for themselves during the first Christmas under lockdown, with 15 per cent planning to purchase new clothes to boost their mood (ACROSS 2020). Antigone Kyrousi et al. (2021) also found a high propensity to self-gift for mood alleviation during lockdown. One trend observed was a rise in self-gifting of luxury. Consumers spent 57 per cent more on luxury goods online in one week in April 2020 compared to the previous year (Enochs 2020).

Motivations for and outcomes of luxury consumption

Luxury consumer research has traditionally postulated the idea of buying to impress others, that is, using luxury brands to signal wealth and status and/or group membership (Veblen 1899; Vigneron and Johnson 1999). Recent research has challenged this view of luxury consumption for others and has emphasized its use for oneself, especially in terms of satisfying one's hedonic needs and achieving personal gratification (e.g. Amatulli and Guido 2011; Tsai 2005). Because they are highly symbolic, luxury goods may enable consumers to express different aspects of their actual or ideal self (Vigneron and Johnson 1999, 2004). Luxury consumption motivations, therefore, can be understood through the self-determination theory of motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000) as resulting from both extrinsic (e.g. seeking others' approval) and intrinsic motivation (i.e. deriving pleasure from the activity itself).

Hannele Kauppinen-Räsänen et al. (2014) explored motivations for self-gifting luxury fashion goods in a sample of nineteen women. Their findings confirm that self-gifting can be fuelled by external motivations such as creating the desired impression on others or feeling confident in social contexts. However, they also emphasize that luxury fashion self-gifting can be viewed as self-communication since it is motivated by factors that are exclusively linked to the self. These include not only the self-related motivations mentioned earlier (e.g. rewarding or consoling the self, celebrating special occasions) but also motivations such as seeking products with tangible benefits (e.g. durability), occasionally allowing oneself to purchase something extraordinary and specific and experiencing nostalgia. For instance, a participant in Kauppinen-Räsänen et al.'s (2014) study rationalized a self-gift from the British brand Burberry through its links to England, where her parents had lived and other family members were still living.

Research on the outcomes of consumption has yielded mixed results. While some research (e.g. DeLeire and Kalil 2010) has found a positive relationship between consumption and hedonic well-being, longitudinal studies conclude weak or negative relationships between these variables (see Ahuvia 2001). When it comes to self-gifting and luxury, research seems to also implicate aspects of eudaimonic well-being (the well-being that involves meaning and self-actualization) postulated by Carol Ryff and Burton Singer (2008). For instance, drawing from a participant who performed well on a project and purchased something that she ‘wanted for a long time’, Mick and DeMoss (1990a: 330) argue that self-gifts can be linked to life goals and contribute to a sense of meaning. The use of self-gifting to enhance self-esteem may be linked to self-acceptance and growth. Furthermore, luxury consumption for group acceptance may satisfy the need for close relationships with others.

The present study

The present study sits at the intersection of three understudied areas: self-gifting, self-gifting of luxury and COVID-19 consumer behaviour. It explored the experiences of four female millennials self-gifting luxury fashion during the COVID-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom. It also explored the implications of these experiences for participants’ sense of self. Females are more prone to self-gift, especially when they are young, well educated and well paid (Luomala and Laaksonen 1999; Mick et al. 1992; Sherry et al. 1995; Ward and Tran 2008). The study thus focused on female millennials, defined as those born between 1981 and 1999 (Okros 2020), because they could be more suitable for studying luxury self-gifting than younger and less affluent females.

METHOD

Design

Because of the need for rich exploratory detail and calls for qualitative enquiry in self-gifting (Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b), a qualitative approach involving interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted. This method is recommended for research that aims to understand complex consumer phenomena which are impossible to glean from individuals' surface responses (Goulding 2005). Unlike some of the other qualitative methods, IPA emphasizes the exploration of subjective lived experience and how individual participants make sense of it (Smith et al. 2009). It takes a hermeneutic approach: the researcher attempts to make sense of how participants have made sense of their experience. The data analysis, therefore, goes beyond what participants are saying on the surface. These characteristics made IPA suitable for understanding in depth our participants' experiences of the COVID-19 lockdowns and their luxury self-gifting during that time.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the first author's personal network. They were living in the United Kingdom during the three pandemic lockdown periods mandated by the UK government to slow down the spread of the coronavirus (15 March 2020 to 12 April 2021). In order to participate, they had to have used personal funds to purchase at least one luxury fashion good for personal use during the dates stipulated. Fashion included jewellery, apparel or accessories. As typically defined in luxury consumer research (Amatulli and Guido 2011; Kapferer 1997), luxury brands were considered to be first tier brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Gucci. The final sample of four females was homogenous and adhered to the minimum three required for phenomenology (Smith and Osborn 2003). Ages ranged from 22 to 35 years. Participants' pseudonyms and characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Occupation	Age	Self-Gift
Kim	HR Manager, Global FMCG Corporation	31	Cartier watch
Jennifer	Sustainable Innovation Agent and student	23	Pandora earrings
Carole	Senior Manager in the civil service	35	Dior handbag
Naomi	Fashion merchandising consultant, luxury fashion brand seller, and student	22	Givenchy Boots, Hermès Twilly scarf

Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the relevant ethics committee at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. It employed semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility and the elicitation of rich data. Interviews were held on Zoom. To facilitate the rapport building necessary for IPA (Smith and Osborn 2003), all participants voluntarily kept their cameras on, as did the researcher.

The interview schedule consisted of three sections. First, participants discussed their pandemic and lockdown experience, reflecting on their activities and how they felt at the time. Next, they shared their motivations for self-gifting and reflected on the outcomes of this experience. Finally, they responded to questions about their perceptions of luxury. Due to the sensitive nature of COVID-19, there were measures in place to minimize participant discomfort during the interview. Participants could choose not to answer questions that they found intrusive or upsetting. If they experienced any distress, they could have a break or terminate the interview. An online audio recorded progressive muscle relaxation exercise was available to help them feel better should they choose to have a break. At the end, participants were debriefed about the study aims. Interviews lasted between 25 and 46 minutes ($M = 43$

minutes) and were audio recorded. None of the participants displayed visible signs of distress while being interviewed.

Data analysis

IPA was manually conducted by the first author following guidelines by Smith et al. (2009). The researcher immersed herself in the interview recordings (listening, transcribing and reading), first compiling a list of emerging themes and connections between them. Next, she sought connections across cases and compiled a list of major themes, as well as subthemes which captured specific aspects of the major themes. Because the first author has experience working in consumer insights in the luxury retail industry, bracketing was used to limit the influence of this consumer focus on the research process. Aided by the second author, the first author adopted a psychological lens throughout, putting aside the consumer behaviour background when designing the study and the interview schedule. She repeatedly asked participants to elaborate during the interviews in order to prevent bias from uncovering deeper meaning (Creswell 2007). A bottom-up approach and discussions between the two authors allowed for an analysis that remained faithful to the raw data. Furthermore, embedding larger quotes in the analysis helped to ensure that participants' experience remained contextualized and maintained validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-gifting luxury during the pandemic appeared to be multifaceted. The IPA resulted in three major themes and six subthemes (see Table 2). Following is the presentation and discussion of each one.

Table 2

Summary of the Findings

Major Themes	Subthemes
Consumption as a coping mechanism	
Hedonic dimensions	A personal indulgence Justified by deservingness For me, not others
A meaningful experience	To enhance or protect the self An act of autonomy Meaning versus pleasure-led well-being

First major theme: Consumption as a coping mechanism

Participants referred to mostly negative emotional states and psychological consequences of the pandemic. They implied the use of consumption as a coping mechanism. For example, self-gifting for Jennifer was an attempt to regulate her mood during lockdown, which she described as involving ‘boredom, sadness, sometimes anger’:

So the first lockdown that I said was the most difficult, that’s when I was shopping for jewellery more. I guess I was more stressed out at the time. It was kind of an escape.

And I was more thinking about what can I do to make myself more happy? So jewellery was one of those things that made me happy to buy.

This is consistent with the literature on self-gifting serving as a therapeutic tool to alleviate irritation, stress and dejection (Luomala 1998; Luomala and Laaksonen 1997, 1999).

Jennifer’s use of the word ‘escape’ supports the role of self-gifts as a potential coping mechanism (Carnevale et al. 2014; Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990a) and the

broader view that consumption may represent emotion-focused coping in stressful times (Yi and Baumgartner 2004).

Self-gifts as a coping tool were also pertinent in Naomi's account. Her experience of the pandemic was compounded by the death of a parent and an undesirable living situation:

It was a very difficult period I have to say, because I started university the same week that I lost a parent. And so that was very intense. And to kind of navigate the pandemic was quite difficult because I was juggling these different things and just like anyone else, I had kind of, you know, it's kind of like a trauma, really. You turn on the news and you see people being put in freezers and it's terrible. So I experienced the normal experiences that other people would as well. And then obviously I was still kind of going through the process of the traumatic loss of my father. And then on top of that, I was in a house share that was just very toxic. There was just a lot going on. But I thrived because I really enjoy what I do. And I really have a passion for luxury products.

For Naomi, buying luxury during the pandemic (for work or personal use) appeared to be a way to cope with 'juggling' multiple adversities – not only to survive but also to 'thrive'.

Participants reported being impacted by uncertainty and disruptions. Jennifer stated that the first lockdown in particular was 'really unexpected', which is when she was self-gifting, but she later adapted. Carole shared how the pandemic created a 'sudden change in circumstances and the way of living that was a shock to the system'. This uncertainty meant that she could not plan activities which were typically emotion-focused coping mechanisms:

So I suppose one thing I didn't quite realize until the first lockdown is that I have this mindset if I was, I don't know, not too happy with things... if I was particularly stressed or whatever, I would try to plan something to look forward to. And I couldn't do that.

Because of this limitation, she focused on activities such as ‘running’, ‘reading’ and ‘browsing products online’ during lockdown.

Second major theme: Hedonic dimensions

The hedonic dimensions of luxury self-gifts were apparent in most participants’ accounts. As mentioned earlier, hedonic consumption addresses hedonic rather than utilitarian needs (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

A personal indulgence

This subtheme expresses participants’ own construction of self-gifts as an indulgence. Naomi distinguished between expectations of joy from luxury compared to necessities:

It should be always a joyful experience to have a luxury because you have necessities, and you have luxuries. You don’t always go, you know, ‘I really want to have this necessity today’, but you can have your needs and wants. So I think luxury should always be joyful.

She later shared that one of her luxury purchases was justified as she had surplus funds during the pandemic: ‘Without the pandemic, I wouldn’t justify spending that much because I would say that my priorities lean more towards future building rather than this luxury. That’s not a necessity, you know?’

Surplus funds resulting from reduced expenses during lockdown seemed to have facilitated the decision to purchase luxury for other participants as well. For Jennifer, the self-gift was a deviation from her usual shopping habits: ‘I would say I don’t always go for luxury, but with stuff like jewellery, I will aim to get something of high quality because I just like looking at my hands and it’s looking pretty’. This is in line with the perception of luxury self-gifts as deviations from normality (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al. 2014). Jennifer later

added: ‘I didn’t have to spend money on my final collection.¹ So I could actually spend the money on something of a higher price, like jewellery. So I think I wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t for the lockdown’.

For Kim, too, the Cartier watch was an indulgence: ‘It was the first time I was buying something like that for myself in a while. I was excited for it to come through the post, excited to take it out, try it on’. She stated that the watch deviated from her typically utilitarian purchase behaviour:

If I’m going to a Christmas party, I know I want a dress and I need a dress. Same if I’m going to a friend’s birthday party. Whereas for this one, it was nothing specifically driven. I wasn’t out looking for a watch. I didn’t need one.

Overall, these accounts support the view that self-gifts are usually independent of immediate need (Atalay and Meloy 2006) and are driven by hedonic rather than utilitarian motivations (Mick and DeMoss 1990a; Park 2018). They also support literature indicating that surplus funding could be a reason behind self-gifting (Luomala and Laaksonen 1997; Mick et al. 1992).

Justified by deservingness

Some participants perceived their self-gifts as deserved and therefore justifiable. For Kim, this was the sacrifice of not buying anything ‘nice’ in a while, leading her to ask: ‘I don’t have many watches, and I hadn’t bought something nice in a while. I’ll just kind of treat myself [...]. So why would I not buy it?’ This rhetorical question nods to Kauppinen-Räsänen et al.’s (2014) finding of ‘allowance’ as a key motivation for luxury self-gifting. It supports the idea of deservingness: self-gifts being an exchange for sacrifice or personal

¹ In the United Kingdom, the final collection is a body of work (e.g. a fashion collection) that university students on practice-based courses tend to produce and showcase at the end of their degree.

efforts on some occasions (Mick and DeMoss 1990a). It is also in line with Anirban Mukhopadhyay and Gita Johar's (2009) finding that consumers may reward themselves with indulgent products when restraint during prior impulse-buying opportunities is salient.

Deservingness was also apparent in Naomi's account as she shared the process of acquiring her hard-to-find Givenchy boots during the pandemic:

So what happened, actually, was they removed the classic Shark Lock boots from the website. [...] So I rang them up and I was like, '[...] I'm really interested in the Shark Lock boots. Like, I want them so bad'. And then they were like: 'Oh, we have one pair in the Paris store that we can ship over to you'. And I was like 'Yes please, yes please. Thank you, thank you'. So that's exactly what happened and I got them.

She later added: 'These have been my dream boots. I've been idealising them for so long, and I saved up to get them'. The 'dream' element emphasizes the fantasy element of hedonic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Efforts made towards the purchase (saving money, sourcing the boots) are consistent with deservingness in the exchange of self-gifts for personal effort or sacrifice (Mick and DeMoss 1990a). Naomi had previously engaged in this behaviour, sending herself gifts accompanied by messages following work-related achievements: 'It will always kind of be something along the lines of, you know: "Keep going. You've had a fantastic year. I'm proud of you"'. For her, self-gifting seemed to be a positive reinforcer for work achievements. This is a novel finding as there is a paucity of evidence on self-gifting as self-reinforcement. Furthermore, the notes Naomi attached to the self-gifts underline the hedonic orientations of the self-gifting experience (Mick and DeMoss 1990a), supporting the idea that self-gifting can follow traditional gifting rituals (e.g. wrapping paper) (Heath et al. 2015).

For me, not others

This subtheme highlights the orientation of self-gifts towards the self rather than towards others. In addition to their perceptions of indulgence, participants seemed to focus heavily on product quality. Of her luxury jewellery, Jennifer said: 'I know it's going to last me a long time, and it's not going to get damaged. And I know I purchased well, going for something more expensive kind of proved to be worth it'. Similarly, Naomi shared of her boots: 'I hope that they do last for years to come. We'll have to see, because that's really important to me. Otherwise, there's no point of me spending that amount of money'. Kim, on the other hand, stated:

I thought, pandemic or not, a watch is something you can wear at any occasion... you can wear at any time [...]. I don't have a limited window to wear it. So it just felt to me like a bit of a solid investment that I can keep using year on year on year.

These statements support Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., who found utility as a prevalent motivation for self-gifting luxury as 'it's better to buy something that lasts' (2014: 123). They also confirm prior research suggesting that luxury consumers with hedonic perceptions towards luxury goods are more likely to base product evaluations on quality as well as self-directed pleasure goal attainment (Hur and Choo 2016).

This segues into another pertinent finding of the present study, which is the seeming lack of external rewards motivating purchases. No participant mentioned 'others'; the social-oriented motivations for self-gifting luxury found in Kauppinen-Räsänen et al.'s (2014) study; or the rewards commonly cited in luxury consumer literature, such as group membership (Vigneron and Johnson 1999) or status (Veblen 1899). In fact, Kim stated: 'It's not that I care what people think. I bought it for me because I liked it. It's not that I think everyone's wearing that so I should be wearing it'. Naomi mentioned social-oriented aspects when wearing the boots: 'It's kind of interesting because you don't really see them when you're out and about and they have an interesting design. So people will be really looking at

you'. However, the mention of others was shared as an observation about wearing the purchase after lockdown, rather than as a motivator initially driving the purchase. Overall, the pandemic may have provided a unique luxury consumption environment whereby individuals under lockdown had restricted opportunity to use items to 'signal' to others, substantiating the notion that not all luxury consumers are driven by others (Tsai 2005).

Third major theme: A meaningful experience

Going beyond hedonic dimensions, participants alluded to meaningful self-gifting experiences, possibly spurred by attempts to cope with the pandemic. This theme addresses experiences and outcomes of self-gifting luxury, drawing on Ryff and Singer's (2008) framework of eudaimonic well-being, that is the well-being derived from reaching one's potential and finding meaning in life.

To enhance or protect the self

Participants appeared to take steps to enhance or protect their threatened sense of self by leveraging the symbolic properties of self-gifts. For instance, Jennifer articulated her motives for self-gifting jewellery:

I feel like I needed something extra to make myself feel less plain. Like I was just at home [...] wearing stuff that's for home, which is like old sweatpants. And when I would look at my hands, for example, I like, now I see there's something extra on them. It feels a bit more luxurious and I feel more like less cheap, I guess, even though that sounds really bad. But it's like I'm not wearing ratty stuff. It's not only that that's on me.

Jennifer's perception of luxury was also evident in her account:

I'm at this massive shop with luxurious clothing, and I have to choose one. And it's kind of like, is this me? Like, am I worthy of that expensive item? [...] It feels like you're trying on gold. I don't want to break it. I don't want to rip the seam or something. I think it's, kind of like, you hold the item in higher regard. Yeah. I still kind of, like, take care of that, then. That's very luxurious. I hold it in a special place. I wash it in special ways.

Clothes can impact the wearer's sense of self (Masuch and Hefferon 2014). The adjectives 'old' and 'ratty' seem to suggest that, for Jennifer, the clothes worn during lockdown may have contributed to an undesirable sense of self. The jewellery may indicate an attempt to reduce the discrepancy between the perceived actual 'cheap' self of the lockdown and an ideal 'luxurious' self. This aligns with research suggesting a potential impact of self-gifts on the self-concept (e.g. Clarke and Mortimer 2013; Heath et al. 2015; Mick and DeMoss 1990a, 1990b; Weisfeld-Spolter et al. 2015). It also supports the view that consumers may compensate for threats to the self via consumption, inflating the value of symbolic objects (Braun and Wicklund 1989). Jennifer's meticulous handling of the luxury garments and mention of 'higher regard' suggests the use of luxury to enhance her self-worth. It supports Kauppinen-Räsänen et al.'s finding of luxury self-gifts as a way 'to take care of myself' (2014: 123). Enhanced perceptions of the self may signal self-acceptance and potential growth, thus highlighting the relevance of self-gifting for eudaimonic well-being. Jennifer seemed to be attached to her jewellery, sharing: 'It's become like a permanent thing that I wear. I never take it off. I feel naked without it. At this point it became a part of me'. Her account can be understood through Belk's (1988) view that attachment strengthens the significance of possessions as part of the extended self. Furthermore, Rebecka Fleetwood-Smith et al. (2019) found that participants infused their clothing items with symbolic meaning that they could access while wearing these items. While wearing her jewellery, Jennifer may

have been able to access the meaning she had attached to it: 'luxurious'. Feeling close to a 'luxurious' and worthy ideal self might explain why she never took it off.

Naomi's choice of a 'creative' Hermès Twilly scarf self-gift was motivated by the 'creative' talents she discovered during the pandemic:

I was also seeing my different capabilities, and I think it just shed light on the fact that I'm a creative person and I love to express myself. And I love to like dress up, you know, and for me to come across, you know, like a Twilly that's, like, kind of representative of that was exciting [...]. You know, it's important to me.

This, too, links to the symbolic nature of possessions and their ability to express identity (Belk 1988). It aligns with the self-product congruity theory, which argues that consumers tend to approach products that match their self-concept (Sirgy 1982) and confirms the notion that consumers buy self-gifts consistent with their identity (Weisfeld-Spolter et al. 2015).

Naomi's declaration 'I love to express myself' links the self-gift to self-expression, a foundation of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff and Singer 2008).

In addition to expressing an actual or a desired present self, luxury items also seemed to help some participants project themselves into the future. Naomi was the only participant to mention COVID-19 fatalities, possibly because her parent's death had increased mortality salience. She seemed to immerse herself in luxury, stating: 'I really enjoy luxury and I enjoy what I do. That's what I do every time on my phone [...]. I'm looking at things, and I'm just seeing what's going on'. In discussing luxury fashion, she emphasized: 'I want to be able to pass things down to my relatives. I want it to go down in generations'. This statement, just like participants' focus on the products' durability that was mentioned earlier, links luxury to the idea of continuity, which underlies terror management theory (Greenberg et al. 1986). Her newly purchased boots may have helped Naomi project herself into the future at a time when this future possibly seemed negative and uncertain. Julie Niziurski and Marie Luisa Schaper

(2021) found that during the pandemic, as futures were unknown, positive future thinking allowed individuals to imagine an idyllic future, thus linking future cognitions with psychological well-being. This contradicts Qianwen Liu et al. (2021), who found that focusing on the post-COVID-19 future could cause a sense of self-discontinuity.

Nevertheless, in Naomi's case, the projection into the future seemed to protect the self. So did the fact that her boots were unique:

I'm purchasing my dream boots, you know, that was kind of the pull with them. And also the fact that the old design, the classic design is gone. So now I'm going to be one of the few that has that. And that made me feel special [...]. I don't love luxury because I want to feel part of the whole community that love luxury. I love it because I want to feel unique.

This was surprising since Naomi tried to normalize her experience of the pandemic, describing it as 'just like anyone else'. Her account is consistent with the idea that individuals feel the need to express uniqueness when the self is threatened, deriving satisfaction from differentiated material possessions that alleviate the threat (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). It supports the idea that individuals may develop, maintain or alter the self through self-gifting (e.g. Clarke and Mortimer 2013; Mick et al. 1992).

An act of autonomy

This subtheme deals with the idea that self-gifting was an empowering act of independence. Kim shared: 'To be honest, it's empowering as well. It's nice to know that you can buy something for yourself without having to wait for anyone or get permission'. Naomi associated self-gifting with independence – a trait she saw in her mother:

It [self-gifting] just makes me feel so proud. It makes me feel like I've worked really hard, you know, because, for example, the dynamic that I saw with my parents was

that my mum was the one that was like, you know, leading things. And, you know, she was very independent. And that's why for me, I'm personally not comfortable with gift giving from anyone, because I've kind of been raised to see a woman/ person who just if she wants something, she goes and gets it, she makes it happen. So because I have that attitude in all areas of my life, it's the most rewarding thing to be able to say to myself, 'I've got this for you'.

This account suggests that self-gifting reinforced Naomi's belief system, which had been shaped by observing her mother. It fostered her self-efficacy in making things happen and gaining autonomy, a mindset she applied to other areas of her life. Satisfying the needs for autonomy and mastery is central to well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000; Ryff and Singer 2008). This potentially supports the view that consumption is a way for consumers to cope during uncertain times, focusing on controllable behaviours which help them regain control and certainty (Ballantine et al. 2014).

Meaning vs. pleasure-led well-being

This final subtheme reflects luxury self-gifting outcomes during the pandemic. Jennifer, who was driven to self-gifting by what seemed to be therapeutic purposes, initially felt 'happy'. However, this seemed to be short lived:

Maybe, like, in the short term, like, for a day or two because you have this new thing, new shiny toy. But then I wouldn't say it had, like, a long-lasting effect because it was a long lockdown [...] you have a new thing for two days, you're happy, and then you go back to it, and then you want something new, just kind of trying to lift yourself up.

This seems to confirm the short-lived therapeutic effect of self-gifting and its limited effectiveness in repairing intense negative mood (Clarke and Mortimer 2013; Heath et al. 2015; Sherry et al. 1995).

Guilt was also evidenced. Jennifer mentioned guilt twice, yet downplayed it as the purchase made her feel better overall:

It made me feel good. But I think after a while it kicks in that I spent the money, so I feel a bit guilty. But overall, I think it just made me feel good because I have something so I'm happy, excited. And then after that, maybe a bit of guilt. But that's not important.

Despite the short-lived positive affect, Jennifer did not regret the purchase: 'I know I didn't spend the money on something stupid. It's proven to be a great thing. And also it makes me feel better'.

Naomi, too, shared nuances of guilt splurging on boots: 'I was like, oh God, like, these are so expensive, like, I'm like spending this money that I could maybe be saving or be putting into something because inflation happens every year'. Nevertheless, she demonstrated continued positive affect: 'I was so excited [...]. And I still feel good talking about them now, actually. Like, I can't wait to next wear them'. These findings support the mixed emotional outcomes typically associated with self-gifting (Heath et al. 2015; Luomala and Laaksonen 1999) and contradict literature on the absence of guilt (Mick et al. 1992). However, the guilt felt by Jennifer and Naomi did not seem to intensify to regret, possibly because of how the self-gifts made them feel during the pandemic. This supports Heath et al.'s (2015) view that negative emotions are rationalized with time due to the justification of the self-gift.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the luxury self-gifting experiences of UK-based female millennials during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that these were complex experiences which occasionally elicited negative emotions such as guilt, but overall helped participants cope with the lockdowns and may have contributed to both their hedonic and

eudaimonic well-being. These findings need to be seen in the light of several limitations. For example, participants may have downplayed their attachment to luxury goods since attachment to possessions is typically perceived as negative (Richins 1994). Furthermore, the small homogenous sample and the qualitative nature of the study do not allow for generalizations to be made. However, IPA allows for an in-depth analysis and interpretation of participants' subjective experiences. It thus forms a strong foundation for future research in this area. Future studies with a wider range of participants can shed light on different self-gifting experiences. Quantitative research using a robust sample size could also allow for theory building and generalization of findings to a population. Future research also needs to investigate the potential long-term impact of self-gifting on factors such as psychological well-being, self-esteem and self-continuity.

Despite its limitations, this study generated novel findings that respond to calls for a better understanding of self-gifting (Weisfeld-Spolter et al. 2015), consumer behaviour during COVID-19 (Sheth 2020) and self-gifting of luxury (Dhaliwal et al. 2020). Overall, findings support and expand on extant literature by providing deeper psychological insights into the motivations for and the outcomes of luxury self-gifting during uncertain times. They contribute to understanding consumption through a eudaimonic lens, which is understudied (Alba and Williams 2013). Finally, the unique situation of limited social interaction during lockdown furthers our understanding of luxury consumption for the 'self' rather than 'for others', which dominates literature (Tsai 2005).

The study also provides a nuanced understanding of the psychology of self-gifting luxury which may benefit consumers, brands and retailers. Findings may help individuals maintain well-being during challenging times, perhaps by moving away from the short-lived relief of hedonic consumption and shifting towards meaningful consumption. Similarly, brands and retailers can design more responsible marketing strategies by differentiating

between hedonic and eudaimonic consumption experiences. Marketing managers can steer away from typical hedonic-led emotive campaigns anchored by the promise of ‘happiness’ while also minimizing their use of pressure tactics to prompt purchases, particularly during trying times.

To conclude, this study found self-gifting to be a complex phenomenon. It challenges the notion that self-gifting is exclusively a hedonic consumption behaviour and suggests that self-gifting luxury can constitute meaningful consumption in some (e.g. challenging, uncertain) contexts. Therapeutic self-gifts may be effective to some extent as a mechanism for coping with negative emotions. They may enhance and protect the self from threats by projecting it into the future and closer to an ideal self, thus potentially increasing the sense of self-continuity and self-esteem. We propose that self-gifting may have implications for eudaimonic well-being as a result of its association with self-acceptance, autonomy and mastery of the environment. This is certainly an area which merits further exploration.

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