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**Anxious self-gifting as a compensatory consumption**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to develop new knowledge on anxious self-gift giving by describing processes where self-gifting is done as a compensatory consumption. Conversational interviews that dive deep into the experiences of anxious consumers form the foundation for the data analysis that is inspired by the Gioia method. The thesis identifies three processes that leads to self-gifting. These processes show that anxiety leads to an internal creation of the idea to self-gift. However, sometimes this idea is interfered by the consumer lacking self-esteem and self-worth, and or the gaze of important others. When anxiety is experienced, self-gifting can be used as a compensation that leads to reduced anxiety.

**Keywords:** Self-gifting, Anxiety, Anxious self-gifting, Compensatory consumption, Consumer behavior

## 1. Introduction

With increasing wealth consumers have more means to spend on non-essential things such as flowers, clothing or chocolate. When anxiety arises from stress and other factors (Umo, 2022) some describe self-gifting as a way of channeling that anxiety and a form of self-medication (Bergh, 2022). This form of self-gifting may not only be positive though as some purchase-decisions made when feeling anxiety improve the situation in short-term but worsen the situation in long-term. This study seeks to answer some of the questions related to this by looking at how anxiety and social anxiety (a common form of anxiety according to The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2023) shapes self-gifting.

Gift-giving is an act of symbolic meanings containing ”meanings ranging from congratulations, love, and regret to obligation and dominance” (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). Previous consumer research on gift-giving is generally dividing gifts between goods acquired for personal use and goods acquired to be given to others (interpersonal, dyadic gift-giving) (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). However, Mick and DeMoss (1990) argued that gift-giving for personal use is very broad, containing purchases with widely different meanings and dimensions. For this reason, distinctions between gifts to oneself with the aim of gaining a more nuanced understanding of relevant consumer behavior was developed (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). One of the branches that was defined from this gap focused on “self-indulgence” and “self-gratification” (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). The phenomenon was later identified as “self-gifting”. Gifts to oneself can according to some be emotionally nourishing (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). Self-gifting is a complex phenomenon that requires more knowledge, some of what is known today is further explained in the literature review below.

The following definitions and statistics are used to identify anxiety and a relevant sample. Anxiety disorder (a group of psychiatric disorders characterized by overwhelming and difficult-to-control anxiety) is one of the most common psychiatric disorders in Sweden (The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2023). A population survey shows that the stigmatization causes problems and concludes that long-term knowledge-raising initiatives is a success factor

(The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2023). This study does not only look at consumers with as widespread symptoms as those with anxiety disorder, but looks broader at experiences of anxiety, i.e. fear or worry often felt in the body (1177, n.d. a). Social anxiety is one form of anxiety where discomfort is felt in some social areas (1177, n.d. b). Anxiety is relatively equally spread over different age-groups but is higher in the groups 16-29 years and 85 years + (CES, n.d.). Swedish statistics also show that more women experience anxiety than men (an even greater difference in diagnosed conditions) (CES, n.d.). This is represented in the sample of this study where more women than men volunteered to participate, and the respondents are between 23 and 31 years old.

A deeper understanding of anxious self-gifting is not only needed within the domain of scholarship but also in broader societal contexts. Reports in Swedish news state that consumers shop to feel better and reward themselves, even when they cannot afford to do so, leading to increased indebtedness (Ibrahim, 2025). This in turn often leads to a feeling of shame over one's economic circumstances (ICA Banken, 2025). The ICA Bank's report, based on a survey with 1000 Swedes in the age 19-29, show that just as anxiety (see above), this kind of shopping is more common among women than men (ICA Banken, 2025). The report shows that 19% of women self-gift to lift their spirits and 10% self-gift as a reward even when they cannot afford to do so, corresponding numbers amongst men are seven respectively five percent (ICA Banken, 2025).

The purpose of this study is to explore anxious consumers' self-gifting and to gain insights valuable both for academia and retail. The aim is to extend existing research by combining ideas from marketing, retail and psychology and by performing in-depth interviews to learn more about the role of anxiety in consumer behavior. This study looks at emotion related (Walsh, Shiu, Hassan, Michaelidou & Beatty, 2011) and avoidance related reasons (rather than actual needs) to shop (Tauber, 1972) and thereby develop new knowledge about anxious self-gift giving. This thesis asks "How is anxiety driving self-gift giving?"

This study looks at anxious self-gift giving as a form of compensatory consumption. A need for more knowledge regarding self-gifting is needed and it is argued that empirical studies within the field are scarce (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al, 2014; Heath, Tynan & Ennew, 2011), less studied within academia than other forms of consumer behavior (Khan et al, 2024) and mostly developed by only a few researchers (them being Mick, DeMoss and Faure) (Heath, Tynan & Ennew, 2011). Previous research on self-gifting have looked at motives for shopping (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al, 2014). This study contributes with learnings by taking one identified motive (anxiety) and investigating deeper into why and how anxiety drives self-gifting.

The works presented here contributes to the knowledge on compensatory consumption by the unique combination of studying anxiety and self-gifting. It presents marketers and others with insights on processes by developing a model on how anxiety is connected to, and drives, self-gift giving. Koles, Wells and Tadajewski (2018) suggest that more qualitative (or mixed-methods) studies are needed within compensatory consumption to capture nuances, and to

compensate for consumers' lack of awareness of that what they are buying is a compensation. This study contributes to that by using a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews. While many past studies are quantitative with artificial cases (example: Mouakhar-Klouz, d'Astous & Darpy, 2016) the method here focuses on real experiences of the respondents.

This study further contributes to the discussion and knowledge on sustainability. Social sustainability is addressed by extending the knowledge on consumer health, by investigating how strong emotions (anxiety) is felt and how it is affecting the purchase decision when self-gifting. UN state that urgent action is needed to combat the climate change (UN Environment Programme, n.d.). As compensatory consumption leads to increased shopping (Koles, Wells and Tadajewski, 2018) which affects the climate negatively, it is both timely and pressing to develop further understanding of more areas within compensatory consumption. This, as it will help decision makers, politicians and others, to make better informed decisions.

This article continues with a literature review (chapter 2) covering relevant research on consumer behavior of compensatory consumption related to self-gifting and (social) anxiety. This leads to the establishment of a research gap. Followed is a statement of the methodology used in the study (chapter 3) and a statement of the results (chapter 4). The literature review and results are compared in the discussion and conclusions as well as limitations and suggestions for further research are presented (chapter 5). At the end an interview guide can be found in the appendix.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Self-gifting**

Self-gifting is the phenomenon that was early described by Levy as an event where “I as subject reward me as object” (Levy, 1982, p. 542). Levy (1982) was curious about the phenomenon and the logic in the minds of those who self-gift and what meanings these consumers use and connect to the purchase. As mentioned in the introduction, a motive for self-gifting is self-gratification and it is suggested that this motive leads to consumers sometimes buying themselves something extra when the consumer is feeling depressed (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). Self-gifting can contain symbolic meanings and make consumers feel better about themselves and act as a manifestation that the consumer is a person worth showing appreciation (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). What “self-gifts” are can be interpreted in several manners (Mick & DeMoss, 1990), in this study it is identified as things bought for oneself that is not strictly necessary. This means that if someone buys milk and bread in the supermarket it is excluded from the analysis, however, if someone treats itself to a fancy loaf at the hip bakery it is included. Purchases studied are also any self-gifting described by the interview object that has similar kinds of symbolic meanings. It is the specific motivation and context that differs self-gifts from other purchases made for oneself (Heath, Tynan & Ennew, 2011). Past literature has lifted the idea that the meanings of self-gifting can be “post hoc rationalizations” (Mick & DeMoss, 1990, p. 681) to deal with emotions like guilt. The risk of consumers changing the meanings after the purchase is addressed in the interview guide in

this study by asking the respondents how they felt in different stages of self-gifting and identifying situations when they had an aim to self-gift when going shopping and situations when they identified the purchase as self-gifting afterwards.

In gift giving both the giver and the receiver is affecting the exchange (Schwartz, 1967). Self-gifting is special as one person takes both the role of giver and receiver. As self-gifting can, by being a reward to oneself, improve self-esteem it can have a self-regulatory and reinforcing function (Park, 2015).

## **2.2 Anxious self-gifting**

The motives for shopping can be far different and of many different kinds (Tauber, 1972). They can be social or personal and planned or impulse (Tauber, 1972). This study investigates situations in which the motives are related to, or driven by, anxiety.

To be able to understand the anxiety meanings of consumer self-gifting practices a demarcation of anxiety is made according to the following. Anxiety is an “emotion characterized by apprehension and somatic symptoms of tension in which an individual anticipates impending danger, catastrophe, or misfortune” (American Psychology Association, 2018a). As a reaction to the perceived threat physical reaction often occur in the individual with tensed muscles, fast breathing and increased heartbeat (American Psychology Association, 2018a). Although the terms fear and anxiety are often used interchangeably according to American Psychology Association (2018a) they are distinguishable in their focus. Anxiety is often aimed broadly on a diffuse threat where the individual is future-oriented with long-acting response (American Psychology Association, 2018a). Fear is an “appropriate, present-oriented, and short-lived response to a clearly identifiable and specific threat” (American Psychology Association, 2018a). Social anxiety entails concern about one’s social role, behavior and status (American Psychology Association, 2018b). American Psychology Association further identifies social anxiety as “fear of social situations in which embarrassment may occur (e.g., making conversation, meeting strangers, dating) or there is a risk of being negatively evaluated by others (e.g., seen as stupid, weak, or anxious)” (American Psychology Association, 2018b). Social phobia or social anxiety disorder is when the social anxiety (or performance anxiety) is extreme and persistent and associated with avoidance behavior and/or strong discomfort (American Psychology Association, 2018c). This study focuses on the experiences of consumers who feel anxiety and/or social anxiety.

Hur and Choo (2016) state that the main motivations for self-gifting can be classified as therapeutic, reward, celebratory and other. As this thesis focuses on self-gifting when the consumer is feeling anxiety, therapeutic motivation is central. Associated reward motivation will also prove to play an important role in highlighting the meanings of consumer self-gifting. Therapeutic motivation is when self-gifts are bought to comfort oneself in depressing or stressful situations and the action of self-gifting is made to relieve oneself from feelings of failure and pain (Hur & Choo, 2016). Reward motivation is when the choice to self-gift is made to reward oneself, often for personal achievements (Hur & Choo, 2016). Reward

motivation can drive purchases both related to the achievement (example grade), the process of achieving something (example studying) and to encourage more effort to achieve the goal (Hur & Choo, 2016).

Self-esteem plays an important role in consumption behavior and purchase intentions (Khan, Ishaq, Iqbal & Raza 2024). Consumers are found to compensate for negative feelings to improve self-esteem and one way of doing that is by self-gifting (Khan et al, 2024).

### **2.3 Self-gifting as a compensatory consumption practice**

Consumer goods do not only have functional values but also psychological value (Mandel, Rucker, Levav & Galinsky, 2017). These psychological values of goods can be used by consumers to reduce different forms of distress (Mandel et al, 2017) (e.g. anxiety). In this study we look at how compensatory consumption is used to reduce anxiety by self-gift giving.

Within studies on consumer behavior, compensatory consumption is an umbrella that contain behaviors where perceived desires, deficits and needs are compensated for with alternative means (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). Compensatory consumption is based on the idea that consumers are influenced by non-rational forces (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). Something is bought not because that it is truly needed but to obtain an emotion. Instead of doing something negative or something that one cannot perform well in, compensation can be used by focusing on something one is good at or something positive (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). This can mean that instead of studying for a difficult exam a person may choose to indulge in shopping, perhaps buying one's favorite chocolate. Compensatory consumption can be done quite suddenly as consumers can compensate by making impulse purchases (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018).

The want to reduce anxiety can relate to a discrepancy between how the consumer is feeling and how it wants to feel. Mandel, Lisjak & Wang (2021) state that when a purchase is made to cope with a difference between one's actual self and one's ideal self (i.e. a self-discrepancy), it is a form of compensatory consumption. Self-discrepancy is associated with anxiety (Higgins, 1987). One of the reasons for this compensatory consumption is that as Sarup and Raja (1996) state, consumption is "a way of gaining identity, meaning" (p. 105).

There can be both negative and positive forms of compensatory consumption (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). In the positive form there is a real need, however, it cannot be obtained, and an alternative is found and consumed instead, i.e. a compromise is made (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). Consumption that is in the negative end of the continuum of compensatory consumption is the focus of this study. On the negative end the motive to buy something is less consistent and there is a lack of need satisfaction (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018). This lack means that the compensatory consumption is likely unsuccessful, the feelings experienced before the purchase will return and a new compensatory cycle emerge (Koles, Wells & Tadajewski, 2018).

The perception that there is a difference between how things are and how the consumer wants things to be (the discrepancy) can lead to acquisition of goods that symbolize accomplishment, increased shopping of self-affirming goods or goods that signal desirable traits and an overall increased level of consumption (Koles, Wells & Tadjewski, 2018). This compensatory consumption can be made with the strategies ‘direct resolution’ or ‘fluid resolution’ (Mandel, Lisjak & Wang, 2021). Direct resolution means that what is purchased and consumed is within the same field as the discrepancy whereas fluid resolution means that the consumption is in a different area than the discrepancy (Mandel, Lisjak & Wang, 2021) (e.g. purchasing chocolate when feeling a lack of social relationships). The consumers themselves may not be aware that what they are buying is a compensation for their emotions (Koles, Wells & Tadjewski, 2018). This is due to consumers having different levels of conscious awareness of their compensatory consumption (Koles, Wells & Tadjewski, 2018).

### **3. Research methodology**

#### **3.1 Study context & setting**

In the literature, three areas within shopping are identified that presented largely different ways of how something is bought. As this study focuses on human interaction, grocery shopping is excluded from the study. Shopping fashion apparel and shopping fashion items (consumer goods that are carriers of cultural meaning, McCracken, 1986) largely differs as changing rooms and the related process plays a large role when buying apparel (Otieno, Harrow and Lea-Greenwood, 2005). To focus on one process, this study focuses on shopping of fashion items and self-gifting. Furthermore, although consumer behavior consists of the three activities shopping, buying and consuming (Tauber, 1972) this study focuses on shopping and some analysis of buying.

To ensure that the study is cumulative, meaning that it builds on previous scientists’ work and identifying the scientific discourse (overview of theories, existing empirical knowledge, previously used methods and normative discussions of how things should be) (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, Towns & Wängnerud, 2017) within anxious self-gifting, a literature review was made. The literature review placed the thesis in the scientific context. For the literature review databases were used to identify meaningful articles. Scopus was the database mainly used, and Scopus was used with the following settings: Limited to: Language: English, Source type: Journal, Publication stage: final, subject area: “Business, management and accounting”, “social sciences”, “decision sciences”, “psychology” and “multidisciplinary”. “Sort by relevance” was alternated with “Sort by cited by (highest)”.

To start I looked at articles that had over 100 citations, that combined with the first search presented me with 17 articles. Some of those were still highly focused on e-commerce or the web in other ways, those were only skimmed through to begin with as focus was put on self-gifting when shopping in physical stores. Search terms used in different searches were “retail\* OR store\*”, “marketing”, “emotion\*”, “consumer behavio\*”, AND “anxiety” AND NOT “web OR online”. The focus was developed to lay on three main searches; “self-gift”; “social

anxiety” AND “self-gift”; “compensatory consumption” AND “social anxiety”. After initial analysis of the interviews were done additional searches on “anxiety” (excluding “social”) and “self-gifting AND compensatory consumption” were made to complement the literature review.

### **3.2 Research approach**

This thesis attempts meaning making and interpretation of linguistic material with the aim of creating explanations and theory, as such it uses qualitative data analysis (Flick, 2014). Empirical research questions lean on observations of reality (Esaiasson et al, 2017). In this study the observations come from the experiences of the interview objects. These interviews delve into the experiences of consumers who self-gift when feeling anxiety and on how these consumers describe these situations. As such, the thesis uses an approach focusing on subjective experiences (Flick, 2014). The thesis started in empirical data to systematically develop good theory and moved back and forth between theory and empirical data. This means that inspiration from an abductive approach was used (Esaiasson et al, 2017). Furthermore, as this thesis aims to explain processes and the experiences of consumers the thesis uses ideas from phenomenology as Flick (2014) state that this epistemology is useful for describing experiences and appearances of phenomena.

The study extends existing research by combining marketing, retail and psychology and perform interviews to learn more of the role of anxiety in compensatory consumption. The interviews looked at how atmospheric elements work (Kotler, 1973; Baker, Grewal and Parasuraman, 1994), other reasons to shop than an actual need (Tauber, 1972) and emotions (Walsh et al, 2011; Berčík, J., Horská, E., Gálová, J. and Margianti, E. S., 2016) in relation to social anxiety and self-gifting. During the analysis the most meaningful topics was identified, and this steered the study to then focus on internal creation of the idea to self-gift, lacking self-esteem/self-worth and the gaze of important others.

### **3.3 Sampling strategy**

Respondents were sampled focusing on centrality and aspects of quota sampling to achieve good representation. The sample was made with sampling in mind as important persons, central in the phenomenon was included (Esaiasson et al, 2017). That the choice of who to interview achieved centrality was ensured by asking two introductory questions before an interview was booked. These questions insured relevance and that the interviewee had experienced strong emotions and/or anxiety when buying a fashion item as a self-gift recently. The size of the sample was determined by seeking saturation and landed on ten interviews. This summed a total of ten hours with data to analyze.

The sample that is being studied in this article represent young persons that has experienced anxiety and/or social anxiety in relation to shopping fashion-items in physical retail stores. Everyone in the sample has a connection to Sweden, either they are Swedish and/or they have

lived here for a longer period. The sample consists of persons between age 23 and 31, eight women and two men, most having finished studies at university. This sample is chosen with support from statistics (CES Region Stockholm, n.d.) suggesting that the phenomenon being studied is more widely experienced by younger persons (than example middle-aged) and that more women experience anxiety than men. For ethical reasons (and as anxiety may be a sensitive topic for some) the names of the interviewees and some other identifications are removed from the data.

### **3.4 Data collection – interviews**

The data collection for our investigation is executed via interviews. These interviews are recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions form the basis for the analysis. These interviews were made with a phenomenological inspired research approach (Flick, 2012) with the aim to study the phenomenon anxious self-gifting in retail in physical stores. This approach was chosen as it lets the experience of the informants steer the conversation and to open to surprising aspects that the informants might mention (Flick, 2012). As such, semi-structured interview was conducted by using an interview guide and asking probing questions.

Conversational interviews give an opportunity for interaction between researcher and respondent (Esaiasson et al, 2017). This form of semi-structured interview also gives good opportunities to register unexpected responses (Esaiasson et al, 2017). For these reasons conversational interviews were conducted.

The interview guide (see appendix 1) was broader than the final presentation of self-gifting processes, reflecting the want to use aspects of an abductive approach. According to Flick (2012) this makes the data collection less sensitive to presuppositions of the researcher. This meant that the interview guide covers aspects such as store environment, something that according to Walsh et al (2011) affect emotions. The interviews started with general questions about shopping and demography to ease into the conversation. The interviews were then divided into six themes: other humans; store environment; awareness of consequences and control; purchase; rules for yourself and norms; and other questions. Each theme in the interview guide covered questions developed to gain insights on how the consumer self-gift, their process of self-gifting and when and how anxiety is present and influence that process. The interviews were finished with some questions on anxiety and social anxiety. Probing was done during the interviews to ensure a correct understanding of the interviewed consumers' perceptions and experiences as well as to dig deeper and learn more about what is being told. The probing was done during the interviews by active listening, asking both prepared and spontaneous follow-up questions. Both more general questions, examples: "What makes you feel that way?" "How does it feel when ...?" "Could you develop on that?" and more specific questions about what the respondents had said earlier were used. Several probing questions was asked after each other to develop understanding.

Although nuances are more easily precepted when executing physical meetings for the interviews, online interviews was also held due to convenience and for geographical reasons.

If meeting physically, the location was chosen with consideration to the importance of that the interview is in an environment where the interviewee can feel comfortable, especially as it might be sensitive to some to discuss emotions and anxiety.

### 3.5 Data analysis

During the interviews, sound files were recorded and these were later transcribed. The text files formed the data that was analyzed, using the Gioia method, in this study. The Gioia method is an approach within grounded theory that was chosen for this study due to its advantages in structuring data and then creating theory from that structure (Gioia & Magnani, 2023). The use of grounded theory is both rigorous and flexible and is a research approach where analysis and data collection are conducted simultaneously (Flick, 2012). This is beneficial for the aims of this study as it allows for adjustments due to surprising findings.

As the Gioia method suggests, first order analysis was executed by first identifying relevant passages and quotes, without any interpretation (Gioia & Magnani, 2023). In the second step these data points are grouped into different themes (in this study by color-coding them and grouping them in a new document). Finally, data and theory were combined, and the abductive method was applied to create aggregated themes that is presented below as the result and discussion.

The Gioia method suggests presenting the results in a figure (Gioia & Magnani, 2023), here the Gioia method was used more freely. Instead of making this figure the result was developed into illustrations of the process of how anxiety leads to self-gifting (illustration 1).

## 4 Results

The results show that the processes of anxious self-gift giving follow different paths. Three paths starting with anxiety and leading to self-gift giving is identified and presented in illustration 1. The different routes are explained in sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3. Section 4.4 summarizes the results and disclose some communalities and effects.

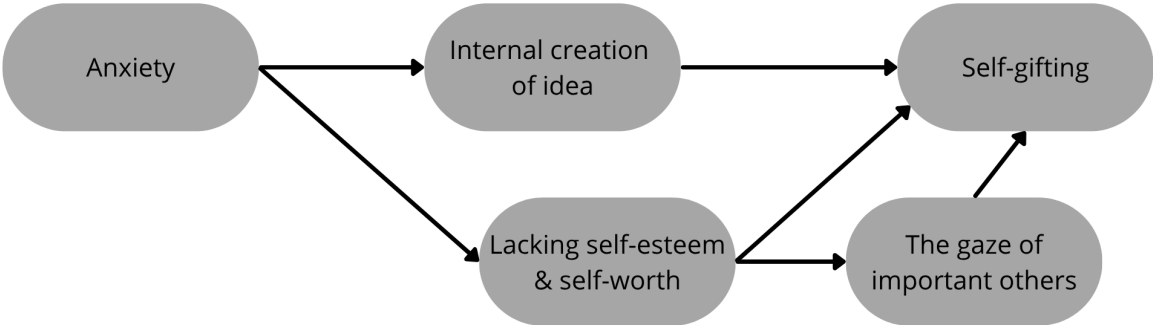


Illustration 1

All identified paths start with the consumer being anxious. The simplest path is an internal creation of the idea to self-gift (4.1). The next path is incorporating low self-esteem and low self-worth (4.2) and lastly, a path includes both lacking self-esteem & self-worth as well as the gaze of important others (4.3).

#### 4.1 Internal creation of idea

The results show that anxiety leads to different consumer behaviors related to self-gifting (compared to shopping without that emotional state). Several of the respondents describe experiencing anxiety as a driver for making purchases and the decision to go shopping. However, the results show that strong emotions (example feeling overwhelmed or crowded) can lead to both extremes, and while it can lead to higher spending and more impulse purchases some respondents describe situations in which these feelings lead to them leaving the store emptyhanded. The most common description of the processes is that it leads to consumption.

The first path (highlighted in illustration 2) that was identified is the shortest process. In this process, anxiety leads to the consumer having an internal creation of the idea to self-gift which leads to a purchase and self-gifting.

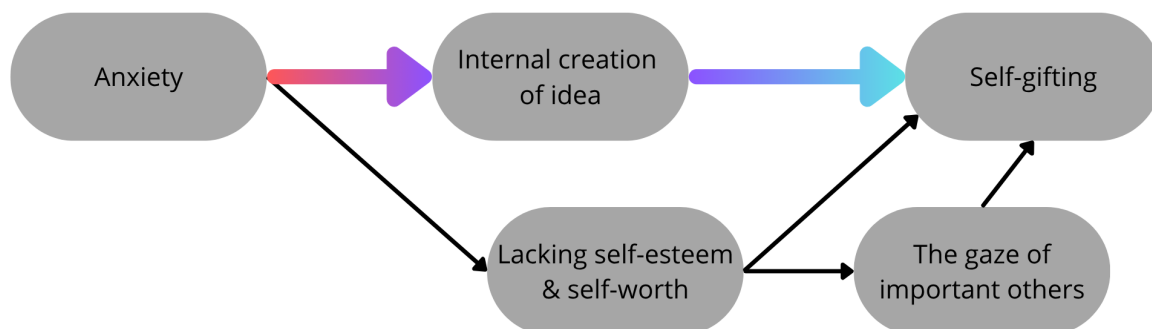


Illustration 2

Respondents witness about that experiencing anxiety make them act differently in self-gifting situations. What they buy when feeling anxiety (before entering a store or induced in-store) is not necessarily something they would have bought in a different emotional state. “I don’t think I would have bought it two days later” is said about a purchase one respondent made when she had anxiety. In these situations, self-gifting works as a distraction where the respondents express that they need something other than what is provoking the anxiety to think about. Then, self-gifting is a way to change the mood and get rid of the feeling in the body. Another respondent explained that she has realized that “no matter how many lipsticks I buy, this won’t fix the issue. So now I’m still miserable but I have more lipsticks, I don’t know, I have more colors”. At the same time these lipsticks fulfill a short-term purpose as they lift her mood and spirit, creating a sense that the respondent is happier while buying the self-gift. A different respondent support by saying that he “think time cures a lot of the wounds, you know? So, in a sense, like because of this distraction, I was able to process

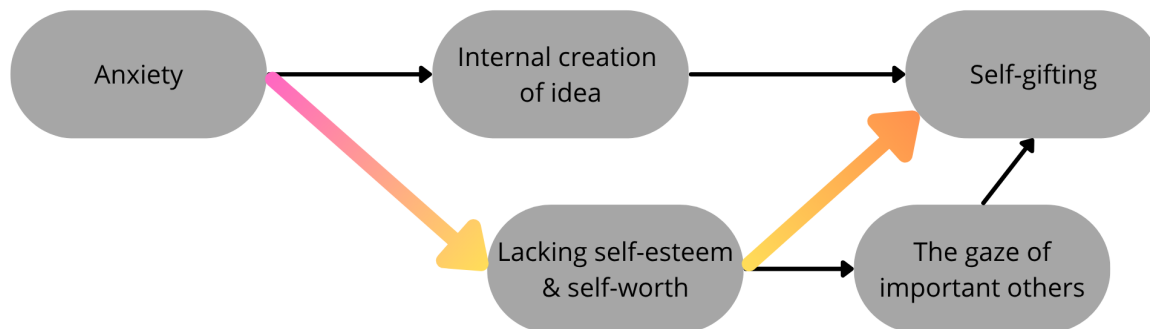
things and kind of put them on the back burner”. Even if they buy things they would not have bought when feeling calm, what is purchased is given a different meaning, as a lifter of one’s spirit.

One respondent describes a specific occasion where she was upset over a situation she deemed unfair which made her feel both angry and sullen. The respondent then described that she shut off others by having turned off her phone and then went shopping. She said: ”I had not planned to buy it. And it also was some kind of way to... ensure that I felt a bit better, decreasing the aggressiveness inside”. The shopping experience was in relation to the event provoking strong emotions described as “total distraction” that makes anxiety emotions vaguer. Another informant says similarly that buying clothes can be a good self-gift when feeling anxiety as he feels “joy when taking on new clothes”. Both self-gifting processes occur without interference of other persons.

In the data it is seen that self-gifting tends to be either done with more generosity or not done at all when feeling anxiety or social pressure. Either the respondents describe how they think too much about their decisions in these occasions, or they describe a lack of energy to think and making impulse purchases. They can be apathic, not having the energy to gift themselves something, or still wanting to gift themselves something but not having the energy to consider the self-imposed rules they otherwise follow. Some of them describe the self-gifting as an accomplishment itself and are generally motivated to make a purchase even when the anxiety is making them lacking energy.

#### **4.2 Lacking self-esteem & self-worth**

A theme that stands out when interviewing consumers that experience anxiety and/or social anxiety is the judgement of themselves and how they put higher standards for and judge themselves stricter than they judge others. It is sometimes related to the rules that the informants talk about. It was said by one informant: “sometimes, I must confess, like I even judge people myself” clarifying that it is not only themselves they judge. However, these consumers seem to judge themselves more harshly. What is okay for someone else to do is not seen as positive if the respondent itself were to act that way. Illustration 3 highlights the process when a worry (anxiety) leads to a lacking self-esteem and a lacking self-worth which then leads to self-gifting.



*Illustration 3*

These stricter rules for oneself are also seen in the decision of when a gift can be bought. It was said: “I don't like buying it for myself. But I would, you know, treat others”. That respondent later continued: “I used to get clothes that I didn't like myself, but I knew that other people would like, and I like that I have a jacket here like I don't, I bought it because of a girl, I will confess, and now I wear it and I get tons of compliments. But I didn't buy it for myself so I'm like, I'm not the biggest fan of this in a sense”.

One respondent has changed what it buys in order to steer attention away from things it is not satisfied with so that others will focus on other things “instead of buying clothes, because I was so conscious about my body, I would shift purchases to cosmetics instead. [...] I guess they fit everyone so you don't have to worry”. This judgement of oneself and wanting to be good enough does not only steer away from some types of self-gifting but also steer self-gifting towards other types of fashion-items. Some things are explained by a sense of accomplishment, especially if others notice and give you credit for something you have created for yourself (a knitted sweater and a cozy home are examples mentioned).

Some respondents are aware that they have stricter standards for themselves and some are less aware. One informant explained in the interview: “I feel myself not good enough like this or as I read that thing, what other people would think about it. You feel anxious and yeah negative things as well”. Another respondent worries about what others may think of his purchases, even though he sees that other in his vicinity make the same purchase and gift themselves those same things without him thinking it is odd or incorrect. One respondent said: “if I don't keep these promises that I urge other people to make myself, then that makes me kind of a hypocrite. I do try to lead by example” although judging from the rest of the conversation she already seems to fulfill more than what she urges others to do.

One respondent might have an idea on why she puts stricter rules to herself on what she is allowed to self-gift. She says that she is “an over-thinker” and might ruminate where every possible negative aspect of one's decision is considered. This could relate to a different respondent's want to “just be a normal human”.

### 4.3 The gaze of important others

Something that becomes clear in the study is the great influence of who you shop with. The relationship between consumers with anxiety and those they visit stores with shapes the emotional experience and the actions of these consumers when trying to buy something for themselves. If feeling anxiety before going shopping, then respondents say that they can handle less social stress than on other occasions. This process is highlighted in illustration 4 where anxiety leads to a lacking self-esteem and lacking self-worth, the situation is influenced by the gaze (feeling of being judged) by important others and lastly leads to self-gifting.

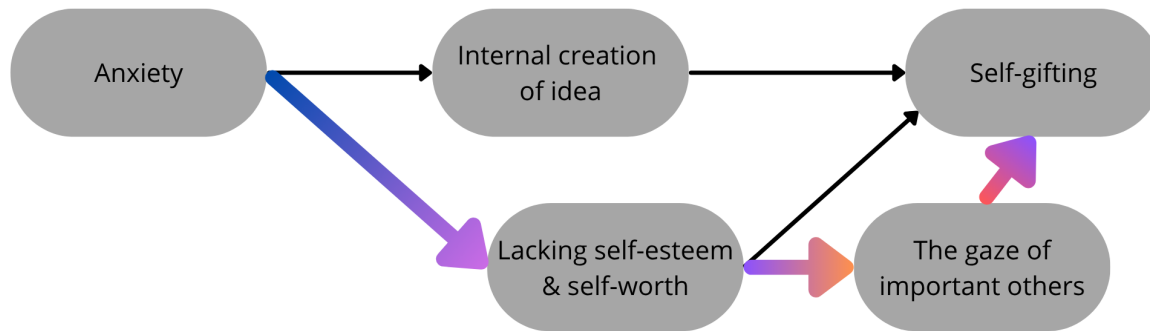


Illustration 4

The social context and company can have both a positive and negative influence and past experiences in the same social context are often present in the mind of the consumer when shopping. An interviewed respondent describes a stress when shopping with others, stating that he cannot relax if it does not shop on its own. He further describes a pressure to be on top-behavior when shopping with others, leading to him not buying anything due to lack of focus. One respondent agrees with this by also describing how she has browsed the store a bit on its own but has been able to shop (both in general and to itself) together with its parents ones she is not feeling as much anxiety. A second respondent agreed by stating that it creates social pressure to shop with friends because you have to interact with another person, she developed: “I remember I was trying to fit in with some new university friends, so I kind of followed the lead. But then yeah, I realized that we were not a good fit anyway”. She also said about its upbringing that “I was often kind of judged for not caring what I wore during school” and that it created social anxiety.

It is also said that it is fun to shop with friends but difficult to make purchases to oneself in that social context. “In the moment it's fun and when you're home alone then you're asking yourself did I really need that and then I most of the times annoyed of myself that I just like yeah, to do that” says one respondent. On the other hand, one respondent describes close friends as helpful to manage anxiety and to be able to self-gift. She described how its friends reinforced the strong want for something she already wanted and talked her through the stressful experience.

On a more positive note on shopping with someone else, one person described shopping with her mom as an important part of bonding with her parent as a teenager. Many respondents express a feeling of safety when shopping with parents. However, the results show tendencies

of consumers being overwhelmed with thoughts of how their relationship is when shopping with their parents. This, for example by feeling the pressure of living in one's father's shadow. It was also said that "stress is higher when I'm with my parents shopping" due to the respondent feeling emotional pressure. One respondent says that the anxiety lays closer at bay as it means more when it is someone close he is shopping with. Clear is that the gaze of important others influences the process.

All three different process lead to reduced anxiety when self-gifting, as shown in illustration 5. The anxious consumers put high moral on themselves and compensate discrepancies with self-gifting. This leads to increased wellbeing, at least momentarily.

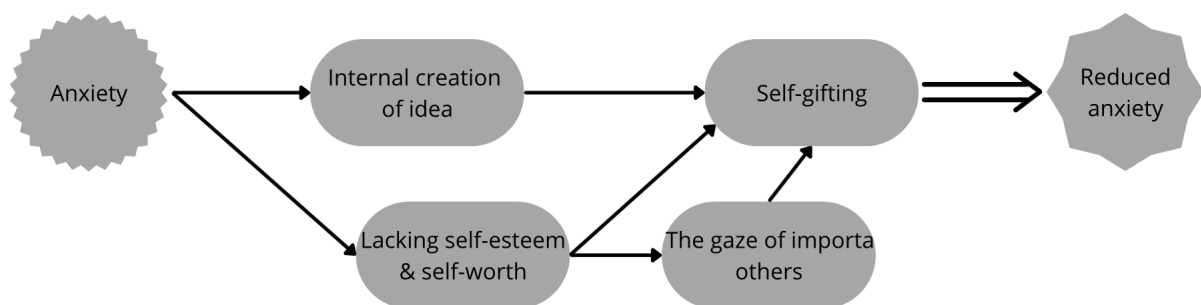


Illustration 5

## 5. Discussion & conclusion

The study shows that self-gifting is done as a compensatory consumption that leads to reduced anxiety. Self-gift giving serves both as a compensation for what is causing the anxiety and as a general means to deal with emotions. Sometimes the self-gifting is more directly connected to the anxiety but most often it is what Mandel, Lisjak and Wang (2021) describe as fluid resolution. Anxiety is driving self-gifting via an internal creation of the idea, lacking self-esteem and self-worth and/or the gaze of important others.

Knowledge gained from this study has both academic implications and implications for marketers. The learnings further the knowledge on anxious self-gifting by a greater understanding of the process where internal creation of idea, lacking self-esteem and self-worth and the gaze of important others influence how anxiety leads to self-gifting. The learnings can be used for consumer relationship management and marketing but can also be used to drive social and environmental sustainability. The sustainable aspect is possible as new knowledge have been developed on processes that can lead to over-consumption. This knowledge also needs further ethical considerations as it can lead to miss-use by companies to instead encourage increased shopping when consumers are anxious.

Literature suggests that culture influences the described processes. As such this study presents possible limitations in generalizability as it studies the Swedish cultural context. Finally, I

would like to present some suggestions for future research. A highly interesting field to develop further is the connection to sustainability. Future studies could benefit in connecting anxious self-gifting as compensatory consumption to social and ecological sustainability issues, to learn how the findings could be used to encourage sustainable development. This could be done by looking at who bears the responsibility (possibly connecting to responsabilization) and how self-discrepancies sometimes increase and sometimes decrease consumption. Future research could also look at the process after a purchase has been made to learn about the long-term effects of anxious self-gifting.

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# Appendix

## Interview guide

### Introduction

- Can you share some demographic data? Age, gender, ethnicity, highest education and occupation?
- What do you think about going shopping?
- Do you usually make purchases in physical stores?
- Do you often buy yourself gifts?
- Is there a certain kind of shopping-experiences where you feel overwhelmed/stressed/worry? Is there a certain kind of shopping-experiences where you have these feelings, and it is connected to social aspects/a worry about what others may think?

### Other humans

- How does other humans in stores affects you? What do you think is the reason that you feel that way?
- How does the store personnel affect you? What do you think is the reason that you feel that way?
- Are there things that the store personnel can do to make the situation/stress/pain in the chest/anxiety worse or better?
- Do you avoid shopping in physical stores due to the presence and or judgement of others?

### Store environment

- Does music in stores affect you? What do you think is the reason that you feel that way? How does the music affect you?
- Do other aspects of the store affect you? The layout?

### Awareness of consequences & control

- How does your worry/stress/feeling overwhelmed effect you in a physical store?
- Do you feel in control of your behavior in the store? Do you make impulse purchases, refrain from any purchases at all, when feeling worried/stressed due to other persons? Can you explain about this? What? How?

### Purchases

- Do you sometimes buy things when feeling symptoms such as pain in the chest/increased heart rate/stress? What kind of things do you buy then? Is what you buy different from occasions where you do not feel these things? What do you think is the reason for the possible difference?
- Can you tell me about the things you buy when you buy something to lift your mood? Are you aware of something physical in these situations? Increased heartrate, sweat, pain over the chest, need to go to the bathroom?

- Are you aware of any social connection in these situations? For example, a worry regarding what others will think or how they will react. How is that shopping experience? What do you think makes it so?
- Do you regret what you buy in situations when you feel increased heartrate, sweat, pain over the chest, need to go to the bathroom and a worry regarding what others will think?
- Can you tell me about the things you buy when celebrating something that has happened, in "yey-me"-situations? How does that shopping experience feel?
- Do you feel that you shop more when feeling down? What do you think makes you buy more or less in these situations?
- Is there a particular kind of purchases you make when you feel down/in a bad mood/spirit?
- Do you think that you would have bought what you bought when down in a situation when you were in a happier mood?

#### Rules for yourself and norms

- When a purchase is executed, and it is a gift for yourself when you have felt down. Can you talk me through that experience? How do you feel then?
- Do you have rules regarding what you can and cannot buy et cetera?
- Do you strive to align with norms?

#### Other

- The thing that has caused a worry about what others may think, is that something that you think about when buying something for yourself? Or does it work as a distraction?
- In these situations, when shopping to yourself and feeling peer pressure/worry about others judgement/wish to belong, do you become aware of a certain part of your body?

#### Five yes or no questions.

Do you experience worry regarding:

- Being judged by others?
- Making a fool of yourself?
- Losing control while others look at you?
- What others think of you?
- To small talk?