

Self-gifting and Temporal Selves: Insights from First-time Older Motherhood

ABSTRACT

Prior literature has long established self-gifts as a form of symbolic self-communication that can be particularly meaningful and impactful for individuals to enhance self-concept clarity and self-definition during life transitions. However, little is known about how life transitions may bring about changes in the practices and meanings of self-gifting. Drawing on individual interviews with twenty-two first-time older mothers, this research uses temporal self-appraisal theory as the theoretical lens and temporal landmarks as a sensitizing framework to explore how people's past, present and future selves may unfold and interact in influencing their self-gifting practices and meanings. Our findings contribute to a fuller understanding of the temporal nature of self-gifting by highlighting the varying self-gifting orientations that emerge from the interaction, reflecting changes in temporal self-appraisals and how they enable a sense of self-(dis)continuity for psychological wellbeing. The temporal perspective of self-gifts offers a theoretical framework for understanding how self-gifts, a form of symbolic self-communication, express, manage or facilitate perceived self-changes and the need for self-continuity. The marketing implications and applications of the theoretical framework are also discussed.

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Self-gifting is the practice of purchasing a present for oneself. Past research has generally conceptualized self-gifts as a form of symbolic self-communication, focused on celebrations, indulgence, consolation, compensation, self-motivation, sharing, deservedness or life transitions (Bradford & Sherry, 2017; Heath, Tynan, & Ennew, 2015; Mick & DeMoss, 1990a; Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992; Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1995). Being driven by the desire to maintain or enhance self-concepts (how I define myself) or self-esteem (how I feel about myself), self-gifts communicate symbolic meanings and messages to the self (Mick & DeMoss, 1990). However, we know little about how the practices and meanings of self-gifting may develop and evolve over the lifetime, especially during life transitions that can be challenging and prolonged (Appau, Ozanne, & Klein, 2020), often resulting in low self-concept clarity or self-concept confusion (Sedikides, Hong, & Wildschut, 2023).

In consumer culture, the self-extending nature of material objects and experiential spending attains psychological value by supporting our fragile sense of self (Belk, 1988; Noble & Walker, 1997). This is particularly the case with self-gifts consumed for mood-alleviation (Luomala, 1998) and for self-definition when recognition from others is unavailable (Schwartz, 1967, p.3). For example, after purchasing an identity-contrary gift for a close friend, Ward and Broniarczyk (2011) find a greater likelihood for the giver to then purchase for themselves identity-congruent goods, to re-affirm their sense of self. Studying wedding gift registries, as a form of self-selected self-gifts to facilitate the transition to married life, Bradford and Sherry (2013, 2017) describe how these gifts are mobilized by the betrothed to better grasp what it means to be a husband, a wife and a family unit. In sum, research on self-gifting has appreciated the cognitive and

affective meanings of self-gifts as messages between different selves (e.g., the individual, relational and collective selves; the desired and undesired selves), focused on resolving identity-related conflicts and achieving higher self-concept clarity for psychological wellbeing.

However, studies of self-gifting have rarely captured how the temporal selves, from the past, to the present self and onto possible future selves, may unfold and interact in influencing the practices and meanings of self-gifting. A welcome exception is Heath et al.'s (2015) work on examining the changing emotional responses to a self-gift at different times. Yet, these changes are mainly described as an improvement or a worsening of an emotional state ("I felt better" or "I felt worse"), not as changes in the practices and meanings of self-gifting. According to temporal self-appraisal theory (Peetz & Wilson, 2008; Sedikides et al., 2023), people's appraisals of past experiences and future goals—the person one was and the person one will be—alter their subjective perception of the present self. Temporal landmarks—events that stand in marked contrast to the seemingly mundane, everyday occurrences, including major life transitions and first experiences—are particularly likely to restructure self-appraisals, leading people to categorize pre- and post-landmark selves into separate segments and change their perceptions of temporal selves accordingly (Peetz & Wilson, 2013; Shum, 1998). Employing temporal self-appraisal theory as a theoretical lens and the concept of temporal landmarks as a sensitizing framework, our work seeks to examine people's accounts of self-gifts and how they relate to the temporal selves, when faced with challenging and prolonged life transitions.

To this end, we chose to study self-gifting accounts from first-time older mothers in their late 30s and beyond in the UK. Becoming a parent requires a redefinition of the self amid unique identity challenges such as losing a sense of personal identity, adjusting to parenting roles

as well as negotiating social norms and judgements on responsible parenthood (Lévesque, Bisson, Charton, & Fernet, 2020). These identity challenges are heightened for older mothers as they navigate around the stigma attached to being an older parent, wrestling with the cultural ideology of the ‘good mother’ and that of ‘normative’ childbearing age. Examining the narratives of older mothers, Shelton and Johnson (2006, p. 328) find that “there are stories of little disruption; of loss, of being subsumed by motherhood, depression and sadness; of drudgery and invisibility; of anger and hostility; of demands and conflicts; of normative development; of achieving new and positive aspects of identity; and of growth” – all of which are fertile grounds for self-gifting that functions to elevate or protect self-esteem, and to develop and sustain self-concepts for self-definition (Mick & DeMoss, 1990b). As our findings indicate, these narratives also often involve temporal self-appraisals facilitated by temporal landmarks, comparing the past (I used to; I was; pre-landmark self) to the present (I am now; I (don’t) miss the past; present self) and looking into the future (I will; I foresee changes in the future; post-landmark self), making first-time older mothers a very rich context from which to shed further light on the temporal nature of self-gifting. In particular, our research findings offer a more dynamic and nuanced picture of the many temporal constraints and priorities that contribute to differing practices and meanings of self-gifting.

Next, we review literature on the role of self-gifts in life transitions as a form of temporal landmark in facilitating temporal self-appraisals before presenting our findings and discussing their contributions to self-gifting theory and implications for marketing practices and future research.

SELF-GIFTS IN LIFE TRANSITIONS AND THE TEMPORAL LANDMARKS

People go through a range of significant life transitions that fundamentally change who they are during the course of their lifetimes, such as changing jobs, getting married, becoming a parent, or getting a divorce. Prior work has found that life transitions often adversely affect psychological well-being (Iyer, Jetten, Tsvirikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Even though the end result of a life transition may be demonstrably positive, the transition itself may still result in reduced self-concept clarity, producing heightened feelings of anxiety, despair, and general distress for individuals (Slotter & Walsh, 2017). Transitioning to parenthood, for example, while typically considered as a blessing, it can be emotionally, physically and intellectually draining, and requires a redefinition of the self (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020).

With this in mind, Mick et al.'s (1992) projective study of motivations and meanings of self-gifts finds that a large percentage of therapeutic self-gifts are purchased by women during significant life transitions. For example, self-gifts in their study, such as new clothes, makeup and perfume, assume significance in the process of and adjustment to a romantic breakup, by enabling the protection or restoration of self-definition and self-esteem (p. 131, p. 134). Since then, very limited research has been published on self-gifts (e.g., Heath et al., 2015; Rifkin, Wight, & Cutright, 2022; Tynan, Heath, Ennew, Wang, & Sun, 2010). Even fewer studies touch on the role of self-gifts in life-transitions. When they do, they continue to highlight self-gifts as a form of symbolic self-communication during life transitions, without delving deeper into how life transitions may bring about changes in the practices and meanings of self-gifting. For instance, investigating the links between hedonic consumption and self-gifts, Thomas and Pizzolongo (2008) find that for some college students who see spring break activities as a

transition stage of life, experiential consumption serves as *a symbolic self-gift* to help them remember and “mark the transition from college life to the adult world” (p. 157). The lack of self-gifting research on how its practices and meanings may change over time is problematic, as it hinders the theoretical unpacking of the temporal nature of self-gifting.

That said, while not being the main focus of their work, Heath et al. (2015) report how significant life-changing experiences may change one’s attitudes towards life and self-gift giving. For example, one participant in their work described how he has become more impulsive with self-gifting when he realized “life is too short” after recovering from life-threatening injuries (p. 1076). Although this finding shows how life transitions can influence self-gifting orientations, it does not detail the ways in which self-gifting orientations may change over time and the implications for the temporal structure and functioning of self-gifts during challenging and prolonged life transitions.

Examining first-time older mothers’ transition to older motherhood as a temporal landmark (Shum, 1998), we explore and underline the role self-gifts play in connecting and highlighting the discrepancies (e.g., in values, goals, lifestyles and temperament) between the pre-landmark past self, the present self, and the post-landmark future self. According to Peetz and Wilson (2013, p. 15), landmarks in the life course “induce temporal categorization—selves on either side of a landmark are more likely to be organized into different categories, promoting contrast and perceptions of dissimilarity”. Our study theorizes how self-change (perceived discrepancies between the temporal selves) and self-continuity (perceived connectedness between the different temporal selves) influence self-gifting practices and meanings as one undergoes a challenging

and prolonged life transition. Next, we describe how temporal self-appraisal theory is an appropriate theoretical lens for this study.

TEMPORAL SELF-APPRAISAL THEORY

Maintaining psychological wellbeing in a challenging and prolonged life transition requires not only a pervasive need for self-change, but also a contrasting need for self-continuity (cf., Gergen & Gergen, 1997). Sedikides et al. (2023, p. 333) define self-continuity as “the subjective sense of connection between one’s past and present selves (past–present self-continuity), between one’s present and future selves (present–future self-continuity), or among one’s past, present, and future selves (global self-continuity)”. According to the authors, self-change can threaten a sense of self-continuity and reduce self-concept clarity, prompting individuals to engage in temporal self-appraisals in an effort to improve self-concept clarity and achieve positive self-regard.

A central tenet of the temporal self-appraisal theory is that people make temporal comparisons with their past and future selves to evaluate their life trajectory, which influences their sense of psychological wellbeing, goal-pursuits and behavior (Peetz & Wilson, 2008). For example, literature in psychology documents that people tend to criticize and feel psychologically more distant from their past self to feel more positive about their present self and related goal pursuits (Wilson & Ross, 2000). They also tend to feel more removed from their future negative self but closer to a future positive *self*, thus becoming more driven to undertake purpose-led work (Sedikides et al., 2023). For example, Peetz et al. (2009) find that students who felt an upcoming exam was fast approaching, and anticipated success were more motivated to study for and perform well on the test, and as a result, they practised more for the test.

In consumer research, Hershfield et al. (2011) find that the more people can imagine and identify with their future selves, the more they will be willing to save and allocate more resources to the future. Conversely, when the future selves become uncertain, people feel liberated to save less and only focus on the present like the aforementioned participant in Heath et al.'s (2015) study who became more impulsive with self-gifting after realizing "life is too short". As such, Zhang and Aggarwal (2015) challenge the wide use of marketing campaigns that assume consumers' sense of self is always continuous (e.g., nostalgia-based ads that portray the good old days versus future-oriented ads that project a lifelong brand/product relationship). Their findings show how positively consumers evaluate a product or a brand depends on how strongly they see a connection between their present and temporal selves.

Taken together, temporal self-appraisal theory has been useful for both psychologists and consumer researchers in providing frameworks to investigate how temporal selves are (not) linked in self-definition, and the implications for people's psychological and behavioral functioning. Because self-gifting serves as a form of symbolic self-communication for self-definition (Mick & DeMoss, 1990), theorizing the temporal nature of self-gifting, we argue, necessitates an investigation into one's temporal self-appraisals related to self-change and self-continuity. Examining how first-time older mothers engage in temporal self-appraisals, we highlight the ways in which their past, present and future selves unfold and interact to influence their self-gifting orientations. In particular, we show how changes in temporal self-appraisals can affect how self-gifts are experienced and practised.

METHODOLOGY

To gain insight into the temporal nature of self-gifting, we examined the ways in which older first-time mothers seek, utilize and experience self-gifts that define the changes or the evolution of their temporal selves. To this end, we unpack how older first-time mothers undergoing the motherhood transition, as a temporal landmark, begin to put their lives into distinct life segments and how self-gifts assume significance in these segments that (dis)connect the past to the anticipated future as they make sense of the present. As aforementioned, we chose older first-time mothers as information rich cases to generate theoretical insights about the temporal nature of self-gifting, because the transition of older motherhood has been documented to heighten identity challenges that undermine self-concept clarity (see Shelton & Johnson, 2006), and self-gifts have long been recognized as a means to facilitate smooth identity transitions (cf., Bradford & Sherry, 2017; Fischer & Gainer, 1993; Sherry et al., 1995).

With the aid of a market research agency, we recruited and interviewed twenty-two older first-time mothers who had had their first child when they were 39 years old or older, and whose first child was aged up to 4 years old at the time of the recruitment, between February and September 2023. Each individual interview is transcribed and lasted up to 150 minutes with an average of 85 minutes (McCracken, 1988). Our participants mainly belong to the middle/middle upper class, judging from their educational levels and occupational roles. Table 1 summarizes their personal backgrounds (see Appendix). Following Arsel's (2017) tutorial on conducting and designing qualitative research that is of an inductive, emergent nature, we entered the interview with a loosely developed research enquiry into the older motherhood transition and its impact on consumption practices and meanings. The participants were prompted to talk about themselves and their lives before and after becoming mothers as well as how the transition brought about life changes and

challenges. Over the course of the interviews, changes in their self-gifting practices and meanings became a recurrent theme. They reflected on types and experiences of self-gifting in the past prior to becoming a mother, in the present as they are going through the new-born stage and/or into early toddlerhood, and in the future as they anticipate further changes as children grow up and achieve more independence.

Finally, the analysis of the transcribed interviews entailed an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy, first within the context of each interview and then between the body of interviews (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The first author also reflected upon her own self-gifting related consumption and experiences that have gone through many changes as she undergoes the challenging and prolonged motherhood transition. It is through this iterative process of repeated analysis of the interviews and personal reflections that we increasingly gained an enhanced appreciation of the role of temporal selves in influencing how older first-time mothers practise and experience self-gifting related consumption. The interactions among these mothers' past, present, and future imagined selves emerged as critical in organizing and developing their self-gifting orientations. Next, we discuss the many self-gifting orientations that the mothers use to make sense of self-(dis)continuity by linking the (transitional) present to the (pre-landmark) past in preparation for the (post-landmark) future.

THE ROLE OF TEMPORAL SELVES IN INFLUENCING SELF-GIFTING ORIENTATIONS

Reflecting on their (pre-landmark) past, (the transitional) present, and (post-landmark) future selves, our first-time older mothers articulate detailed and thoughtful accounts of how their self-gifting orientations shift as they adjust to the often challenging and prolonged transition of older

motherhood. They experience older motherhood as a gestalt experience, in which their temporal selves are linked to the dynamicity of the self-concept that motivates and changes how they experience and practise self-gifting, both transient and enduring. Below, we identify three types of self-gifting orientation: (1) self-indulgence, (2) the interplay of self-reduction and self-expansion, and (3) self-projection. These self-gifting orientations help the mothers (dis)connect the temporal selves, through which they grasp a sense of self-continuity versus that of self-change. It is, however, important to note that the self-gifting orientations are not mutually exclusive, but our analysis distinguishes which becomes more dominant in the past, present, and future self-gift stories that our mothers tell.

Self-indulgence. While some mothers in our study have endured pregnancy related difficulties and hardship as ‘geriatric’ or ‘IVF’ (In vitro fertilisation) mothers for many years (Tsigdinos, 2022), the majority of the older mothers tell stories of having enjoyed an extended period of personal freedom and independence prior to their attempts at conceiving and preparing for pregnancy. They appear to easily recall a past period when they prioritized career pursuits, had more disposable income, focused more on appearance upkeep, and valued experiential and travel-related consumption for personal pleasure and enrichment. Their self-gifting orientation of the past self is marked by a strong sense of *self-indulgence*, which tends to be highly ego-involving and/or activity-packed with narratives around how they have enjoyed life, had plenty of time to themselves and did many of the things they wanted to do. When probed about gifts they used to purchase for themselves, they tend to allude to the general lifestyle they used to lead as if self-gifting is not special or noteworthy as it is simply part of the lifestyle where they can indulge in personal time, finance, and interests. Consider Melanie’s comments on her life before having children:

Melanie: I was enjoying life, holidays, career, being single, just embracing life really. I was very independent, living by my own rules and got 3 properties. I was travelling 3-4 times a year. I went backpacking by myself. [...] I was carefree, just going away.

In Melanie's verbatim, the recurrent use of the pronoun "I" seems to suggest that the past is a life stage where she is more focused on herself (Pennebaker, 2011). While not all our mothers enjoyed the same degree of financial freedom as Melanie, terms such as "enjoying life" or "embracing life" are repeatedly cited by most of the mothers to refer to the relatively carefree consumer lifestyle they once had had to afford plentiful self-gifting opportunities, ranging from travel to financial investment, to fashion, and to leisure and hobby-related consumption (cf., Liu & Kozinets, 2022). Notably, relating the past carefree self to the present experiences of mothering, we see the mothers narrate an evolving life story of self-gifting with its orientation shifting away from self-indulgence. They frame the motherhood transition as a time of self-change marked by the lack of desire to acquire self-gifts, especially the ones that are regarded as highly indulgent and ego-involving in consumer culture. Dawn gave examples of the types of self-gifts that she no longer indulges in, now she is a mother.

Dawn: I was into buying lots of clothes when I was younger, not anymore...I'm in a different part of my life, right? I've done all this stuff [partying, drinking until four in the morning etc.]. I don't miss it. I don't wish to go out partying until two or three or drinking until four in the morning. Like I don't. I've done all that.

Fashion, partying and alcohol consumption provide the conditions for consumer indulgence, seduction and hedonism that are generally seen as the motifs of Western youth culture (Brain, 2000)—a life stage Dawn sees herself no longer belonging to. In declaring "I'm in a different

part of my life...I don't miss it...I've done all that", Dawn engages in autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Köber, 2015; Singer & Bluck, 2001), interpreting and evaluating remembered experiences, to bridge personal change in her self-gifting orientation, and to help define and further guide the priorities of her present self.

The Interplay of Self-reduction and Self-expansion. "It's an exhausting blessing", Diana states in regard to the motherhood transition—a sentiment that is widely shared among the mothers we interviewed, seemingly reducing their self-concept clarity (self-reduction) while expanding it with dynamism and complexity (self-expansion). Diana further reflects on how the motherhood transition transforms how she practises and experiences self-gifting.

Interviewer: Can you think of the last time you bought something that you felt was a gift to yourself?

Diana: Oh, nothing. In January I tried to. I wanted to look for a causal long coat...with the children [two under three years old running around] like I forgot about looking... I bought nothing for myself...Most people love their children...You don't get a break... But the thing is petty, I would just like one little thing, to get my eyebrows done [but I can't. I need to have every opportunity to sleep] ...How I look after myself has definitely changed.

Just as choosing and buying a perfect gift can be an effortful and time-consuming activity (Mortelmans & Damen, 2001; Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1993), Diana tells a vivid story of how looking for a self-gift with two young children is inherently chaotic and stressful to the extent that she "forgot about looking" and thus "bought nothing" for herself. Despite feeling challenged in finding time to treat herself, Diana downplays her desire for self-gifts in the story she tells by declaring it as "petty", as she rationalizes, "most people love their children...don't get a break".

The rationalization reflects what Scharp and Thomas (2017, p. 407) refer to as the discourse of “(self-)sacrificing blissful moms” in which “children always come first, even at the expense of mothers’ needs”. One of these needs that Diana forgoes is seemingly her desire for self-gifts.

It seems that after birth, the mothers become so invested in childcare in terms of headspace and finance that they tend to not engage in self-gifting as much as in the past, but focus more on buying daily essentials, as Rachel states: “*I bought a tracksuit again, some sleeping shorts, some socks...not much really, just essentials more now*”. That said, when they actually purchase a self-gift, it tends to be about expanding their self-concepts to include the other, rather than self-indulgence in material pleasures. Consider the words of Natalie who describes taking her daughter to *Walt Disney World Paris* as a birthday gift.

Natalie: We're gonna be taking our daughter to [Walt Disney World] Paris in May so it's like for her birthday, my birthday, his [husband's] birthday...I'm really looking forward to seeing her reaction to getting on a plane [to Disney World] and yeah, she definitely has given me a purpose and made me want to be a better person, like pushing for the promotions...to make our lives easier and better and to give her more experiences.

Self-gifting can be a means to convey self-concepts (Mick & DeMoss, 1990) that also often reflect relational selves who derive a sense of enjoyment or achievement from pleasing significant others (Chen, Boucher, & Kraus, 2011; Tynan et al., 2010). While describing *Walt Disney World Paris* as a self-gift, instead of focusing on self-indulgence related narratives, Natalie places the emphasis on how it will bring her great joy by “seeing her (daughter's) reaction to getting on a plane” and enjoying Disney World. This sense of great joy, according to Natalie, is what gives her a purpose in life and makes her want to be a better person “pushing for

the promotions” so that she can afford to give more to her family and her daughter in particular, like a trip to *Walt Disney World Paris* – a self-gift that takes on a collective value in compelling Natalie to achieve more. Many of the Mother’s Day self-gift accounts we have observed also take on this collective value, sharing stories about the personalized jewelleries and photo albums the mothers make as a special purchase to cement the family ties and/or the enduring mother-child bond (cf., Goodman, Lim, & Meyvis, 2018).

Besides self-gifts that are *other-oriented*, we have also observed that while self-gifting for self-indulgence is something that they were all used to in the past, it becomes a new learning experience for our mothers to treat themselves as the majority of them constantly juggle between childcare, work and day-to-day chores (cf., Thompson, 1996). Describing a spin class as a self-gift that her past self enjoyed for training and self-care, Cassie reflects on how it obtains additional value as “the best therapy” as she learns about the significance of self-gifting in enabling “good parenting” and “good mental health” post giving birth.

Cassie: I'm trying [to treat myself more] because I think that it's the key for good parenting and for good mental health ...I used to give my husband all the time he needed to have self-gifts until one person told me, “No, you are the one who needs the most because you just went through IVF...you need to have your self-gifts. And so, I learned it very late [not until Anita was five or six months]. So now yeah, I go. And so if I want to have like a spin class in the evening, I go... [I bought running shoes and] last Sunday I ran my first half marathon ...I found that self-gifts were like a therapy really help me. I feel much better since I understood that self-gifts were essential... setting that goal (running my first half marathon) really helped me with my mental health because I had a purpose.

In identifying self-gifting motivations, Heath et al. (2015) uncover that there is a compensatory/therapeutic dimension in almost all self-gift accounts they examined. That said, while self-gifts can be a potentially powerful tool for therapeutic care, Rifkin et al. (2022) note that when consumers feel constrained about time, energy and finance, they tend to believe self-gifting will not boost emotional wellbeing and thus become less interested in it. Counter to this belief, the authors' experimental results evidence that self-gifting can bring amplified emotional benefits to resource-constrained consumers, when compared with those who feel less constrained. As with Diana, in several stories that Cassie tells, she emphasizes *a sense of constraint* where she endures IVF, deprioritizes her own self-care and finds herself completely alone in new motherhood because of the key lockdowns introduced during the Covid pandemic (cf., Ashman, Radcliffe, Patterson, & Gatrell, 2022). Being reminded about the importance of self-gifts for self-care, Cassie articulates how it serves as a wake-up call that prompts her to look after her own emotional wellbeing with self-gifting consumption. The spin class, running shoes and half marathon are symbolic in that they represent a means to inspire Cassie towards specific goal-pursuits (Mick & DeMoss, 1990) and more crucially, they underline and validate a sense of purpose that prioritizes her personal or individual satisfaction, not her familial selves as a wife and a mother and the related caring responsibilities.

In contrast to their past selves whose self-gifting tend to be described as exciting, luxurious and/or abundant, all our mothers now seemingly value self-gifts more that will bring them calm and personal space without having to splash the cash that can conflict with their relational/familial goal of saving for/spending money on the children.

Julie: I used to go out for meals a lot, buy myself designer clothes...but that wouldn't happen now [because of affordability] ...I'd rather spend it on my kids...Self-gifts is potentially an

hour to yourself per day where you're doing something just for yourself, and that might be just watching a programme on TV, reading a book chapter [that you love]...just a little bit of me time. Not everyday, perhaps just a couple of times a week, just so you can connect with yourself...then it just makes me calmer and a better parent.

Experiencing “time poverty” that can lower their sense of wellbeing, physical health and productivity (Bishop, 2022), means the value of time, especially personal time, becomes profound for our mothers. “Me time” becomes the most sought after self-gift in the accounts of our mothers. With a sense of self-expansion due to their newly acquired relational commitments and maternal love for their children, it seems that they simultaneously experience a sense of self-reduction as in having to forgo their interests outside of childcare/family care responsibilities. In a similar fashion to Cassie’s physical activities that allow her to have “me time”, Julie reinforces how little “me time” – an hour to herself a couple of times a week – she needs to “connect” with herself so that she can grow calmer and have more capacity to parent. “Me time” appears as a self-gift that helps tackle self-reduction by supporting a sense of self-continuity (e.g., “I feel connected with who I was in the past”) (cf., Sedikides et al., 2023, p. 338), which in turn fuels their capacity to ‘expand’ as “a better parent”. Note that it is not to say that in the past, “me time” is not as valuable for these mothers, but it is generally not recalled as a form of self-gift that is precious. The emphasis on “me time” as a self-gift also highlights how our mothers make sense of the self-changes they experienced after birth as they construct evolving narratives of the self in relating the past self to the present self (McAdams, 2001; Peetz & Wilson, 2008).

Self-projection. By self-projection, we mean the mental ability to shift one’s perspectives from the past and the present to the anticipated future. According to temporal self-appraisal

theory, people tend to envisage and desire a continuous upward life trajectory. They tend to criticize past selves (Wilson & Ross, 2001) and anticipate that the future will only get better (Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003; Peetz & Wilson, 2008). This is especially true when a temporal landmark separating the present and future selves is made salient to motivate goals related to self-improvements (Peetz & Wilson, 2013). Having emphasized how self-gifting rarely gets practised due to the lack of time and headspace, Nancy then turns to depict how her future self-gifting practices will be increasingly concentrated on satisfying her personal desires as well as her needs for sociality, which she largely abstains from at present.

Nancy: [What I give myself will be] a day at Spa, sometime shopping, just go to a couple of shops, just not with Leroy (14 months old). Having a long lie in to relax. My past self would have found this boring. I would have wanted a trip abroad, weekend getaways with friends, like Spain. I would have done more. I'm here in the present, that's fine [I might see some clothes when I'm out, but I think I am never going out these days...I don't know size or style anymore]. In the future, Leroy will go to school. I will need less solitude time [to gain a sense of self]. I can start doing creative stuff, craft, seeing friends, doing stuff I used to do and spending more quality time with husband [my non-mothering identity].

People may evaluate their present selves more positively when feeling close to, rather than distant from, a future success (Wilson, Buehler, Lawford, Schmidt, & Yong, 2012). Therefore, they tend to construct stories that emphasize a steady improvement in personal growth and exaggerate the glories of psychologically proximal future selves (Molouki & Bartels, 2017; Peetz & Wilson, 2008). Being able to anticipate her son going to school and how she will have some *breathing space* as a result seems to be what makes Nancy become more tolerant about the present lack of self-gifts/self-care: *"I'm here in the present, that's fine"*.

Note how imagining some more breathing space plays a key role in influencing how Nancy projects how she will experience and practise self-gifting in comparison to her past and present selves. In contrast to her past self that tends to value self-gifts that are activity-packed such as “weekend getaways with friends”, Nancy states how her future self will instead seek self-gifts like a spa day that enable her to cultivate a sense of tranquillity, balance and positive wellbeing, given how completely her 14-month-old son is dependent on her at present: “*Now life is busy. You never have a minute*”. The dramatic change in her self-gifting orientation between her past and future selves is captured by Nancy’s exclamation that, “*My past self would have found this boring*”. We also notice a sharp contrast between her present and future selves in terms of how Nancy’s mothering identity gets featured in the self-gift stories that she tells. In the present, she describes self-gifts such as in finding little time to breathe and buying “little things for Leroy to play so I can clean the kitchen” with a firm focus on fulfilling the commitments of her relational self. However, she largely excludes her son in her future self-gift narratives that typically involve her non-mothering identity: “*Just not with Leroy*”. The exclusion helps Nancy bridge her past and future selves by allowing her to “*start doing creative stuff, craft, seeing friends, doing stuff I used to do and spending more quality time with husband*”, heightening a sense of self-continuity in the face of so much self-change that she had experienced when relating her past to present selves.

This projected sense of self-continuity (Reiff, Hershfield, & Quoidbach, 2020; Sedikides et al., 2023) further instils a sense of felt subjective wellbeing in Nancy. Yet, it is not to say that our mothers no longer see their children being included in their self-gifting endeavors. Notwithstanding, when they do, they tend to project self-gifts as a means of enabling them to continue being part of their children’s lives as they grow older and become more independent.

Having mentioned earlier how self-gifts such as the spin class are crucial for her past self as a form of “*training*” and her present self as “*the best therapy*”, Cassie tears up during the interview when she re-imagines how these same self-gifts will help her future self stay fit enough to see her daughter grow up.

Cassie: I’ll be older, but I will try my best to keep fit [with spin class etc.] so I can see her grow. I’ll be so proud of her because she’ll be doing the activity she wants. She’ll be at the university...I’ll be happy to see her growing, I want to be there for her and I want to see her blossom and be happy. She will have her problems, but I want to be there for her to support her and I’ll try to be more fit.

Feelings of pride are often linked to a future self (Tracy & Robins, 2004). The anticipated pride for her daughter drives Cassie to place renewed significance on self-gifts focused on “keeping fit”. Giving birth at 40, Cassie is clearly concerned about her health and active ageing, and intends to “keep fit” to see her daughter growing up “blossom[ing] and [being] happy”. Taken together, in Cassie’s account, we see how her past, present, and future selves, despite being distinct from one another, come full circle to define and frame her varying experiences with self-gifting and what it means to her at each stage of the life journey.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research uses temporal self-appraisal theory (Peetz & Wilson, 2008; Sedikides et al., 2023) and temporal landmarks (Peetz & Wilson, 2013; Shum, 1998) as steppingstones to explore how the practices and meanings of self-gifting may develop and evolve during life transitions that are challenging and prolonged. Our findings contribute to an enhanced understanding of the temporal nature of self-gifting by highlighting how temporal selves interact to define, develop

and motivate varying self-gifting orientations, such as self-indulgence, self-reduction vs. self-expansion and self-projection. These self-gifting orientations emerge from symbolic self-dialogues between the pre-landmark past, present and post-landmark future selves—as our first-time older mothers engage in temporal self-appraisal to navigate through not only the many self-changes they experience in the motherhood transition, but also the many endeavors that they undertake to enable a sense of self-continuity for psychological wellbeing.

These findings yield new insights into self-gifts as a form of symbolic self-communication. Mick and DeMoss (1990) previously conceptualized self-gifts as a form of symbolic self-communication, focusing on conveying the affective self-regard and self-concepts. Much research has since embraced this conceptualization from which to examine other self-gifting domains, including contexts of self-gifting and related messages (Heath, Tynan, & Ennew, 2011; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002), cultural dimensions of self-gifting (Tynan et al., 2010), emotive aspects of self-gifting (Heath et al., 2015) and the mood-regulatory functioning of self-gifts (Luomala & Laaksonen, 1999). Our findings expand this line of work by pointing to the pervasiveness and expressiveness of temporal selves in guiding and informing symbolic self-communications that have a direct bearing on the ways in which self-gifting is practised and experienced. In identifying the temporal selves, we extend the understanding of self-gifts from what self-concepts a self-gift represents or induces to how self-concepts evolve and change, affecting practices and experiences of self-gifting and vice versa. The temporal perspective of self-gifts offers a theoretical framework for studies that are focused on understanding not only self-gifts as a form of symbolic self-communication, but how this self-communication serves as a vehicle to express, manage or facilitate changes in self-perception and perceptions of self-continuity.

Our findings, like Tynan et al.'s (2010) work, also shed light on the importance of significant others for the enjoyment of the self-gifts. However, we differ in important ways. Studying cultural differences in self-gifting orientation, Tynan et al. (2010) note that self-gifting is less self-oriented for their Chinese participants than for the British. Our study of British first-time older mothers underlines how self-gifting may be more or less self-oriented depending on how the symbolic self-dialogue unfolds between or among the temporal selves. For example, following their mother-role transition, our British first-time mothers speak of self-change in terms of weakened/undermined past-present self-continuity. Prior to their attempts at conceiving and preparing for pregnancy, we find a pervasive self-gifting focus on self-indulgence that is very much a self-oriented expression of individualism focusing on a consumer lifestyle of carefree traveling, partying and/or luxury fashion and designer shopping. Moreover, while the motherhood transition imbues their self-concept with confusion, fragility and at times negativities around the lack of time and energy for self-care because of reduced past-present self-continuity, it also generally inspires our mothers to visualize past self-indulgences as a life stage along a pathway to greater meaning in family life. This reduced self-concept clarity, coupled with the visualization of meaningfulness, induce more other-oriented less self-oriented—self-gifting pursuits with the former driven by a sense of self-reduction and the latter by a sense of self-expansion. Both focus on the criticality or the prioritization of their relational/familial selves in influencing their practices and experiences of self-gifting. Finally, as our mothers look into the future and envisage their children progressing to school and adulthood, they generally foresee having more personal time, facilitating a return of more self-oriented self-gifting pursuits. In addition to a sense of deservingness (Cavanaugh, 2014; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002), it appears that these projected self-oriented self-gifting pursuits are significant in that they often trigger

state nostalgia in terms of their desire to relive some aspects of bygone days, especially their non-mother identity, such as Nancy's needs for experiential gifts (Puente-Díaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2021) that will allow her to do creative stuff and craft as well as spend quality time with her husband and friends. The state nostalgia as experienced in projected self-gifting pursuits works to counteract feelings of self-discontinuity and helps our mothers restore/foster self-continuity through which they derive psychological wellbeing, meaning and purpose (Sedikides et al., 2023).

Furthermore, our findings are consistent with Rifkin et al.'s (2022) experimental findings on how the feeling of constraint can discourage self-gifting related consumption. The challenging and prolonged motherhood transition often leaves our new mothers feeling too constrained financially, physically and/or psychologically to self-gift, especially between the new-born stage and early toddlerhood. Yet, as Rifkin et al. (2022) also note, a brief self-gifting experience can have amplified well-being boosts to those who feel most resource-constrained, relative to their less-constrained counterparts. We add to this finding by presenting narratives from our mothers that frame self-gifts not only as a "*therapy*" for personal growth (e.g., "*me time*" for mental health) and relational betterment (e.g., "*good parenting*"), but also as something that they need to learn how to practise again. Given the motherhood transition necessitates de-prioritization of self-care (Shelton & Johnson, 2006), our mothers, like the working mothers in Thompson's (1996) seminal work, have to constantly juggle between their caring commitments and personal desires and often go through guilt trips when engaging in self-care. Therefore, we find that by emphasizing the new-found significance of self-gifting to both their personal and relational wellbeing, our mothers seem to experience less guilt and more legitimacy in their more self-oriented self-gifting pursuits, despite persistent feelings of constraint. In sum, our findings

suggest that while those who feel resource-constrained should be encouraged to derive myriad benefits from self-gifting (Rifkin et al., 2022), it is equally if not more important to better understand how they can be better encouraged to self-gift, as delineated in the present study.

With this in mind, the study findings have managerial implications for positioning market offerings as potential self-gifts that may help manage and overcome challenging and prolonged life transitions. As Zhang and Aggarwal (2015) note, nostalgia- and future-oriented marketing campaigns generally emphasize self-continuity but fail to consider how people's present self may be differentially (dis)connected from/to their past and future selves. The preliminary research findings on the temporal nature of self-gifting provide marketers with rich narratives on how the disconnections highlighting perceived and anticipated self-changes become connected through stories of personal growth and endurance that can take on individual, relational and collective values, as in the case of Cassie's spin class. We argue by incorporating temporal messages of how, when and why the 'self-gift' may speak to the evolving life themes of self-indulgence, self-reduction/self-expansion, and self-projection as revealed in the present study (e.g., for seasonal marketing campaigns, such as Mother's Day, Father's Day or Valentine's Day), marketers can better assimilate their offerings into systems that consumers create, not only to help tackle their distinct temporal concerns but also to imbue meaning into their lives (cf., Fournier, 1998). Future research can compare the relative efficacy of marketing interventions that operationalize the (dis)connections of the three evolving life themes in encouraging consumers to engage in self-care, especially during times when they feel resource-constrained (Rifkin et al., 2022).

In closing, our study revealed three discrete, yet interconnected, themes of self-indulgence, self-reduction/self-expansion, and self-projection, rendering insights into how, when, and why

self-gifting practices and meanings obtain temporal significance in challenging and prolonged life transitions. Both temporal comparisons (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000) and life-span development (Carstensen, 2021) posit that, despite significant life transitions that can fundamentally change who we are, people generally view their life trajectory as a continuous journey in which the past shapes the present self, and their future presents a desirable state that may be achieved by present sacrifices and hard work. Further investigation is encouraged to explore how our findings might translate to other special or more mundane periods of our time, such as passing another New Year's Day or another birthday. As Peetz and Wilson (2013, p. 2) note, "even mundane landmarks—when salient—might temporarily organize time into different temporal categories or chapters".

Our current study lacked the scope to examine the transitional aspect of self-gifts. Additional research might explore how self-gifts may help bridge the liminal state between the temporal selves, and between changes in self-perception and the need for self-continuity. It might usefully compare, for example, the self-gifting patterns of pregnant women who are in the midst of a major life transition with people who are undergoing a mid-life crisis. While the former may place the temporal focus more on the future self, the latter may be more about past regrets. Further research could investigate how the perceptions and organizations of temporal selves may vary with different forms of life transitions, giving rise to distinct self-gifting practices and meanings.

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