

The Nature of the Social Gift in the Age of Digitalization



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Abstract The purpose of the study is to analyze various approaches to understanding the nature of gift giving, revealing the characteristics of a social gift as an important resource for establishing and strengthening business and informal relations between partners for optimizing corporate efficiency. The authors of the paper relied on the contemporary foreign and domestic scientific literature on the researched topic. The paper shows that a social gift is a non-verbal means of communication, a carrier of encoded information about the giver, the recipient and the gift situation itself, aimed at establishing, maintaining, and strengthening long-term social ties. The authors note the significant differences between a social gift in its goals and objectives and a bureaucratic gift considered as a social and bureaucratic bribe. The authors of the paper demonstrate that along with the positive aspects of social donation, negative aspects are inevitable, including an increase in the moment of uncertainty, non-guaranteed positivity of the consequences of the gift. The novelty of the study lies in the fact that the main trends in the modernization of social gift in the digital age are identified. First, a social gift is based on new norms, standards, and values. Second, the non-utilitarian significance, informal character, and emotional coloring of a social gift in the digital age is growing. Third, the exchange of social gifts in a networked society is nonequivalent. Fourth, there are new forms of social gifts (virtual gifts, digital gifts). Fifth, specialists in the field of human resources management are faced with new problems: difficulties in algorithmizing and digitalizing a gift, the risks of being too open in connection with the distribution of gifts on the Internet, and the risk of losing the national-cultural component of a social gift. The paper may be interesting and useful to specialists in the field of personnel management, everyone interested in the transformations taking place in the digital society.

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1 Introduction

Through socializing, a person masters social norms and standards, which, on the one hand, level his behavior and train of thought, and, on the other hand, allow him to communicate with other individuals and social groups.

Presenting gifts, or giving (дарение), is one of the events of socialization. Giving is a procedurally, ritually designed holiday event that brightens one's day.

The main subject of giving is a gift. In the explanatory dictionary of Dahl, the word "present" is defined as "*give as a gift*" [6]. However, the gift is not free. Analysis of scientific literature shows that the essence of a gift is not in material benefits, but in relationships that are formed in the process of giving, and subsequently are supported and deepened by the tradition of the gift.

The corporate effectiveness of an organization largely depends on the relationship that the organization builds with partners and customers. The exchange of gifts aimed at establishing relationships is one of the business rituals that is undergoing significant qualitative changes in the digital age.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 *The Concept of the Social Gift*

There are several scientific approaches to understanding the essence of the gift. The French ethnographer and sociologist Moss [15], in his "*Essay on the Gift*," talking about the conditions for maintaining equilibrium in a social group and society as a whole, emphasizes the importance of material exchange, due to which interpersonal relationships are built between groups of people. The "give and receive" relationship balances any social group, the gift is always useful for the person to whom it is intended, but the motive of the giver is always self-serving. Therefore, the essence of any gift is the sum of self-interest and utility for others.

The French sociologist Levy-Strauss [14], explains the phenomenon of giving not by the self-interest of the giver, but by the moral condition of the act of giving. According to the scholar, the system of non-mechanical moral acts strengthens interpersonal relationships within a social group, as well as the relationship between the individual and the group itself. This is possible since there is a minimum amount of rationality in the act of giving.

In a 2006 study, the author proposes a third approach based on the communal-commitment paradigm. Under this approach, givers live in a society consisting of a network of social systems. The exchange of gifts is cyclical, and the act of giving

is not only visible directly to the giver and recipient. Gifts are exchanged between members of the community; social relations between them play a decisive role in the choice of a gift [11].

In the structure of the act of giving, it is necessary to single out, firstly, the subject of giving. This item can be animate and inanimate, a thing that has various forms, an event, a ceremony, and even a perfection (или даже индивидуальным образом). A gift is always a social construct that initially does not have the status of a gift, but acquires it in the process of the act of giving itself. Secondly, the act of giving is always accompanied by a ritual situation. This is a complex set of ritualized actions, relationships, and connections that are either first formed, maintained, or restored. In the ritual situation, the meaning of the gift is constructed, and a space is formed that unites all the sociocultural fields of the participants in the act of gifting. The solution to the problem of forming a unifying space is always meaningful, even if a gift is given spontaneously.

The answer to a material gift can be an intangible thing—an increase in the self-esteem of the giver or a certain feeling of gratitude, dependence on the part of the receiver, or another form (making amends, showing affection, etc.). However, one condition that everyone planning to get a return gift is trying to fulfill is to take into account national characteristics, status, personal needs, interests, desires, and passions of the gifted person. Along with this, there is a whole range of formal rules that must be implemented to obtain a gift status that matches the specific situation. This is not an easy task since it is necessary to turn a certain resource (for example, money, a personal thing) into a gift filled with a certain meaning, and so that the result of this sacralization is a value that is equally perceived by all parties to the act of donation.

Social giving is the act of the donor transferring a certain social gift to the circle of recipients with an emphasized lack of personal benefit, but the presence of interest. The main task is the spiritual satisfaction of the donor in order to form a stable subsequent interaction to solve common problems. Social giving has a number of features.

1. With social donation, the donor receives a certain emotional response in return.
2. The giver and the receiver (individual or collective) may belong to different social groups, with a set of their specific needs and interests. However, the donor, realizing this, consciously chooses his social role and acts in transpersonal interests.
3. The giver and the receiver share a common system of values, and their implementation will be facilitated by the gift.
4. The value of a social gift is difficult to determine. The cost of an ordinary gift is determined by the monetary equivalent: the higher the price, the more expensive the gift. Therefore, unnecessary and complex material obligations are imposed on the giver in return. In the case of a social gift, the true value is also determined by the residual positive or negative emotional impressions of the person presented.

5. The need for a gift is not formed by external circumstances, but by internal motivations or motives of the giver himself. A person voluntarily assumes the fulfillment of a socio-cultural role in transferring his resources.
6. In the social gift ritual, the emphasis is not on the gift or the personality of the donor, but on the transfer process and the relationships formed by this process.
7. Giving a social gift has a conscious basis and is prolonged.
8. Conscious attitudes about the choice of gifts of this kind have their own social limitations, both personal and national.

2.2 Social Gifts and Bribes

Compared to a social gift, a completely different task is performed by a social bribe, a bureaucratic gift, and a bureaucratic bribe.

A social gift is the exchange of private resources between individuals or members of a social group whose main purpose is to create, strengthen, and maintain social ties. The organizational affiliation of the participants does not matter. The exchange of gifts is regulated by informal norms, but the acts of giving themselves are quite transparent.

A social bribe also has social functions, but the resources of the organization are used in the act of exchange, and the act of exchange is not transparent. Thus, the community and individuals benefit from the strengthening of social ties, but the organization loses resources.

The bureaucratic gift is a transparent and formally regulated form of gift that simulates social gifting for strengthening relations between the participants of the bureaucratic relations, including between individual organizations. Usually, it is distinguished by a lesser degree of reciprocity, as recipients of gifts see behind them a calculation, not a sincere help.

The main function of a bureaucratic bribe is also the survival of the organization, although individuals may also be beneficiaries. A formal violation of the rules in the process of giving a bribe is regulated by informal norms and is supported by the organization's corruption culture. In the case of a bureaucratic bribe, the loser is usually society [8].

3 Results

3.1 Social Gifting as Information

The non-utilitarian value of a gift has increased in the information society. A gift acts as a carrier of social information (this is information that directly relates to the relations of people, their interactions, their needs, interests, etc.) [1].

A gift, acting as a carrier of social information, appears before the recipient in the form of a signal, sign, or socio-cultural symbol.

The gift is not only a carrier of cultural symbols. It is also used by people as a means of communication. A social gift is an act of communication, not using lexical or verbal means, but things and objects [4].

Presenting a gift, people tend to convey information about the nature of the relationship or do it involuntarily. In order to do this, they use a certain set of characters rooted in a given culture. In addition, the gift can act as a symbol depending on the communication situation. A gift can be interpreted as a hidden text or encoded message [3]. This is a text that we read based on stereotypes and traditions rooted in culture, the characteristics of the social group to which we belong, personal experience, etc.

3.2 Social Gifting as Communication

Giving is an act of communication. In the process of communication, there occurs messaging, i.e., information is transferred from one participant to another. Information is encoded using a specific character system, transmitted and then decoded, or interpreted by the message recipient. A gift transfers to the receiver only the information that he is ready to read, and, in return, agree to establish the desired relationship between individuals or social groups.

A gift, performing the functions of social communication, turns into a text, a sign that carries information about the giver, recipient, and the gift situation.

Information about the giver takes the form of self-presentation and impression management. The behavior and emotional state of the giver are programmed in a certain way; the gift itself forms the status-role positions of the participants.

4 Discussion

On the one hand, the positive value of the gift is obvious. “A correctly selected and successfully handed, in all senses, the gift can have an undeniably positive impact on the formation of a single semantic field of the giver and the recipient in a common information and symbolic space for them” [9].

The gift, acting as a carrier of social information, promotes consolidation, giving the event a positive emotional tone. The gift is a symbol of the present or future good relationship between the giver and the receiver. The symbol, transmitted via a gift, signals an event that should be remembered or not forgotten, which is the key to long-term, future communications.

On the other hand, a social gift in today’s dynamic world carries a negative connotation.

Information acquired in the process of donation complicates a person's life and increases the moment of uncertainty contained in it, which is an inevitable aspect of life in modern society.

In the book "*The Origin of a Network Society*," Manuel Castells [5] describes a network society as a specific form of social structure, characteristic of the Information Age. The vertical hierarchy between society and the state is being replaced; the rigid consolidation of roles and statuses is being replaced by horizontal, "flat" organizational structures of relations and relations between people and their informal, self-organizing communities. New values, norms, and standards are being formed: decentralization of management, reciprocity (reciprocal exchange on a natural basis) and nonequivalence of exchanges, building up weak ties between network members, etc. [18].

The social gift also takes a specific form in such a society.

Gratitude for services and assistance is no longer a "kickback" (so it was accepted in unregulated corporate relations) and, moreover, not a "tribute" (a traditional form of gift in vertical patron-client relations, where the client depends on the power of a powerful patron and fears sanctions for disloyalty to him). Moral obligations in a gift situation come to the fore. Interestingly, in a recent experiment, two different approaches to bribing public servants were investigated. The participants of the experiment could choose to call the payment offered to the official a bribe or a gift. The hypothesis that participants of the corruption relations prefer to call bribes gifts was refuted. Despite the fact that giving a gift seems preferable, since it looks less offensive and demanding, the results showed that many participants chose the term "bribe" precisely because it carries more obligations for the participants in corruption. The bribe clearly shows that the recipient is expected to receive mutual service, and, in case of opportunistic behavior, retaliation will follow [13].

The irrational, sacred nature of the gift does not depend on its price. Moreover, a social gift can lose its value if a person is too concerned about its price [7]. One study shows a difference in the perception of obligations imposed by gifts received in different situations. In western culture, there is a strong connection between the nature of the relationship between the participants of the gift exchange and the intention of the recipient to present a return. When participants are connected by personal relationships, these relationships and the symbolic meaning of the gift will be decisive for reciprocity, in contrast to the economic value or usefulness of the gift. For the situation of commercial gifts, the determining factor is the satisfaction of the recipient, which is often directly related to the utilitarian value of the gift [2].

The exchange of social gifts in a network society is non-equivalent in nature, which reflects the history of relations of the participants in the gift process (for short-term contacts, the importance of comparability of gifts is great) and their high emotionality, unofficiality. A number of studies emphasize that one of the main features of social networks is the visibility of users. Gifts are socially visible in nature. However, an additional level of visibility appears on the internet, making gifts between two users visible to any of their mutual contacts, which can increase the so-called social risk and deter users from giving online gifts through social networks [17]. On the other hand, a social gift was originally intended to be visible to a wide circle of people,

therefore, an increased online visibility in this situation can have a positive rather than a negative effect.

In a 2018 study aimed at studying the distribution of online gifts, the authors also point out the significant role of social influence caused by the presence of observers. Among the mechanisms for distributing virtual gifts, the authors mention the expectation of reciprocity and social learning. The study shows that people quickly learn the observed norms of gift exchange on the network and that those who observed the exchange of online gifts among friends consider this behavior to be more normal than those who learned about such gifts from other sources or in person after having first received an online gift. The authors also note that virtual gifts can either replace or complement personal gifts: according to the results of the study, more than half of the gift cases would, in reality, not have taken place due to various obstacles to the personal exchange of gifts [12].

The variety of gifting situations and the low predictability of the development paths of these situations makes their algorithmization and, as a result, digitalization problematic. This problem is caused by the creative nature of the gift. “The giver has to make decisions in the face of a lack of time and information, as well as the unwarranted positivity of the consequences of their implementation” [9].

As was mentioned at the beginning of the paper, three paradigms to understanding the nature of donation can be distinguished: the economic exchange paradigm, the relational partnership paradigm, and the communal commitment paradigm. Gift exchanges on the Internet can be described in the framework of all three approaches, but most of the opportunities on the network are open for gift acts within different communities. According to researchers, this discovery can be used in marketing. Marketers can focus on P2P (person-to-person) marketing within potentially loyal communities with a developed gift-sharing culture, which will lead to group loyalty and provide a significant advantage for companies that target such communities [11].

In the context of the digitalization of many aspects of the life of a modern person, a social gift can be clothed in a modern—digital—form, and this trend also deserves careful study.

There are various approaches to the role and nature of online digital gift-sharing. Many researchers view digital gifts as an anti-economic activity; however, in a 2016 study, the authors dispute the correct use of the term “gift economics,” while arguing that gift exchange and purely economic exchange are not mutually exclusive concepts, since they perform different functions and belong to two different universes. Gift exchange on the Internet is not associated with the exchange of goods, but with mutual recognition [16]. It should be noted here that when using the term “gift economy,” the authors refer to M. Moss. However, Moss also believed that gift exchange can coexist with other types of exchange, in particular, with economic exchange in the markets. The anthropologist rather believes that even in a capitalist market economy, there is no purely economic rationality [10].

The authors propose distinguishing between three types of gifts: ceremonial gifts, graceful gifts, and mutual aid gifts. Only the last two types can be designated as truly anti-economic. Ritual gifts are not a manifestation of generosity; they are necessary

to initiate and maintain a mutual recognition procedure. Digital gifts are a form of ritual gifts [16].

5 Conclusion

Based on various approaches to understanding the nature of donation: the theory of economic exchange, the theory of social partnership, and the theory of social obligations—we managed to comprehensively analyze the information and communication essence of the gift and the features of the social gift. A gift is a non-verbal means of communication, a carrier of encoded information about the giver, the recipient, and the gift situation itself. A social gift is characterized by a non-mercantile nature, the presence of a deep interest in creating, maintaining, and strengthening social ties.

The contradictory nature of the social gift in the information society is disclosed. The conclusion that, in the digital era, the forms and methods of social donation were transformed is substantiated. The following modern trends in presenting social gifts have been identified: moral obligations in the gift situation come to the fore, the symbolic meaning of the gift and its emotional aspect are increasing, gift exchange is not equivalent.

In the digital age, the following unique forms of social gifts appeared: virtual gifts (online gifts via social networks, which are characterized by increased visibility, which at the same time create new risks by their increased openness to outside observers) and gifts in digital form.

New hard-to-solve problems arise—the algorithmization and digitalization of social gifts makes it unlikely that the irrational component of the gift can be preserved, and the national identity of situations of social gifting is at risk. All these problems have to be addressed by modern generations of human resource managers.

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