GIFT MEMBERSHIP IN HERITAGE & ARTS ORGANISATIONS: 
A RESEARCH AGENDA

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Introduction

People give gifts to celebrate key moments in individual’s lives including birthdays, graduation, marriage and retirement, annual calendar (commercial) events such as Christmas and to maintain or improve personal and social relationships (Anton et al., 2014; Austin & Huang, 2012; Belk, 1979 in Clarke, 2006). Gifts can include tourism themed event experiences and annual membership of heritage and arts organisations. Raymond (1992: 5) defines membership as “a product consisting of a range of benefits that are sold for a fee” which normally include free admission at heritage sites and museums, priority booking at performing arts organisations, previews, discounts, information mailings, magazines and other privileges such as members’ rooms. Membership has similarities with, but is also different to other gifts as it falls into the category of ‘serial use’, a gift that offers multiple experiences throughout a year, or in the case of life membership, a lifetime.

Membership schemes in the UK heritage sector date back to the beginning of the 20th century; the first was recorded in 1909 at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Heaton, 1992). Until 1950 most schemes were affiliated to cathedrals, churches and theatres after which they became more common in the museum sector (Slater, 2003). The largest schemes in the UK are run by The National Trust which has nearly 4 million members (National Trust, 2013) and English Heritage 750,000 (English Heritage, 2013) although the range at national museums and galleries and performing arts organisations normally between five and one hundred thousand.

A body of literature on membership in the heritage and arts sectors has emerged from the USA, UK and France during the last 20 years and explores typologies of membership scheme (e.g. Slater, 2004), barriers to membership (Armstrong & Slater, 2011; Petr, 2007), motivations of members (e.g. Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Burns Sadek Research Ltd, 1992; Glynn et al., 1996; Lansley, 1996; Slater, 2003; Slater & Armstrong, 2013), consumption and lapsing (e.g. Bhattacharya, 1998; Glynn et al., 1996; Ngobo, 2005) involvement of members (Slater & Armstrong, 2010) and volunteering amongst members (e.g. Holmes & Slater, 2012) but gift membership has been neglected. The purpose of this working paper is to draw on the extant literature on heritage and arts memberships and gift giving to set a research agenda to explore gift giving of heritage and arts membership. The research is timely due to the paucity of academic research in this area and increasing interest in gift membership by practitioners in the cultural sector.

Gift giving

A gift has been defined as a ‘ritual offering that is a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another’ (Cheal, 1987: 152 in Clarke, 2007) and as “the voluntary transfer from one person to another without compensation” (McGrath, 1995 in Austin & Huang, 2011:11). Gift giving is not new in society or the literature with Mauss first exploring the construct in 1925 from an anthropological perspective. Mauss (1954) was the first to articulate ideas around the gift giving concept, for example, that when gifting the donor gives a part of them self. Not surprisingly then gifts are seen as highly symbolic, making a statement about the giver, recipient and their relationship (Wofinbarger, 1990 in Clarke, 2007). This is interesting as gifting is most often driven by reciprocity with the giver and recipient changing roles over time resulting in a sequential chain of gift exchanges rather than
one-off simultaneous gift exchanges. Clarke (2006, 2007) concludes that the interaction between four components is what creates the unique gift exchange; these are the recipient(s), donor(s), gift (product or experience) and occasion.

The extant literature builds on these concepts and components of gift giving to explore: the gift exchange process; motivations and how personality traits of givers influence motives, information searches and symbolic meanings; the influence of characteristics of recipients and their social resources; the relationship between donor and recipient; how gifts confirm ties between the two; the symbolic interaction of exchange of gifts; and enhancement of self-concept for the giver. In their critique of the literature Anton et al. (2014) note there has been less focus on the recipient (compared to the giver), little attempt to apply the core consumer behaviour models or to test these through empirical studies, their study being one of the exceptions. Saying this, there is a new body of literature emerging, for example Segev et al.’s (2013) paper which applies impression management theory to develop a gift-giving model amongst adolescents and Taute and Sierra’s work (2015) on the emotional implications of gift giving.

Anton et al., (2014) and other authors acknowledge Sherry’s (1983) early three stage flow model which is comprised of two columns labelled donor and recipient and three stages, ‘gestation’ (decision making process), ‘prestation’ (gift exchange and impression management) and ‘reformulation’ (gift consumption and relationship realignment) as the most influential model on the concept of gift giving despite criticising it for being too theoretical and descriptive. Clarke’s work on the gifting of ‘experiences’ in the tourism and leisure sectors has provided insights into how experiences in the tourism and leisure sector are purchased, modified and created at the decision making or ‘gestation’ stage, exchanged and consumed within the context of the extant literature but the same criticism applies, her multifarious papers draw on limited data (Clarke, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013). Despite this we would acknowledge that the additional factors she highlights, the influence of others, delayed gratification and post-purchase dissonance during the redemption (Clarke, 2008) are probably relevant in the context of heritage and arts membership given that the recipient might wait a few months before being able to redeem their gift.

Motives for gift giving can be altruistic, pleasure for the recipient or pleasure for the giver, or as Sherry (1983) describes as agnostic (calculated exchange). Goodwin et al. (1990 in Clarke, 2007) split them into two broad categories voluntary and obligatory and Wolfinbarger & Yale (1993 in Clarke, 2007) enjoyment in giving, obligation derived from reciprocity or from social norms and practicalities. Ottes et al. (1993) also discuss ‘sleuthing’, where the recipient hints at a gift. This suggests that the motivation to give is satisfaction that the recipient is happy.

Whatever the motivation, gift giving is symbolic and gifts are valued as such rather than by their material benefit. The extant literature suggests that the ‘perfect’ gift should demonstrate true donor sacrifice, be all about the recipient’s pleasure and be pleasing to them, a luxury, appropriate for the recipient and a surprise within ones resources, defined as time, money and effort (Belk, 1996b in Clarke, 2006). Predicting the recipient’s response to the gift has been described as a complex mental process, metaperception as it requires an understanding by the recipient of the donor’s constraints, understanding of the self-perceptions of the recipient and donor in the exchange and also their relationship (Austin & Huang, 2011, 2012). Segev et al. (2013) also note that the “value-laden impression of gifts” can influence how others see the gifter putting gift giving into a wider context.
The literature on anxiety and gift giving suggests that if an individual is hard to shop for, or the relationship more distant gift cards are an easy method of reciprocating as they are less likely to fail in giving an unwanted gift and the recipient can easily evaluate how much money was spent (e.g. Sherry, 1983) however we do not know if a gift of membership at a heritage or arts organisation is evaluated in the same way. Austin & Huang’s (2012) work suggests gift cards are valued less by recipients and donors as they are perceived as lacking thought and a ‘last minute’ gift option. As gift membership at heritage and arts organisations is normally a gift token to be redeemed or membership card in the recipient’s name is it perceived the same as a gift card and therefore valued less than a physical product, or is it an appropriate gift as it reflects understanding of the recipient’s interests and identifies them with a specific brand? A study of identity research and gift giving suggests that when someone makes a gift counter to their own identity it can cause a threat to their own identity which they then seek to counter (Ward and Broniarczyk, 2011). If you received membership of the Tate what would that say about you? Would someone who does not have a membership buy one for somebody as a gift?

Or is it a cultural symbol that Bourdieu would argue is a reflection of the giver’s cultural capital? (Bourdieu, 1996 in Field, 2005) In his discussion of social capital Bourdieu emphasises the need to invest in relationships and cites the example of how personalisation of a gift can transform a gift beyond its monetary value and broader meaning giving it greater value and he continues describing it as a solid investment that will reap a profit in the long term (Bourdieu, 1986 in Field, 2008). Bourdieu's work on distinction may be relevant in understanding how the nature of the gift may be linked to the giver's cultural identification as much as the receiver and may act as a form of social bonding although his ideas were drawn from studying the French elite and how social capital was exclusive to this class and how they use it to secure their relative position in society (Field, 2008).

Setting a research agenda for gift membership in the heritage and arts sectors

There is an absence of literature on gift giving and membership in the academic literature and understanding of gift membership in the sector. A meeting of the Membership Management Forum1 in February 2013 to discuss and share experiences regarding gifting membership attracted some thirty membership managers who are or were planning to actively market gift membership yet despite investing their time and money in designing gift packs and in technology to enable donors to purchase membership online most knew very little about donors, recipients, their motives, the occasion prompting the exchange, the exchange process or consumption of the gift membership. An exception, perhaps due to its size and resources was the Royal Horticultural Society which had recently undertaken research regarding donors’ needs for gift membership. They found that donors just wanted a gift card, something tangible which the recipient could activate at any time and perhaps surprisingly did not want ‘gifts’ such as a magazine or seeds included as part of the gift package.

Anecdotal evidence at the meeting suggested that more women gift membership than males and gifts are often for friends, colleagues, children and spouses for birthdays, Christmas presents and as retirement gifts. The ability to buy gift membership online had increased sales but up to 25% of gift memberships in some organisations are never redeemed or used and renewal rates are just 30% to 40% compared to 90% for membership bought by individuals

1 A networking group of membership managers in the cultural sector formed in 2004 to share good practice which has become a community of practice.
(partly due to the payment type which tends to be a one off transaction rather than direct debit). The membership managers were concerned at such trends as their PIs include renewal rates although in the retail sector it is expected that some vouchers will not be redeemed by the expiry date and in the gifting literature failed gift transactions are considered inevitable (Roster & Amann, 2003) and individuals routinely include receipts with gifts so the recipient can exchange a present. Gift membership is therefore a challenge, low retention rates and often time consuming to fulfil as the meeting revealed donors asking the museum or performing arts organisation to personalise the gift, for example handwriting cards, anonymising the parcel to retain the surprise element and communicating with both the donor and recipient, thanking the former for making the purchase and encouraging the recipient to renew a year later.

The full working paper will present a more extensive review of the gift giving literature, unpicking the construct of gift giving and the findings of from key informant interviews working in heritage and arts membership. We will also discuss our initial ideas for a conceptual model of the drivers and motives of gifting membership which we intend to test in phase two of this project. This research is pertinent to both academics and practitioners involved in membership across the tourism and leisure sectors, professional associations and special interest organisations where membership is gifted as greater understanding of what drives and motives givers can be used in future marketing communications.
References:


