GIFTS TO WHOM? TOWARDS A NETWORK VIEW OF GIFT RECEIVERS

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Abstract[1]

Purpose: This research aims to understand how givers characterise and manage their gift giving networks by drawing on attachment theory. This responds to the need to illuminate the givers-receivers' networks beyond traditional role-based taxonomies and explore their changing dynamics.

Design/methodology/approach: A multi-method, qualitative approach was employed involving 158 gift experiences captured in online diaries and 27 follow-up interviews.

Findings: Results show that givers organise receivers into gifting networks that are grounded in a contextual understanding of their relationships. The identification of *direct*, *surrogate* and *mediated* bonds reflects three different dimensions that inform gift-giving networks of support, care or belongingness rooted in *attachment theory*. The relative position of gift receivers in this network influences the nature of support, the type of social influences and relationship stability in the network.

Originality: This study illuminates gift-giving networks by proposing a taxonomy of gifting networks underpinned by attachment theory that can be applied to study different relationship contexts from the perspective of the giver. This conceptualisation captures different levels of emotional support, social influences and relationship stability, which have an impact on the receivers' roles within the giver's network. Importantly, results reveal that the gift receiver is not always the target of gift-giving. The target can be someone whom the giver wants to please, or an acquaintance they share with the receiver with whom they wish to reinforce bonds.

Research limitations/implications: This study illustrates the complexity of relationships based on the data collected over two specific periods of time, thus there might be further types of receivers within a giver's network that our data did not capture. This limitation was minimised by asking about other possible receivers in interviews.

Practical implications: The findings set a foundation for gift retailers to assist gift givers in finding gifts that match their perceived relations to the receivers by adapting communication messages and offering advice aligned with specific relationship contexts.

Keywords: gift-giving, gift receivers, gifting, networks, relationships, attachment networks.

Introduction

Gift-related retail sales represent over one trillion dollars per year in the US (Cheng et al., 2021), while in the UK, the total gift market was worth roughly £46 billion in 2019 and is expected to reach around £50.5 billion by 2024 (Technavio Industry Analysis, 2021). These expenditures are closely linked to relationships between givers and receivers, thus the social side of gift-giving is one of the most prominent topics in this area (Gupta et al., 2023). Gifts constitute a form of social exchange, with impact on interpersonal relationships (Belk, 1979) and it is also important to understand how relationships themselves shape gift-giving and how givers perceive their network of receivers. Such an understanding will add to theorization in gift-giving and offer a more nuanced understanding of how consumers (and consumption) are related to, and shaped by, interpersonal relations. In this direction, we identified three main limitations in extant research on gift-giving that restrict understanding of a giver's network of gift receivers. First, recent research highlights the importance of understanding gifting networks (Song et al., 2021). The number of studies on virtual giving networks is growing (Badi, Wang and Pryke, 2017) and the increased use of social network platforms has changed how people relate to each other (Baboo, Nunkuu and Kock, 2022). In this context, it is relevant to explore the interpersonal nature of gift-giving and the involvement of multiple givers, receivers and third parties (Givi et al., 2022). Existing conceptualisations of dyadic gift-giving such as the social influences proposed by Lowrey, Otnes and Ruth (2004) require revisiting to accommodate new ways of interaction and complex networks. Second, although gift-giving scholarship acknowledges that gifting changes over one's lifetime (e.g. Belk and Coon, 1993; Lowrey et al., 2004; Sherry, 1983), and that an individual's "social network expands and contracts" (Sherry, 1983: 158), most studies adopt a largely static approach to gift relations (e.g. Pillai and Krishnakumar, 2019). They also tend to concentrate on a particular context (Otnes, Zolner and Lowrey, 1994), or focus on social influences within a specific network (Lowrey et al., 2004). Thus, extant work does not provide an overall network configuration nor enough clarity on how to compare the ongoing stability of a receiver's position within the givers' gift network. Finally, existing classifications assume that specific types of relationships, such as immediate family (e.g. Caplow, 1982) and romantic partners are close by definition and those with, for example, co-workers or classmates are generally fairly distant (e.g. Pillai and Krishnakumar, 2019). Indeed, work based on such classifications treats the context in which a gift relationship is found (e.g. within the workplace) as defining the importance of that relationship, rather than explicitly considering what makes receivers more or less important to the giver. This lack of differentiation of

relationships occurring within similar contexts can lead to errors in reasoning (MacInnis, 2011), including that of mischaracterising gift receivers, their relation to givers and, ultimately, the nature of this behaviour.

In this paper, we aim to understand how givers characterise and manage their gift-giving networks. For this we illuminate gift relations using insights from Attachment Theory (AT), which conceptualises humans' propensity to form strong affectional bonds with preferred, particular others (Bowlby, 1977). This theory's focus on relationships, emotional bonds and social networks (Gillath, Karanzas and Lee, 2019) makes it especially valuable in making sense of gift-giving networks. Attachment theory offers a novel theoretical approach to advance gifting research (Nguyen and Munch, 2011; Givi et al., 2022) and has been successfully applied to other consumption phenomena (David, Carter and Alvarez, 2020). We draw on an interpretive analysis of 158 diary entries and 27 interviews, to offer a focused understanding of the giver's network of receivers. Findings illuminate the complexity of gifting networks. In particular, they show how givers perceive and manage their context-specific network of receivers according to three distinct network dimensions, which we labelled *direct* (i.e. sacred, personal and social), *surrogate* (i.e. substitutes of important others who are not available) and *mediated* (i.e. extensions of important others) relationship bonds. Results elucidate how each of these dimensions is informed by distinct attachment needs, levels of stability in the giver's gifting network, and social influences. This article contributes to the literature on gift-giving networks by both 1) differentiating the various dimensions of relationship bonds underpinned by the need for social support; and 2) integrating receivers into a dynamic taxonomy that can be applied across and within different relationship contexts. Therefore, this study extends previous understanding by the differentiation of new network dimensions and their integration with extant understandings of gift-giving (MacInnis, 2011). Implications are drawn for practitioners interested in developing strategies more attuned to the giver's networks of receivers involved in gift giving and its context.

Theoretical research background

Gift giving networks and relationships

Givers give gifts within a network of relationships including family, friends, co-workers or neighbours (Hollenbeck et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2019) and within this diversity of relationship types, there is substantial variation with respect to what makes these relationships strong (Chan and Molginer, 2017), and how those

individuals who receive gifts differ from those who do not (Sherry, 1983). Recent research has emphasised the relative importance of giving networks including the givers' tendency to give gifts to a greater or lesser number of members of their network and the positioning of consumers within it (Song et al., 2021). As our interpersonal relationships have been highly influenced by the dramatic increase in the use of social networking (Baboo et al., 2022), there is a growing research focus on understanding virtual networks in peer-to-peer contexts such as rhizomatic music-file sharing networks (Giesler, 2006), food sharing (e.g. Harvey et al., 2020), *guanxi* networks of business owners (Badi et al., 2017), online communities and social-gaming networks (Song et al., 2021). To study these virtual networks, scholars have used social-network theory (e.g. Song et al., 2021), and social-network analysis of interactions, employing analytical and visualisation software (e.g. Harvey et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021). While studying gifting networks in virtual contexts is enabled by the accessibility of data recorded in online platforms, the exploration of gift-giving relationships networks - where gift exchanges happen both offline and online - requires different methods.

Consumers buy gifts across a variety of networks (Song et al., 2021), including persistent, personal ones based on family and kin (Otnes, 2018), those based on social roles within a community (Weinberger and Wallendorf, 2012), and those created temporarily for a specific purpose such as a wedding registry (Bradford and Sherry, 2013). The ultimate outcome of dyadic gift-giving is the inclusion of the receiver into a network of dyads with a defined structure, where gifts form "tie signs" that define and maintain networks (Weinberger and Wallendorf, 2012: p. 75). In the study of dyadic networks, scholars consider gifts as markers of interpersonal relations, containing evidence about the relationship between the giver, the receiver (Song et al., 2021; Yang, 1994), and sometimes their relationships with significant third parties within their social networks (Giesler, 2006; Lowrey et al., 2004; Segev et al., 2012). Thus, the interpersonal nature of the gift-giving process can include multiple givers, receivers or outside parties, and these relationships are a crucial factor impacting gift-giving (Givi et al., 2022). However, the study of relationship closeness in gift-giving tends to be, with the notable exception of Lowrey et al. (2004), limited to the giver-receiver dyad, neglecting the networks around those receivers (Park, 1998) and the ways in which givers organise different receivers into a unified gift-giving network. In their prominent work, Lowrey et al., (2004) address the influence of "third parties" within the giver's social network to identify ten "social influences"[2] on dyadic gift-giving, their associated motivations, and relational processes. Since

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[2] 1) *calibrating* (distinguishing among receivers); 2) *practicing equipollence* (treating receivers as equivalent); 3) *re-enacting third party traditions* (taking over traditions previously maintained by a third party); 4) *relinquishing tradition* (third party

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this work was published, technology and the explosion of social media have changed how people relate to each other (Sbarra, Briskin and Slatcher, 2019) and as a result, their gift-giving relationships and networks.

Givers' relations with gift receivers have traditionally been classified in terms of: the nature of the relationship (e.g. Belk, 1979; Gao et al., 2017); the division between kin, romantic and non-kin relationships (e.g. Joy 2001); genetic relatedness (Saad and Gill, 2003; Tifferet et al., 2018); the emotional closeness of the relationship (e.g. Caplow, 1982; Yan et al., 2021); relationship power between the giver and the receiver (Choi et al., 2018; Septianto et al., 2020); and receivers' pickiness (Chen et al., 2021). While aspects such as valuing relationships and a sense of belonging have a positive impact on the amount of giving and gift selection efforts, the understanding of relationships still needs to be broadened to incorporate other dimensions such as individuals' need for affiliation and friendship (Beatty et al., 1996). Although the importance of gifts to maintain relationships has been widely researched, gift-giving has been rarely studied as a way of providing (or obtaining) social support (Wiener, Howe and Chartrand, 2022).

Gift research suggests that gifting relationships can change due to the givers and receivers' life cycles (Lowrey et al., 2004), divorce and remarriage (Otnes et al., 1994), changes in physical distance between givers and receivers (Caplow, 1982), and the stage of their relationship (Belk and Coon, 1993; Schiffman and Cohn, 2009). One of the main implications of the identification of distinct gift relations is that their differences reflect the importance that givers place on gift receivers. This importance influences givers' gift expenditures (Saad and Gill, 2003), selection strategies (Otnes et al., 1993), manifestations of reciprocity (Johnson, 1974), and motives to give (Wolfinbarger and Yale, 1993; Vanhanme et al., 2020), amongst others. However, previous research does not show: 1) how givers organise receivers into a comprehensive giving network; 2) how likely a particular giver-receiver relationship is to change over time; and 3) the psychological underpinning of such changes. The understanding of gifting networks is useful to assist givers in the management of multiple relationships using gift-giving as a way of obtaining/providing social support.

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changing tradition for a particular receiver); 5) *enrolling accomplices* (to assist the giver); 6) *using surrogates* (third parties reduce giving risks); 7) *gaining permission from gatekeepers* (seeking approval from third parties); 8) *adhering to group norms*; 9) *integrating* (third party brings new recipients to the network) and; 10) *purging* (giver subtracts receivers because of severed relationship with third party).

Attachment theory as a lens to study gift giving networks

Because of the key role of gifts in interpersonal relationships and given that attachment variations impact on gift-giving perceptions (e.g. Karwal, 2021; Nguyen and Munch, 2011), attachment theory can shed light on gift-giving networks within a variety of relationship contexts. Attachment theory is "an important theoretical foundation in marketing because of the relational nature of consumption" (David et al., 2020: p. 3015), and is a powerful framework to unpack key aspects of close relationships (Fraley, 2019). Attachment is conceived as any form of behaviour that results in a person obtaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual, who is usually perceived as stronger (Bowlby, 1977). As children develop, a number of attachment related functions shift from parents to peers or partners and there are multiple factors that facilitate the development of new attachment bonds into an attachment hierarchy (Fraley, 2019). Indeed, the desire for support and care is part of human nature throughout life, and it promotes optimal health and well-being (Feeney and Collins, 2019). Attachment theory has been used to study relationships in a variety of contexts including family (Ponti and Smorti, 2019), romantic relationships (Mende et al., 2019), friendship (Gillath, Karanzas and Selkuk, 2017), the workplace (Luke, Carnelley and Sedikides, 2020; Yip et al., 2018) and other contexts such as attachment relationships with places (Ram, Björk, and Weidenfeld, 2016), brands (Japutra, Ekinci and Simkin, 2018) or pets (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer and Shaver, 2011). This demonstrates the versatility and usefulness of attachment theory to reveal different relationship contexts, and as indicated by Nguyen and Munch (2011), it can also illuminate gifting networks.

There are two main approaches to attachment theory research: 1) the study of *attachment styles*, reflecting individual differences on how people perceive themselves and others (Collins and Feeney, 2000); and 2) *normative attachment*, concerned with human's predisposition to form close relationships to satisfy their need for security with social relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). The use of AT is still emerging in consumer (David et al., 2020; Godefroit-Winkel et al., 2019) and gift-giving research (Nguyen and Munch, 2011; Rippé et al., 2019) with most of these studies focusing on attachment styles yet neglecting the normative dimension of attachment. By using this theory, we further respond to Givi et al.'s (2022) call for the use of new theories to advance scholarship in consumer gift-giving.

From a normative perspective, there are four defining functions of attachment to a particular figure: *proximity maintenance* (staying close); *separation protest* (resisting separations); *safe haven* (turning to

someone specific for comfort, support and reassurance); and *secure base* (using a significant other as a base from which to engage in other activities safely) (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). Attachment figures are individuals who are considered to be wiser and stronger (Bowlby, 1977) and they become a full-blown attachment figure when they meet all four functions (Feeney, 2004). The attribution of attachment functions to them happens gradually, from *proximity maintenance* to *secure base* (Hazan and Shaver, 1994), and the full attachment process usually takes at least two years (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment needs are complemented by a caregiving system responding to the needs of dependent others (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2009). This is an important part in the understanding of attachment (Hazan and Shaver, 1994), given that the caregiving system alerts attachment figures and motivates them to provide comfort and assistance to those who depend on them (Collins and Feeney, 2000). Children and adults can have multiple attachment figures, including romantic partners, parents, friends, doctors, caregivers or pets, with various degrees of importance (Ainsworth, 1979; Cicirelli, 2010). These figures can be seen as organised into a hierarchy based on the strength of their attachment, around the four attachment functions (i.e. proximity maintenance, separation protest, safe haven and secure base) (Trinke and Bartholomew, 1997) and fulfil attachment needs in different life situations (Doherty and Feeney, 2004). Although full-attachment networks tend to comprise between five and seven people, scholars are yet to understand the psychological function of individuals' broader social networks (Gillath et al., 2019) including functions such as turning to others for affiliation; emotional, instrumental and informational support; or seeking enjoyment and pleasure (Bush, Walker and Perry, 2017). By contrast with dyadic relationships, which are focused on two single individuals, the existence of multiple others requires network management skills to manage multiple relationships simultaneously and these are informed by attachment (Gillath et al., 2017).

In this study, we allowed participants to describe their gift experiences and relations in their own terms. This emic approach (Spiggle, 1994) aimed to: *address* the inherent limitations of existing relationship labels and correct the over-reliance on the giver-receiver dyad; *avoid* the focus on the static nature of gifting relationships; and ultimately, *make sense of* how givers constructed their network of gift receivers. Towards this end, we used the normative approach of AT as a guide in interpreting the results and as an enabling theory to "furthering ongoing conversations" on gift relationships (Dolbec, Fisher and Canniford, 2021: p. 446).

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to understand how givers characterise their network of gift receivers and how this network changes overtime. For this purpose, and in order to illuminate givers' relationships with receivers, we draw on insights from attachment theory. Previous research on third-party social influences employed interviews and shopping trips with five participants giving gifts over five Christmas seasons (Lowrey et al., 2004). We used a multimethod qualitative approach involving the completion of: 1) a short questionnaire to capture information about the profile of our informants; 2) online diaries to record specific gift experiences in the context where they happened and; 3) interviews to further inquire about gift experiences reported in diaries and givers' perceptions of their gifting networks. By using this approach, we aimed to compensate for the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of the other methods (Givi et al., 2022). Our sample consisted of 27 gift informants in the UK covering a variety of profiles in terms of gender, age, income, and life stage), which allowed us to capture a diverse range of gift-givers and their perceptions of the recipients of their gifts (see table 1 for an overview of participants' profiles and an indication of the data collected). This sample comprised 19 women and 8 men to reflect women's greater involvement in gift-giving and their response to gift-giving studies (see Branco-Illodo and Heath, 2020; Otnes et al., 1993).

TABLE 1

We recruited participants using a short questionnaire advertised online in the local newspaper of a medium-sized city in the UK. Drawing on Noy (2008), we also employed a snowballing approach using the researchers' networks and the networks of participants, who recommended the study to their contacts. We followed an ethical protocol, according to which informants received information on the research process and signed a consent form. A sample of 27 individuals committed to complete both parts of the study, keeping an online diary for a month and participating in a follow-up interview. Two of these participants did not complete the diary as they said that they did not give any gifts during the diary-keeping period. Data were collected at two different times of the year, December and June to capture relevant gift-giving occasions, thus broadening the applicability of findings (Tuten and Kiecker, 2009).

The completion of online diaries revealed 158 giving stories ranging from 145 to 850 words, comprising a total of 43k words. Each participant's diary was accessible to them over a web interface to help them to follow instructions and contact the lead researcher with any questions. We encouraged diarists to describe gifts and the experiences in as much detail as possible including aspects such as the gift, their emotions,

their relationship with the receiver and specific facts of the gifting experience in their own words. We also offered prompts such as a broad description of what constitutes a gift (can be bought, handmade, recycled, a family heirloom, an existing collection item, an experience...), a list of emotions and occasions, as well as a field for the givers to describe their relationship with the receiver. Although qualitative diary research can capture rich insights into consumers and consumption, its use in marketing remains relatively scarce (Patterson, 2005). In this study, diaries allowed participants to: 1) express sensations, thoughts and emotions (Green et al., 2006) about specific relationships and gifts experiences; 2) write their "own near time reports" (Burton and Nesbit, 2015; p. 310) capturing details about the gift events that might have been otherwise forgotten and; 3) avoid misrepresentations common in other data collection methods such as questionnaires or interviews (Tidwell et al., 1996). This resulted in rich data that was used to inform the next stage of the research.

Participants' diaries revealed 47 different types of receivers including partners, daughters/sons, step-parents, half-siblings, their children's teachers, friends, siblings, neighbours, or ex-colleagues. The complexity of the giver's relationships with gift receivers from our data is illustrated in figure 1, which highlights the central role of family and that, for most gift contexts (e.g. family, friendship), givers also give to receivers their bonds to whom are an extension of important relationships. Diaries were combined with follow-up interviews "as a supplemental source of insight" (Arsel, 2017: p. 939) to fill any gaps and clarify any diary entries that might benefit from further inquiry (Radcliffe, 2013). After completion of the diary stage, interviews were scheduled at the time and place most convenient for the informant, comprising over 24 hours of interview data (between 21 and 90 minutes per interview). We asked questions about gift-giving practices in general, the receivers who typically receive gifts from our participants (including the existence of any gifting networks), new gift experiences and further details about specific events mentioned in diaries. These specific instances were analysed alongside diary information, focusing on each event as the unit of analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service, because of the independent verification of transcription accuracy it offers (Curry et al., 2009).

FIGURE 1

Data analysis followed a streamlined-coding approach (Saldaña, 2016), moving from raw data on gift-giving relationships/experiences, coding and categorisation of initial codes to the theorisation of a network

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of gift receivers. Interpretation of data was informed by insights on attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969) to refine codes, assist their categorisation and the final conceptualisation. The use of attachment as an enabling theory helps to better explain processes that lead to previously under-theorised outcomes and concepts, thus furthering an ongoing conversation with new insights (Dolbec et al., 2021). This approach is consistent with an interpretivist perspective to enable themes to emerge from the data (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988). Table 2, below, shows the data analysis audit trail (from data collection to theorisation) in five steps, including: *Step 1*. Organising the data from diaries and interviews around the same experience for each participant; *Step 2*. Reading and familiarising with data finding connections between diaries and interviews; *Step 3*. Assigning initial codes; *Step 4*. Interpreting codes by using insights from the theory into higher-order categories; *Step 5*. Developing a theoretical framework by uncovering *direct*, *surrogate* and *mediated* bonds between givers and receivers, within the givers' gift network.

TABLE 2

Findings and discussion

The holistic understanding of gift-giving networks we propose in this study extends traditional gift relationship classifications focused on the nature of the relationship (e.g. Joy, 2001) and on the role of third parties (Lowrey et al., 2004). Specifically, it demonstrates that gift receivers can be organised into three main categories according to the *direct*, *surrogate* and *mediated* bonds they have with givers, each of these categories reflecting different levels of stability in the givers' network and being subject to specific social influences. These categories are summarised in Table 3, which will be used as a guide to present our findings focusing on the differentiation between *direct*, *surrogate* and *mediated* relationship bonds.

TABLE 3

Direct bonds

Gifts to receivers sharing direct bonds with the giver suggest that the giver values the receivers for their own worth in the sense that these bonds are not conditioned by relationships with other parties. Charles illustrates this when he refers to his friend: "*She is a very dear and close friend, and also she is hosting a*

birthday party. Even if it wasn't for the birthday party, I would still have purchased the gift [...] every moment we spend together is cherished and very important for me" (Charles, diary, 007GS). Direct bonds with receivers may reflect different levels of attachment, leading to our differentiation between '*sacred*', '*personal*' and '*social*' receivers. We describe these below.

Sacred receivers. These receivers can be seen as the most important relationship figures for the giver. They are unique because they provide givers with support, satisfy the receiver's need for support, or both. Gifts to 'sacred' receivers tend to incorporate elements of customisation (e.g. reference to receiver's name) or involve shared experiences (e.g. holiday together). For example, Heather bought "*a boxed set of waxed pine firelighters*", as a thoughtful gift for her "*friend [who] is called Teresa, abbreviated to Tree, so this is to give her a present that is from a tree (well, it's a joke between friends)*". The main reason for Heather to buy this gift is because Tree "*is an excellent friend for over half a dozen years and [she] has been an immense source of support*" when she needed it (Heather, diary, 055G). Heather's friend is a *safe haven* of support and comfort (Hazan and Shaver, 1994), elucidating the strength of their relationship and her place in Heather's gifting network.

Our givers did not only *search* for support; they also incorporated into their gifting network "sacred receivers" who *needed* support. Sofia illustrates this when explaining how the loss of her father impacted the kind of giving to her mother. Sofia and her sister bought their mother tickets to the *Phantom of the Opera,* play, which she was very keen to watch, for her 80th birthday. When Sofia highlights that her mother is "*almost like the child now*" and that the "*kind of gift-giving*" with her mum now is "*sort of looking after her and making sure she is okay*", giving "*things to make her feel better*" (Sofia, interview), Sofia is responding to the attachment needs of her mother. This illustrates the central role of caregiving in attachment relationships (Feeney and Collins, 2004). It also highlights how the identities of key attachment figures change in later years from those of earlier adult life (e.g. spouse), with adult children becoming main sources of support because ageing attachment figures are not able to do so (e.g. following the death of a husband) (Cicirelli, 2010). While this is typical when parents give gifts to care for their young children or elderly family members, our data reveals that givers also give to show they care for receivers in a variety of other contexts, (e.g. a close partner, a friend, a colleague having a difficult time). Thus, gift-giving has an important role as a way of providing social support (Wiener et al., 2022). By identifying the crucial importance of support seeking and caregiving as key factors underpinning the most special gift relationships for givers, our data also adds insights to the ways in which sacredness may be

embedded in gift-giving. Specifically, it offers evidence to the argument that "certain persons are sacred and set apart from others" (p.11) and that "gifts are not as sacred as the connections between people that they are used to signify" (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989: p.18). Givers' behaviour towards receivers with whom they shared 'sacred bonds' was impacted by several social influences.

In particular, givers "calibrated" receivers, that is, they compared them to differentiate their choice of gifts, and they practiced "equipollence", that is, they treated receivers with whom they shared similar bonds in similar ways (Lowrey et al., 2004). As an example of the latter, Eleanor gave both her children the same amount of money for Christmas. When exploring the stability of 'sacred receivers' in the giver's network, we found that they tend to be *enduring* recipients, to whom the giver frequently gives gifts, over several years, and through changes in the giver's life cycle or in physical distance separating them. For example, Lucas explains who the regular givers in his network are: "*Every year it tends to be my mum, my dad, my brother, his wife, before they died, my grandparents, [...] so it's that family unit and now Maria, my [new-born] niece, has joined that network!*" (Lucas, interview). Although important incidents in life such as deaths and births affect the flow of gifts, and could be interpreted as "integrating" or "purging" receivers from the network (Lowrey et al., 2004), typical situations such as changes in the life cycle or living far from each other do not change Lucas' desire to give gifts to his parents or brother. Despite the physical distance from his brother and the fact that they do not see each other much (they meet 4-5 times a year, email every couple of weeks), Lucas has been giving his brother gifts "*since 1977*" because, as he says, he is "*my only sibling*", "*he is important to me, I am glad I have him*" (Lucas, diary, 067G), and with a family member "*you've got a bond that's never going to be broken*" (Lucas, interview). Lucas' views of the relationships with his brother and gifting history suggests that Lucas' brother is a secure base and an *enduring* member of Lucas' gift network. Adults feel secure from simply knowing that the attachment figure can be contacted if needed (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). These bonds can be sustained over time and across physical distance with only intermittent contact (Ainsworth, 1991). The existence of strong attachment bonds explains why family bonds are usually less vulnerable to changes in physical distance (Caplow, 1982). This explains why people may give gifts to the same individuals on multiple occasions throughout the year (Givi, 2020), signalling that they care (Givi and Galak, 2022) for 'sacred receivers'.

Personal receivers. These are receivers with whom the giver spends time or shares common interests, although they are not typically a key source of comfort. They tend to receive gifts that are short-lived (e.g.

food, flowers, chocolates) or related to the common interests shared by the giver-receiver dyad (e.g. baking).. Since secondary school, Helena has remained very good friends with Daniel, who has recently started University, and who does not know many people, so Helena sees him quite regularly, even inviting him out with her friends. Over Christmas, she "*felt the need to give Daniel a Christmas gift*" (Helena, diary, 046G). Repeated interactions through a variety of activities indicate Helena's desire for *proximity maintenance* (Hazan and Shaver, 1994), which supports the claim that interactions with the same group of people in an enduring context of affective concern for each other's welfare are normally more satisfactory than interactions with a changing sequence of individuals (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). As both of them enjoy baking, Daniel suggested they bake their Christmas presents and he went to Helena's house on the 22nd of December to watch some "Christmassy films" and exchange their "gingerbread/biscuit" gifts (Helena, diary, 046G). The interaction facilitated by these gifts reflects the first stage of the development of attachment bonds when "congenial companions" spend time together in activities of mutual concern or interest (Ainsworth, 1989: p. 714).

Although many 'personal receivers' have been reported in a friendship domain, they may be a part of other contexts too, such as family. This is specially the case with a diverse configuration of families (e.g. step-parents, multiple step- and half-siblings), requiring an approach beyond prototypical family considerations (Berscheid and Peplau, 1983) to understand their behaviour. Gail who is at university and living away from home enjoys spending time with her step-siblings and half-sister and always gives them a gift, although she acknowledges that the gifts she buys for them are not very thoughtful. Over Christmas, Gail bought them "*three chocolate Santas*" in a supermarket when she was doing her own food shopping and recognised that this did not involve "*very much time or effort*", "*feeling*" and "*thought*" on her part, nor *"excitement on the behalf of the recipients*". Gail recognises that they are "*very close but not as close as" with her "sister, who is 19, because of our age difference, but I love to spend as much time as possible with them" (Gail, diary, 048G)*. Gail's focus on the pleasurable interactions with her step/half siblings indicates that their bonds are based on *proximity maintenance.* In the context of sibling relationships, especially after their parent's divorce and remarriage, half/step sibling interactions can help to negotiate their roles over time when all of them are adults (Connidis, 2007).

Within 'personal receivers' we found four social influences affecting their gift giving practices: "practising equipollence", "calibrating", "initiating" and "severing" relationships (Lowrey et al., 2004). In the previous gift experience Gail's reports show that she is "practising equipollence," by treating all of

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her half/step siblings in the same way (giving them identical gifts), while "calibrating" in favour of her older sister who is described in another diary entry as "*one of my closest and most important*" sibling. Thus, for Christmas, Gail was planning to "*take her to the theatre in the West End*" (Gail, diary, 001NG). At the same time, we found that givers added and removed receivers from their giving networks, which both alludes to the social influences of "initiating" and "severing" relationships (Lowrey et al., 2004), and reveals the transient character of gift receivers within this group.

When exploring the stability of 'personal bonds' within the givers network, we identified that most receivers are *transient* (e.g. secondary family, dating/potential partners, regular friends and new context-specific receivers), that is, their place in the giver's network is volatile and changes as one's life context changes. Thus, receivers belonging to the 'direct personal bonds' group were more likely to lose or change their status on the giver's gift network with changes in the life cycle or physical distance than those with whom the giver shared sacred bonds. Miranda, for example, says that she "*kind of stopped doing birthday presents for my friends apart from - I think there's four of us which are good friends*" and she adds that if they did not see each other she "*probably wouldn't give them a gift or if I became better friends with someone, I'd probably start giving them a gift*" (Miranda, interview). This elucidates how Miranda's social interaction with receivers (or the lack thereof) leads her to add or remove people from her network of gift receivers, again highlighting how gift giving is a fluid and dynamic process, shaped by evolving social bonds. While the idea of the transient receivers resonates with the changing nature of the American family proposed by Otnes et al. (1994), where upon divorce and remarriage receivers are added or removed from the Christmas gift list, our data shows that there is a variety of other contexts and ways in which receivers are transient.

In other cases, the transient character of 'personal bonds' is reflected in the content of the gift exchanged. While Patricia still gives gifts to the person who used to be her best friend before this friend moved to Australia, the nature of gift giving changed. Patricia explains: *"We are not as close now due to living so far away, but she will be a friend for life and I love her dearly*". In fact, they "*email each other every few weeks and occasionally Skype or use Facetime (four/five times a year)*". As her friend lives far and will not have a traditional Christmas, Patricia sent her friend "*a container with Christmas teabags*" because she "*wanted to get her a traditional gift that would make her feel closer to home"* (Patricia, diary, 86G). Patricia used this gift to compensate for the loss of support her friend felt for being away. This gesture also helped Patricia to enhance her own well-being (Wiener et al., 2022) as for Patricia "*it felt very nice*

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to share a bit of Christmas spirit with her" friend. In adulthood, mental representations of attachment include many methods of establishing contact and asking for comfort such as talking, phoning, sending emails or texts to a comforting figure (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2012) and gifts can be a way to compensate for not providing face-to-face support (Wiener et al., 2022). This further suggests that the flow and type of gifts is more likely to change with friends whose bonds are newer and therefore, more malleable. In fact, relationships with friends which do not involve enduring attachment bonds can drift apart when their interests diverge (Ainsworth, 1989). The identification of attachment bonds as an underlying factor for changes in gift-giving networks sheds light on previous studies beyond the recognition that gift relationships evolve overtime (e.g. Belk and Coon, 1993) in a variety of contexts.

Social receivers. These are receivers who are simply part of a shared social context where the giver and the receiver meet within a broader group of people. Thus, when referring to social receivers, givers place a great emphasis on the social context to which they both belong and do not seem to express any type of emotional connection that could make the receiver a unique figure for them. In other words, gifts in this context are given in one-off situations and tend to be impersonal as receivers are *sporadic* companions. For example, Eleanor, a retired teacher, used to take part in collections at work "*when people left at the end of the year they used to collect for everybody who left, and you felt really you'd got to give to everybody whether you knew them or not*". She saw it as a *"sort of corporate gift" (Eleanor, interview).* The fact that Eleanor refers to the gift as a "*corporate gift*" suggests that the receiver is important only to the extent that they are a part of the workplace community, rather than being valued at a more personal, individual level. This is in line with the idea that regulating closeness with groups is as essential for the individuals' survival as it is regulating closeness with other individuals (Smith, et al., 1999). Now after retirement, Eleanor is involved in many activities and groups (e.g. clarinet group, charity) and she gives various, small gifts within such groups. When giving these gifts within miscellaneous contexts, Eleanor does not indicate any sign of emotional closeness or interest for proximity maintenance with the receiver, which would be the beginning of the development of bonds with another individual (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). However, people tend to choose friends among those individuals they know by being part of different groups, thus a random neighbour can become a friend by choice through continuous and meaningful interactions (Bush et al., 2017). A giver may devote time towards a gift not because they genuinely wish to please the recipient but because of the circumstances (Givi et al., 2022). By giving a small gift that the receiver does not expect, Eleanor signals care with a much lower cost as happens with random acts of kindness (Givi and Galak, 2022).

Within the group of 'social receivers' the goal of the gift is to signal that the giver and the receiver belong to the same group, and they do so by "adhering to group norms", as a key social influence where they follow shared rules of gift behaviour (Lowrey et al., 2004). We also found some evidence of social influences "integrating" new receivers and "calibrating" them (Lowrey et al., 2004). Although givers "adhere to social norms" in context such as the workplace (Lowrey et al., 2004) and gift-giving may coincide with an established gifting occasion (e.g. special birthday, graduation), our data shows that giving to "social" receivers is sporadic and rather spontaneous. As recent experimental research shows, it is easier and often cheaper to make people happy when giving a gift outside established occasions (Givi and Galak, 2022), especially when it is unexpected, and this helps givers to signal to receivers that they are part of a network. Regarding the *stability* of their presence in the givers network, 'social bonds' are often associated with *sporadic* recipients who receive small gifts (e.g. cup of coffee) only in one-off situations, because they do not represent any strong attachment bonds (to the giver or to a giver's significant other). Astrid illustrates the *sporadic* nature of gifts to 'social' receivers when she spontaneously gave her colleague a small gift to "*congratulate him*" for passing his thesis defence. Astrid's relationship with this colleague is "*strictly professional*" (Astrid, diary, 022GS) and, as she reports later in her interview, "*I won't repeat it very easily because I don't feel the social obligation [....] they [my colleagues] are not my friends; I don't love them*" (Astrid, interview). The occasional character of Astrid's gift and the lack of attention to her choice of gift suggest an absence of attachment indicators and an affiliative relationship. Affiliative relationships include expectation of regular contact, but there is no expectation that contact is guaranteed or available when wanted in the future (Sheldon and West, 1989). The theme of *direct* bonds involves 'sacred', 'personal' and 'social' bonds with receivers, which represent different degrees of closeness that are not conditioned by relationships with other parties. In addition, our data also shows two types of non-direct bonds (i.e. *surrogate* and *mediated*) between givers and receivers, which we discuss next.

Surrogate bonds

Receivers with whom the giver shares *surrogate bonds* are individuals who serve as substitutes for others who are unavailable sources of support for, or targets of support from, the giver. Previous research suggests that "typically, givers re-enact traditions because both givers and recipients shared a common bond with the now absent third party" to acknowledge, remember and keep alive absent loved ones (Lowrey et al., 2004: p. 551). Our study extends this idea and suggests that surrogates present an

alternative way of filling the missing void due to the absence of an unavailable source (for example, the void created by a deceased sibling or an unresponsive parent). Specifically, some of our givers compensate for missing emotional bonds (Belk, 1988) by incorporating surrogate receivers in their network. These surrogate figures can be a new receiver, or an existing one who has been elevated to a more important supporting role. Surrogate bonds are unique, in that they act as substitutes for bonds with a significant other who is not there for some reason. For example, Eleanor, whose sister had died, reconnected with an old friend from school who often receives gifts from Eleanor, and is like a sister to her:

"*She was [my] best friend at school and we lost touch for 35 years and found each other over Friends Reunited so I often give her a gift […] she's a bit like a sister to me. I lost my sister. My sister died, and I think it's so nice to have sort of pseudo-sisters. You know, a sister is a very important relationship and when that relationship goes because you lose your sister then you sort of need other sisters […] sibling relationships are quite important I think to everybody*" (Eleanor, interview).

This suggests that Eleanor considers her old friend to be a surrogate sister who provides Eleanor with the security that her deceased sister can no longer give and thus she is incorporated as a regular gift receiver. Eleanor's sister had been a source of support during their whole lives and an important attachment figure for Eleanor. A shared background of experiences over a long period of time promotes the development of attachment bonds within the family context (Ainsworth, 1991) and the role of a sister is a typical attachment figure for women in old age (Cicirelli, 1989). When Eleanor's sister died and this bond was severed, she sought a surrogate sister, to replace the presence of a caring female sibling. When people lose – or otherwise miss - one of their most important bonds, finding a new relationship of the same type is, in many cases, a viable and effective way to cope with the loss (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). For example, Lorraine, who does not have any children, gives gifts regularly to her niece:

"[I] was trying to choose a Kim Kardashian bag for my niece […] [we are] *very close - she tells me everything and [she] is very important to me - she is like a daughter.* […] I know she values my opinion. […] I would rather give her vouchers and take her shopping to spend them. *We always have really good shopping trips* and then go for food […] *it is a treat for both of us"* (Lorraine, diary, 014G).

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Lorraine seems to project on her niece the image of a daughter by: 1) acting as a source of support; 2) being perceived by her niece as a confidant (thus providing a *safe haven* of comfort and support) and; 3) by promoting positive interactions between them through sharing time and speaking through Facebook most days thereby seeking *proximity maintenance*. Using the lens of attachment theory, this can be seen as a "surrogate attachment", which refers to a particular person replacing the emotional bonds of a significant other who is not responsive or unavailable (Cicirelli 2010).

Lowrey et al. (2004: p.552) introduced "surrogate *givers*" as third parties who acted "as intermediaries to redefine the gift setting and reduced the likelihood of rejection" or relationship harm by claiming that gifts were from these surrogates (e.g. giving to a mother-in-law as if the gift was from the grandchildren). We propose an alternative approach to examine 'surrogate *receivers'* informed by the attachment needs they help fulfil. This resonates with Klein et al. (2015), who describe how gifts can help to recreate a sense of family for those who had been dramatically deprived of this, and with Yang (1994), who acknowledges that non-kin members can be brought into the family through reified kinship ties to compensate for the lack of kinship bonds. The theme of *surrogate gift receivers* is almost non-existent in the gift-giving literature and this new categorisation provides new insights into the nature and extent of receivers that a giver's network may entail. The role of surrogates also adds nuance to the multiplex ties amongst givers and receivers, by showing how the same individuals can play more than a single role (e.g. friend who is like a sister). According to Bush et al. (2017), in our complex social world, research rarely captures the multiple ties that arise from the many roles that individuals play simultaneously (e.g. family and co-worker, family and friend).

Mediated bonds

Finally, gifts to receivers who share *mediated bonds* with the giver illustrate how the giver-receiver relationship is not always close. Mediated bonds exist because of the connection of both giver and receiver with a third party (*mediator),* who is close to the giver, the receiver or both. This highlights the importance of investing in gifts to "maintain other relationships that givers regard as more crucial", thus when givers enter into romantic relationships, they may add their "new partner's associates" or remove recipients associated with a previous partner from their gifting list (Lowrey et al., 2004, p. 554). In this case, the gift concentrates on the preferences and needs of the mediator, which are at least as important as those of the receiver. However, mediated bonds are not limited to romantic relationships and are evident in a wide

range of relationship contexts (e.g. a friend's child, a sister's friend, a colleague's baby). In selecting gifts for receivers connected with the giver by mediated bonds, givers are ultimately targeting the *mediators*, who will not receive a gift but feel appreciative (hopefully) of the gift given to receivers. For example, George gave a gift to his sister's husband with whom he can be seen as having mediated bonds. The receiver in this case is only important to the extent that he is the husband of his sister (the mediator). In fact, the receiver is not close to George and the gift was chosen under the 'nod of approval' from his sister who may be the one benefitting from the gift the most:

> "My brother-in-law loves movies with explosions (read: loud) and action games on his console! Now that he became a father he will not have much time for either, but! …when he can spare some, those *headphones will allow him to enjoy a game or the occasional movie whilst keeping the house whisper-quiet* […] [I was] *anxious, very anxious!* I knew this was something he could definitely make use of, but *I did not really know whether he would take on the idea of wearing a headset* […] *For this gift to succeed, in my mind, it had to have the 'nod of approval' from my sister* […] we [*my sister's husband and I] are completely different (one could say 'polar opposites') so we will never be buddies -but we trust each other implicitly and there is a sense of camaraderie in our interactions; we share -after all- the same goal: the happiness of my sister"* (George, diary, 025GS).

Mediated bonds with gift receivers (i.e. sister's husband) are extensions of more important direct bonds between the gift giver and third party (i.e. sister) who act as *mediators*, connecting the giver and the receiver (George and his sister's husband). Although bonds with in-laws may be seen to reflect a poor giver-receiver relationship (e.g. Sherry et al. 1993), the importance of: 1) the mediator to the giver; and 2) the receiver to the mediator, illuminate extant classifications (e.g. Belk 1979). This explains why parents-in-law, son- and daughters-in-law and siblings-in-law feature, along with direct family, amongst the most common groups of gift recipients. Similarly, children's teachers and carers are often incorporated in the giver's giving network. For example, Monica gave her son's carers a gift because "*they are important in my son's life as they are the people who took care of him during the day for the past years*" (Monica, diary, 039GS) or Heather who gave a gift to her daughter's teacher as *"a small thank you"* (Heather, diary, 058G). Although Heather emphasised in her interview that she resented giving this gift, she knew this was important to her daughter. From an attachment perspective, promoting children's closeness with teachers can assist children's learning (Birch and Ladd, 1997). Relationships with gift receivers can be mediated

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by more than one person, which further extends and clarifies the complexity of gifting networks. For example, Janet usually gives Christmas gifts to the half-brother of her old friend's daughter:

> "[I gave him] *A tin of chocolate worms [….] when I was shopping for something else.* I saw it and thought it would make a good present for our friend Richard who is 9yrs old […] *I always give Richard a gift of some description* [for Christmas] […] *Richard is the half-brother of our friend Alice. We have known her all her life and we know Richard's dad, who is Alice's dad [as] well [...] [we have] sporadic contact maybe 3 times a year, but we know what he [Richard] gets up to through Megan, Alice's mum and our long-time friend* […] I gave his gift to my friend to pass on to him" (Janet, diary, 61G).

In this case, Janet's bonds with the receiver are mediated by Megan (her long-time friend) and Megan's daughter, Alice, who Janet sees as "part of the family" (Janet, diary, 061G). This further provides evidence to Belk and Coon's (1993: p. 394) claim that gift exchanges can "include larger gift-giving networks"; in this case, Janet's gifts network extends to include other people (outside the realm of her relations) who are related to those important to her. Mediated bonds resonate with Caplow's (1982) classification of kin as secondary and tertiary relationships requiring two (e.g. brother's wife) or three (e.g. friend's daughter's half-brother) primary kin terms for adequate description. However, we also extend this notion by incorporating other relationships outside the core family (e.g. friend's daughter's half-brother) and by identifying underpinning attachment needs.

Data shows evidence of several social influences, including third parties "integrating" new relationships into the network, "purging" receivers because of severed relationships with third parties, "gaining permission from gatekeepers" or "enrolling accomplices," (Lowrey et al., 2004). We refer to these third parties as *mediators* because of their central role linking the giver and the receiver. The key importance of mediators aligns with literature on network analysis of virtual networks, which finds that a few well-connected, central actors are extensively involved in relationships with other actors (Badi et al., 2017). This highlights the significance of the social influence of *mediators* within the network as they affect gift-giving behaviour to a greater number of recipients. Mediated bonds do not seem to stand on their own. Their stability seems to be connected to the givers' and receiver's bonds with the mediator. The volatility of these bonds is apparent when there is a conflict (e.g. between giver and receiver, between receiver and mediator) or when the relationship changes (e.g. via distance, life cycle). For example, Eleanor's son-in-

law was very unpleasant to her and her husband over Christmas. As a result, she felt upset and considered not giving him a gift ever again. As he is married to her daughter, the father of her grandsons and a good and caring husband, Eleanor reconsidered and decided not to make the situation worse. However, the gift she eventually gave him (a half-price box of Thornton's chocolates) was no more than *"a token present"*, reflecting the fact that Eleanor "*wasn't very thrilled with him*". This and other accounts suggest that bonds with mediated receivers depend on the relationship with the mediator, whose needs take priority over those of the giver or of the receiver. The consideration of a broader social network beyond attachment figures has been neglected by previous attachment research (Gillath et al. 2019). Thus, the role of mediators contributes to the understanding of attachment networks by shedding light into network members who are different from attachment figures who still fulfil attachment functions indirectly.

Towards an integrated network view of gift receivers

By looking at gift networks and making sense of their complexity, we revealed the importance of *context* in givers' decisions of whom to give gifts to. Attachment theory provided a useful lens illuminating how receivers, within a wide range of social contexts in givers' lives, can fulfil important attachment roles in the givers-receivers relationships at different stages of life, thereby justifying their inclusion as receivers. Importantly, although family is at the heart of gifting (Marcoux, 2009; Otnes, 2018), our data shows that specific individuals within other contexts can become more precious receivers than family members. For example, a supportive colleague can provide an individual with the security needed at work that a family member (who is not part of the work environment) would not be able to offer.

Indeed, we found that descriptions of what makes relationships close in a family setting are often very similar to descriptions of what makes other people close in other contexts, such as those of friendship or the workplace. This is related to the attachment bonds established and emotional security provided. Thus, a close colleague can provide the security that a mother is not able to give at work, and housemates can offer a student the support she needs when living away from her family. For example, for Gail who has just started university, her housemates are a *"strict network, if we forget someone's birthday that would be terrible."* This emphasis on giving to housemates does not mean that Gail does not value her family. In fact, she says: "*family I think is important but they're not…they are expecting it less…so it's…if you didn't give them a gift, I don't think they would be as upset. But I find them the most important because they are sort of the closest relationship*" (Gail, interview). However, the pressure for Gail and other

students to give gifts to her house mates seems to respond to their need for belongingness to the new place where they live now as Valentina also illustrates. She exchanges gifts with her housemates, especially with one of them whom she sees as a "*good friend*", *"fun"* to be around, to whom she feels *"quite close"*, and whom Valentina would like to keep in her life (Valentina, diary, 006G). Indeed, the attachment system and need for support activates when entering a new environment (Nelson and Quick, 1991). For younger adults, the quality of their attachment bonds with peers can compensate for the transitional changes of going to college (Fass and Tubman, 2002).

While previous research has considered the nature of the relationship in gift-giving and accounted for the typical differences between family, romantic partners and friends (e.g. Joy, 2001; Dodlova and Yudkevich, 2009), the variation within each of these contexts is far richer than previously depicted. Specific individuals belonging to what are usually seen as low-importance contexts can provide individuals with emotional security that they cannot obtain from anyone else. As our data shows, they include a variety of groups to which individuals belong as a result of the different roles they play in their lives (e.g. group doing pub quiz, voluntary work, childcare). Gifts that show care can improve givers' relationships within such groups (Givi and Galak, 2022). Our analysis of gift-giving networks captures the nature of the giver's bonds with receivers and demonstrates how these bonds can be used to study gift networks within different contexts. The integration into a unified network can be represented as a "spider web" diagram, as in figure 2.

FIGURE 2

As depicted, the giver is at the centre, surrounded by the dark grey layer, which represents social contexts and shows the most common environments captured in our data. The number and description of social contexts can be extended depending on the giver's social life and the number of social groups the giver is part of (e.g. family, friends from university, friends from home country, work, gym). Around each social context layer and highlighted in light grey, there is a layer of *direct* (sacred, personal and social) bonds, reflecting receivers who are valued for their own worth; and *surrogate* bonds, signifying substitutes of important others who are not available. There is a final layer outside direct and surrogate bonds to capture *mediated* receivers, depicting extensions of direct relationships within the family, friendship, work or other contexts. The dashed lines show that the boundaries between different social

contexts are not rigid to illustrate that the same individual could be part of one or more social contexts in the givers' network.

Conclusion and implications

We found that givers mentally organise gift receivers into a dynamic network, which comprises those individuals who are somehow significant to the giver at a particular time. This novel conceptualisation of gift receivers addresses the issues emerging from the over-reliance of existing research on relationships labels (e.g. mother, husband, child) as it does not depend on traditional relationship labels as a reliable proxy for closeness. Indeed, as we showed, the labelling of receivers is not, in itself, the most important aspect to understand gift networks. What seems to matter the most is the context wherein those labels are embedded. Thus, for example, givers who seek security may include in their giving network people who would normally be treated as more distant. This understanding is important because it sheds a new light onto how relationships impact and shape gift giving. This contribution is summarised in three main points.

First, this manuscript advances knowledge on gift-giving by identifying three different relationship dimensions according to which givers distinguish among gift receivers around *direct*, *surrogate* and *mediated* bonds. According to MacInnis (2011), such distinction matters because a lack of differentiation creates errors in reasoning. While *direct* bonds are associated with receivers who are sources or targets of support to the giver (e.g. supportive husband), s*urrogate* bonds are established with receivers who replace unavailable supportive others (e.g. friend as a substitute of a deceased sister). In addition, *mediated* bonds are established with receivers connected with the giver through a mediator, who is a significant other for both the giver and the receiver and without whom, the receiver would not be included in the giver's network (e.g. a husband mediating the relationship between his wife and mother). Uncovering these different levels of support in givers-receivers relationships allows a fuller understanding of the different roles that gifts play in people's lives and responds to Wiener et al.'s (2022) call for research incorporating gift giving as a way of social support. Second, although extant research indicates that givers give gifts within a network of relations such as family or friends (Hollenbeck et al., 2006), we identified that givers integrate and organise receivers into a gift network around the aforementioned three dimensions as shown in Figure 2. While previous research identified social influences and the role of third parties in gift giving (Lowrey et al., 2004), the present study extends understanding of who gift receivers are and how they may be integrated into a network of gift receivers to understand specific relationship contexts. Finally, the

consideration of receivers' stability within the giver's gift network endows the network with dynamism, thus responding to calls for research on the changing nature of gift exchange over time (Otnes et al., 1994). In fact, by identifying *enduring*, *transient*, *sporadic* and *dependent* receivers, we can see how some recipients or network members are more prone to change their status in the giver's network than others depending on life contexts, and this also impacts gift giving. This seems to be a result of the differences in the type of attachment bonds tying the giver to the receiver.

In sum, this framework not only differentiates different groups of receivers based on givers' attachment ties (e.g. direct, surrogate, mediated), but also integrates them with previous research on social influences (Lowrey et al., 2004), relationship change and social contexts. Therefore, this work contributes to marketing scholarship by 'relating' to show how *wholes* (i.e. relationship social contexts, types of relationship bonds) and *parts* (e.g. stability of receivers in the givers' network, social influences) are connected (MacInnis, 2011). The *integrated network* of gift receivers based on normative attachment, also extends the application of AT theory to gift research beyond attachment styles (Nguyen and Munch, 2011). The identification of mediators and surrogate receivers within a giver's network helps the giver to nurture attachment bonds with other people to achieve attachment goals and emotional safety. This responds to the need to consider individuals' broader social networks. In particular, it shows how network members, who are not attachment figures, may fulfil attachment functions (directly or indirectly) or become new members of the attachment network (Gillath et al., 2019). Importantly, this work shows how a giver's network of gift receivers is complex and dynamic, and deeply entwined with people's attachment needs.

Implications for practitioners

From a practitioner's perspective, when promoting gifts around relationships, main retailers in the UK focus on demographics (e.g. "for him", "for her", "for kids") or specific relationship labels (e.g. mothers, husband/wife), neglecting aspects of relationship closeness and change. Marketers could use advertising appeals reflecting the *type of bonds* tying the giver to the receiver (i.e. direct, surrogate and mediated). While gifts to direct receivers are well addressed, gifts to surrogate and mediated receivers are less so. Gifts to *surrogate* receivers could emphasise the importance of the relationship they substitute, for example by attributing aspects of sisterhood to a friend who is "like a sister". Gifts to *mediated receivers,* which serve as means of supporting the mediator, could be promoted by highlighting the benefits to the giver or the mediator. For example, an advertising message such as "Because they are here for the ones

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you love" could appeal to a mother wanting to reward her daughter's teacher for the support and care given to her daughter (mediator). Furthermore, marketers can design segmentation strategies focusing on how givers categorise gift receivers according to the *stability* of their presence in the giver's gift network (i.e. enduring, transient, sporadic and dependent). For example, gifts to *enduring* members of the giver's network can reflect the continuity of the relationship and the existence of more opportunities to give them gifts by offering gifts that build on previous acquisitions and that facilitate gift selection for the giver. Finally, retailers could offer gifts for specific contexts (e.g. friendship, workplace) that reflect direct *sacred*, *personal* or *social* bonds. In this way, the gift would reduce relationship mismatches (Galak et al., 2016) because it is too much, too little, or inappropriate for the relationship.

Limitations and future research

Along with these contributions to theory and practice, the current research has several limitations that open interesting avenues for further inquiry. First, in their diaries, individuals reported their gift experiences over two specific periods of time, which may not have captured all gift receivers within the givers' networks. Although we did inquire about other possible receivers during the interviews, it is possible to have missed some relevant receivers. Future research could focus on the mapping of gift receivers using the proposed taxonomic classification in specific contexts. Second, our research was conducted in the UK, capturing a Western perspective of gift relationships. Considering that gift-giving is highly influenced by cultural differences and relationship dynamics across geographical borders (e.g. Park, 1998), it would be interesting to see how these cultural differences are reflected in gifting networks. Third, this research adopted the perspective of givers to shed light on the configuration of their networks and its impact on gift-giving. An alternative avenue of research would be to adopt the point of view of receivers to define a profile of givers and compare how givers and receivers differ in their perceptions of gift networks. Another area that would be worth of study is to use gift-giving experiences to understand attachment orientations and hierarchies. As individuals' attachment styles influence people's tendencies to initiate, maintain or dissolve emotional ties (Gillath et al., 2017), another fruitful research area would be to combine the normative approach of attachment employed here with attachment individual differences and explore how different attachment styles (based on individuals' perceptions of the 'self' and 'others') impact the giver's network of receivers. For example, exploring how networks of givers showing secure attachment compare to those of anxious and avoidant givers would add value to the understanding of networks in gift research. Also, as new technologies facilitate different forms of

relationships such as virtual gifting (e.g. Badi et al., 2017), there is scope to investigate how technologies influence new forms of gifting. Finally, while the data for the present research has been collected before the Covid-19 pandemic, it would be interesting to research the influence of the pandemic on gift giving networks in a post-covid context, which is a situation of crisis likely to activate the attachment system and increase the need for support and care from others.

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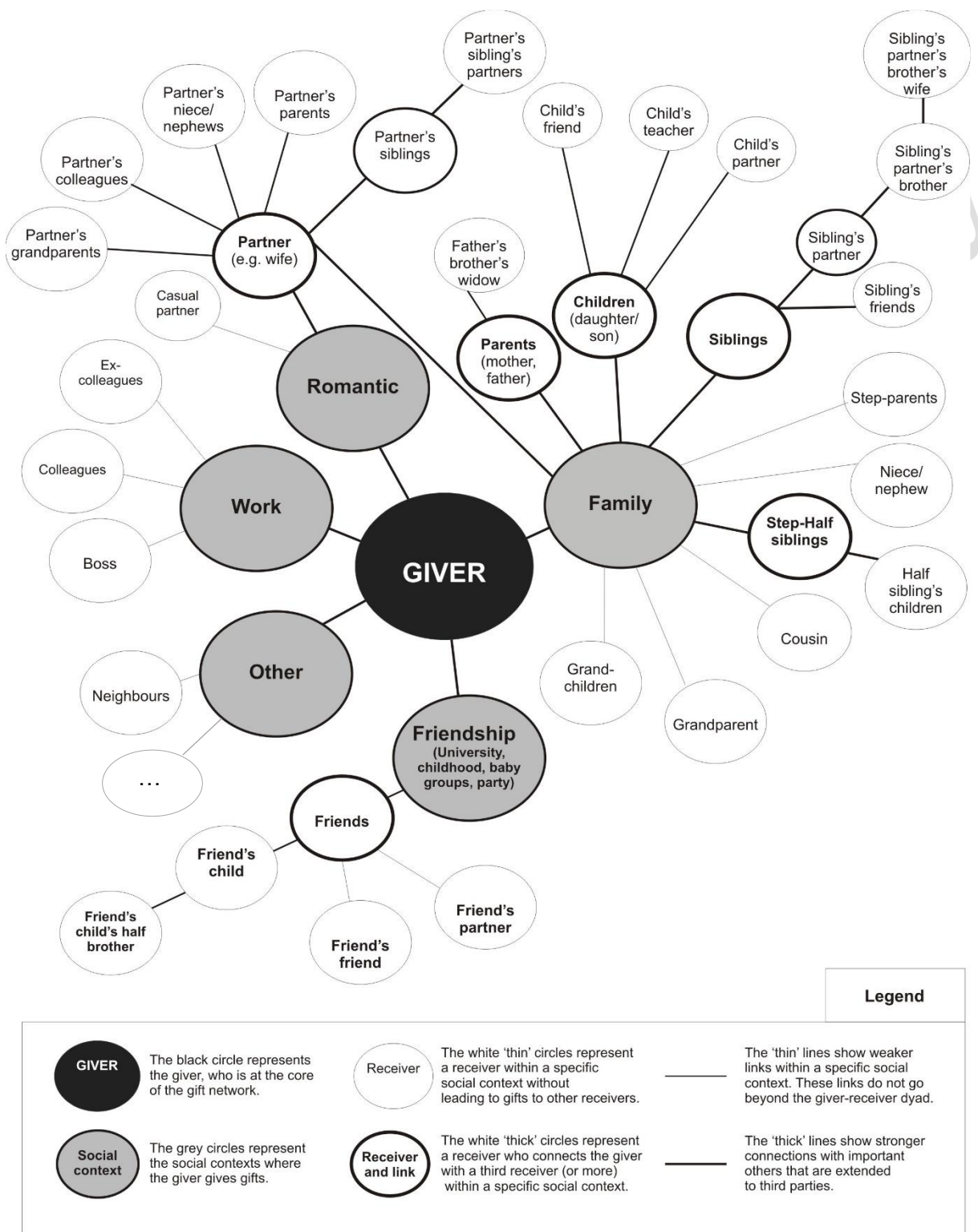
Table 1: Participant's profile and data

Name	Gender	Age	Income (£ per week)	Some aspects about the informants' life stage	Types of receivers	Giving occasion
				PARTICIPANT'S PROFILE	**DETAILS OF DIARIES**	
MIRANDA	Female	18-24	<£200	Miranda is studying at University and she lives with her family.	Friends, sister, father, mother, brother.	Christmas, birthday.
ELAINE	Female	18-24	<£200	Elaine is an only child, who lives with her parents and is about to go to University. She is in a new relationship.	Friends, mother, boyfriend.	Christmas, return from a trip.
HELENA	Female	18-24	<£200	Helena is a student and lives with her housemates. She has been in a relationship for five years.	Boyfriend's grandmother, friends, friends from university, friends from 'home', boyfriend, father, mother.	Christmas, engagement party.
GAIL	Female	18-24	<£200	Gail lives with her housemates while she is at University. Her parents are divorced and she has now several half and step siblings. Gail has a boyfriend.	Friend, step-mother, step-brother/step-sister/half-sister.	Christmas, birthday.
VALENTINA	Female	18-24	<£200	Valentina has just started her studies at University and lives with new housemates. After the school term, she lives with her parents and brother.	Friend, father, mother, brother.	Christmas.
KATE	Female	18-24	£200-£299	Kate finished her studies at University and has recently started new job. She has been in a relationship for six years.	Friends, colleagues, partner's brother, partner's dad, partner's mum, father, mother, sister, partner, friend's daughter.	Christmas, birthday.
PATRICIA	Female	25-34	<£200	Patricia is married and has a two-year-old daughter. Patricia's parents are divorced and they remarried with other partners more than 27 years ago. Now, Patricia has several half-siblings.	Colleague, friends, friend's children, sisters, step-mother, daughter, husband, mother, step-father, niece, brother, father, husband's sister, grandmother.	Christmas, birthday, baby Shower.
MONICA	Female	25-34	£1000-£1499	Monica is married and has two children. She has started a new job recently.	Husband, son's teachers/carers, partner, son, colleague.	Birthday, thank you gift, Father's Day, spontaneous, farewell.
ASTRID	Female	25-34	£1000-£1499	Astrid is in a long-distance relationship and lives far from her family. All of them reside in another country. Astrid does not have many friends and she is very focused on her job.	Friend's daughter, colleagues.	New-born, getting a degree.
SONIA	Female	35-44	<£200	Sonia has been married for five years and now she is pregnant with her first baby.	Parent's neighbour, grandmother, sister in-law.	New-born, birthday, getting pregnant.
GERTRUDE	Female	35-44	<£200	Gertrude is married and she has just had a baby. At the moment she is not working, and she is spending as much time as she can with her child.	Husband's colleagues.	Birthday.
HEATHER	Female	35-44	£200-£299	Heather does not explain her marital situation. She lives with her two children.	Friends, son's teacher, daughter's teacher.	Christmas, thank you gift.
GLORIA	Female	35-44	£300-£399	Gloria is married and she has two young children. Gloria lives far from her parents and sister, who reside abroad.	Daughter, daughter's friend, colleague, son, children's colleagues.	Play date for daughter, Christmas, retirement, birthday, thank you gift.
LORRAINE	Female	35-44	£400-£499	Lorraine is married and does not have any children. She lives far from her parents although she tries to visit them very often because they are getting old.	Niece, friends, partner's grandparents, mother, partner, partner's mother, partner's father, sister in-law/friend, goddaughter/friend's daughter.	Christmas, New Year.
CARMEN	Female	35-44	£600-£699	Carmen has been married for 15 years and has a young son.	Husband, friends.	Father's Day, birthday.
JANET	Female	45-54	£1000-£1499	Janet cohabits with her partner for 36 years and has a 15-year-old child. Most of her family died and her partner, child and an aunt by marriage are her only family now.	Father's brother's widow, son, partner, friend's daughter's half-brother, friend, friend's daughter.	Christmas, visit, birthday.
SANDRA	Female	55-64	<£200	Sandra has been married for over 40 years, has two children, three grandchildren and a fourth grandchild is on its way.	Husband, husband's father, daughter.	Spontaneous, Father's Day, new-born.

Name	Gender	Age	Income	Description	Recipients	Occasions
SOFIA	Female	55-64	£200-£299	Sofia is married and she does not have any children. She lost her father recently and she takes care of her mum.	Ex-colleague, friend's friend, friend, colleague, mother.	Civil partnership, thank you gift, birthday.
ELEANOR	Female	65-74	£200-£299	Eleanor is retired and she has been married for over 40 years. She has two children and two grandchildren.	Daughter's husband, grandsons.	Birthday, thank you gift, spontaneous,
CHARLES	Male	25-34	<£200	Charles cohabits with his partner, with whom he has been for almost 10 years. He does not have any children.	Friends, parents, partner's niece, partner's nephew, partner's sister, partner's brother, partner's brother's wife, partner's mother, partner's sister's husband.	Birthday, visit.
ELLIOT	Male	25-34	<£200	Elliot is married and he has a five-year-old daughter. He is unemployed and he spends lots of time with his child.	Father, nieces, nephews, daughter.	Birthday, visit.
GEORGE	Male	25-34	£600-£699	George is single, shares the house with friends and lives far from his family.	Father, aunt, mother, sister's husband, sister, sister's husband's brother's wife, friends.	Spontaneous, wedding anniversary, new-born, wedding, to address a need.
WILLIAM[3]	Male	25-34	£900-£999	William lives very far from his family, who live in a different country. He has a girlfriend, with whom he has been dating for two years and they have just moved together	-	-
DONALD[1]	Male	35-44	£200-£299	Donald lives far from his family and is cohabiting with his girlfriend, with whom he has been for less 11 months. He recently met his girlfriend's family.	-	-
LUCAS	Male	35-44	£500-£599	Lucas is single and he is looking for a girlfriend. Lucas lives far from his parental family.	Niece, brother's partner, brother, father/mother, friend.	Christmas.
KEVIN	Male	45-54	<£200	Kevin is divorced and has a 15-year-old daughter. He does not have a stable job and his financial situation now is tight.	Sister, mother, friends, colleague, friend/mentor, daughter, half-sister's daughter.	Christmas.
ANDREW	Male	55-64	£500-£599	Andrew has been married for over 20 years and he has a teenage daughter. He runs his own business.	Wife, father, friend.	Birthday, Father's Day.

[3] William and Donald did not give any gifts during the diary data collection period in June. They shared their views in their interview.

Figure 1: Complexity of gift receiver relationships based on relationship context

Legend

GIVER	The black circle represents the giver, who is at the core of the gift network.	
Social context	The grey circles represent the social contexts where the giver gives gifts.	
Receiver	The white 'thin' circles represent a receiver within a specific social context without leading to gifts to other receivers.	The 'thin' lines show weaker links within a specific social context. These links do not go beyond the giver-receiver dyad.
Receiver and link	The white 'thick' circles represent a receiver who connects the giver with a third receiver (or more) within a specific social context.	The 'thick' lines show stronger connections with important others that are extended to third parties.

Table 2: Data analysis audit trail

EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS			THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS	THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS		
Step 1: Organising data	**Step 2:** Reading and familiarisation with the data (Finding diary-interview connections)		**Step 3:** Initial Coding	**Step 4:** Interpretation AND combination of codes into categories	**Step 5:** Development of framework	
	RAW DATA		**CODES**	**CATEGORIES**	**CONCEPTS**	**THEORY**
			Initial code / Final code			
Miranda's diary {071G} {072G} {073G} {074G} {104G} {105G} {106G} **Miranda's interview** **Elaine's diary** {008G} {009G} {022G} {082G} {083G} {002R} {008R} **Elaine's interview** . . . **Elliot's diary** {048GS} {049GS} {050GS} {051GS} {052GS} **Elliot's interview**	*"My dad is **one of the most important** relationships in my life"* {Miranda, diary, 104G}.	Relationships that stand out	**Uniqueness**	**Sacred recipients** (bonds based Attachment signs)	**Direct receivers** (sources/ targets of emotional security)	Taxonomy of gift recipients based on attachment (how givers relate to gift recipients)
	*"I know that **if I ever need her** [my close friend Jane] **she will be there for me**"* {Elaine, diary, 008G}.	Being always there	**Responsiveness** (Secure base)			
	*They are **my parents** and I love them dearly […] I wish there was **more I could do for them**, and I know **they feel the same way**"* {Charles, diary, 009GS}. *"With **my parents** the **relationships is pretty much the same** all the time, so there is **less pressure** [to give than giving to other people]"* {Charles, interview}.	Helping	**Based on support** (Safe Haven)			
	*"**I always give** something [gift] at New Year to **my parents** […] with my mum and dad it's different because, obviously, I know them very, very well"* {Lorraine, interview}.	Always receiving gifts	**Enduring receivers in givers' gift list**			
	*"We [my young half-sister and I] have always got on really well and have a nice friendship, often **teasing and joking** with each other […] we **only speak when we see each other**"* {Patricia, diary 027G}.	Based on interaction	**Time spent together** (proximity maintenance)	**Personal recipients** (based on interactions)		
	*"It's [gift-giving] basically my family unit and the occasional friend **on and off** […] or **girlfriends if I'm seeing them at the time** and the odd friend but not many"* {Lucas, interview}.	People in and out of the list	**Transient receivers in the givers' gift list**			
	*"I will be **giving** something [little gift] to about 5 people **in my workplace** as I move to a new one […] we have been **working together** for a long time […] the new job will soon start, and **I hope to find nice people there too**"* {Monica, diary, 042GS}.	Receivers in a particular social setting	**Restricted to a social context** (group attachment)	**Social recipients** (based on affiliation)		
	*"There is a regularity of the people I give gifts to **except if there is** […] a **new friend** who has his **birthday** and I, will buy him something"* {William, interview}.	Occasional gift receivers	**Sporadic members in the givers' gift network**			
	*"I **always** buy [a gift] for Lisa [my friend's daughter] […] I consider her [Lisa] to be **part of the family**, a sort of **cousin or sister to Jake [my son]**"* {Janet, diary, 065G}. *"Other than him [my partner] and our son, **I have no family** now"* {Janet, diary, 059G}.	Receivers filling a relationship void	**Substitutes of figures who are not available** (surrogate attachment)	**Surrogate recipients**		
	*""This is only the fourth or fifth gift I am buying for him [my long **standing friend's husband**], and I still **do not really know him** […] The girl [my friend] **is a long-time friend (since high-school!) and we are extremely close: she can tell me a-n-y-t-h-i-n-g that troubles her or that she is really happy about, and that holds true for me** as well (although that is a privilege I do not make much use of!). **Her guy is not my friend** in the traditional sense (only met him properly […] after the wedding)"* {George, diary, 029GS}.	Givers' relationship with the recipient tied to a third person (different from the recipient).	Bonds **dependant** on a third person	**Mediated recipients** (extensions of special others)		

Table 3: Categorisation of relationship bonds in the network of gift receivers

Network dimensions		Description of dimensions	Underlying attachment insights	Stability within the network	Social influences
Direct (receivers sharing direct bonds with the giver are individuals who are valued for what they bring to the giver's life and this is not conditioned by relationships with other parties)	**Sacred**	*Sacred* bonds with receivers represent the most important figures for the giver. They are *unique* either because they: 1) *provide* givers with support or; 2) *need* the givers' support	Secure base, Safe haven of support	*Enduring*	-*Calibrating* (e.g. providing care instead of being cared for) -*Integrating* (e.g. newborn) -*Purging* (e.g. deceased)
	Personal	*Personal* bonds with receivers reflect those individuals with whom the giver spends time or shares common interests, although they are not key sources of comfort	Proximity maintenance (physical or through digital media)	*Transient*	-*Calibrating* (when relationships become more/less important) -*Practicing equipollence* (treating a group of receivers the same) -*Initiating* (new receivers with whom the giver has more contact now) -*Severing* (removing receivers with whom there was a regular interaction, but the giver does not see at all)
	Social	*Social* bonds with receivers are those who are simply part of a shared social context where the giver and the receiver meet as a broader group of people	Addressing needs for affiliation that enhance givers' need to belong and can lead to attachment	*Sporadic*	-*Adhering to group norms* -*Calibrating* -*Integrating*
Surrogate		*Surrogate* bonds with receivers signal individuals who are substitutes of unavailable targets or sources of support to the donor	Surrogate attachment (substituting missing attachment bonds)	*Enduring*	-*Enacting traditions*
Mediated		*Mediated* bonds with the receivers indicate that the giver-receiver relationship is not close. This relationship exists because of the connection of both giver and receiver with a third party (mediator)	Givers' supporting third parties to develop emotional bonds with peers or other important relationships	*Dependent* on the relationship with the mediator	-*Integrating* -*Purging* -*Gaining permission from Gatekeepers* -*Enrolling accomplices* - *Practicing equipollence* -*Calibrating*

Figure 2: A network of gift receivers