

Exploring Digital Gifting Rituals

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Abstract

Background Gift exchange is a ritual practice imbued with current values of social relationships. The Internet and smart devices have reduced temporal and geographical barriers in gift exchange by enabling digital gifting. Online gifts are increasingly being exchanged on multiple, everyday occasions. Thus, it is important to understand how digital technology frames our social interactions with regard to digital gifting. In this paper, we present qualitative research by introducing Ritual Probe, a bespoke diary booklet, where participants are sensitised to retrospectively articulate rituals in their everyday lives and digital interactions. We suggest an avenue for the development of digital gifting that resonates with our interpretation of how digital gifting rituals are vaguely practised in private and social contexts.

Methods We designed Ritual Probe in a semi-structured format that facilitates participants' autonomy to elude latent rituals while they act out daily practices. The mobility of the probe materials was expected to help this practice throughout the study. Participants were encouraged to use the probe materials for 2–4 weeks. Moreover, follow-up interviews were conducted to examine participants' points of view in discerning rituals in secular and quotidian contexts, distinctive of daily habits.

Results Participants showed varying degrees of engagement with the probes. The interview helped participants to comprehend the ritual aspects of their digital gifting experience and other social interactions. We found that ritual design in digital gifting needs to be considered from three perspectives: keeping the momentum of gifting rituals, synchronising giving and receiving, and building a mutual bond while reflecting upon the use of digital gifts.

Conclusions From the outset, we aimed to recollect, restore and reconcile dubious rituals in the exchange of digital media contents. Through a ritual lens, we attempted to understand the way people structure and think about digital gift exchange. We examined how people ruminate on the current practices of digital gifting, which lack the common vocabulary of exchange rituals. This study suggests implications for designers and researchers in designing experiential gifts by employing digitally augmented physical artefacts or events, which can be reformulated as episodic interactions.

Keywords Digital Gifting, Gift Exchange, HCI, Ritual, Interaction Design

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1. Introduction

Gift exchange is a densely ritualised form of human interaction that has been shaping social (Berking, 1999; Sherry, Jr., 1983), economic (D. J. Cheal, 1988; Rook, 1985) and moral (Komter, 2004) aspects of human society across history. The notion of gift exchange is pervasive in modern social life, not only in a physical sense but also in online life as a mechanism to begin and maintain social relationships. In turn, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and adjacent fields have drawn an analogy between gift exchange and computer-mediated communication, such as texting (Taylor & Harper, 2002) and file sharing (Giesler & article., 2006; Håkansson et al., 2007), and have considered how to account for gift exchange and participation in online communities (Pearson, 2007; Skågeby, 2010) and social media (Kizilcec et al., 2018). Only recently, HCI designers have begun to develop a digital gifting platform that enables users to design and exchange an experience as a gift (Fosh et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2019).

Ritual is an active process of engagement and meaning making that penetrates longstanding norms of gift exchange. Relatively little literature, however, has considered the ritual aspects of gifting or communication in HCI and interaction design. Only recently, Kirk et al. (2016) proposed bespoke phatic devices reflecting family rituals and routines that support mobile workers communicating with their family members at home. Routine is often used as a synonym of ritual, and the word frequent appears in the lineage of works undertaken in Ubiquitous Computing (Weiser, 1994). Tolmie et al. (2002) examined the fundamental nature of 'routines' in our domestic environment and identified design issues within the requirements for developing 'unremarkable' computing systems. While there is a clear demarcation between ritual and routine or habit (Grimes, 2013), HCI has inconsiderately used the terms interchangeably.

In this paper, our focal point is digital gifting and ICT technology that supports the manner of the exchange ritual. Given that a gift is a ritual offering (D. Cheal, 1987) that marks our social involvement and connectedness to others, it is doubtful to what extent the main elements of exchange rituals (e.g., effort, appropriateness, wrapping, gratitude, etc.) apply to digital gifting, in which givers deliberately choose to give intangible digital media through online means. Kwon et al. (2017) investigated some pitfalls of the digital gifting experience and suggested implications for design by emphasising ritual concerns in digital gifting. In this paper, we draw directly upon Kwon et al. (2017) and scrutinise how digital gifting is currently being practised in which digital communication applications are sufficiently used by a wide range of end-users. While examining the state-of-the-art digital gifting rituals, on one side, we have set a hypothesis that there are still limitations in the gifting services and user experiences that HCI designers and researchers have yet to give rigorous consideration. Subsequently, we will draw on some important aspects of the rituals that people call, make, and sustain in their everyday digital social communications. Finally, we will reflect on the digital gifting practices with an aim to draw out design implications for making digital gifting rituals, services, and experiences. Our findings are intended to guide HCI researchers and designers who wish to engage with the design of rituals for digital communication technologies, especially in the areas of gifting services, user experience design, and wider consumer retail domains.

2. Background

In online communication, the forms of giving and receiving digital media are generally portrayed as sharing rather than gift-giving ‘in that they lack the ritual presentation of the gift’ (R. Belk, 2007). HCI and adjacent fields have drawn an analogy between gift exchange and online communication, which can be seen in text messaging (Kelly et al., 2017) and file sharing (Håkansson et al., 2007) as well as in efforts to account for gift exchange and participation in online communities (Pearson, 2007; Skågeby, 2010). However, there has not been much research on explicit digital gifting in which a giver deliberately chooses to pass ownership of digital media to the recipient. A few studies have investigated purposeful acts of giving in the area of online games (Wohn, 2014) and museum experience (Fosh et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2019). Belk (R. W. Belk, 2013) has argued that comments on online social networks are ‘a more subtle form of costless gift-giving that is perhaps the most pervasive type of digital giving’. Recently, social influence and reciprocity have been investigated in online gifting, including the exchange of comments, between Facebook users (Kizilcec et al., 2018). These comments are perceived as a casual ritual of phatic communication between online friends. In terms of ritual design, Kirk et al. (2016) proposed bespoke phatic devices reflecting family rituals and routines that support mobile workers communicating with their family members at home. While gift exchange has been recognised as a ritual practice, relatively little, however, has been considered about the ritualistic aspects of gifting in HCI and interaction design. At most, studies of family rituals on special occasions (e.g., Christmas) can be found in this area (Petrelli & Light, 2014). A notable exception is the work of Kwon et al. (2017) that explored how the very convenience of digital gifting actually serves to undermine some of the most valued aspects of social gifting rituals, such as personalisation, thoughtful exchange, delightful unwrapping, and showing gratitude. In their study, a 5-stage framework (Figure 1) was employed as a lens to view and analyse the gifting process. They made the ‘Reveal’ stage prominent to stress the significance of wrapping in the digital gifting experience. Furthermore, Kwon (2017) extended the idea of digital gift wrapping by introducing edible music tracks that employed a dessert to ‘wrap’ a music track that was designed to playback once the recipient breaks the shape. Their study proclaimed an alternative framing of digital gifting by suggesting designers focus more on the rituals of gift giving than on the form. Thus, we directly reflect on their concluding remark: *‘whether the emergence of digital technology will fundamentally transform the nature of the gifting’*. In this study, we attempt to understand the ritual practices in a quotidian context that incorporate digital technology. We aim to investigate the common lexicons that describe the imperative social behaviours that underlie social exchange in digital media. In what follows, we describe our research approach and provide details regarding the probe method.

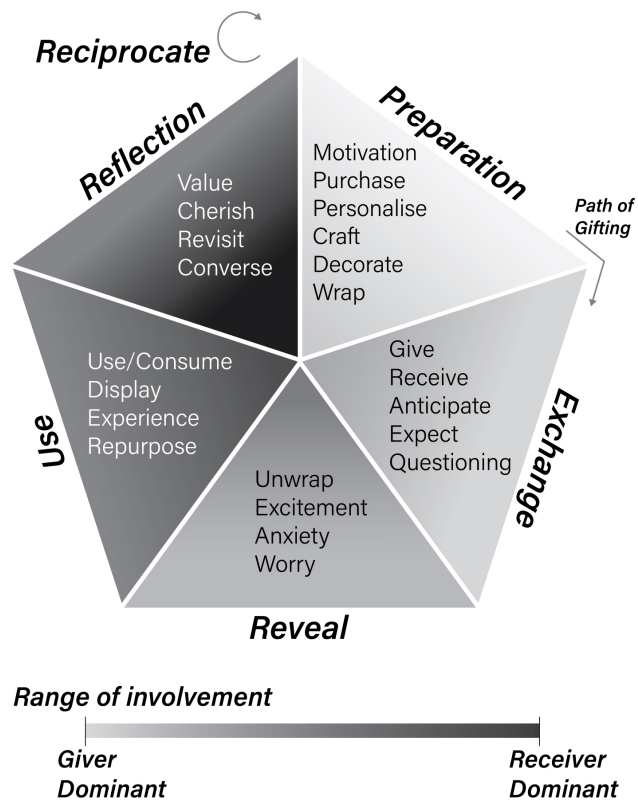


Figure 1 5-stage gift exchange framework (redrawn from Kwon et al. 2017).

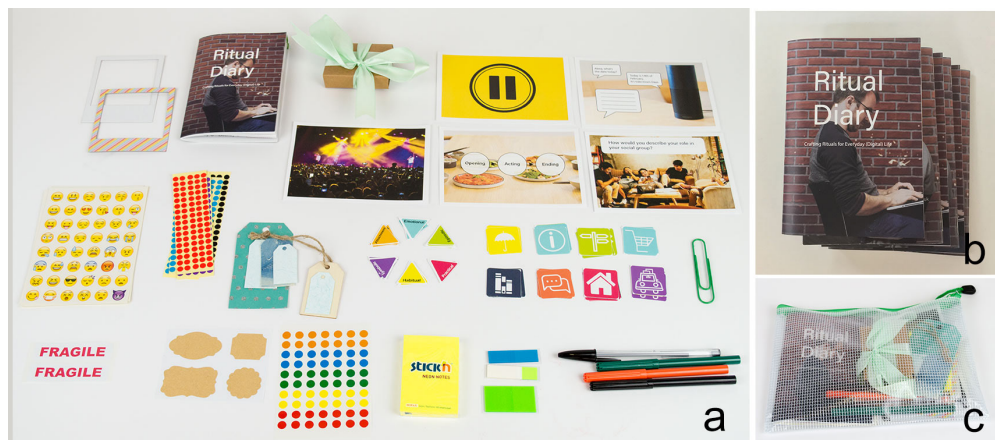


Figure 2 (a) Contents of the probe kit. (b) A6 size Ritual diary booklet. (c) Probe kit in a A5 sized package.

3. Method

We designed physical packets containing various inspirational materials to prompt participants to reflect on and account for their own experiences. From the outset, our approach resembled Cultural Probe's open-ended and provocative glimpses into people's local cultures that were initially developed by Bill Gaver and his colleagues (Gaver et al., 1999). The probe techniques are broadly analogous to ethnography in terms of their reliance on participants' perspectives on their everyday lives. Within HCI, probes are often employed as an alternative to ethnographic methods, but the probes' inspiring yet unaccountable nature has arguably been rejected for variants of ethnographic inquiry (Dourish, 2006). In this work, we endeavoured to position our approach in between the probe and ethnography by emphasising that our method provides a rich narrative of contexts. We were aware that rituals are often realised by tacit knowledge or latent needs and are difficult to elicit all at once in unfamiliar places, e.g., meeting rooms. Thus, we designed Ritual Probe (Figure 2) that facilitates participants' autonomy to educe latent rituals while they act out daily practices. Additionally, in the interview, we encouraged participants to retrospectively annotate the meaning and value implied in the rituals. The mobility of the probe materials was expected to help this practice throughout the study. Moreover, in-depth follow-up interviews played a critical role in examining participants' points of view in discerning rituals around gifting in quotidian contexts. In what follows, we will describe the design of Ritual Probe and the praxis of ethnography that inspired the interviews to study rituals in quotidian social actions as mediated by communication technology.

3. 1. Interview

At the inception of recruitment, we were aware that digital materials are often rarely perceived as gifts, unless they are specified as a 'gift' (e.g., 'gift' voucher) (Kwon et al., 2017). Thus, we recruited people 'who have exchanged any digital gifts' by noting this requirement in the advertisement. After securing approval from our institution's ethics committee, we recruited participants through various channels. Emails were sent out via the authors' university networks and word of mouth, and hard copies of a recruitment flyer were also posted across the university campus. We informed potential participants about the purpose of the study over email and in person. Ten participants (4 males) confirmed that they had experience with digital gift exchange and participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged between 24–55 years old (mean age 34.9); they had various ethnicities (4 British, 3 Asian, 1 Latin American, 1 European, 1 Arabian), academic, and vocational backgrounds; all were living in the East Midlands of the UK; and their marital status was varied (3 lived alone, 2 lived in shared flat individually, 5 lived with their family or partner). We made an individual appointment with each participant. Upon obtaining consent, we gave a general introduction of the study and handed out the probe kit. We fully explained what we mean by ritual in this study, i.e., the difference between ritual and routine or habit. The participants were instructed to engage with the kit over a period of at least ten days. After the designated duration, follow-up interviews were arranged via email. Interviews were held 2-4 weeks after they had received the kit. All participants were interviewed when they returned the probe kit. The interviews were open-ended, semi-structured conversations that focused

on the participant's rituals denoted in the diary booklets (Figure 3). Interviews were held individually by appointment in a university meeting room, lasted approximately one hour, and were audio and video recorded for later transcription. Each participant received a £10 Amazon voucher as compensation after the interview. The interview broadly comprised two phases. First, we examined the participant's rituals, focusing on the ones that involve other people—interpersonal rituals. Then, we discussed ritual aspects in digital gift exchange. In prior to focusing our interview on gift exchange, we presented 5-stage gift exchange framework (Figure 1) for participants to reflect their experiences upon the framework. These interviews were framed around the three questions below:

1. General description of the experience.
2. Which aspect of your digital gift exchange has a ritualistic element?
3. If no rituals were pre-established within your peer or group, at which stage of the gifting experience do you want to develop one?

From the interview, we aimed to examine how the value of each ritual is reflected in the exchange of digital media that is purposefully prepared, given, reflected, and reciprocated.

Figure 3 displays three example pages from a diary booklet. Page (a) features a photograph of a dining table with various dishes and a form for recording a ritual. The form includes sections for 'Inter-personal Interaction' (Social: Group, Peer; Personal/Private: Familial, Individual) and 'Self-oriented activity'. It also has fields for 'Context', 'Time' (Morning, Noon, Night), 'Place' (Home, Work, Other), 'Frequency' (Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Quarterly, Yearly), 'Seriousness' (Not at all, Quite, Extremely), and 'Obsession' (Not at all, Quite, Extremely). A dashed box labeled 'a' highlights the 'How do you feel?' section. Page (b) is a blank page with the same form structure. Page (c) is a rating card titled 'If you couldn't conduct the ritual, how uncomfortable/anxious do you feel?' with a scale from 'Very uncomfortable' to 'Very Satisfied'.

Figure 3 Example pages of the diary booklet. (a) Photo of a dining table and description page. (b) Blank page. (c) Uncomfortableness/anxiety rating card (All photos in the booklet)

4. Result–Ritual Practice in Digital Gifting

Probes returned with varying degrees of engagement. One participant returned within 10 days, which was recommended time period, while others kept for a month. Some participants had only three or four ritual while others had nearly 10 rituals. Some participants actively used the booklet and annotated the rituals by using post-its, adding stickers, sketching situations, and taking photos. In contrast, the other participants returned with few rituals, reflecting that they realised they had little to say. We fully transcribed the interviews (approximately 610 minutes in total) and analysed them via thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014) to distil themes across the entire data set. The authors performed an affinity analysis (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1999), and the themes were refined through several collaborative data sessions between colleagues in the lab. In analysing the gifting rituals, we used Kwon et. al's 5-stage framework as a template to examine every part of the experience that people went through in the exchange of digital gifts. (All names are anonymised in the quotations.)

4. 1. Ritual of Preparation–Joining Time, Place, and People

Many informants have rituals that they developed in relation to their past (P1, P4, P6, P8, P10) or to join places and people (P2, P4, P7, P8, P9) who are far away. The participants' interviews show that gifting rituals are being shifted from one platform to another while maintaining the essential formality. P1 described a humorous birthday ritual between him and his friend, which is now performed digitally (Figure 4). The ritual began when P1 received a card from his friend that was still wrapped in a plastic bag, lacking a message or name, and with the price tag still attached. P1 recalled, “[...] he deliberately did all that, because he knew I would find it funny [...] Why it’s funny is my birthday is the day after his, so (since then) I give it to him and then he gives it straight back to me and then we wait until the next year [...] so now it’s evolved into just a happy birthday message on the Facebook wall. But it will have in brackets, along the lines of ‘unopened card addressed to Mike...’ So it kind of carries the joke on.” The fact that they are no longer living close to each other and cannot exchange the original card made them move to a digital space to keep the momentum of the ritual. Having mutual codes such as ‘unwritten card’, ‘still in plastic wrapping’, and ‘price tag left on’ helped them make a smooth transition to online and keep the ceremonial act of celebrating each other’s birthday alive.

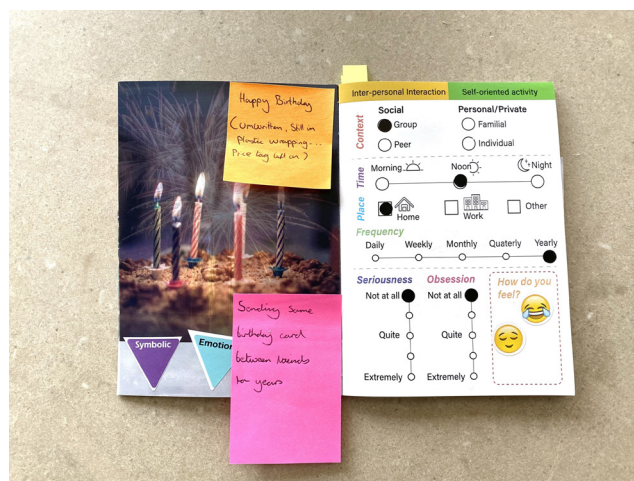


Figure 4 P1's birthday ritual described in the Probe Diary.

P4 had a ritual called 'GBBO' named after a British TV program that she has been watching with her daughters for many years (Figure 5). This ritual has kept on even after one of her daughters moved to a different city a few years ago and is now living in a country with a different time zone.



Figure 5 P4's ritual illustrated with cake and muffin stickers.

(P4) “[...] we religiously watch ‘GBBO’ on a Tuesday night and we would be WhatsApping each other, saying ‘oh such and such is doing well’ or ‘that is not very good’ [...] even between me and my daughter sitting there, we’d have a group chat.” (Researcher) “What do you mean by religiously?” (P4) “Every Tuesday [...], whatever you do you have to stop to be able to watch it.” Due to the time difference, the conversation on WhatsApp was asynchronous. Nevertheless, they preserved the formality of the ritual by ‘not spoiling the result’ of the episode. This example demonstrates that the family has placed a significant value on attachment, which is reinforced by synchronising the attention of family members.

4. 2. Ritual of Exchange and Reveal–Craft a Gifting Context

Given that surprise represents a central emotion in gift exchange (Ruffle, 1999), wrapping is often a significant part of the gift ritual. Ritualised occasions such as Christmas (e.g., P1, P2, P4, P6) and birthdays (e.g., P5, P6) have well-defined episodes of interaction that are materialized through wrapping. Many participants expressed how zealous they are about hiding gifts, keeping the secret from the receiver, waiting until the appropriate time to reveal the gift, and unwrapping it in a formal manner. P1 recounted the limitations of digital gifting in terms of wrapping and re-gifting. P1 planned to give his partner a concert e-ticket via email. He wanted to embed an element of surprise in the gift, so he deliberately sent the e-ticket to her work email and wrote a message in a very formal style. (P1) “It was like, ‘Dear Sam, please see attached file, ...’ and they did kind of the surprise-thing. Then she’d been reading it all serious to begin with and then she’d open the attachment and it was this (e-ticket).” Since P1 couldn’t attend the concert with his partner, she then re-gifted the second ticket to her friend who could accompany her. In the re-gifting phase, she then had to reveal what the gift was in order to plan the journey (i.e., by train).

A prominent advantage of internet technology lies in its ubiquity that facilitates gift exchange at any time regardless of distance. However, gifts are often exchanged asynchronously between people who are in different time zones (e.g., P4, P5, P8). Hence, givers often sent the gift without informing the recipients and waited for the recipients to find the gift and

feel surprised. Yet, they also reported that the experience was disappointing if the reply was delayed. In this vein, P7 made an interesting claim about an exchange ritual. She had given a gift voucher to her father through email for his birthday. Rather than sending it and waiting for him to open it and be surprised, she informed him to check his inbox while she was talking with him over the phone to send congratulations on his birthday. *“[...] it’s like you need the expectation, well, it’s not even the expectation of getting a gift, just some sort of communication before... maybe it should be... they’re responding to you. In the real world it would be like, ‘here is a gift’ and then they’d say ‘thank you’, which is natural [...] but (in the digital case) if they’ve just opened the gift voucher, they’re the ones who have to go out and start that conversation.”* P7 pointed out that the recipient becomes obliged to open the reciprocal conversation, which may put pressure on the recipient. P7 continued to explain that, in digital gifting, the exchange stage can be considered to be an area where both the giver and the recipient can build a mutual bonding. *“[...] you can build everything else around that. Preparation obviously, that’s [...] on one side of it, that’s the giver’s, and then obviously the reveal is ... with the receiver, **the exchange is that where they meet, but not physically.**”*

4. 3. Ritual of Use and Reflection–Show Them You Love It

It was notable that terms related to moral-ethical behaviour, such as gratitude, manner, propriety, etc., remained strangely elusive in the interview. However, these concepts were still played out in actual practice. P6 had designed four personalized videos as a Christmas gift for her friends. She had carefully devised the surprise element by wrapping the video in a physical card, i.e., writing a greeting message and the URL of the video. But she recalled how disinterested she was to find out how the recipients perceived the videos. She made a comparison with physical gifts by reflecting on her home country’s gifting rituals. There, a giver often gives a gift with a receipt for the product purchased to allow the recipient to exchange the item; this is especially common for clothes, when exchange can be necessary if the item is the wrong size. (P6) *“[...] when I notice that someone exchanged my gift for something completely different, I feel really bad [...] for me, this (Use) part is more important (in physical) than digital. [...] I saw digital as something more ephemeral, [...] digital has a beginning and an end, even when it’s not always like that, [...] maybe because it’s this feeling ‘I cannot touch that thing!’”* She perceived digital gifts, or the use of digital gifts, as ephemeral in the sense that the experience (viewing, listening) is not the core part of the gift. Conversely, P5’s articulation directly contradicts P6’s account. P5 once sent a digital birthday card to her mother-in-law, which she had created using a tablet, with a hand-drawn illustration and a message in her own handwriting. She then sent it through a mobile messenger on the birthday. (P5) *“...the use and reflection parts make me think if the gift was successful or not, [...] she loved it and changed her profile photo on the messaging app so that everyone can see... (Figure 6) The way they reflect makes the value of the gift.”*



Figure 6 P5's gift had been displayed on the recipient's messenger profile page that was made available for everyone to browse.

How the recipient reflects on the gift, repurposes the gift, and responds to the giver are part of the ritual, and these reactions need to be considered in the gift exchange.

We found that while digital gifting is being practised widely in our daily lives, people tend not to consider the manner of the exchange, or computer systems are hindering such interactions. This has revealed an opportunity to investigate more into how people share mutual understandings and how rituals can be constructed in our social lives. Ritual design in digital gifting needs consideration from three perspectives: keeping the momentum of exchange rituals in the process, synchronous digital gift exchange, and building a mutual bond while using and reflecting upon the gift.

5. Design Implications

The gifting ritual has a solid framework that is constructed with episodes of interactions—effortful preparation, thoughtful exchange, unexpected receipt, displaying nervousness and curiosity, and removing the wrapping with surprise, followed by immediate gratitude (Berking, 1999). Such a gift ritual has been rooted in the customs and traditions of one society. Rituals, however, are 'adaptive' (Gordon-Lennox & Russo, 2016): the gift customs are not fixed and may change over time or in different local contexts (D. J. Cheal, 1988). Thus, it is unreliable to directly replicate the social effects of physical gifting rituals within the digitally enabled gifting practices. For example, designing a graphically animated box that reveals a digital content (gift) would just seem like an artless imitation of a wrapped box, which doesn't even require fine hand movements when removing the wrapping. Arguably, designers may seek to augment the experience by suggesting a tangible artefact that forms a digital-physical hybrid gifting experience. HCI researchers have begun to examine the 'gift experience' in museums and galleries through the exchange of personalised interpretations of artefacts (Fosh et al., 2014). The personalisation may accompany additional digital gifts, including music, messages, and photos. Exchanging this kind of 'in the moment' experience through gifts creates a mutual obligation to jointly enjoy the transient moment and results in empathetic responses (Spence et al., 2019). Tangibly transformed digital gifts offer 'in the moment' social interaction and memories that allow people to reflect and share empathy,

gratefulness, and recognition after the experience. We argue that designers may consider the 'exchange' stage as an instrumental bridge that synchronises the giver's effort and the receiver's surprise.

Dominant types of digital gifts are, still, confined to a kind of file or asset that can be transferred via a bland communication platform (e.g., email, messenger). Thus, feelings of detachment, delayed response, and insufficient ways to surprise the recipient have been seen to inhibit digital gifting from being a ceremonial process of empathetic dialogue. Physically exchanged gifts readily embody expressive rituals, whereas digital gifts may load an obligation onto the recipient to find a way to open a conversation and show gratitude at an appropriate time that sometimes could be delayed or forgotten. Even failing to reciprocate via mundane text messaging can be seen as problematic when the messaging conveys a sense of gift exchange (Salovaara, 2008; Taylor & Harper, 2002). While surprise is an indispensable element in gift exchange, it is barely supported by email or messaging apps. In our study, some participants had given experiential gifts (e.g., concert tickets, dinner) but were rarely satisfied with the exchange process. The date, time, and travel had to be agreed upon with the recipient, a process that diluted the surprise effect (cf. P1). Our study suggests an alternative ritual frame to the momentary surprise and focuses more on the 'episodic interactions' (Rook, 1985). We suggest, for example, a service that would enable conjoining a concert ticket with a train ticket that would be revealed one by one to build up expectations in the exchange process. Also, such an application could assist in collecting messages, photos, and videos from the event that could be gathered together as a digital memento, which could be exchanged and reflected on later. The experiences participants dubbed as 'ritual' had a common characteristic: 'purposeful conduct of episodic interactions that primarily have an implicit function'. The mobility, adaptability, and connectivity of digital devices may support packaging individual events in a methodical linkage of episodes.

6. Limitation and Future Work

The study had limitations in a manner that we focused on dyadic gift exchanges that always involve two parties. Variants of gifting such as, self-gifting, re-gifting, can be examined further in regard to secular rituals. Herein, the ritual dimensions of everyday life including, consumming food, products, and occasional events can thus illuminate insights in the area of designing rituals for digital consumption culture. Recently, Koleva et al. (2020) developed a portfolio of four hybrid gifting experiences that addresses three design concepts: hybrid wrapping, effortful interactions, and consideration of social obligations. For future work, we propose digital-physical hybridity (Koleva, et al., 2020) as an approach to embed interpersonal rituals in the craft and exchange of personalised digital content as unique gifts. Stylised form of interactions including wrapping, exchanging, and revealing can be augmented by combining physical artefacts and digital gifts.

7. Conclusion

At the beginning, we aimed to recollect, restore, and reconcile dubious rituals in the exchange of digital media that had been categorised as ‘not yet a gift’ (Kwon et al., 2017). Through a ritual lens, we attempted to understand the way people structure and think about gift exchange in private and social contexts. Thus, we conducted a Ritual Probe to capture elements of quotidian rituals, which frame aspects of personal and social life that are largely mediated by digital technology. We examined how people ruminate on the current practices of digital gifting, which lack the common vocabulary of exchange rituals. This study was completed before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced people to be separated from their families and friends. For the last couple of years, we have witnessed that there is much to be done in the design of the digital gifting experience and services beyond Zoom live chat. We hope to inspire designers and HCI researchers to pay more attention to the areas of digital gifting that value human-centred ritual interaction over pragmatic gains from computer-mediated digital communication.

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