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The Logic of Gift in Business and Economics: A Systematic Literature Review

La lógica del don en los negocios y la economía: Una revisión sistemática de literatura

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Abstract

Objectives: To identify the main themes, contributors, and theoretical perspectives on the logic of gift in business, management, finance, and economics (BMFE); map relevant BMFE practices; and discuss findings and gaps to inform a future research agenda. **Methodology:** A systematic literature review was conducted focusing on gift theory, gift-giving, and the gift economy. The final sample comprises 143 articles and book chapters indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection, published between 1997 and 2025. **Results:** Five main themes emerged in the literature: (1) Digital and gift economies; (2) Gift-giving in consumption and productive practices; (3) Differences between gift-giving, bribery, and *guanxi*; (4) Moral principles and integrative approaches of gift-giving; and (5) The relationality of giving and receiving in organizations. **Discussion:** Moving beyond instrumental views of human relationships and their impact on decision-making, we discuss an ethical background for gift-giving to respond to the mapped digital, cultural, and contextual challenges. This includes exploring different motivations, exchange types, and the nuances between gratuity and self-interest. **Conclusion:** The logic of gift provides a crucial anthropological framework for understanding alternative forms of economics and management. We close by proposing a comprehensive agenda for future research to further integrate relationality into BMFE. **Limitations:** The sample was restricted to WoS-indexed journals and chapters, omitting books and grey literature.

Keywords: Gift; Logic of gift; Gift-giving; Reciprocity; Decision-making; Business and management; Business ethics; Systematic literature review.

Resumen

Objetivos: Identificar los temas principales, los autores y las perspectivas teóricas sobre la lógica del don en los negocios, la administración, las finanzas y la economía (BMFE, por sus siglas en inglés); mapear las prácticas relevantes de BMFE; y discutir los hallazgos y vacíos de conocimiento para fundamentar una futura agenda de investigación. **Metodología:** Se llevó a cabo una revisión sistemática de la literatura centrada en la teoría del don, el intercambio de dones y la economía del don. La muestra final comprende 143 artículos y capítulos de libros indexados en la Colección Principal de Web of Science, publicados entre 1997 y 2025. **Resultados:** Surgieron cinco temas principales en la literatura: (1) Economías digitales y del don; (2) El intercambio de dones en las prácticas productivas y de consumo; (3) Diferencias entre el don, el soborno y el *guanxi*; (4) Principios morales y enfoques integradores del don; y (5) La relacionalidad del dar y recibir en las organizaciones. **Discusión:** Discutimos cómo la lógica del don puede contribuir a superar el reduccionismo de las visiones instrumentales de las decisiones humanas, y ofrecer un marco teórico capaz de responder a los desafíos digitales, culturales y contextuales mapeados. Esto incluye la exploración de distintas motivaciones, tipos de intercambio y las tensiones entre la gratuidad y el interés propio. **Conclusión:** La lógica del don proporciona un marco antropológico crucial para comprender formas alternativas de economía y administración. Concluimos proponiendo una agenda integral para futuras investigaciones con el fin de integrar en mayor medida la relacionalidad en las disciplinas de BMFE. **Limitaciones:** La muestra se restringió a revistas y capítulos indexados en WoS, omitiendo libros completos y literatura gris.

Palabras clave: Don; Lógica del don; Economía del don; Reciprocidad;Toma de decisiones; Negocios y economía; Ética empresarial; Revisión sistemática de la literatura.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the logic of gift (LoG)[1] has gained increasing recognition in the fields of business and economics, challenging predominantly instrumental approaches to human relationships and opening new avenues for understanding decision-making. While having received increasing attention, gift-giving in business, management, finance, and economics (BMFE) has not been systematically reviewed. This article addresses this gap by conducting a systematic literature review on the logic of gift (gift theory, gift-giving, and gift economy) from articles and book chapters published in Web of Science (n=143) from 1997 to 2025.

The logic of gift is an age-old concept rehabilitated and proposed anew in the early twentieth century by ethnographers and cultural anthropologists, thanks in large part to the work of Marcel Mauss (1925/1966). This renewed interest is primarily due to the complexity and pluralism that the concept provides in understanding a certain kind of social relationship: "under the logic of gift relationships can be deeper, richer and stronger if gift-giving is mainly motivated by spontaneity, gratuitousness and disinterest" (Faldetta, 2018, p. 197). Moreover, Caillé (2000) conceives of it as a *third paradigm* within the social sciences: "the expression and the instrument of personal relationships located beyond the spheres of the market and the state" (Godelier, 1999, p. 207). Nevertheless, despite decades of scholarly advances, Sherry's (1983, p. 157) observation still holds true: "gift-giving is an intriguing, universal behavior that has yet to be interpreted satisfactorily by social scientists". A recent comprehensive literature review on Virtue Ethics has suggested exploring this avenue as key to advancing the field (Ames et al., 2026). In this way, the present article aims to analyze the intellectual network of themes, contributors, and concepts found in the literature on gift-giving by conducting a systematic literature review (Marzi et al., 2025). In what follows, we present a foundational contextualization of gift-giving and introduce the research question, objectives, and methodological approach of our study.

The gift is a millennia-old concept linked to economics even before its "proto-foundation" by Aristotle (Scalzo, 2017), who, when delving into the analysis of commutative justice—which governs exchanges within the community— refers to the *spirit of the Graces* as a form of reciprocity aimed at maintaining community cohesion: "This is why they give a prominent place to the temple of Graces—to promote the requital of services; for this is characteristic of grace—we should serve in return one who has shown grace to us, and should another time take the initiative in showing it" (Aristotle, 1995, NE 1133a).

The Graces to which he refers are the *Kharites*, a cultural symbol in classical Greece with tribal roots that had ethical and aesthetic connotations fundamental to the social order (Spuybroek, 2014, p. 122; MacLachlan, 1993). Indeed, *gratia*—from which the term *gratuitousness* derives—is the Latin translation of *kháris*, largely popularized by Seneca in *De Beneficiis* (2011). According to Hesiod, the *Kharites* are three goddesses: Aglaea, Euphrosyne, and Thalia (Scalzo & Moreno-Almárcegui, 2022). They should be "understood as the personification and circulation of effects involving *charis*" (Spuybroek, 2014, p. 139).

From an exclusively ethnographic, historical and sociological perspective—without any mention of the three Graces (Vidal, 2014)— Mauss considered the gift as a universal social phenomenon that has been present in all ancient societies, with different forms and variations but consistently characterized by the dynamic structure encompassing the three moments that were present in the long-lasting Western tradition: giving, receiving, and returning benefits. Hence, this triadic structure can be considered as the main relevant feature of the so-called "logic of gift".

The gift can be defined as "any provision of goods and services without obligation, guarantee or certainty of return, undertaken with the intent to create, maintain or regenerate a social relationship" (Caillé, 2000, p. 124). Indeed, as Hénaff (2010, p. 251) highlights, the gift shifted from its ancient ceremonial form—as a gesture of reciprocal recognition—to a gesture of mutual assistance in modern times; *i.e.*, there was a shift from a social conception to a moral one (Hénaff, 2010, p. 251). Moreover, according to Hénaff (2010, p. 245) this semantic shift represents the first meaning of the Latin word *gratia*. "In the realm of grace and beauty, things present themselves to us—and to other things—as gifts" (Spuybroek, 2014, p. 132).

At first, the notion of a gift—by definition unexpected and undeserved—stands in contrast to that of the *commodity*, something that can be produced or purchased (Hyde, 2007). Whereas this is true, its meaning goes much deeper: the gift expresses a kind of value that cannot be captured in the impersonal objectivity of a price, since it represents the person herself. As such, unlike a commodity, the gift is unique and irreplaceable: it expresses the person who gives it, and in a certain sense, gives something of herself in the very act of giving (Moreno-Almárcegui & Scalzo, 2022). Therefore, its value depends not only on *what* is given, but also on *who* gives it, to *whom*, and *why*. The relational power of the gift lies precisely in its capacity to bring people together. Unlike in ancient times—when things were scarcely produced and were, above all, given (Godbout & Caillé, 1997, p. 180)—it may seem that we now live in a world of production and consumption. Yet, in a certain sense, the most valuable things—family, friends, life itself—are given; thus, even today, although we appear to be immersed in the logics of interest and duty, the gift remains at the very foundation of a meaningful life (Hyde, 2007), since it is the only logic capable of bonding people by nurturing strong relationships (Faldetta & Paternostro, 2011).

In his seminal study, Mauss observed that the gift generates a particular dynamic: a three-stage process—comprising giving, receiving and giving back—that is strictly known as the "logic of gift." Indeed, this triadic structure is its more characteristic feature, as opposed to the dual structure characteristic of contractual (impersonal) relationships, epitomized by the formula "*do ut des*," which governs both the market and the State. "The combination of these two traditions of thought leads to the consideration that there exist two major systems of social action, and only two: the market system, in which individual interests confront and are harmonized, and the political system, structured by the monopoly of legitimate power" (Godbout & Caillé, 1997, p. 25, authors' translation). However, the practical reason contained in the logic of the gift—which underlies and gives foundation to the other two—is the only one capable of generating a genuine network of social capital able to overcome the market–State dichotomy, contributing to the common good enriching justice with generosity and social friendship. Indeed, justice, as a social virtue—understood as the constant and perpetual will to give each person what is due—admits of degrees: from merely avoiding evil or refraining from harming others, to intentionally seeking their good. When inspired by the gift, justice fosters stronger and more enduring relationships, for one gives to the other not only "what is theirs," but also, in a profound sense, "what is one's own" (Scalzo & Moreno-Almárcegui, 2022).

In this sense, the gift has been conceived by several scholars—headed by Caillé (2000, p. 124)—as a "third paradigm," a multidimensional theory of action and social relationships that transcends both the methodological individualism of the market and the holism of the State. According to Faldetta (2018, p. 199), "[w]hat makes the two paradigms similar is that interpersonal relationships are not deeply considered; people—but also organizations, social groups and societies—cannot completely develop if they are not embedded in the relationships that bind them to the others." Such relationships can be nothing other than personal.

To understand the human being as a person implies recognizing that she is essentially 'open to relationship' (Polo, 1996, 1999; Haya, 1997). Among persons there exist natural relationships: kinship, fraternity, friendship and filial bonds, which are expressed through giving and receiving. Ultimately, the person's happiness is intrinsically linked to that of others; she grows and fulfills herself through self-giving (Vargas & Scalzo, 2024) in acts of mutual assistance, care for others, generosity, compassion, and other expressions of the human need to be recognized and loved.

The encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), authored by Pope Benedict XVI, marked a significant moment in Catholic social thought by reasserting the role of gratuitousness, reciprocity, and relationality within economic and social structures. Over the past decades, the concept of the gift has continued to resonate across its remarkable interdisciplinary roots. Many of these ideas have been fundamental to the discussion of economic and organizational activity, fundamentally, broadening the understanding of the motivations behind economic and business activity, challenging the *homo oeconomicus* assumption (Caillé, 2000), since the gift is an especially privileged key to understanding the person and human nature. However, to date, no study has systematically reviewed the literature on the logic of gift within business, management, finance, and economics. Hence, it is both timely and necessary to revisit the literature on gift-giving in the field of business and economic studies. This is an effort to understand the social fabric of gift-giving relations in creating and maintaining business, management, finance, and economics (BMFE) practices while being shaped by them, and gift-giving's significance for human flourishing and the common good (Melé, 2024).

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: How has gift-giving been addressed in the literature on BMFE, considering its various meanings and theoretical backgrounds? In particular, how has it been discussed in relation to other logics, such as market-oriented and duty-based reasoning?

A comprehensive review of this evolving body of scholarship is crucial not only to assess the current state of the debate, but also to deepen our understanding of how the logic of gift can inform contemporary responses to social, economic, and ecological challenges. We conduct a bibliometric-systematic literature review (Marzi et al., 2025) on gift-giving related to BMFE. Our goal is threefold: (1) to identify main themes, contributors, and theoretical perspectives on gift-giving; (2) to map business, management, finance, and economics issues (BMFE) related to gift-giving; (3) and by discussing an ethical background for gift-giving in the face of BMFE's challenges, to propose an agenda for future research on gift-giving. We address the literature indexed in six Web of Science collections, including articles and book chapters published in five languages, with no time restrictions, gathering a sample of 143 articles. To map the thematic clusters, major contributors, theories, and perspectives on gift-giving, we applied systematic bibliometric methods—bibliographic coupling, keyword co-occurrence, and co-citation analysis—complemented by a qualitative assessment of the findings. While this is a more systematic approach to science, we explore a more normative-based ethical discussion of findings based on virtue ethics.

This article maps the thematic network of gift-giving in BMFE, and addresses its main contributors (journals, articles, authors), perspectives and concepts. We report main findings organized around its five main themes: (1) Digital and gift economies, (2) gift-giving in digital communities, consumption and marketing, (3) Differences between gift-giving, bribery and corruption, (4) Moral principles and integrative approaches to gift-giving, and (5) the relationality of giving and receiving in organizations.

Following this introduction, the section of methods describes the methodological procedures of bibliometric-systematic literature review applied in this study of gift-giving. In the section "Gift-giving in Business, Management, Finance, and Economics (BMFE)" we present the results of this approach: gift-giving's main contributors, thematic clusters, perspectives, and concepts, organized in its five major thematic clusters, and holistically synthesized. In the Discussion section, we explore main findings and potential gaps, considering gift-giving ethical roots. Finally, we suggest a future research agenda for gift-giving, this article's limitations and final conclusions.

2. Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize the existing body of knowledge on the logic of gift, gift theory, gift-giving, and gift economy in BMFE, following established guidelines (Donthu et al., 2021; Marzi et al., 2025; Snyder, 2019). The process was structured into multiple phases to ensure both breadth and depth of coverage, and to enhance the rigor and transparency of the review.

The first phase of the review was exploratory and spanned approximately three months. During this period, authors read influential references and informally browse relevant publications across various academic databases. This stage was crucial for refining the research focus, query's keywords, and preparing the search strategy (Marzi et al., 2025). Authors analyzed references with the support of Mendeley.

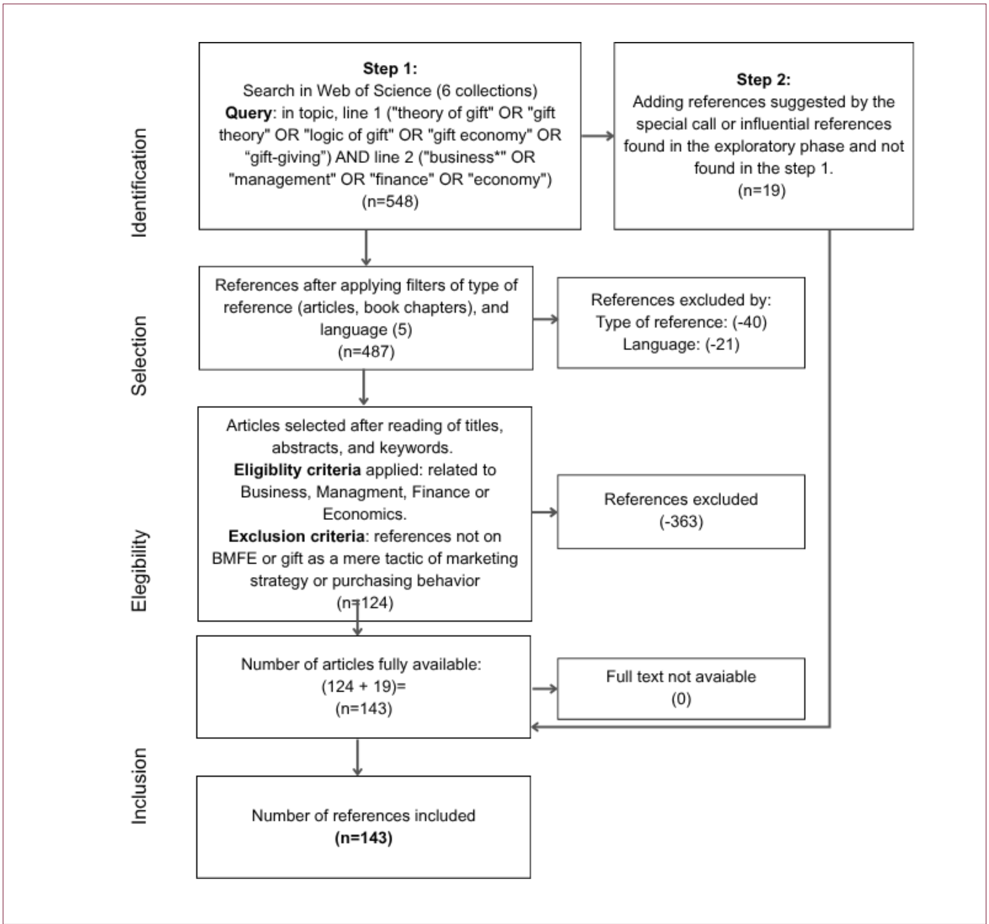
Based on preliminary exploratory findings, Web of Science (WoS) was selected as the sole primary database due to three main methodological considerations. First, the number of references found in the exploratory phase presented a high number of duplicated references—among Scopus, Web of Science, and Ebsco—which suggests many references redound between databases. Second, WoS gathers influential and high quality BMFE journals and book chapters, indexed in different collections. The majority of articles found in other databases are integrated in the journals indexed in WoS. Third, methodologically, its available format of data exportation allows running bibliometric analysis in VOSviewer, such as bibliographic coupling and co-citation analysis (Donthu et al., 2021). As this SLR focuses on peer-reviewed articles and book chapters related to gift, the search in WoS addresses its following six collections: Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), Science Citation Index Expanded, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Emerging Sources Citation Index, Book Citation Index-Science, and Book Citation Index-Social Sciences & Humanities.

The query for search integrates keywords related to gift-giving and the fields of BMFE, structured as follows: in topic (title, abstract, keywords), line 1, ("theory of gift" OR "gift theory" OR "logic of gift" OR "gift economy" OR "gift-giving"), and in line 2 ("business*" OR "management" OR "finance" OR "economy"). We limited our search to these terms because they are the most central ones in relation to gift theory and the ethical underpinnings of the logic of gift. This initial, unfiltered search retrieved a total universe of 548 documents, covering a timeframe starting from the earliest available record in 1981 up to 2025.

The first two eligibility criteria applied were: type of references (articles and book chapters) and those published in one of the five following languages: English, French, Spanish, Italian, or Portuguese. These filters were operated in the WoS interface, which reduced the number of references from 548 to 487. No restriction was applied regarding the year of publication.

As WoS search's outputs include articles from many disciplines, a third eligibility criterion was to include only articles related to business and management, finance or economy. We preferred not to automatically apply WoS' internal categories on business, management or finance, instead we read each reference's information: title, abstract, keywords and journals' title. Simultaneously, we apply an exclusion criterion regarding articles using the words "gift" or "giving" to address phenomena from other fields or related to mere tactical marketing strategies (such as promotional giveaways) of gifting or as a tool to stimulate purchase behavior, which represents a large number of articles. The reason is that they often do not address the normative depth of the gift. It is important to note that we did not exclude all marketing articles, as marketing studies grounded in gift theory are highly relevant. Rather, we excluded only those focusing strictly on behavioral responses to promotional incentives. To be included in our sample, a paper must explore gift-giving through the robust anthropological, sociological, philosophical, or ethical theoretical backgrounds that characterize the logic of gift. Therefore, the sample of 487 was reduced to 124 references. Complementarily, in a second step we added references suggested by a special call on gift-giving from the journal Philosophy of Management and relevant articles found in the exploratory phase (n=19). Therefore, our sample included a total of 143 references published between 1997 and 2025. Figure 1 presents the flow of the searching and selection process.

Figure 1
Flow of the search and selection process



A PRISMA flow diagram, illustrating the literature selection process structured into four phases: Identification, Selection, Eligibility, and Inclusion. It shows the initial filtering of 548 Web of Science records, leading to a final consolidated sample of 143 publications.

Procedures for Analysis of the literature

With the sample defined and references' full PDF available, we started their analytic reading, organizing articles' descriptive information in a Google spreadsheet (Snyder, 2019), such as year, authors, title, journal, and document type (theoretical or empirical). Information automatically computed by VOSviewer was also organized with articles' data: local citations (LC) (number of citations count in WoS), total link (TL) (number of connections of an article or keyword) and total link strength (TLS) (the intensity of the connection among articles or keywords) (Donthu et al., 2021).

Science mapping analysis were operationalized with the support of VOSviewer: (1) co-citation by authors (authors cited by our sample of articles); (2) keyword co-occurrence analysis, and (3) bibliographic coupling by articles (Donthu et al., 2021; Marzi et al., 2025). The objective of co-citation analysis is to provide an overview of the background or a vision of the recent past of the topic, whereas bibliographic coupling offers a view of the present thematic network related to the topic, complemented by keyword co-occurrence, which indicates the content of that network.

The main analysis applied to map thematic clusters of gift-giving is bibliographic coupling. It addresses the relatedness of articles by assessing the extent to which two documents cite common sources. This approach is especially suitable for mapping the research front, as it captures early convergence among contemporary publications before citation patterns fully develop. Network visualizations of bibliographic coupling typically highlight emerging communities of practice, with link strength corresponding to the number of shared references. Density visualizations expose zones of strong methodological or topical alignment, while overlay maps—often incorporating publication year or topic metadata—facilitate the identification of newly forming clusters, thus offering a temporal perspective on the development of emerging research areas (Marzi et al., 2025).

Additionally, keyword co-occurrence analysis focuses on conceptual relationships by examining how frequently authors' keywords appear together in the same documents. This method reveals the thematic content of a field, enabling researchers to trace dominant themes and their linkages. Network maps display clusters of co-occurring terms, the rise of novel concepts, and the diffusion of research trends across time or subfields (Donthu et al., 2021). Additionally, to science mapping, we list the top eight most cited articles from each thematic cluster, considering their total citation consulted in Google Scholar, therefore presenting the top 40 most influential articles of this literature.

Complementing these quantitative methods, we delve deep into articles content, assumptions, theses and conclusions, by a round of articles' full reading, notably a more qualitative phase of analysis (Snyder, 2019). We consider: articles' type (theoretical or empirical), the logic addressed (of exchange, of duty, or of gift), concepts of gift (gift economy, logic of gift, gift-giving), main thesis and conclusions. From empirical articles we also identify: country, sector of activity, and methods applied. These categories were analyzed in each article and organized in Google's spreadsheets for further analysis, by each one of the five thematic clusters. A second round of analysis involves identifying main patterns of each thematic cluster, by addressing the main trends and common BMFE issues addressed in each one. A third and holistic analysis considers all the thematic clusters together, exploring their cross-clusters commonalities, differences, overlappings and potential gaps (Marzi et al., 2025) (Supplementary data for this systematic review are openly available on Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22746644).

Taken together, these procedures provide us with a deep and methodologically robust understanding of the literature on gift giving.

3. Gift-giving in Business, Management, Finance, and Economics

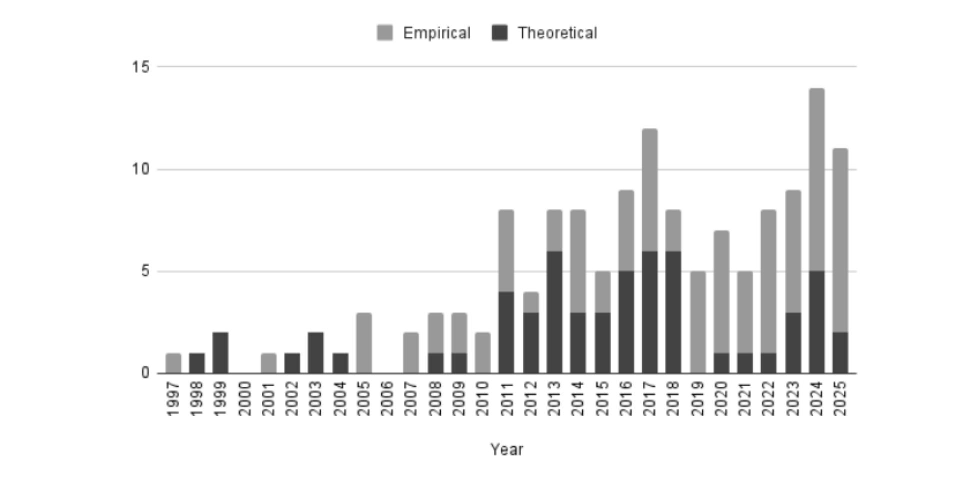
We begin by presenting the distribution of publication by year, most influential journals, and evidence of articles' theoretical background (from co-citation analysis). In the following, we present the main thematic clusters of the literature on gift-giving in BMFE, based on bibliographic coupling by articles and keywords co-occurrence. To each thematic cluster, we conduct an in-depth examination of its most influential contributors (articles, authors), key themes and main concepts addressed.

A total of 143 articles and book chapters have been published between 1998 and 2025, in 115 different sources, most of them being journals. In total, they represent the effort of 216 authors, affiliated to 177 universities and distributed in 33 countries.

Among these 143 references, 58 (40.56%) are theoretical, while 85 (59.44%) are empirical. Figure 2 presents the distribution of theoretical and empirical articles throughout the years. From 1997 to 2010, only a few articles or book chapters address gift-giving, with no more than four publications in any given year. From 2011 onwards, the topic has received growing attention. Part of this growing attention may be explained by the publication of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, in 2009. While theoretical articles concentrate between 2013 and 2018, the past few years have witnessed a significant increase in empirical articles exploring themes as gift economy and alternative forms of exchange in business and management.

Figure 2

Numbers of theoretical and empirical publications by year



A combined bar chart displaying the annual evolution of theoretical and empirical articles on gift-giving from 1997 to 2025. Main finding: From 2011 onwards, there is a sustained growth in empirical research, surpassing the theoretical developments that were dominant between 2013 and 2018.

While our sample includes only six book chapters, other 137 articles were found in a collection of 117 different journals addressing gift-giving in BMFE. Several of these journals belong to foundational disciplines to gift-giving, such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and theology. The most prolific journals are the *Journal of Business Ethics* (15 articles), *Journal of Consumer Research* (5), and *Business and Society Review* (4), followed by seven other journals publishing two articles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of articles published by sources (mainly journals) and their total citations

Sources	#Articles	Citations
Journal of Business Ethics	15	682
Journal of Consumer Research	5	504
Business and Society Review	4	4
American Ethnologist	2	113
Culture and Organization	2	28
Employee Relations	2	14

Sources	#Articles	Citations
Journal of Cultural Economy	2	22
Organization	2	26
Sustainability	2	46
Theory Culture & Society	2	72
Others (105)	105	2,207
Total	143	3,718

As Table 1 suggests, articles working on gift-giving have a high horizontal publication, distributed in 117 journals.

3.1. The landscape of the literature of gift-giving

In this section, we outline the key references that underpin the literature published during the period, as well as the five thematic clusters identified through bibliographic coupling and keywords' co-occurrence, along with their main contributors, approaches, and underlying theories.

The theoretical background of this literature of gift-giving is supported by seminal references regarding gift theory and its related fields such as anthropology. sociology, philosophy, business and economics. The most cited authors by our sample of articles are: Mauss, M. (local citations=93), Belk, R. (74) Bourdieu, P. (48), Godbout, J. (41), Sherry, J. (39) Bruni, L. (37), Faldetta, G. (31), Petrilli, S. (28), Sahlins, M. (27) Caillé, A. (26), Melé, D. (25), Polo, L. (25), Derrida, J. (23), Frémeaux, S. (23), Polanyi, K. (23), Dolfsma, W. (22), Graeber, D. (22), Sison, A. (22), and Carrier, J. (21). To a lesser extent, some philosophers' names emerge, such as Aristotle or MacIntyre.

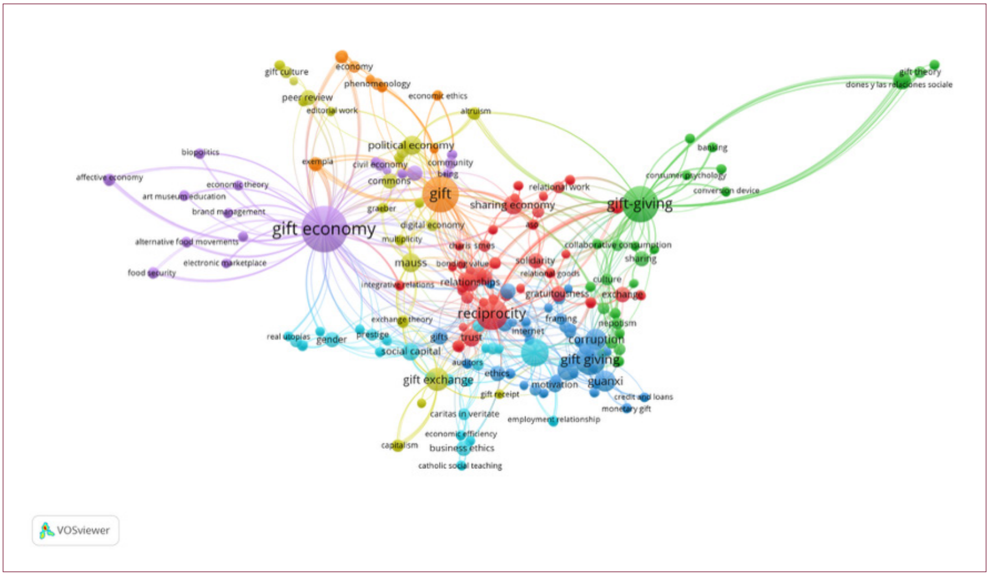
This group of authors reveal a deeply interdisciplinary landscape that is rooted in anthropology but extensively developed across other disciplines. Foundational anthropologists and economic historians— such as Mauss, Sahlins, Polanyi, and Sherry— focus on the historical, cultural, and social mechanics of reciprocity and exchange. Another group of top-cited authors belongs to the fields of business, management, economics, and business ethics, which highlights a strong contemporary trend of applying gift theory to consumer behavior, humanistic management, and the civil economy. Additionally, scholars from sociology (Bourdieu, Godbout, Caillé), philosophy or semiotics (Derrida, Polo, Petrilli) represent critical perspectives on symbolic capital, the anti-utilitarian paradigm, and the ontological paradoxes of the pure gift.

Geographically and culturally, this foundational literature reveals distinct theoretical traditions. There is a prominent Francophone influence (Mauss, Bourdieu, Godbout, Caillé, Derrida, Frémeaux), which is closely tied to both post-structuralism and the MAUSS network (Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences). North American scholars (Belk, Sherry, Sahlins, Graeber, Carrier) heavily influence the intersections of cultural anthropology, consumer culture, and economic anthropology. Finally, a robust Southern European presence drives much of the literature regarding civil economy, virtue ethics, and Catholic Social Teaching in business contexts. Ultimately, while anthropology laid the groundwork, the logic of gift-giving has evolved into a highly diverse, multidisciplinary research domain.

The current literature on gift-giving addresses BMFE issues by articulating a collection of keywords regarding giving, receiving and giving-back. Figure 3 maps the network of keywords' co-occurrence. Keywords that occur the most (#occurrence) are gift economy (28, total links, TL=144), gift (17, TL=83), gift-giving (17, TL=102), reciprocity (13, TL=68), gift giving (12, TL 52), logic of gift (10, TL=46), gift exchange (7, TL=37), China (6, TL=28), corruption (6, TL=26), *guanxi* (6, TL=28), sharing economy (5, TL=20), Mauss (5, TL=30), and political economy (5, TL=29).

Figure 3

Visualization of keywords co-occurrence



This keyword co-occurrence network represents a node and link map generated by VOSviewer representing the conceptual interconnections among the most frequent keywords. Main finding: "Gift economy" and "gift-giving" act as the central nodes that connect subfields such as sustainability, corruption, *guanxi*, and the sharing economy.

In Figure 3, "gift-economy" is interconnected with keywords such as sustainability, commons, peer review, economic sociology and political economy. For instance, scientific peer review is addressed as gift economy (Kaltenbrunner et al., 2022); while other authors explore the gift economy as an alternative to foster social sustainability (Becchetti et al., 2022; Nogueira et al., 2023; Thygesen, 2019).

"Gift-giving" co-occurs with altruism and reciprocity. Consider articles discussing different logics of exchange and the possibility of transcending them, as well as those examining hybrid motivations for giving (André et al., 2017; Faldetta, 2011). "Gift giving" is used in articles addressing corruption, and the practice of *guanxi* in China (Steidlmeier, 1999; Millington et al., 2005). The "logic of gift" is articulated with the logic of exchange, *Caritas in Veritate*, and generosity (Grassl & Habisch, 2011; Klein & Laczniak, 2013). Looking at the intensity of these co-occurrences, on the other hand, we note just a few keywords highly interconnected (higher TLS): gift & reciprocity, gift & Mauss, gift economy & sustainability, gift giving & corruption, and China & *guanxi*. Themes related to them are comprehensively addressed in the following section.

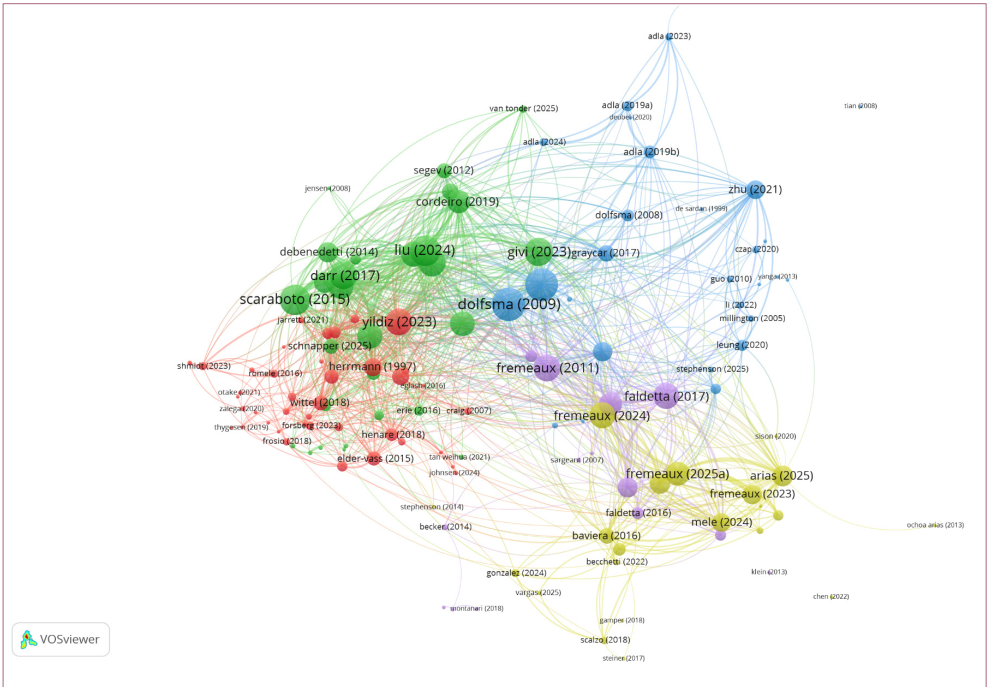
3.2. Thematic clusters of gift-giving in BMFE

Through bibliographic coupling we found five thematic clusters in the literature on gift-giving in BMFE. Rather than isolated topics, these clusters form a cohesive narrative illustrating how gift theory operates across different levels, from macro-technological environments to internal organizational dynamics. Clusters are delineated and designated as follows (Fig. 4):

- Cluster 1 (red), "Digital and gift economies", comprises 40 articles, addressing gift and sharing economy. For instance, some articles explore how reciprocity manifests in online spaces, such as open-source communities or peer-to-peer sharing platforms;
- Cluster 2 (green), "Gift-giving in consumption and productive practices" includes 28 articles, exploring consumer's behaviors and motivations in contexts supported by collaborative work arrangements and financial practices, such as borrowing money;
- Cluster 3 (blue), "Differences between gift-giving, bribery and corruption", gathers 28 articles; addressing gift as an antecedent of trust, indebtedness and gratitude, while also discussing its reciprocal boundaries regarding some context-situated forms of reciprocity, such as guanxi;
- Cluster 4 (yellow), "Moral principles and integrative approaches of gift-giving", interconnects 22 articles, highlighting gifts' ethical and humanistic backgrounds (virtue ethics, civil economy), and including solidarity, care, and the common good;
- Cluster 5 (purple), "The relationality of giving and receiving in organizations" integrates 16 articles, addressing individual and organizational forms of giving (philanthropy, donation, communion) and their significance for relationships and responsibility.

Figure 4

Five thematic clusters on gift-giving, based on bibliographic coupling by articles



Note. Weights (size of nodes) are based on total link strength (TLS)

Few underconnected articles (9) were not included in this thematic network, as operationalized in VOSviewer. Together these five thematic clusters suggest the relevance of gift-giving in different practices occurring in BMFE and, at the same time, how the BMFE's environment may shape gift-giving through their digital, cultural, and moral challenges. Fig. 4 shows the network of five thematic clusters on gift-giving. Across all of them, reciprocity emerges as a central, unifying topic in this literature, and the discussion embraces conceptual nuances ranging from commodity-based exchange to conceptions of free-gift.

In the following, we describe main themes, conceptualizations and BMFE issues related to gift-giving in each cluster. Supported by the mentioned analysis, we detail cluster's main themes, contributors, and theoretical bases

3.2.1. Cluster 1 (red): Digital and gift economies

Within Cluster 1, half of the publications (20) are theoretical, while the remaining 20 are empirical. Composed of forty articles, this is the biggest cluster found in the literature of gift-giving, published in 40 different sources (journals and chapters). Its prevalent theme is digital gift economy. Articles explore anthropological and gift economy differences compared to a commodity or market economy. Differences between gift and sharing economy are also highlighted. Moreover, some articles critically analyze how the logic of exchange (market) in the digital world can capture the gift economy, demanding counter-gifts or benefiting companies and brands. The most productive authors are Elder-Vass and Wittel, with two articles each.

Two central conceptions appear in this cluster: gift economy and sharing economy, with the former generally subsumed in the latter. Gift economy is a central element of contemporary society and economy. Once described as an economy of small groups (whereby) emotional ties are the glue that holds a community together (Hyde, 2007, as cited in Jarrett, 2021), today the gift economy has disrupted through the internet and the digital environment, observing in more hybrid forms of digital gift economies (Jarrett, 2021).

Articles argue that from both economic and sociological perspectives, the gift economy has remained on the margins of academic debate, with little recognition of its contemporary forms of social relations that sustain economy (Elder-Vass, 2015), or still subject to views that separate economic from social relations (Herrmann, 1997). Different economic interactions are posited within the continuum from gift, at one side, and commodities, at the other, allowing hybrid forms of exchange (Herrmann, 1997). However, articles have different interpretations regarding free gifts and reciprocity.

While certain scholars argue that gift-giving inherently implies a duty to reciprocate (Zeitlyn, 2003), others identify modes of giving that operate entirely free from expectations of return (Elder-Vass, 2015), such as substantive human activities and unpaid work. Elder-Vass (2015) presents three types of gifts according to their expectations: (1) reciprocal gifts, where recipients should provide a return gift to the giver at some future time; (2) positional gifts, where a person in a relevant position and circumstance should give such gifts, such as feeding and clothing one's children; and (3) free gifts, with no expectation of return nor obligation to make return gifts (this last type is distinct from a view of a pure gift). Although holding different views, articles often agree that the reciprocal relationship engendered by gift-giving forms the moral basis for society. Mauss' anthropological assumption of the intricate connection between the giver and the gift is mentioned by many articles, assuming that the act of giving embeds something of the giver into the gift (what is given), referred to as *hau* in Maori tradition, which in turn creates a social expectation for a reciprocal gift (Hēnare, 2018; Herrmann, 1997; Zeitlyn, 2003).

Based on classical perspectives on gift, some anthropological assumptions consider humans as interdependent beings, and that qualitative human relations are what matter (Hanson, 2015; Zeitlyn, 2003). In the gift economy, propriety is not a thing but a network of social relations, whereas in the commodity economy, objects revert to being property in the sense of things, losing their connection to subjects (depersonalization) (Vandenberghe, 2002). On the other hand, the sharing economy does not involve a change of propriety; agents only share objects/services.

The "sharing economy" is considered an umbrella term that represents several similar, though not identical, concepts (*e.g.*, gig economy, gift economy, collaborative consumption) (Yıldız & Altan, 2023). It consists of alternative forms of sharing goods or services that are based on access rather than ownership, and are distributed along a continuum from non-profit to for-profit models (Soltysova & Modrak, 2020; Shmidt, 2023; Zalega, 2020). Authors note the existing tension between these two poles, as well as between market logic and the construction of the commons. While non-profit forms of sharing are much older, several approaches to the sharing economy exclude gift-giving, which is based on reciprocity, especially because in the platform-based sharing economy there is an established value (Shmidt, 2023). Together, the non-profit and for-profit forms of sharing are considered paradoxical (Shmidt, 2023).

The motivations that trigger the sharing economy involve a search for cost savings and more sustainable consumption, in which access (borrowing, sharing, leasing) takes priority over ownership. Unlike gift-giving, the strengthening of relationships is not a motivation associated with the sharing economy (Zalega, 2020). Furthermore, authors acknowledge the distinction in sharing practices noted by Belk (2014): "sharing in", which occurs among friends and family, and "sharing out", which extends to strangers.

Two types of sharing economy are highlighted: the traditional sharing economy and the platform-based sharing economy. The traditional model is based on the ownership of something that is shared person-to-person (P2P), supported by human relationships. The second type corresponds to sharing mediated by platforms, such as Airbnb and Uber. A difference between traditional and platform-based types lies in the way trust is established. In the former, trust is built at an individual/personal level; in the latter, trust is based on publicly shared feedback (Soltysova & Modrak, 2020).

Sharing economy practices also unfold into different business models, as alternatives for micro and small enterprises. In general, they can involve business-to-consumer (B2C), business-to-business (B2B), and P2P structures. Platform-based business models are divided into three types: demand-based, product-service-based, and second-hand-based. In summary, sharing practices vary in terms of the motivation that precedes such practices, typologies, models, and in the role and place of technological platforms (Shmidt, 2023).

Described examples of the gift economy are: charity (philanthropy) (Hanson, 2015), garage sales (Zeitlyn, 2003), artistic communities (poets) (Craig, 2007), higher education (Wittel, 2018), pre-industrial villages or societies (Forsberg, 2023; Johnsen, 2024), sustainable communities (Nogueira et al., 2023), and international North-South aid chains (Silk, 2004). At a cultural-national level, it is associated with Japanese and Islamic business ethics and practices (Sakurai & Sendo, 2016).

Moreover, gift economy manifests in different forms of digital gift economies (Taylor & Street, 2024): open-source software development communities (Herrmann, 1997), digital services (Fourcade & Kluttz, 2020), live streaming platforms (Zhang et al., 2019), multiplayer online games (Hulsey & Reeves, 2014; Jarrett, 2021), and online gift (Romele & Severo, 2016). Some social initiatives are defined as a hybrid between gift and capitalist economies, such as urban farms projects (Rohanekar, 2025).

Articles position the gift economy as a distinct concept that is often conflated with or part of the broader "sharing economy" (Soltysova & Modrak, 2020; Zalega, 2020; Shmidt, 2023; Yıldız & Altan, 2023). Examples of shared economy include car sharing (*e.g.*, Blablacar), co-housing and co-working (Zalega, 2020), Uber, AirBnB, TaskRabbit, among others. Gift economy also differs from the economy of contribution in the case of digital commons, or immaterial labor in the internet (Wittel, 2013).

Together, those examples suggest a tension along the continuum between gift and commodity, or gift economy & market-contractual forms of exchange. Besides this paradox related to reciprocity, a minor group of articles critically analyze questionable business practices operated in the digital environment: the subtle obligation to reciprocate imposed by free digital services, in which the counter-gift are personal data; digital platforms and the hijacking of gift economy (Wittel, 2013; Zhang et al., 2019), digital consumers' surveillance (Hulsey & Reeves, 2014), and, finally, the appropriation of gift by business and brands' narratives (Tselenti, 2022). Table 2 presents the most influential (most cited) articles from cluster 1.

Table 2
Top 8 most cited articles of cluster 1

#	#Total citations[a]	Article	Title	Journals
1	409	Zeitlyn (2003)	Gift economies in the development of open source software: Anthropological reflections	*Research Policy*
2	260	Herrmann (1997)	Gift or commodity: what changes hands in the U.S. garage sale?	*American Ethnologist*
3	183	Silk (2004)	Caring at a distance: Gift theory, aid chains and social movements	*Social and Cultural Geography*
4	177	Vandenberghe (2002)	Reconstructing humants: a humanist critique of actant-network theory	*Theory, Culture & Society*
5	142	Fourcade and Kluttz (2020)	A Maussian bargain: Accumulation by gift in the digital economy	*Big Data and Society*
6	130	Zhang et al. (2019)	Virtual gifting on China's live streaming platforms: Hijacking the online gift economy	*Chinese Journal of Communication*
7	70	Hulsey and Reeves (2014)	The gift that keeps on giving: Google, ingress, and the gift of surveillance	*Surveillance and Society*
8	56	Hanson (2015)	The anthropology of giving: toward a cultural logic of charity	*Journal of Cultural Economy*

Note. a. Total citations were consulted in Google Scholar on October 30 2025.

3.2.2. Cluster 2 (green): Gift-giving in consumption and productive practices

Cluster 2 (green) contains only one theoretical contribution, with the other 27 classified as empirical studies. It has a remarkable focus on consumer behaviors and on different forms of productive practices, including financial and work activities. Most articles develop an ethnographic or qualitative research method (case studies, ground theory, interviews). The most prolific authors are Darr (3 articles), addressing gift-giving in mass consumption markets; Weinberger (2 articles), investigating consumption and moral economies; and Kaltenbrunner (2 articles), exploring the practice of peer review as a gift economy.

When analyzed together, several studies acknowledge the interweaving of the logics of gift, exchange, and duty, describing this relationship as "hybrid" (Scaraboto, 2015), "intertwined"

(Weinberger, 2017), or "entangled" (Andersson-Cederholm & Åkerström, 2016; Erie, 2016). The argument is that gifting, sharing, and market exchange are not distinct and opposing paradigms, but rather complementary and integrated processes that coexist within a consumption or work community (Corciolani & Dalli, 2014). Yet some studies suggest only the coexistence of these logics, implying a lower degree of integration between them (Givi et al., 2023).

However, a second difference among these perspectives concerns the definition of gift-giving itself. While some scholars recognize gift only as altruism, assigning reciprocity to the market and duty to the social sphere (Givi et al., 2023), other works assume that the logic of gift, exchange, and duty may occur in commercial or non-commercial contexts (across different sectors and spheres of practice), drawing on Mauss or rooted in diverse religious and cultural contexts that embrace the paradoxical logic of reciprocity[2] (Bergquist & Ljungberg, 2001; Corciolani & Dalli, 2014; Scaraboto, 2015; Bird-David & Darr, 2009). At the individual or organizational level, authors seek to understand how agents navigate plural and conflicting normative contexts (Erie, 2016), suggesting that gift-giving operates both within and alongside contract-based relationships (Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2011).

The theme of consumption (and consumer behavior), found in marketing and other fields, encompasses different aspects of gift-giving: collaborative consumption (Corciolani & Dalli, 2014; Scaraboto, 2015); consumers' emotional bonds and place attachment (Debenedetti et al., 2014); gift-giving consumption, which involves givers' motivations, giver–recipient mismatches, and the context of gift-giving (Givi et al., 2023); consumers' financial vulnerability (Cordeiro et al., 2019), impression management through gifts (Segev et al., 2012), and gift-giving in mass consumption markets (Bird-David & Darr, 2009; Darr, 2017, 2022).

The theme of productive practices in which gift-giving manifests unfolds across different work sectors, including collaborative networks or community-based practices—where relational work may emerge—and financial practices (borrowing money, credit, crowdfunding) (Bartel, 2016; Cordeiro et al., 2019; Lainer-Vos, 2013; Maciel & Weinberger, 2024; van Tonder & Saunders, 2025). Examples of the former include work within open-source environments (Bergquist & Ljungberg, 2001) and peer-review communities, which involve mutual indebtedness among peers (Kaltenbrunner et al., 2022; Kaltenbrunner, 2026). Furthermore, authors examine commercial exchange through grassroots social initiatives and in rural contexts. Regarding the latter (finance), scholars investigate consumers' helping behavior in banking (Cordeiro et al., 2019), and credit as a Christmas gift between individuals, or organizations.

Gift-giving is presented as a process that structures and integrates society (Sherry, 1983, as cited in Cordeiro et al., 2019). In financial forms of gift, people make counterintuitive financial decisions to borrow money for closer people in need, even in situations where this represents a financial debt in the market economy (Cordeiro et al., 2019). Individuals borrow money from the market to support the moral economy, suggesting the motivation of maintaining or strengthening interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, gift-giving can become onerous to individuals, as in the Marcoux's (2009) critique of gift, which suggests it can be emotionally demanding, humiliating, and tyrannical, creating feelings of subjection and indebtedness. Consequently, people use the anonymous market not as a last resort but as a valued escape to preserve their autonomy.

From perspectives that acknowledge the mutual indebtedness between agents, personal favors and the gift economy can be understood as intertwined with the market economy. In some contexts of entrepreneurship, as the Sweden horse-related enterprises, authors found that relational work may also involve practices that maintain indistinct boundaries between different types of relationships, thus sustaining tensions between market and gift economy (formal and informal economy) (Andersson-Cederholm & Åkerström, 2016). In open-source communities, gift-giving is not purely altruistic; it's a mechanism for gaining power and reputation. This digital gift economy creates social interdependencies and hierarchies, and the acceptance/rejection of contributions acts as a form of peer review (Bergquist & Ljungberg, 2001).

Cluster 2's most influential articles are listed in Table 3.

Table 3
Top 8 most cited articles of cluster 2

#	#Total citations[a]	Article	Title	Journals
1	759	Bergquist and Ljundberg (2001)	The power of gifts: Organizing social relationships in open-source communities	*Information Systems Journal*
2	537	Scaraboto (2015)	Selling, sharing, and everything in between: The hybrid economies of collaborative networks	*Journal of Consumer Research*
3	321	Debenedetti et al. (2014)	Place attachment in commercial settings: A gift economy perspective	*Journal of Consumer Research*
4	272	Marcoux (2009)	Escaping the gift economy	*Journal of Consumer Research*
5	125	Corciolani and Dalli (2014)	Gift-giving, sharing and commodity exchange at bookcrossing.com: New insights from a qualitative analysis	*Management Decision*
6	82	Givi et al. (2023)	An integrative review of gift-giving research in consumer behavior and marketing	*J Consum Psychology*
7	69	Bird-David and Darr (2009)	Commodity, gift and mass-gift: On gift–commodity hybrids in advanced mass consumption cultures	*Economy and Society*
8	66	Lainer-Vos (2013)	The practical organization of moral transactions: Gift giving, market exchange, credit, and the making of diaspora bonds	*Sociological Theory*

Note. a. Total citations were consulted in Google Scholar on October 30 2025.

In summary, cluster 2 suggests that various productive and consumer practices involve collaborative means and gift-giving, by a flow of reciprocity of material and immaterial goods. This behavior has been noted in marketing and in the organizational sets, which strengthens relationships and, on the other hand, may potentially be instrumentalized, reinforcing the tension between the logic of gift and the logic of exchange.

3.2.3. Cluster 3 (blue): Differences between gift-giving, bribery, and guanxi

Cluster 3 (blue) encompasses eight theoretical and twenty empirical works. The central theme in this group is the difference between gift-giving, bribery (and corruption in a broader sense) and *guanxi*, highlighting different meanings of reciprocity. Complementing this theme, some articles discuss positive outcomes of gift-giving, while others stress their instrumental use for corruption. Relations based on gift-giving or *guanxi* are ethically addressed, considering their philosophical and cultural background. Dolfsma and Adla are the most prolific authors (4 articles each), followed by Gallego-Roquelaure (3), and Faldetta (2).

Gift-giving is presented as a better theoretical background for and as an antecedent of social capital (Dolfsma, 2008). It consists of social practices that create and maintain trust, relational reciprocity, labor relations, knowledge transfer and open innovation (Adla, 2019; Adla & Gallego-Roquelaure, 2024; Dolfsma & van der Eijk, 2017). In China, it is an expected behavior that strengthens relationships, indicating respect to another person (Steidlmeier, 1999).

Analysis of gift-giving in buyer–supplier relationships address its cultural context, donors' objectives (favors or strengthening relations) and the extent to which the gift leads the recipient to act contrary to their employer's aims (Millington et al., 2005). Moreover, the indebtedness generated by gift-giving involves gratitude for having received something, which may lead to other acts of giving and high-quality relationships (Faldetta, 2018a).

However, there are blurring lines between gift-giving and corruption. Gift-giving may facilitate corruption, as well as its legitimization (Olivier-de-Sardan, 1999; Steidlmeier, 1999). At the same time, giving gifts is considered part of many cultures, as a form of love, appreciation, and respect in some contexts (*e.g.*, China, African countries, Arab and Muslim countries), (Al-Aidaros, 2025). Acts of giving may trigger a cycle of reciprocity, while the ambiguity of reciprocity remains (self-oriented or other-oriented motivations) (Zollo et al., 2017).

Gratuitous gift, bribery, and commissions bonus represent different forms or reciprocity (different intentions, moments, contexts). When a reciprocity act is interpreted as bribery, it means a wrongful transfer of resources between parties (Steidlmeier, 1999). Bribery occurs when gifts are used to obtain a behaviour that is not appropriate or legitimate within the relevant transaction, especially if the receiver is urged to act in their own interest rather than in line with their employer's objectives (Millington et al., 2005). According to Steidlmeier (1999), reciprocity acts should be analyzed from within a cultural context and in concrete action to better understand its purpose, meaning, and consequences. What is considered a bribe in one context may be a legitimated practice in another.

Consider *guanxi* in the Chinese context. It may involve a reciprocal obligation and mutual exchange of favors and trustworthiness (Millington et al., 2005). From a framework composed of three cultural elements—including artifacts, social knowledge and cultural logic, Steidlmeier (1999) suggests that gift-giving in the Chinese context is tied to *guanxi*'s larger framework of interpersonal networks. *Guanxi* is concerned with the quality of relationships. According to its Confucian tradition, people prioritize relationships with family and friends (*guanxi*) in economic or business interactions. Loyalty and social obligations attributed to a family in the *guanxi* system may be transmitted to organizational and business relations. In this context, gift-giving supports relationship's growth by deepening trust, respect, and mutual commitment (Steidlmeier, 1999). *Guanxi* is presented at the individual and network level, as a system of interpersonal relationships that carry long-term social obligations (Guo & Miller, 2010; Millington et al., 2005).

Gift-giving, *guanxi*, and corruption are also addressed in inter-firms' relationships (Millington et al., 2005). Managers from UK companies operating in China perceive gift-giving as a problem related to illicit payments, corruption and the pursuit of self-interest. However, gift-giving from within *guanxi* networks appears to be an acceptable practice. The social ties maintained within *guanxi* networks are supportive of the different phases of entrepreneurship (Guo & Miller, 2010; Rivet-Préfontaine, 2024).

Regarding knowledge, authors address the kind of social (Steidlmeier, 1999) or tacit knowledge (Dolfsma, 1998) gift-giving requires to one properly discern the opportune moment, the appropriate gift and the obligations imposed by gift-giving (reciprocity), or its moral significance.

Gift exchange is the core process that creates and constitutes social capital. By establishing a cycle of mutual obligation and indebtedness, gift exchange forms the social relationships, trust, and bonds that allow individuals to access resources. This perspective expands the knowledge on social capital, explaining its creation and destruction (Dolfsma et al., 2009). Table 4 lists cluster 3's most cited articles.

Table 4
Most cited articles of cluster 3

#	#Total citations[a]	Article	Title	Journals
1	1390	de Sardan (1999)	A moral economy of corruption in Africa?	*The journal of Modern African Studies*
2	480	Steidlmeier (1999)	Gift giving, bribery and corruption: Ethical management of business relationships in China	*Journal of Business Ethics*
3	278	Millington et al. (2005)	Gift giving, guanxi and illicit payments in buyer–supplier relations in China: Analysing the experience of UK companies	*Journal of Business Ethics*
4	247	Guo and Miller (2010)	Guanxi dynamics and entrepreneurial firm creation and development in China	*Management and Organization Review*
5	168	Lambsdorff and Frank (2010)	Bribing versus gift-giving – An experiment	*Journal of Economic Psychology*
6	161	Graycar and Ancsics (2017)	Gift giving and corruption	*International Journal of Public Administration*
7	146	Dolfsma et al.(2009)	On a source of social capital: Gift exchange	*Journal of Business Ethics*
8	135	Tian (2008)	Perception of business bribery in China: The impact of moral philosophy	*Journal of Business Ethics*

Note. a. Total citations were consulted in Google Scholar on October 30 2025.

In all, articles suggest the importance of social relationships nurtured by gift-giving for non-profit and for-profit companies, while discouraging these relationships with and within statal structures, due to the problem of corruption, bribing or extortion with gifts (Graycar & Jancsics, 2017).

3.2.4. Cluster 4 (yellow): Moral principles and integrative approaches of gift-giving

Cluster 4 (yellow) includes thirteen theoretical and nine empirical articles. Most of its articles address moral principles underpinning the logic of gift (LoG) manifested in alternative economic movements and in interpersonal relationships. Moreover, articles conceptually suggest the integration of the different logics of exchange, duty and gift (Baviera et al., 2016; Kearns, 2017), or propose typologies of gift-giving based on humanistic and ethical bases (Melé, 2024; Arias & Melé, 2025). Additionally, the benefits of the LoG in inspiring behaviors of trust, generosity and creativity (Baviera et al., 2016) are significant to sustain relationships, servant leadership, and the search for the common good. Among its 22 articles, 13 are published in business ethics journals. The most prolific author in this cluster is Frémeaux (4 articles), followed by Scalzo (3), Grevin (2), Sferrazzo (2), and Melé (2).

This group of articles discuss important moral principles from philosophy or inspired by the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Bruni, 2012; Grassl & Habisch, 2011), such as care, *charis* (grace), *munus*, solidarity, generosity, reciprocity, gratuitousness, communion, human dignity, and a common good oriented gift economy (Frémeaux et al., 2023). Moreover, empirical research evidence shows how the logic of gift fosters alternative economic models inspired by generosity and solidarity, such as Economy of communion (EOC) (Frémeaux et al., 2023, 2026).

As a form of civil economy, the gift economy involves reciprocity and human relationships. Giving is an antecedent factor that nurtures ecological motivation (Frémeaux & Moneyron, 2024). Frémeaux and Lee (2026) explore how the ecological orientation of an organization can be encouraged by the LoG in a common good-oriented gift economy.

Suggesting the relational approach of gift-giving to address the S of ESG, Becchetti et al. (2022) recognize the importance of relational goods and the gratuitous gift exchange, which triggers gratitude and activates reciprocity. In a macro level, relational goods involved in different forms of work can be supported by a circular subsidiarity between the spheres of market, State, and civil society (González & Scalzo, 2024). At the organizational level, a relational approach represents internal and external relationships; the first corresponds to inter-subjective relationships; the latter, to inter-organizational ones. Both suggest the social capital companies may nurture.

Arias & Melé (2025) propose a typology of three business gift-giving acts based on the Thomistic triple font to judge moral acts: the object of action, intention, and circumstances: (1) ethically unacceptable giving, (2) ethically acceptable giving, and (3) ethically excellent giving. The first is morally wrong because their object, intention, or circumstances (or some combination) violate ethical norms, such as dignity, fairness, and honesty; this includes types of gifts such as bribery, manipulative, and malevolent gifts. The second type, ethically acceptable giving, depends on good intention, proportionality, clarity, and appropriate circumstances. This means they are not morally excellent, but they do not cross ethical boundaries. Its types of gifts are instrumental and reciprocal ones. The third category is ethically excellent giving, which corresponds to morally good or virtuous gifts. They exhibit generosity, gratuity, concern for others without expectation, solidarity. These are "beyond duty" gifts. Its types of gifts are gratuity gifts, gratuitous gifts, and solidarity gifts (Arias & Melé, 2025).

Sison et al. (2020) evaluate family-related business attitudes and practices in light of Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics standards, in particular family relationships ("nepotism"), gift-giving ("bribery") and networking ("*guanxi*"). Regarding gift-giving, in the Aristotelian view it is generally frowned upon as an occasion for bribery and corruption, while in the Confucian tradition it is both accepted and expected as part of *guanxi*. However, *guanxi* must be voluntary, accompanied by benevolent feelings, in accordance with social norms, and looking toward a long-term relationship. *Guanxi* differs from bribery, which is motivated by purely economic interests (Sison et al., 2020).

If this is correct, an ethically excellent gift-giving relation is related to gratuity, a genuine concern for others and motivated by solidarity and generosity (Kearns, 2017; Frémeaux et al., 2023). In this sense, Becchetti et al. (2022) point to the need for an ethical background such as that of virtue ethics and the common good to better understand gift-giving, which is addressed by other authors in this cluster.

Solidarity appears as both an end pursued by all participants in the solidarity project, and as a means to pursue the common good as a higher end (Frémeaux et al., 2023). Authors view the gift as the mechanism that enables solidarity and generalized reciprocity. It is presented as a "free, authentic, and fulfilling" act that is not primarily sacrificial or instrumental. Findings suggest that the culture of solidarity creates a virtuous circle that benefits all participants, through activities that construct a solidarity mission, and share and disseminate it (Frémeaux et al., 2023). Solidarity facilitates an awareness of the interdependence among people and our co-responsibility for all. The culture of solidarity can be understood as an example or manifestation of the LoG and gratuitousness, which benefits members of the work community and other actors in society (Frémeaux et al., 2023).

Empirically, articles gather examples of the gift economy: enterprises of the Economy of Communion (EoC), street libraries (peer-to-peer market), educational sector organizations, entrepreneurial inter-firm cooperation, family businesses normative traditions, and a national plan of CSR. Table 5 presents the most cited articles of cluster 4.

Table 5
Most cited articles of cluster 4

#	#Total citations[a]	Article	Title	Journals
1	104	Grassl and Habisch (2011)	Ethics and economics: Towards a new humanistic synthesis for business	*Journal of Business Ethics*
2	85	Becchetti et al. (2022)	Going deeper into the S of ESG: A relational approach to the definition of social responsibility	*Sustainability*
3	56	Baviera et al., (2016)	The logic of gift: Inspiring behavior in organizations beyond the limits of duty and exchange	*Business Ethics Quarterly*
4	56	Sison et al., (2020)	Some virtue ethics implications from Aristotelian and Confucian perspectives on family and business	*Journal of Business Ethics*
5	29	Scalzo et al., (2023)	A personalist approach to business ethics: New perspectives for virtue ethics and servant leadership	*Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*
6	27	Frémeaux et al., (2023)	Developing a culture of solidarity through a three-step virtuous process: Lessons from common good-oriented organizations	*Journal of Business Ethics*
7	16	Steiner (2017)	Religion and the sociological critique of political economy: Altruism and gift	*The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*
8	15	Kearns (2017)	Rebuilding trust: Ireland's CSR plan in the light of Caritas in Veritate	*Journal of Business Ethics*

Note. a. Total citations were consulted in Google Scholar on October 30 2025.

3.2.5. Cluster 5 (purple): The relationality of giving and receiving in organizations

Cluster 5 (purple) is predominantly theoretical, comprising 13 theoretical and three empirical studies. While addressing giving-receiving-giving-back, this cluster gives a special focus on *giving*, particularly addressing motivations, practices and forms of exchange related to giving behaviors.

Authors discuss the personal motivation of funders or donors, considering the financial activity of fundraising and philanthropy in the nonprofit sector or for entrepreneurship. By considering the distinct motivations of altruism (free-gift) and self-interest (utilitarian logic), authors explore possibilities to transcend the logic of exchange through an existential gift (Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011) or explore hybrid forms of reciprocal giving based on Mauss' theory of gift (Faldetta, 2011; André et al., 2017). This cluster also explores the dynamism of the logic of gift in organizations, addressing relationships of responsibility (Faldetta, 2018b). Faldetta is the most productive author in this cluster (5 articles).

While some authors assume gift exchange may be governed by reciprocity, others argue that a logic of non-reciprocity (free gift) as a condition, based on Derrida (1991) and Gouldner (1960). From a more relational and nuanced perspective, some authors sustain that neither a purely free and gratuitous giving nor a purely interested, utilitarian notion of exchange, but a sort of hybrid logic of exchange may happen in an organizational context. Crowdfunding and charitable gifts (donations for the nonprofit sector in the USA legal context) are examples of this hybrid logic sustained by the gift economy. When giving, donors and founders are rewarded with material and immaterial gifts, such as status, reputation, and social identity (Tait, 2015). Finally, the gift economy is considered as an economy driven by non-market exchange and social norms (Tait, 2015).

The logic of gift highlights the intrinsic meaning of relationships, at a personal and organizational level (firm-stakeholders). The bonding value of the LoG (Godbout & Caillé, 1997) represents a genuine motivation to build and develop social relationships and enriches people involved (Faldetta, 2011, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020; Faldetta & Paternostro, 2011), assuming goods' circulation as a means for the development of relationships. This perspective considers two anthropological assumptions: people are by nature donors, manifesting a state of permanent and mutual debt with others; and that the LoG begins with receiving. This approach, combined with Levinas' thought on organizational justice, caring, and relationships of responsibility, may represent relational asymmetries and a mutual state of debt between managers, the firm, and employees, in which caring involves a kind of responsible call for the other (Faldetta, 2016). In light of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Klein & Laczniak, 2013) that would involve the inclusion of gratuitousness and communion into economic activity, with the purpose to restore trust and social cohesion. The former is presented as a necessary element in economic life and the latter the proper experience of justice and inclusion among people. This is presented as an expression of charity (*Caritas*) and fraternity, a moral force needed to humanize markets and ensure they serve the common good. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is fundamentally personalist, emphasizing the inviolable dignity of the human person as the center of all economic and social life (Klein & Laczniak, 2013).

Sargeant and Woodliffe (2007) explore what motivates people to make monetary donations to non-profit organizations. The reasons found in the literature include: self-esteem, self-interest, altruism, guilt, pity, distributive justice, empathy, and making a difference. However, this article instrumentally addresses giving behavior to inform fundraisers. André et al. (2017) focus on reciprocal giving as a hybrid logic that transcends the simple opposition between the gift (altruism) and exchange (self-interest). Authors test the effect of reciprocal giving relationships on the success of reward-based crowdfunding campaigns, arguing that Maussian gift theory is the best approach to understand this hybrid phenomenon.

From a law perspective, charitable giving is not a simple, one-way transfer but the central component of a complex economy of exchange. This "charitable gift economy" is a nexus of material and social exchanges where donors receive a wide range of benefits (tax breaks, status, social identity, warm glow or personal pleasure) that constitute a robust form of reciprocity (Tait, 2015). In this context, gift-giving is described as "a complicated form of exchange that provides a donor with numerous intangible benefits and operates within an intricate system of social networks and cultural norms." (Tait, 2015, p. 1702). Gift as a form of currency that signals not only appreciation or gratitude, but also kinship, obligation, and even superiority (Tait, 2015). Table 6 lists cluster 5's most cited articles.

Table 6

Most cited articles of cluster 5

#	#Total citations[a]	Article	Title	Journals
1	420	Sargeant and Woodliffe (2007)	Gift giving: an interdisciplinary review	*International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*
2	186	André et al. (2017)	Beyond the opposition between altruism and self-interest: Reciprocal giving in reward-based crowdfunding	*Journal of Business Ethics*
3	94	Frémeaux and Michelson (2011)	'No strings attached': Welcoming the existential gift in business	*Journal of Business Ethics*
4	88	Faldetta (2011)	The logic of gift and gratuitousness in business relationships	*Journal of Business Ethics*
5	36	Tait (2015)	The secret economy of charitable giving	*Boston University Law Review*

#	#Total citations[a]	Article	Title	Journals
6	35	Fridman and Luscombe (2017)	Gift-giving, disreputable exchange, and the management of donations in a police department	*Social Forces*
7	33	Myers (2013)	The logic of the gift: The possibilities and limitations of Carlo Petrini's slow food alternative	*Agriculture and Human Values*
8	28	Faldetta (2016)	Organizational caring and organizational justice: some implications for the employment relationship	*International Journal of Organizational Analysis*

Note. a. Total citations were consulted in Google Scholar on October 30 2025.

Finally, some articles address the possibility and limitations of gift-giving subsumed by capitalism (Myers, 2013), and implications in public service (Fridman & Luscombe, 2017).

3.2.6. A holistic analysis

A holistic analysis of clusters reveals that gift-giving in BMFE is not merely a collection of isolated sub-disciplines, but rather an interconnected narrative grappling with the boundaries between social relations and economic transactions. While the clusters operate in distinct empirical contexts—ranging from digital platforms (cluster 1) to consumer and production behavior (cluster 2), cultural practices in the frontiers of what is ethically acceptable (cluster 3), moral principles for business and management (cluster 4), and organizational expressions of gift-giving (cluster 5)— they share a fundamental meta-theme: the erosion of the classical dichotomy between the gift and the market economy. Across the network, scholars are moving away from viewing these as opposing paradigms and toward understanding them as hybrid, entangled, or co-constitutive logics.

The most dominant commonality across Clusters 1, 2, and 5 is the concept of hybridity. The literature consistently challenges the notion of a "pure gift" versus a "pure commodity." In cluster 1 (red), this manifests as the "digital gift economy," where the logic of sharing is captured by market platforms (*e.g.*, Uber, Airbnb), creating a tension between community building and corporate profit. Cluster 2 (green) echoes this at the micro-level of consumption, describing market and gift logics as "entangled" or "intertwined" in everyday practices, such as family finance or peer review. Cluster 5 (purple) further cements this by exploring the coexistence of altruism and self-interest (tax breaks, status) in a Maussian "reciprocal giving" framework. Collectively, these clusters suggest that modern economic actors do not switch between "social" and "economic" modes but rather navigate in a continuum where market transactions serve social ends, and social bonds maintain economic exchange.

A significant divergence emerges in how reciprocity is evaluated, particularly when comparing cluster 3 (blue) with cluster 4 (yellow). Reciprocity is the central mechanism in all clusters, yet its interpretation varies wildly based on context. In Cluster 4, (moral principles), reciprocity is largely viewed through the lens of virtue ethics and Catholic Social Teaching (*e.g.*, *Caritas in Veritate*). Here, reciprocity creates solidarity, trust, and the common good; it is an aspirational force that humanizes the market. In cluster 3 (bribery & corruption), reciprocity is scrutinized as a potential source of ethical corruption.

Clusters reveal some contextual factors driving different forms of gift-giving. Cluster 1 focuses on the digital, or how the internet and platform business models facilitate or exploit the gift (*e.g.*, open source, data surveillance). In contrast, Cluster 3 is culturally determined, heavily anchored in anthropological and regional contexts (*e.g.*, China, Africa, the Middle East) where specific cultural norms like *guanxi* dictate the rules of exchange. Additionally, cluster 4 recovers foundational moral principles of the logic of gift, offering a comprehensive point of view to address the nuances of personal forms of giving. This highlights a potential schism in the literature: technological perspectives often treat the gift as a universal structural feature of the digital commons, whereas business ethics and management perspectives emphasize deep, ethical and cultural nuances driving gift-giving.

However, a minor portion of this literature restricts gift-giving only to civil society or non-profit enterprises, while others already recognize its manifestations in market and economics more broadly, especially in more hybrid forms of exchange (gift-based and exchange-based). Future studies could empirically explore the circular subsidiarity (González & Scalzo, 2024), and the relational responsibility (Faldetta, 2018b) between the market, civil society, and public organizations.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This literature review shows the growing interest in gift-giving in BMFE, manifested by its 143 references published in the last decades in the WoS database. The five thematic clusters of gift-giving illustrate individual, organizational, and macro level evidence of gift-giving. Together, they suggest an entangled view of the social and economic spheres, pointing to a paradigm beyond this dichotomy. However, conceptual nuances persist with respect to reciprocity, gratuity, and indebtedness. In this section, we propose directions for future research and concluding remarks, including this article's limitations.

As suggested (Steidlmeier, 1999; Arias & Melé, 2025), the nuances of gift-giving in concrete situations are better understood with a personal judgement perspective based on an ethical framework, which allows the appreciation of human long-term purpose, such as human flourishing and the common good, and recognizes the importance of human relations to their moral growth. While the "blurred lines" between a legitimate gift, *Guanxi*, and a bribe highlight the need to address agents' intentions, the act of gift-giving itself (Melé, 2024) and its relational consequences, cluster 4 suggests the "logic of gift" as the primarily and human natural logic sustaining BMFE practices.

In the current reality of BMFE practices, both contextual factors surrounding human relations—digital, (cluster 1), consumption and production practices (cluster 2), cultural challenges (cluster 3)—; as well as more profound anthropological and ethical principles—humans' dignity and relational nature, freedom, generosity and virtues of charity (cluster 4 and 5)—are involved in the dynamics of gift-giving. To some extent, reciprocity is defined in each agents' gift-giving interaction, with more or less agency (freedom) and mutual recognizement, which are shaped by those factors. This is the reason why gift-giving is profoundly a human ethical manifestation, expressing the very act of being humans and the natural co-existence that underlies human relationships (Polo, 1999).

In our current reality highly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI) systems, future studies could explore how the logic of gift could offer a normative and relational background to address AI's challenges for people, the market and society. As AI systems increasingly mediate knowledge sharing and human interactions, unprecedented relational paradigms are emerging within the human-AI-environment triad. The current literature on gift-giving has yet to fully capture this technological shift, primarily due to its recent onset. Future studies must investigate how the logic of gift operates within these new digital ecosystems. Particularly from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching and recent *Magnifica Humanitas* (Leo XIV, 2026), scholars should critically examine whether AI-mediated interactions can be guided by the gratuitousness of the gift, or if they will merely reinforce utilitarian dynamics and a "culture of power." Exploring the normative and ethical dimensions of gift-giving in the context of Generative AI represents a highly promising and necessary avenue for advancing this literature.

Future research should transcend binary analytical frameworks that treat social and economic dimensions as mutually exclusive spheres. Part of this literature still indicates that the *intent* (relationship building vs. immediate gain) and the *sphere* (private/communal vs. public/statutory) determine whether the gift is a "virtuous circle" (Cluster 4) or a "corrupt exchange" (Cluster 3). We encourage future studies to go beyond these assumptions, through addressing the counterintuitive and paradoxical nature of reciprocity and gratuity.

Whereas some articles assume a dyadic perspective of gift (*e.g.*, Cordeiro et al., 2019), defining different forms of giving based on a giver and a receiver, their explanations on reciprocal or free gifts remain restricted to this level of analysis. Differently, in the context of *guanxi*, articles suggest a more multi-level interconnection (interpersonal, family, and network level relations) in terms of the social living dynamics of life (Millington et al., 2005; Sison et al., 2020). In other words, some articles still do not address the relationship' chains between peers as a broader and dynamic dimension of gift-giving, assuming that the return of a gift occurred between A and B may happen through a future giving to C. Asymmetry, open reciprocity, and mutual indebtedness, while recognized by some (Faldetta, 2018a), are less explored in this literature, representing a possible avenue for future theoretical and empirical research.

Also, the theoretical potential around the notion of *munus*—the Latin translation for gift (Hittinger, 2002)—is underdeveloped. Often related to the idea of function, vocation, or mission, the semantic field of this term is related to many other concepts that highlights the personal dimension of human action (Scalzo & Moreno-Almárcegui, 2022), including: talent, duty, obligation, tribute, office, personal commitment, task, service, pastoral care, among others (Moreno-Almárcegui & Scalzo, 2022). This notion could offer key insights for the development of the aforementioned third paradigm (Caillé, 2000) since "the notion of the *munus* unifies two things which are so often split apart in modern political and social thought: first, what man claims as his own, and second, what man has to give as a gift of service" (Hittinger, 2002, p. 56).

Another idea that remains underdeveloped is the personal dimension of gift as a contemporary evolution of the concept (Scalzo, 2017), closely related to the notion of "self-giving." There has long been a controversy regarding what lies at the origin of the gift cycle: giving or receiving (accepting). In Ancient approaches, the former is clearly regarded as superior, since the giver assumes a stronger position than the receiver, and the focus tends to fall on the gift itself. The assumption that giving embeds something of the giver into what is given, was further developed within a personalist approach, according to which: respect to *things*, the person is above all *giving*; whereas with respect to *persons*, the person is above all *accepting* (Polo, 1996) because ontologically, one person cannot be "more" than another one, but she enriches herself by accepting others. That is the main reason why Catholic Social Thought has insisted on emphasizing the third moment of the gift, *i.e.*, to reciprocate to the gift that has been given (first by God, then by others). This enrichment is key to fostering a new paradigm of servant leadership with a focus on interpersonal relationships rather than individual agency. Moreover, this personalist approach can complement the "extensive," superficial or quantitative idea of social capital with a more "intensive", profound and substantial view of strong human relationships. Ultimately, this could help to place the person at the center of economic life.

5.1. Future research on gift-giving

This study allows the identification of the following gaps and future research directions:

- The digital-moral gap: While cluster 1 discusses the exploitation of the digital gift, it rarely draws upon the rich philosophical and virtue-ethics frameworks found in cluster 4. Future research could delve into gratuitousness and humanistic management (cluster 4) to critique and redesign digital platforms (cluster 1) and AI' systems, moving beyond descriptive analysis of exploitation toward normative solutions for digital solidarity.
- The instrumentalization of corporate philanthropy: There is an under-explored tension between the "existential gift" advocated in Cluster 5 (giving for the sake of the relationship) and the strategic "instrumentalism" found in clusters 2 (marketing/branding) and 3 (guanxi/networking). The literature lacks a unified theory on how organizations can practice "ethically excellent giving" (cluster 4) without it inevitably collapsing into "instrumental branding" or "soft corruption."
- Data as the counter-gift: There is a gap regarding "data." While cluster 1 notes that personal data is the "counter-gift" for free digital services, the other clusters (focused on finance and commodities) have yet to fully theorize *data* as the primary currency of modern reciprocity. Integrating the "moral economy" (cluster 3) with the "data economy" of cluster 1 could yield new insights into digital gift economy and privacy as a breach of reciprocal trust. While personal data appears as an object of exchange through gifts, future studies could further explore human attention as a resource sought on social media as a counter-gift to services "given for free" (Jarrett, 2021; Hulsey & Reeves, 2014) from big techs, exploring the implications for social relations and human flourishing (attention economy).
- Gift-giving in leadership: Based on this comprehensive synthesis and conceptualization of gift-giving, future studies could analyze how and to what extent gift-giving supports leadership, a potential field less explored in the current literature. The idea of gift could enlighten the relational dimension of leadership in light of personalist or systemic approaches.
- Awareness of ethical washing: the potential "ethical washing" of the gift economy or gift-giving relations between corporations and the public, as a way to instrumentalize it to gain reputation, status, or power (see Tselenti, 2022).

In conclusion, the BMFE literature on gift-giving is characterized by a shift from defining *what* a gift is, to analyzing *what the gift does*—how it structures digital networks, complicates consumer markets, challenges ethical boundaries, and creates social capital. The challenge for future scholarship is to bridge the gap between a moral philosophy of the gift (cluster 4) and the gritty, often ambiguous realities of digital and globalized exchange (clusters 1 and 3).

We also acknowledge the limitations of this study, in particular in addressing publications indexed in Web of Science. Future studies could review the publication from other databases, focusing on books, thesis or conference papers. Another possibility is to include articles from other fields, therefore fostering a dialogue with BMFE studies.

6. Notes

1. Considering hereafter gift-giving as an umbrella term, this article addresses the literature related to logic of gift, gift theory, theory of gift, and gift economy.

2. The paradox of reciprocity lies in the fact that social relationships require giving back, yet when reciprocity is too precise or immediate, it destroys the symbolic value of the gift and turns the relationship into a commercial transaction.

Author's contribution

Germán Scalzo: Project administration; Formal analysis; Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; Investigation; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Funding acquisition.

Maria Clara Ames: Project administration; Formal analysis; Conceptualization; Data curation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Software; Validation; Visualization.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no financial or other conflicts of interest that could have influenced the results or the interpretation of the findings presented in this article.

Ethical compliance

The research underlying this article is theoretical and documentary in nature and did not involve experimentation with human participants, the collection of personal data, or any intervention involving participants. Therefore, institutional ethics approval was not required. The study was conducted in accordance with generally accepted principles of research integrity, including appropriate acknowledgment of authorship and proper attribution of the sources consulted.

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