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“How about giving my things away over the Internet?”

When Internet makes it easier to give things away

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The present article looks at the meaning of gift-giving when it is performed via free online recycling websites. Underpinned by research on the difficulties inherent to giving, our paper illustrates how these websites remove the difficulties inherent in giving to kith, kin or to charities.

Introduction

Many studies have explored the way people dispose of items they no longer want (Jacoby, Berning and Dietvorst 1977; Cherrier 2009; Arsel and Dobsha 2011) either through the market economy (Chu and Liao 2009; Sherry 1990), the kith and kin gift economy (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000), charities (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi 1996) or online (Nelson, Rademacher and Paek 2007; Arsel and Dobsha 2011). Studies investigating online recycling have generally looked at the trend from a community perspective, concluding that giveaway websites are underpinned by a mechanism of generalised reciprocity. However, these websites have a specific feature that makes it interesting to analyse the online giving process from an individual slant since, unlike giving possessions to charities, free recycling websites enable the giver to *meet* the unknown recipient and, unlike gifts to close friends or family, they allow the giver to meet a *stranger*. In short, free recycling websites offer a new channel whereby individuals can give things away to a stranger in person, a factor that is likely to change the way givers perceive gift-giving. Underpinned by research on the difficulties inherent to giving (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000; Lastovika and Fernandez 2005; Marcoux 2009), our paper illustrates how recycling websites resolve the tensions that the giver may otherwise be confronted with when giving, by offering an encounter with an alien recipient.

Review of the literature

Many studies have highlighted the romantic aspects of giving (Belk and Coon 1993; Joy 2001), but the process also has a darker side (Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999; Marcoux 2009). Gifts to kith and kin can lead to unease in both the giver and the recipient. The giver is not entirely free when giving, but is trapped in a web of

constraints and norms. Giving to friends and family not only means that the giver gives, but also that the recipient must receive (Gouldner 1960) or must reciprocate (Godbout and Caillé 1992). Giving to charities, on the other hand, presents fewer constraints, and is underpinned by a notion of solidarity (Frémeaux and Michelson 2011). However, it can also be a source of frustration for the givers who have no idea what happens to their donations. In effect, some people need to meet the future beneficiary in order to be able to detach themselves from their possessions (Roster 2001; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). While previously, only the market enabled two strangers to meet in the circulation of second-hand goods (Herrmann, 1997), today free recycling websites also offer this possibility. Our aim is to explore what this encounter means to the online giver.

Methodology

To understand how givers experience online recycling and what it means to them as individuals, we conducted 27 long interviews (McCracken 1986), adopting a phenomenological approach (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). The respondents were recruited through the managers of the free recycling websites www.recupe.net, www.donnons.org and www.recupe.fr, who put us in touch with givers. The interviews began with the question “*Can you tell me about the different options you choose when you decide to get rid of something?*” and then focused on online recycling and how this is experienced by the giver.

Findings

In addition to the practical and environmentally-friendly nature of the practice (Nelson, Rademacher and Paek 2007; Arsel and Dobscha 2011), our analysis led us to identify two central factors that give insights into the meaning of the online recycling experience: first, givers experience it as spontaneous gift-giving rather than just an opportunity to get rid of unwanted clutter. Second, the gesture is given its full sense through the encounter with the unknown recipient. This specific feature of online recycling removes the obstacles inherent to the three-way gift-giving process that arise in other forms of gift-giving (Mauss 1924): i.e. the giving, the receiving and the return.

With regard to *giving*, online recycling means that the giver does not run the risk of a refusal as may be the case when giving to friends or family, or to a charity. A refusal is often painful for the giver: by refusing an object, individuals signal a rejection of the relationship. Refusal is very rare in online recycling as recipients are aware of the state of the items they will find at the givers’ beforehand. Consequently, givers are able to give ‘everything away as they are not worried about being judged for the ‘poor’ quality of their objects. With regard to *receiving*, the giver chooses the future beneficiary he or she will meet in order to give them the object, along with its history, its wear and tear and its special way of working. In listening to the giver, the recipient implicitly makes a promise to take care of the object, thereby reassuring the former (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). Finally, with regard to the *return*, the interaction with the recipient makes the giver feel (s)he exists and is recognised. Online recycling fulfils the need of givers for recognition, without necessarily creating a bond of dependence: the meeting is a brief, one-off situation, and reciprocity is immediate. The desire not to get involved with the recipient, that is also reflected in other studies (Bajde 2009), can be seen in the way the items are passed on: some givers will place the items in a neutral space like the hallway or the corridor (Korosec Serfaty 1988) to ensure that the recipient does not trespass on the giver’s privacy.

Conclusion

This article adds to current research on the circulation of second-hand goods (Lucas 2002; Cherrier 2009) in several ways. The study contributes to our understanding of the topic by analysing online recycling websites from the perspective of the individual. This is interesting in view of one specific feature of such websites, namely the *encounter* with an unknown recipient.

The article also illustrates how free recycling websites remove the difficulties inherent in giving to kith and kin or to charities. Such sites offer givers the potential for rewarding interaction with the recipient that is also liberating. It is rewarding since they are recognised for their gesture, unlike giving objects to charities. At the same time, it liberates the giver as, even if there is a meeting with the recipient, it is brief, reciprocity is immediate and it does not create a relationship or a bond of dependence in the same way as a gift to family or friends. At the same time, the study enriches the model proposed by Marcoux (2009): by removing the obstacles linked to giving, free recycling websites offer individuals the possibility to remain in the gift economy. The gift economy and the market economy are two options that free individuals from the obligations inherent to other forms of giving, although they are not mutually exclusive.

The article has implications with regard to three pillars of sustainable development: i.e. economic, as the free flow of objects facilitates the decision to replace them (Roster and Richins 2009); social, as free recycling websites help people to find what they need at less cost, while developing social links, and finally, environmental, as free recycling websites contribute to reducing the volume of waste.

Finally, our research opens up several potential avenues for further research to enhance our understanding of online recycling. While our study focuses on givers, an investigation of the recipients could raise some interesting questions: what signals does the recipient put out that the giver picks up as recognition for his or her gesture, for instance? How does the recipient receive a gift via the Internet? Why does the recipient use free recycling websites apart from the obvious reason of getting something for free?

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