From Trash to Treasure: Freecycle.Org As a Case of Generalized Reciprocity

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This study examines Freecycle.org as a gift system with a focus on identifying how reciprocity is enacted. Analyses of netnography, survey, and interview data revealed differences between Freecycle and other gift economies due to the predominance of a "generalized" reciprocity, where goods are given without expectation of anything in return. This contemporary version was witnessed outside kin groups in a virtual community made up of individuals with weak ties but a high level of trust. Reciprocity is realized through the forum’s structure and rules, community, and benefits of membership. Freecycle appears to satisfy both altruism and the egoism of commoditization.

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FREE! Free software, songs, and stuff. The Internet provides a place to share technology, art and goods. Thus, Cyberspace may be fostering a new age of altruism that contrasts the egoism of commoditization (Belk 2007). Whereas sharing source code or Napster files offers a way to give without sacrificing ownership (Gielser 2006), giving tangible goods means letting go of the stuff—for good. Members of Freecycle.org do just that. Unlike traditional market systems or other second order (used) systems (e.g., craigslist), members give and receive goods absent monetary exchange. Thus, Freecycle serves as an apt forum to explore contemporary consumer gift systems and the phenomenon of reciprocity (Gielser 2006).

Reciprocity, a “set of rules and obligations that builds the complex pattern of give and take and helps establish moral standards of social solidarity” (Gouldner 1960, cf Gielser 2006), need not be tit-for-tat. Anthropological literature has revealed a continuum from generalized reciprocity (people give without expectation of anything in return) to balanced reciprocity (some expectation of repayment in a future exchange) to negative reciprocity (expectation of immediate repayment; Sahlins 1972).

We investigate Freecycle as an example of a traditional gift system with a focus on identifying how reciprocity is enacted and enforced. The multi-method approach included: (1) netnographic analysis of post content over a 1-month period; (2) an online survey (n=183) to elicit motivations for membership and to measure consumption attitudes and behaviors; and (3) depth interviews with nine members from a Freecycle group to gain a deeper understanding of Freecycle attitudes and behaviors. Analysis included both inductive and deductive as well as qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Findings

Gift Economy? Our analyses revealed distinct differences between Freecycle and traditional gift economies (e.g., Mauss 1925/1990). Traditional gift economies are defined by feelings of reciprocity (Malinowski 1953) that seem to represent a balanced or negative reciprocity. In this view, the “pure” gift does not exist (Mauss 1925/1990). Rather than being a “free and disinterested” social process, gift giving is inherently “constrained and self-interested.” Gifts establish ties of reciprocity and interdependency among social actors and specific entities that provide benefits for both the gift giver and recipient (Hyde 1983; Malinowski 1953; Mauss 1925/1990). This traditional framework is altered, however, for Freecycle.org because of the predominance of a “generalized” reciprocity present within this community, as evidenced through the forum’s structure, social rules, community and trust, articulated motivations and benefits of use.

Forum Structure. An average of 82 “offer and wanted” posts per day were observed in this community. Consequently, Freecyclers witness the flow of goods from one to another and see generalized reciprocity in action. These observations along with personal experience with Freecycle (the majority of our informants had experience in giving and receiving goods) may reinforce generalized reciprocity. Behavioral studies on humans (Berkowitz and Daniels 1964) and rats (Rutte and Taborsky 2007) suggest individuals may base cooperative behavior on prior experiences—irrespective of the identity of their partners. In other words, we can practice generalized reciprocity if we believe that others are doing so and we have experienced such acts of kindness in the past.

Rules and Social Norms. Although generalized reciprocity is typically witnessed in kinship groups or among villagers who know one another (Sahlins 1972), research in economics has found even with “constantly changing partners” (a.k.a strangers), elements of