Is a Gift Always a Gift? an Ethnographic Inquiry Into the Diversity of Giving Experiences

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The aim of the present research is to study how situations influence giving behaviors. An ethnographic study has been designed, based on depth interviews (life stories questions), diaries and observations of fifteen persons varying in socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. Several themes emerge from preliminary results: diversity of giving experiences, ordinary versus extraordinary; influence of emotions, especially in taking the giving behavior in action; influence of physical surroundings; social dimensions of giving, individual versus social experience; importance of the life path and childhood in framing giving representations and learning to give.

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to why consumers are motivated to participate in a leasing lifestyle. Specifically, the fashion industry is naturally aligned with the trend towards transumption due to the seasonality and temporary nature of style. If consumers are aware that trends change with the seasons, they may expect to use product for a shorter duration resulting in a greater motivation to rent rather than purchase. Luxury consumption has been impacted by a weakening economy; however, several luxury fractional ownership firms have recently experienced an increase in transactions. Michele Krause, the founder of Bling Yourself, an online fractional ownership accessory retailer, says that the economic downturn has not impacted their number of new customers or rentals (Roane 2008). Is fractional ownership not only a way to reduce environmental impact but also the answer to a sustainable economy?

In conclusion, the availability of fractional ownership options means less commitment, enabling consumers to enjoy a product temporarily before moving on to the next experience (Wisper 2007). Future research seeks to create a typology of transsuming consumers by conducting interviews across industries and clustering based on theme. Investigating this new consumption trend provides marketers with insight into the motivations of these consumers and further seeks to illuminate the question set forth by Belk (2007), “Why share rather than own?”

References

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In January 2005, after the Asian tsunami, the French Croix-Rouge collected more money in one week than usually collected in an entire year of fundraising (41 millions Euros). Médecins Sans Frontières was approached by 411 volunteers ready to fly to Indonesia, a number usually taking five months to reach. The total amount of giving actually reached far beyond the needs of these associations to face up to this disaster. Why did people give to meet the tsunami disaster? Maybe because of the situation (Christmas period, death saliency, social influence of children and grand-children...) generating affective reactions (surprise, anxiety, fear...) and resulting in taking giving behaviors in action.

We assume that situations may have a great impact on giving behaviors just as it does on consumption behaviors in general. Situations are defined by Belk (1975) as “momentary encounters with those elements of the total environment which are available to the individual at a particular time”. Situational characteristics are physical and social surroundings, temporal perspective, task definition features and antecedent states.

The aim of the present research6 is to answer the following questions:

Do situations influence giving behaviors?

If they do, how does the situation have an impact on giving?

By focusing on the physical and social surroundings, on the affective and experiential aspects of giving behaviors, we lie within the scope of consumer culture theory (CCT, Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Although givers do not actually consume physical goods or

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6This research is a part of a larger one, financed by the ANR (the French National Research Agency), aiming at tackling problems encountered by associations by a better understanding of giving behaviors. The research is limited to individual giving behaviors, excluding firms or foundations donations.
services, we believe that they do indeed undergo a consumption experience with persons or associations who benefit from their giving behaviors.

As we cannot assume that the different types of giving behaviors (gifting, donation, volunteering...) are not related, we will study how people imagine and experience giving:

- of money, of time, of gift, but also of blood, of organs,
- to other persons, known (members of the family, friends) or unknown (beggar),
- or to associations (local or international, public or civil, whereas aiming at social tasks, health promotion and risk prevention, education and research, culture, sports and leisure...).

A lot of research in an anthropological (Malinowski, 1922 ; Mauss, 1923-1924 ; Weiner, 1992 ; Godelier, 2002), sociological (Levi-Strauss, 1971 ; Godbout and Caillé, 2001), philosophical (Derrida, 1991) or economical (Cheal, 1988) perspectives pays attention to giving behaviors.

In consumer research, an important research stream has focused on giving since the seminal works of Belk (1979 ; 1993) and Sherry (1983). Most of them have dealt with gift giving (Otnes, Lowrey and Kim, 1993 ; Sherry, McGrath and Levy, 1993 ; McGrath, 1995 ; Otnes, 1996 ; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel, 1999).

When raising the issue of fundraising by associations, the research has concentrated on the influence of socio-demographic and psychological features of givers and volunteers on their behaviors (Guy and Patton, 1988 ; Burnett and Lunsford, 1994 ; Wymer, 1997 ; Wooten, 2000 ; Bennett, 2003 ; Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007), or less often, on the influence of appeal techniques on giving behaviors (Rothschild, 1979 ; Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi, 1996 ; Desmet and Feinberg, 2003 ; Venable et alii, 2005 ; Goatman and Lewis, 2007).

Few studies have addressed the question of situational characteristics on giving behaviors, some focusing on social surroundings (Fisher and Ackerman, 1998 ; Bryant and Test, 1967 ; Gillath et alii, 2005), on temporal perspective (Fisher, Vandenbosch and Antia, 2008) or on task definition features (Bryant, Slaughter, Kang and Tax, 2003).

To our knowledge, some situational influences, as physical surroundings and antecedent states have not been studied, and, moreover, no comprehensive and integrative study of situational influences on giving behaviors has been conducted, what could be of great interest for associations’ marketing.

So, we have designed an ethnographic study aiming at studying behaviors in social and cultural context (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994 ; Sherry, 1995 ; Sunderland and Denny, 2007). As a first stage, we have conducted depth interviews with 15 persons from January to February 2009. We employed snowball sampling, recruiting informants from among family and acquaintance networks. We have interviewed 8 women and 7 men, from 26 to 65 years-old, living in Paris or west regions of France. They are either workers, retired or housewife, single, married or widow, with or without children in care, with diverse levels of education, of income, practising or not diverse religions (Christianity, Judaism, Muslim religion). We followed Bertaux and Kohli’s (2001) and Bertaux (2009) recommendations on life stories questions to elicit holistic descriptions of our informants’ representations and experiences of giving. Interviews ranged from 55 to 85 minutes, were audiotaped, transcribed, and yielded to more than 300 pages single-spaced pages of text.

We are in the process of interpreting the text using dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), immersing ourselves in the interdisciplinary literature on giving behaviors, to seek out consistencies and/or inconsistencies with our text.

Some preliminary results emerge about the situations:

- the existence of different types of experiences (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982 ; Caru and Cova, 2003) of giving: ordinary as giving a coin to a beggar in the street or old clothes to an association versus extraordinary as TV shows or sports events aiming at fundraising, definitions of ordinary and extraordinary experiences being diverse among participants ;
- the physical surroundings, often described as “disappointing”, especially in small charity organizations;
- the influence of emotions: for example, the death saliency seems to be important in acting the giving behavior in extraordinary experience, the mood seems to influence more ordinary experiences ; disappointment is also salient in discourse;
- the social aspects of giving: it may be an individual versus a social experience.

Life stories also have shed light on the importance of the life path, especially childhood, in framing giving representations and learning to give.

From these preliminary results, we conclude that associations should evolve from a person-association/cause relationship to a person-association/cause-situation relationship as giving decisions are also contingent on situational variables.

Further depth interviews and diaries will be collected and analyzed until the end of 2009. Observations will also be organized.

References

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Can mood change our color preferences? Would people be attracted to different colors depending on their mood? Even though emotional influence on judgment and decision making has been well established (Schwarz and Clore 1983), little is known about how the perceiver’s emotion affects his or her aesthetic judgments including color preferences. On the other hand, it is well established that people feel various emotions from colors (Crozier 1996; Guilford and Smith 1959; Ou et al. 2004; Valdez and Mehrabian 1994). For example, people feel calmness or low arousal from short-wavelength colors, such as blue and green. People feel excitement, happiness, or high arousal from long-wavelength colors, such as red and yellow. People feel relaxation and softness from light or pastel tone colors, while tension and hardness from dark colors. Given the strong associations of colors and emotions, we examine if an individual’s color preferences are contingent on his emotion.

Specifically, we contrast three potential hypotheses from emotion literature: affective evaluation (Andrade 2005; Schwarz and Clore 1983; Isen et al. 1978), affect regulation (Andrade 2005; Gross 1998), and affective fit. These three hypotheses predict a perceiver’s emotional influence on color preference differently.

We used within-subject design to measure color preferences, since individual differences in color preference are rather significant (Schloss and Palmer 2007). Thus, the changes between two color preferences were used as the main dependent variables of the study. We used emotionally laden movies to induce happiness, sadness, and neutral emotion. The movies were edited into black and white films to eliminate color exposure confounding during video watching. We asked participants to evaluate the colors before and after watching emotionally laden movies. As a cover story, participants were told to take part in two unrelated studies, color preference study and video evaluation study. They heard that to avoid their eyes from being tired from evaluating subtly different colors, color preference study would be split into part I and part II and videos study would take part in between the two parts.

Colors were chosen based on Hue-Saturation-Light (HSL) color scheme, which is widely accepted by color theorists as describing three independent properties of colors (Valdez and Mehrabian 1994). To identify which aspect of colors is influenced by emotions, hue (red, blue, yellow, and green), saturation (saturated vs., muted), and lightness (light, middle, dark) dimensions of colors were fully