Exploring the Social Dynamics of Online Bartering

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With the exception of few studies, bartering behavior remains a highly understudied phenomenon in consumer behavior literature. With this research, I depict the social dynamics of an online community that has constructed a self-sustaining, self-regulating and interactive bartering system of used cosmetics. Through a multi-method investigation that incorporates netnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I examine the processes that sustain this informal market system. Additionally, I discuss the vulnerabilities that participants face by partaking in exchanges that violate the legal, economic and hygiene norms of the formal marketplace. Lastly, I discuss the coping mechanisms that the participants employ to address these vulnerabilities.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Ownership and possession practices have historically been a central interest to Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). While there is an increased interest in boundary conditions of ownership, such as the disposal of possessions (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), access in contrast to possession (Chen 2009) and sharing of possessions (Belk forthcoming), these boundary conditions still remain an under-explored territory. This session threads three empirical studies that examine boundary conditions of ownership, more specifically ownership transfer and shared ownership. We seek to address the following issues:

1. Exploring how attachment to and appropriation of objects are performed in these boundary conditions.
2. Demonstrating how emerging marketplace structures mediate these hybrid and transient forms of ownership.
3. Investigating the ways individuals manage symbolic and physical contamination of goods that are shared with or transferred from others.
4. And lastly, highlighting the ecological and political issues that arise in the context of these transient and alternative forms of ownership models.

These three papers provide a focused, but multifaceted and multi-method treatment of the topic. The specific contexts that the presenters ground their theories in are also novel: second hand clothing users, online bartering communities and shared car ownership. These marketplace contexts promise many discussion opportunities and further theory development.

This session is likely to attract three groups of ACR members: (1) researchers that are interested in ownership and identity (2) those who study emerging marketplace structures that mediate new forms of exchange, consumption and divestment (3) a broader audience that consists of Consumer Culture Theory researchers and students. We anticipate a lively dialogue facilitated by John Deighton, who will tie the session together, highlight theoretical and practical implications of the papers and offer insights for further inquiry.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Identity and Self-Territory in Second Hand Clothing Transfers”

Dominique Roux, IRG-Université Paris-Est, France

Previous studies have highlighted the emotion of disgust and the negative representations associated with possible reuse of other people’s possessions (Gregson and Crewe 2003). Anthropologists and psychologists attribute this taboo to the principle of sympathetic magic and its two laws (Frazer 1950; Mauss 1902/1972; Rozin et al. 1993). The law of contagion recognizes the offensive effect that slight or incidental contact with a polluted object may have, even long after the pollution, whereas the law of similarity assumes that things that resemble each other are from the same essence. Because clothing intimately links with the body, negative contagion both through similarity and contact, may impede the reappropriation of unknown people’s possessions (Gregson and Crewe 2003; O’Reilly et al. 1984). However, these principles sharply contrast with the development of second hand markets, in which clothing is an important if not central category among the wide range of goods for sale. The volume of commerce in second-hand clothes seems to contradict prevailing theories about contamination and disgust, especially when the social distance from previous owners increases.

The gap between theory and consumer practices originates in the assumptions that unfamiliarity inevitably triggers a fear of contagion but is also supported by experimental methods that tend to emphasize specific contamination cues. For example, Rozin and Fallon (1987) gather reactions to different disgust elicitors, which represent abstract situations that consumers seldom face in reality (e.g., wearing a laundered sweater that belonged to Adolf Hitler). Similarly, recent investigations of consumers’ reactions to products touched by others in retail contexts (Argo et al. 2006) manipulate explicit contamination cues that might not be as salient in natural settings. When patronizing second-hand channels, consumers are perfectly aware that clothes have been previously worn. This research thus aims to understand how people, in anonymous but normal contexts of exchange, manage to reappropriate clothing from unknown owners and what distinguishes them from those who reject pre-used garments.

In the literature devoted to second hand markets and exchanges, very few studies have examined appropriation or rejection processes of previously worn clothes. What they bring to light are the specific conditions that increase or reduce the perceived risks and facilitate or limit the transfers of garments. For example, O’Reilly et al. (1984) indicate that the newness and the quality of the merchandise strongly affect their resale. Gregson and Crewe (2003) confirm that specific conditions such as the absence of signs of wear, temporal distance from the former wearer, cleansing rituals and exclusion of certain types of garments are preconditions for a possible reuse of second hand clothes. As a consequence, underwear is considered as never reusable, even if washed or laundered (O’Reilly et al. 1984). The continuity of links within, and beyond, transmission has also been stressed by Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) who emphasize the “common-identity shared self” that underlies transmission processes, even in non-family contexts.

In this study, I examine the meanings and representations that second hand buyers attached to other’s possessions and contrast them with those of people who refuse to wear used clothes. More precisely, I try to uncover the reasons that are put forward to support their appropriation versus rejection processes and the underlying mechanisms that are at stake. The data come from a three-year survey conducted between 2003 and 2005 in Paris, France, that followed three steps: a first sample of eighteen second hand shoppers was recruited in different second hand outlets and settings to ensure a diversity of motives, profiles and types of clothes purchased; a second data set of 212 second hand consumers and non-consumers was built in order to get a broader knowledge of general behaviors toward previously worn clothes and to offer alternative insights; a third data set of twenty-two informants consisted in selecting respondents who could complete less common profiles such as male or older informants, enlighten unusual standpoints and provide negative cases.

The findings show that the appropriation/rejection processes of pre-used garments are both grounded in the categorization of the previous owner and in a possible or impossible negotiation of his/her territory. First, while for non-consumers the law of similarity is...
confirmed along the lines of “the garment makes the man”, the fact that the former owner could be socially distant, totally unknown or morally unacceptable is not the only cause triggering rejection. This phenomenon is also linked to the feelings of deterriorialization and depersonalization that derive from the difficulty of re-inscribing the self into objects that remain first and foremost “inhabited”. From this standpoint, reusing second hand clothing prevents these respondents from extricating themselves from a confusion of identity with the other. Second, although the law of contagion states “once in contact, always in contact” (Mauss 1902/1972), the results seem also to contradict this assertion, as several respondents testify to the possibility of wearing used clothes under particular conditions, such as a second hand evening dress or suit for a fancy dress ball or a special event. Third, a large number of respondents occasionally (20%) or regularly (2%) purchase and/or wear second-hand clothes, even of unknown origin. The appropriation mechanism is based on a process of categorization of the seller as another oneself, someone who could be the buyer in his/her role of buyer, thus freeing the objects of their history and provenance. Clothes can thus be “emptied” of the presence of a prior owner and become re-appropriate by virtue of the exchange process. This neutral, depersonalized view of the object does not support the existence of a shared self in the sense intended by Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005), but of a shopping role community experienced in second hand buying.

“Exploring the Social Dynamics of Online Bartering”1
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Informal exchange of used commodities has been an ongoing interest of consumer culture researchers. In their influential methodological piece that introduced the naturalistic inquiry to consumer researchers, Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1998) depict a swap meet as an anarchistic but alternative medium of exchange. Other studies of ownership transfer (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Arnould and Curasi 2000; Herrmann and Soiffer 1984; Nelson, Rademacher and Paek 2007) explore similar angles and depict socio-cultural aspects of transferring personal goods to others. While previous researchers have exemplified many ritualistic, meaning-making and identity effects of ownership transfer, the social dynamics of the process and the way emerging marketplace structures function in these dynamics is an understudied territory.

This research explores how informal marketplace structures, more specifically bartering communities, mediate ownership transfer. While bartering might be perceived as an outdated form of exchange, quite a number of online bartering communities were formed in the last few years. Through online messaging and matching systems, individuals could participate in non-monetary transactions of a gamut of consumer goods such as video games, craft supplies, clothes, books, diapers, plant seeds and even used cosmetics. In the case of cosmetics, bartering sites provide a secondary market for goods that are otherwise disproportionately depreciated, contaminated, or even deemed illegal to sell in the formal economic markets. The system theoretically provides better efficiency in trade by reducing waste and establishing exchanges that account for the use value of commodities rather than their depreciated market values.

However, the system also introduces numerous consumer vulnerabilities. For example the ability to exchange previously unmarketable goods encourage some participants to act impulsively, increase their perceptions of disposability, perpetuate compulsive variety seeking and foster the over-glorification of the treasure-hunt aspect of the medium. Furthermore, a great proportion of the products that are bartered with complete strangers are previously used cosmetics items that potentially pose health risks to their new owners. Likewise, these grassroots marketplace systems are also structurally vulnerable, in the sense that the usual safeguards of formal economy, such as consumer protection institutions, do not support them. Lastly, the social stigma of seeking returns from goods by violating the alienability and hygiene norms of the formal marketplace creates anxieties in the participants.

Drawing from multi-sited netnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I explore the social dynamics of this complex marketplace system. My presentation aims to highlight four processes that sustain this otherwise risky and stigmatizing exchange behavior: humanizing (de-commercializing and de-stigmatizing), hedging (risk reducing), circulating (alienability) and vigilantism (policing). Humanizing is performed by socializing throughout the exchange and ritualizing the process akin to reciprocal gift giving. Furthermore, the participants challenge the apprehensions of using potentially contaminated products through apotheosizing the previous owners and differentiating them from the hoi polloi in terms of personal ethics and hygiene. Hedging is maintained by a complex status hierarchy where the majority of the risk is transferred to newer members of the community until they are proven reliable. Furthermore, members of swapping communities protect themselves by establishing idiosyncratic principles of exchange and shipping. Circulating corresponds to perpetual re-bartering items after a period of use, which is subjectively experienced as borrowing or sampling, rather than owning. This serves as a preventative strategy to hoarding, while satisfying variety-seeking impulses. Lastly, since there are almost no consequences of fraud within these communities, members seek justice through vigilantism, more specifically by publicizing and slandering the names of those who act dishonestly through third party web sites they establish.

Through these four processes, the participants of this online community create a self-sustaining, self-regulating and interactive marketplace system, which facilitates exchanges that customarily violate the legal, economic and hygiene norms of the formal marketplace. My findings not only theoretically advance our understanding of ownership transfer, alienability, risk and consumer communities, but also highlight issues that are of interest to marketing practitioners and policymakers and provide them with directions to make better informed decisions and policies regarding secondary markets.

“Market-Mediated Collaborative Consumption in the context of Car Sharing”
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Rifkin (2000) suggests that in today’s hypercapitalist economy, buying and owning things are outmoded ideas. Rather, consumers want access to goods, and prefer to pay for the experience of using a consumption object rather than buying it. Indeed, during the last decade, we have seen the development and popularity of alternative consumption models which involve sharing or pooling of resources/products/services (Belk 1997, forthcoming). Examples of such collective consumption models vary from time-share real-estate, to more recent developments in car-sharing programs (e.g. Zipcar.com), bag sharing programs (e.g. Bagborroworsteal.com), and jewelry renting programs (e.g. Adornbrides.com and Borrowedbling.com). While sharing has been and continues to be the norm in some cultures and social contexts, such as within the family (Belk forthcoming; Epp and Price 2008), observers argue

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that models of collaborative consumption mediated by the marketplace, such as Zipcar, are and will continue to gain popularity fueled by the internet, as well as by a capitalist marketplace trading in cultural resources rather than material objects (Belk forthcoming, Rifkin 2000). The goal of this research is to examine this model of collective consumption when it is mediated by the marketplace.

Shared consumption has received little attention in the marketing literature. Recently Belk (2007, forthcoming) conceptualizes sharing in consumption as an alternative to the private ownership emphasized in both marketplace exchange and gift-giving. In sharing, two or more people may enjoy the benefits and costs that flow from possessing a thing. “Rather than distinguish what is mine and yours, sharing defines something as ours” (Belk 2007, p. 127). Sharing includes joint ownership, voluntary lending and borrowing, pooling and allocation of resources, and authorized use of public property. There are two types of sharing: sharing in and sharing out (Belk forthcoming), which correspond to altruistic sharing and what we call collaborative consumption. Sharing in is altruistic, involves gift-giving, and expands the extended self by expanding the domain of common property. Examples of this are the consumption of shared property or shared meals within the family by family members. Within the sharing-in consumption model, Belk (forthcoming) finds that shared consumption enables family members to create bonds/feel part of a collective, extend the self to the family, and is guided by norms of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972). However, the marketplace mediated shared consumption models such as Zipcar, or collaborative consumption (Felson and Spaeth 1978), divides a resource among discrete economic interests, preserves the self/other boundary and does not involve sharing out model of consumption, consumers do not own or possess the product/services, but share its consumption, which is motivated by non-altruistic concerns. While altruistic sharing is beginning to be investigated in the literature (Belk forthcoming), collaborative consumption has not been examined.

As such, in this study we examine the role of the marketplace in collaborative consumption. Belk (2007) suggests that commoditization of shared possessions doesn’t change or eliminate its value. We examine this claim empirically in the context of car sharing. More specifically, we examine consumer motivations for participating in car sharing, compare and contrast the model with car ownership, and investigate the role of the company in mediating the model. The data for the study is based on 45 semi-structured interviews with Zipcar customers. Zipcar is currently the market leader in car-sharing in the US. Zipcar has 180,000 members, who pay at least $50 a year to access cars in 50 cities in the US and the UK and its business hit $100 million in revenue in 2008 (Frankel 2008; Naughton 2008). For about $10 per hour, which includes gas and insurance, Zipcar customers can use any car located conveniently near them. Our results highlight the lack of brand community, the paradox of freedom within car sharing, and the lack of responsibility present in the model. We discuss the implications of our findings for theories of brand building, brand community, and gift giving/sharing.

REFERENCES


