Hybrid Pro-Social Exchange Systems: the Case of Freecycle

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Freecycling is a pro-social community that facilitates non-reciprocal exchange of goods among its users. Four tensions are explored between the institutional norms imposed over the participants and the divergent consumer needs that emerge organically. We suggest that hybrid systems like Freecycling necessitate a better theorization of marketplace exchanges.

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expertise of the community (Sampson 2002). Increasingly the time bank is seen as a way to mobilize the power of this network increasing collective efficacy and contributing to the quality of community life. Time bankers rally to engage in community projects, such as working on the summer street festival, facilitating the weekly farmers’ market, participating in the annual clothes swap, and volunteering at the local visitor information center finding that even physically demanding tasks are more pleasant when shared (Belk 2010). Time bank members initiated a scheme to “tag bust” and clean-up graffiti. The time bank creatively responded to cuts in government funding by training time bankers to run physical fitness courses and adult education classes—participants then paid in time credits. The time bank is used to socialize the youngest community members on being civic minded and altruistic. For instance, the local school encourages their student body “to learn about the benefits of community and giving” through beach clean-ups and other community enhancing projects.

Rather than suffering from the classic economic free rider problem, community time wealth accrues and needs to be redistributed. Time bank members regularly gift their time credits to members who are in need of support or toward community projects. A community treasure chest of time credits enables the time bank to direct community effort to priority initiatives, such as volunteer assistance with reading recovery programs, art and drama projects, and working bees at the school. As one older informant states: “I go into the school each week and work with a few children who need a bit of extra help with reading. All my grandchildren live in the North Island, so it is lovely to have this contact with these delightful beings.”

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the time bank’s potential for collective efficacy and community resiliency was evidenced in the aftermath of the first New Zealand earthquake; the time bank helped people rally when the civic services became overwhelmed. For instance, the health center turned to the time bank to activate members to phone elderly patients to check on their safety. When the volunteer fire brigade was besieged with calls to dismantle unsafe chimneys and structures, the time bank assisted. Members also manned the information center providing a retreat and social valve for residents to vent their anxieties. Direct support was provided to residents, whose homes were severely damaged, providing them with shelter and support. The time bank acted as a conduit of information regarding tunnel and road closures and local infrastructure and support. Perhaps most importantly, community members were given the opportunity to act constructively helping others during a crisis that often left people feeling helpless and alone.

**Hybrid Pro-Social Exchange Systems: The Case of Freecycle**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Freecycling is an organization that facilitates non-reciprocal exchange of goods within local communities with the goal of reducing waste (Freecycle website). This exchange is pro-social since the participants who offer their possessions to others do so at a personal cost and without immediate gain (Penner et al. 2011). It is often characterized as a gift system given no financial exchange occurs; instead, the exchange is governed by a principle of generalized reciprocity across members (Nelson and Rademacher 2009). Initiated informally by a group of friends in Tucson, AZ who realized that their trash might be another’s treasure (company documents), members now number over 8 million users across 85 countries. The institutional mission is to promote gifting among its members, divert goods with existing use value from landfills, and reduce the overall impact of consumption on the environment.

Freecycling provides free goods to consumers for a diverse range of reasons. The majority of the participants are similarly minded, socially cooperating, free laboring individuals who redistribute goods in a creative and novel way. In fact Nelson, Rademacher, and Paek (2007) found that members of a local Freecycle community had a distinctly less materialistic relationship with consumer culture and higher levels of civic involvement and politicized consumption than non-Freecyclers. Whereas the assumption is that Freecyclers are acting upon some greater moral imperative when they gift these items, previous research suggests that participants who joined Freecycle could actually fit into one of four categories of motivation: self-interest, decluttering, environmental concerns, and helping others (Nelson, Rademacher, and Paek 2007).

We have conducted a multi-method analysis utilizing blog mining, archival search, and interviews with 22 regular participants of Freecycling. Both authors also are active participants of the community since 2007 and exchanged goods through their local Freecycle chapters. Our data analysis revealed several interesting tensions between the goals of the institution (the owners of the Freecycle brand) and its community members (participants in local chapters). Specifically, these tensions arise from institutional norms being imposed upon the participants rather than from the patterns of consumption that emerged from freecycling. While others find improved community cohesion as a result of these pro-social communities (Ozanne and Ozanne 2010), our research suggests a more complicated picture.

Our work extends theories on exchange following Belk’s (2010) article on sharing. Belk outlines a typology of marketplace exchanges that correspond to three divergent cultural patterns with their own rituals and behaviors: sharing, gift giving, and commodity trade. The case of Freecycling exhibits characteristics of all three prototypes in contrast to the organization’s frame of “gifting.” Furthermore, within each exchange, tensions and paradoxes arise from the institutional misalignment of norms and expectations. For example, while the mission of Freecycle is to offer and request goods free, participants are discouraged from providing information related to personal predicaments (a counterindication of sharing) and from expecting reciprocity (counterindication of gifting). We suggest that this complex and paradoxical practice of impersonal “sharing out” (Belk 2004; Widlock 2004) provides a fruitful context to further extend theories of exchange.

We find four main tensions arising from the mismatch between the institutionally imposed norms and community participation. These tensions suggest the hybrid and ambiguous status of this exchange system vis-a-vis Belk’s typology. The first tension arises around the issue of materialism. While the aim of Freecycle is to reduce overconsumption, some informants are materialistic in their motives and actually hoard goods. In some ways, Freecycle allows them moral license to acquire too much. Still, we argue that this hybrid exchange system allows people to engage in variety seeking and collecting while minimizing their ecological impact when compared to buying “new” goods. The second tension arises when nontraditional items are commodified. For example, pets and personal services are considered inappropriate from the institution’s perspective, whereas local participants disagree and frequently defy this rule. The third tension arises on the need for personalization and communal bonding. Freecycle’s policy is to remove personal stories from listings to discourage pity exchanges and increase market efficiency. Yet, participants express a strong need for divestment rituals and the transfer of symbolic meaning of goods through storytelling. We argue that this tension creates an impediment to community, an asset that Freecycle’s policies undermine or at least undervalue. The last
tension arises on the non-profit nature of the system. While no official policy exists on reselling goods, participants express conflicting views about the appropriateness of this practice. This divergence highlights the varying motives consumers have for participation in contrast to the institutionalized mission.

Finally, we argue that the institutional framing of Freeecycling as a “gift economy” is oversimplified since it ignores the hybridized form of exchange. Similar to Eckhardt and Bardhi’s work (2010) that found that not all consumers who used car-sharing services were motivated by environmental concerns, we suggest that a gift-based positioning does not fully capture the experiences participants have while engaging in the redistribution of goods. We further argue that institutionalized emphasis on efficiency and impersonalization impairs the community-building potential that some participants value.

“The Indefinite Future”:
Ideas, Ideals, and Idealized Ideology in the Global Eco-Village

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Intentional communities have a long and checkered history as wellsprings of social experimentation and innovative new cultural forms (Brown 2002; Sargisson and Sargent 2004). In contemporary parlance, intentional communities include not only such specific and relatively temporary (anti) consumption-related happenings as the Burning Man project (e.g., Kozinets 2002) and the Rainbow Family Gathering (Niman 1997), but also more lasting manifestations such as ecovillages, cohousing communities, residential land trusts, communes, student co-ops, urban housing cooperatives, intentional living, alternative communities, and cooperative living. Each of these is considered to be a quasi-experimental “project” where people strive to live out a common vision in their everyday lives. Oftentimes, this vision is one that combines the environmental with the communitarian and which seeks to question in a collective setting the base of values underlying contemporary consumer culture and simultaneously to explore what could or should replace it (Dawson 2010).

In this cross-cultural, longitudinally-oriented, multi-sited research, we seek to deepen our knowledge of the ideologies of consumption that support and underlie participation in one particular and ecologically-oriented form of intentional community: eco-villages. The commonly accepted and value-laden definition of ecovillages is that they are “human-scale, full-featured settlements in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future” (Gilman 1991, quoted in Dawson 2006, p. 13).

Eco-villages are a fascinating place for consumer researchers to ponder the transition of consumer culture and contemporary society into a more eco-friendly and sustainable form for a variety of reasons. First, they come in many shapes and sizes, and thus attract consumers from the most ecologically radical to those with merely a firm commitment and interest in sustainable living. Second, they are part of an organized and successful international intentional community movement. Third, the global network of eco-villages is not only transnational but transcultural, having been partially founded on an alliance between sustainability-based communities and networks of traditional communities in developing countries. And fourth, eco-villages are explicitly ideological enterprises concerning themselves with the alteration of the economic values underpinning contemporary consumer culture, particularly, the linkage of economic growth and personal and social well-being.

We begin with an overview of the core notions of intentional community. We develop our understanding of ecovillages as a concept and a movement. We then introduce our research that was conducted at three different eco-villages, speaking three different languages, in three different countries (Germany, Scotland, and French Canada). We undertook an ethnographic exploration of eco-village life and conducted (and are in the process of conducting) over one dozen interviews, as well as using participant-observational techniques. Data collection and analysis at two sites has been completed, with a second wave possible before the October presentation. Initial data collection in the third site is planned for June, and full analysis will be completed by October. As of February, we have more than enough data collected and analyzed to present, even without the third site.

As with the other presentations in this session, the members of eco-villages are concerned with sharing, capacity building, and the wise use of the planet’s limited resources. However, the levels and depths of commitment, and the range of ideological engagement is more pronounced and perhaps profound. At the Findhorn ecovillage in Scotland that we studied, the ecological footprint per person is a bit over half of the UK average, which is the lowest footprint recorded for any settlement in the industrial world.

Perhaps even more interesting than the achievement of low energy usage is the means for its accomplishment. Most of the energy-saving activities also are credited with increasing the well being of eco-village members. For example, the decision by eco-villages to grow a significant amount of their own food creates a social situation where community members must work together cooperatively. Similarly, living together necessitates new social forms of engagement. The net effect, as with other types of intentional community both temporary and permanent, is that economic activity becomes local and thus ideologically linked to the immediately social. This powerful relocation of production is a common theme of the eco-village experience, along with a series of other reconnections—reconnecting people with their food, reconnecting people with their land, reconnecting people with indigenous people and practices, and reconnecting people with other people with whom they live. Add to this an educational and experiential ethos, and you have a potent potential for social change.

What is the net effect with our encounter with the distant boundaries of living as an ecovillage embedded consumer and consumer researcher? It is nothing short of informing our understanding of connection, disconnection, and reconnection. There are answers to our questions about new transitional forms of living that can lead the way to a more ecologically sustainable post-consumer culture.

REFERENCES


