Is It About Giving Or Receiving? the Determinants of Kindness and Happiness in Paying It Forward

Minah H. Jung, New York University, USA
Leif D. Nelson, University of California Berkeley, USA
Silvia K. Kurtisa, Georgetown University, USA

Three studies examined two forces behind paying-it-forward: reciprocation and generosity. In the absence of direct social pressure, generosity had a stronger influence on behavior than reciprocation. However, giving did not make people feel happier than receiving a kind act. Gift-givers and receivers displayed asymmetric beliefs about their and others’ happiness.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1020359/volumes/v43/NA-43

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Paying-it-Forward: How Greed, Generosity, and (un)Fairness Spread Through Social Networks

Chair: Adrian F. Ward, University of Texas at Austin, USA

Paper #1: Social and Material Concerns in Paying it Forward: People are Selfish, But Only in Secret
Adrian F. Ward, University of Texas at Austin, USA
Michael I. Norton, Harvard Business School, USA
Kurt Gray, University of North Carolina, USA

Paper #2: When is it Better to Give or Receive? Kindness, Happiness, and Reciprocity in the Chain of Giving
Minah H. Jung, New York University, USA
Silva K. Kurtisa, Georgetown University, USA
Leif D. Nelson, University of California Berkeley, USA

Narayan Janakiraman, University of Texas at Arlington, USA
Zhiyong Yang, University of Texas at Arlington, USA
Karen Page Winterich, Pennsylvania State University, USA

Paper #4: Moral Responsibility and Paying it Forward: The Effects of Social Distance and Queue Length on Paying Forward Generosity
Zhiyong Yang, University of Texas at Arlington, USA
Narayan Janakiraman, University of Texas at Arlington, USA
Morgan K. Ward, Southern Methodist University, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW
The concept of “paying it forward” is prevalent in game theory, psychology, and popular culture. This concept is a simple one: A is kind to B, and B—rather than paying that kindness back to A—pays it forward to C. C then pays that kindness forward to D, D pays it forward to E, and so on, creating a never-ending chain of good will. However, reality is not so simple. On any given day, consumers may receive not just kindness, but also cruelty. They may be motivated by self-interest, pressured by social norms, or influenced by individual differences. In this session, we look at how various internal and external factors may influence the likelihood of paying forward both positive and negative outcomes. In so doing, we shed light on how greed and generosity, fairness and unfairness, and prosocial and antisocial behavior may spread through social networks.

The first paper (Ward, Norton, and Gray) investigates how two potential incentives—material gain and reputational concerns—may influence the likelihood of paying forward both positive and negative outcomes; results suggest that adults use sophisticated cognitive abilities to maximize material benefits while minimizing social costs.

The second paper (Jung, Nelson, and Kurtisa) analyzes the separate influences of reciprocity and generosity on paying-it-forward; results from this work shed light on multiple components motivating pay-it-forward behavior and suggest that prosocial behavior may often be motivated by misguided beliefs about the effects of one’s actions on others’ happiness.

The third paper (Janakiraman, Yang, and Winterich) investigates how individual differences in communal vs. exchange orientation and differences in potential recipients’ perceived needs interact to produce different levels of paying-it-forward; results from this work indicate that individuals who are sensitive to others’ needs are affected by the salience of these needs, while those who are relatively insensitive to others are not.

Finally, the fourth paper (Yang, Janakiraman, and Ward) investigates the perceived importance of individuals’ actions in a different light. This work suggests that longer chains of recipients—which objectively increase the potential effectiveness of a prosocial action—ironically reduce the likelihood of paying forward positive outcomes due to a diffused sense of moral responsibility.

Together, these papers add to a growing area of research acknowledging that prosocial (and antisocial) behavior such as giving (and taking) is often determined by social context; both the outcomes people experience and the impact they believe they might have feed into their decisions about how to treat others. These data provide evidence that consumer behavior cannot be considered in a social vacuum; rather, pay-it-forward chains connect consumers’ actions to the actions of those around them.

Social and Material Concerns in Paying it Forward: People are Selfish, But Only in Secret

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Daily life is filled with opportunities to be greedy or generous, cruel or kind, antisocial or prosocial. A growing body of research suggests that one of the most powerful influences on people’s choices between these alternatives is the way they have been treated in the immediate past (e.g., Gray, Ward, and Norton 2014; Leimgruber, et al. 2014), and that people may be more likely to pay this treatment forward (AàBàC) than to pay it back (AàBàA) (e.g., Herne, Lappalainen, and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2013; Stanca 2007).

In two experiments, we investigate the effects of both material (financial) and social (reputational) concerns on paying forward both positive and negative outcomes. These experiments add to a growing body of literature that recognizes the potential ripple effects of both pro- and antisocial interactions (e.g., Gray, Ward, and Norton 2014), contribute to theory by providing new insights into the determinants of paying-it-forward (PIF), and reveal broad principles for both maximizing prosocial and minimizing antisocial PIF behavior—principles that may be particularly relevant in a world increasingly defined by anonymous interactions.

Each participant in each experiment served as the central link in a PIF chain of financial allocation decisions. Participants first played the role of “receiver,” accepting some amount of money left to them by a previous participant, then played the role of “decider,” choosing how much money from a second endowment to leave for a future participant. Participants’ behavior in the “decider” phase served as our measure of “paying it forward.”

Both prior treatment and social/reputational concerns were manipulated within each experiment according to a 2 (receive: negative, positive) × 2 (anonymity: anonymous, non-anonymous) design. Participants in the anonymous condition never saw the future participant. Participants in the non-anonymous condition experienced only minimal contact with the future participant; they stood in this person’s presence for a few seconds, but were not introduced or allowed to speak.

Material/financial concerns varied across the two experiments. Experiment 1 utilized a zero-sum dictator game; participants in the “decider” phase were endowed with $6 to split between themselves and a future participant. Because leaving money for future others required participants to sacrifice a portion of their own endowments, generosity in this experiment represented materially costly prosocial behavior. Experiment 2 utilized a non-zero-sum dictator game;
participants in the “decider” phase received the same amount ($4) regardless of whether they chose to leave a negative ($1) or positive ($4) outcome for a future participant. This design allowed participants to engage in materially costless prosocial behavior.

The constellation of results across these two experiments provides insight into the effects of all possible combinations of negative vs. positive prior treatment, salient vs. non-salient social concerns, and present vs. absent material concerns on PIF behavior.

In experiment 1 (N = 91; Mage = 26.15 years), the material costs of generosity were pitted against the potential social costs of greed for participants in the non-anonymous condition; for participants in the anonymous condition, however, social concerns were irrelevant. Results from this experiment revealed two significant main effects on the amount of money paid forward: one of receive condition, M_{negative} = $2.19 vs. M_{positive} = $3.93, F(1, 87) = 21.59, p < .001, and one of anonymity condition, M_{anonymous} = $2.42 vs. M_{non-anonymous} = $3.71, F(1, 87) = 11.93, p = .001; there was no interaction effect, p = .80.

Participants in anonymous situations behaved consistently with prior research indicating that people asymmetrically pay forward negative outcomes (e.g., Gray, Ward, and Norton 2014). Participants who received negative outcomes paid this greed forward, leaving significantly less than an equitable split for the future participant, M = $1.59, t(21) = 4.71, p < .001; participants who received positive outcomes did not pay generosity forward, although they did leave future participants an amount statistically indistinguishable from an equitable split, M = $3.24, t(20) = .44, p = .67. Participants in non-anonymous situations, on the other hand, were moderately generous. Those who received negative outcomes treated future others better than they themselves had been treated, paying forward an amount statistically indistinguishable from an equitable split ($3), M = $2.79, t(23) = .82, p = .42; those who received positive outcomes paid this generosity forward, paying forward significantly more than an equitable split, M = $4.63, t(23) = 4.39, p < .001.

Experiment 1 pitted material gains against social costs; in experiment 2, we removed the possibility of material gains by examining PIF behavior in the context of a non-zero-sum dictator game. This design removed both the material costs associated with allocating positive outcomes to a future participant and the material benefits associated with allocating negative outcomes to this participant. Like in experiment 1, social concerns were only relevant for those in the non-anonymous condition. Results from this experiment suggest that when prosociality is costless, people pay forward positive outcomes regardless of how they have been treated in the past. A logistic regression with anonymity, received outcome, gender, and age as predictors revealed no effect of anonymity (Wald’s X^2(1) = 0.099, p = .753) or received outcome (Wald’s X^2(1) = 0.00, p = .997) on allocation decisions. Received outcomes (negative, positive) did not affect PIF behavior in either the anonymous (n = 40, Fisher’s exact, p = .49) or the non-anonymous conditions (n = 35, Fisher’s exact, p = .13).

Taken together, the results of these two experiments suggest that removing material concerns by holding outcomes constant for “deciders” may stop people from paying forward negative outcomes even under conditions of anonymity; across all conditions in experiment 2, 94.67% of participants paid forward positive outcomes. However, such an approach is not always feasible in practice; a more tractable method for maximizing prosocial behavior in PIF settings may be to increase social concerns by providing social cues. When collapsing across receive conditions in experiment 1, participants in non-anonymous situations paid forward an average of $1.29 more than those in anonymous situations; simply introducing minimal social contact induced people to pay forward 79.46% more than they would have under conditions of anonymity.

**When is it Better to Give or Receive? Kindness, Happiness, and Reciprocity in the Chain of Giving**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

People are kinder when paying for someone else than for themselves (Jung, Nelson, Gneezy, and Gneezy, 2014). This effect is at least partially driven by people’s incorrect perceptions of others’ behavioral tendencies; people tend to overestimate others’ kindness and raise their own payment to match their perception of social norms.

Paying-it-forward (PIF) has two quite different stages: receiving a gift and giving a gift. These stages are associated with reciprocation and generosity (respectively), and each stage may both have an influence on and be influenced by misperceptions of others’ behavioral tendencies. In three studies, we examined the underlying mechanisms behind PIF by disentangling the social forces of reciprocation and generosity.

There is some evidence suggesting that generosity toward others might be a more powerful force than reciprocation. Grant and Dutton (2012) argued that people were kinder when they reflected on giving benefits to others than receiving because giving enforces a prosocial identity as a caring and capable person, while receiving makes the people feel indebted and incompetent. Study 1 tested this argument in the PIF framework by manipulating the salience of reciprocation vs. generosity.

We conducted Study 1 at a local Indian restaurant. Karma Kitchen has been using the PIF model for its Sunday lunch operation for many years. In this study, we varied the salience of the giving vs. receiving feature of PIF and recorded customers’ payments for their meals. All diners (N=94) were informed that their meals had been paid for by another customer and they had a chance to pay-it-forward to another customer. At the end of their meal, each group of diners received their check with a card that said either “Someone who came earlier paid for your meal as a gift.” or “Now you have a chance to pay for the meal for as a gift for someone who will come later.” All participants indicated their payment amount on the card. Customers paid more when their card emphasized giving than when it emphasized receiving, (M=)$20.42 vs. $11.09).

The results of Study 1 suggest that generosity might be a stronger force than reciprocation in influencing consumers’ PIF behavior. It could be that the social pressure from the reciprocation emphasis might induce customers to pay the minimum amount that was considered appropriate, whereas the generosity emphasis might lead them to pay an amount that sufficiently makes them feel generous (DellaVigna, List, and Malmendier 2009). That is, the salience of reciprocation vs. generosity might be invoking different norms. Study 2 aimed to further examine how these forces operated in the presence or absence of direct social pressure. We conducted our experiment at an art museum using the same salience manipulation as in Study 1. Museum visitors (N=836 individuals; 470 groups) were asked to pay-it-forward either anonymously by placing their payment in an envelope or directly to the receptionist. Visitors paid more paying anonymously (M=)$3.42 vs. $2.82). But they paid similar amounts regardless of the receiving and giving salience (M=)$3.18 vs. $3.06). The interaction between these two variables was significant; in the giving condition, people paid forward a similar amount whether they were paying anonymously or directly, (M=)$3.08 vs. $3.27), but in the receiving condition, people paid significantly more when paying directly than anonymously, (M=)$3.76 vs. $2.37). When reminded of reciprocity, people were sensitive to the presence of
direct social pressure and were less kind when their payment was not observed, but they were equally kind when reminded of generosity regardless of anonymity.

People’s behavior in Study 2 might reflect that they perceive different norms when receiving vs. giving a gift. But it is also possible that people’s kind behavior reflected how happy they felt about giving and receiving a gift. If people were kinder when reminded of giving vs. receiving, does giving make people feel happier than receiving? In Study 3, we further examined givers’ and receivers’ feelings and their beliefs about others’ feelings by comparing their predicted and actual levels of happiness. In addition, we measured how connected they felt toward others before and after their kind act.

In Study 3, we collaborated with the Social Coin, a company that provides its clients a customizable online platform to foster and track acts of kindness across generations of participants in a PIF chain. The Social Coin mints its own coins that allow users to track their coin as it changes hands when someone pays forward an act of kindness to another person. We used social coins and tracked participants’ PIF behavior and happiness on our customized website.

Participants (N=206) were randomly assigned to one of two implicit reference points for kind acts; they were encouraged to complete either a small (e.g., make/buy a cup of coffee) or a large act of kindness (e.g., make/buy dinner for someone). Before and after paying forward kind acts, they reported forecasted and experienced happiness of others and themselves, and self-reported connection to others on our online platform. We hired nine independent coders to read participants’ descriptions of their PIF experience and rate the extent of their kindness, difficulties of completing kind acts, and social connection to others.

Givers of a kind act were happier when they completed a small act of kindness than a large one, (M=5.69, vs. 5.88) but recipients were equally happy regardless of the size of the kind act (M=6.37 vs. 6.34). Givers and recipients of a kind act displayed asymmetric beliefs about others’ happiness. Recipients were happier than givers predicted them to be, (M=6.54 vs. 6.17) and givers were less happy than recipients predicted them to be, (M=5.69 vs. 6.28). These results suggest that the power of giving might come from givers’ underestimation of how positive recipients view the givers’ kind act.

In summary, three studies examined the underlying mechanisms of paying-it-forward. In the absence of social pressure, people were kinder when reminded of giving (vs. receiving). However, giving a kind act did not make people happier than receiving one; participants displayed asymmetric beliefs about their own and others’ feelings of happiness when paying-it-forward.


EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine the person before you in line unexpectedly purchased you a cup of coffee. You turn around and see the person after you is either a struggling college student or a well-dressed executive. How likely are you to reciprocate the giver’s gesture to the person after you?

“Pay-It-Forward” is a growing field, studying actions where one cannot reciprocate directly with the giver, but can instead “pay forward” outcomes to someone else. Previous research on this topic has mainly focused on the extent to which an individual reciprocates kindness versus selfishness (Gray, Ward, and Norton 2014) and the degree to which outcomes are paid forward. Little is known about the motivations underlying the behavior. The majority of potential explanations are “push” factors such as feelings of gratitude (DeSteno et al. 2010), feelings of obligation (Pitulla et al. 2003), or adherence to social norms (Leimgruber et al. 2014).

We focus on a particular “pull” factor—namely, the perceived need of a potential receiver. Since individuals differ in their sensitivity to others’ needs, we incorporate individual differences in communal/ exchange orientation into our framework. We predict that perceived need of the recipient increases the willingness to pay-it-forward among individuals with high communal orientation (CO), but doesn’t affect those with exchange orientation (EO). Perceived impact is the process underlying these effects. The rationale underlying our prediction is that individuals with different orientations are driven by different goals (Chen, Lee-Chai and Bargh 2001). While CO individuals are driven by social responsibility goals, those with EO are driven by self-interest goals.

Four experiments support our proposed effects. Study 1 featured a 2 (need: high vs. low) × 2 (orientation: communal vs. exchange) mixed design, using 118 students from a major Southwestern university. In the high [low] need condition, participants were asked to imagine that they were buying a cup of coffee at a coffee shop in a bad [good] neighborhood. After they placed the order, the cashier told them that the person before them had already paid for them. They were then asked for how likely they would be to pay this behavior forward and completed a CO-EO scale. We derived an orientation score by subtracting EO (α=.81) from CO (α=.82), with a higher number reflecting a greater degree of CO. A regression analysis using pay-it-forward likelihood as a DV supported our hypothesis, with a significant interaction between relative CO and neighborhood (β=.98, t=1.98, p<.05). Spotlight analyses at one standard deviation above and below the mean of relative CO showed that high CO participants reported greater pay-it-forward likelihood in a bad neighborhood than in a good neighborhood (β=.41, t=3.89, p<.01), whereas high EO participants were indifferent between good and bad neighborhoods (β=.12, t=.98, p=.50).

Study 2 (N=113) replicated study 1’s findings in a between-subjects design and provided direct evidence of the proposed mediator. The procedure was the same as that in study 1, with two exceptions: (1) CO vs. EO was manipulated and (2) perceived impact was measured after participants made the pay-it-forward decision. Consistent with study 1, the orientation × need interaction was significant (F(1,112)=5.46, p<.02). Participants primed with CO had greater pay-it-forward likelihood when perceived need was high (M_BadNeighborhood=5.22 vs. M_GoodNeighborhood=3.69, F(1,112)=8.35, p<.01). However, those primed with EO were equally likely to pay-it-forward regardless of need (M_BadNeighborhood=4.03 vs. M_GoodNeighborhood=4.18, F(1,112)=.097, p>.50). Mediation analyses showed that the indirect effect of perceived impact was significant (95% CI: from .05 to 1.07).

Study 3 examined real-world pay-it-forward behavior in 117 students one week before final exams. Participants were first asked to practice an enjoyable task (rating an English-version of a joke) and an unenjoyable task (counting the number of vowels in the Italian-version of the same joke). After getting familiar with the tasks, they were then exposed to the orientation- and need-priming manipulations used in study 2. After finishing the priming tasks, they were told that the previous individual had shared with them 9 enjoyable tasks and 1 unenjoyable task, and then asked to split 10 additional tasks (5 enjoyable, 5 unenjoyable) with the person behind them. They had to actually finish the remaining tasks that they did not assign to the next person. Perceived need was manipulated by providing an indication of how busy the next person was and how much time she needed to prepare for her upcoming exam. We performed an ANOVA using the number of good tasks paid forward as the DV. Consistent with the findings in earlier studies, perceived
need of the next person affected participants in CO conditions (Mhigh
need=3.42, Mlow need=1.36; t=4.31, p<.001), but not in EO conditions
(Mhigh need=2.53, Mlow need=2.46; ns).

Study 4 directly manipulated the mediator—perceived
impact—in a 2 (orientation) × 2 (impact) design. Using 116 people
from mTurk, we examined how likely they would pay forward
good tasks as a function of their CO/EO and perceived impact.
In all conditions, participants were told that they had to divide 4
tasks (two word-association and two vowel-counting) between
themselves and a future participant: they could complete two word-
association tasks, two vowel-counting tasks, or one of each. The
word-association tasks were easy to complete, while the vowel-
counting tasks were difficult. They were told that the person before
them had assigned them two easy tasks that they would need to
complete in addition to the ones they were left with, after deciding
what would be passed onto the next person. The DV was a binary
value of whether they passed forward both the easy tasks or not. In
the high [low] perceived impact condition, the participants were
told that the person behind them had earned $2 so far, and “your decision
on how much to help would have a huge [small] difference in how
much they would earn today”. The orientation × impact interaction
was significant (χ²(1,116)=4.08, p<.04), with high CO having higher
proportion of passing forward under high-impact (45%) than under
low-impact (12%) condition; while those primed with EO showing
no difference in passing forward proportion under high-impact
(18%) or low-impact (15%) condition.

Moral Responsibility and Paying it Forward: The Effects
of Social Distance and Queue Length on Paying Forward
Generosity

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine you are in line at a coffee shop and the person in front
of you purchases a coffee for you. Are you more likely to pass a
similar act of kindness onto the individual behind you if there are
only two people behind you, or if there are twenty?

Prior research shows that potential ‘helpers’ feel a sense
of responsibility that compels them to help perceived victims
(Schwartz and Howard 1982). Several variables that affect helping
also affect cooperation. For example, the classic bystander effect
suggests that the presence of others inhibits helping (Darley and
Latane 1968); the greater the number of bystanders, the more the
feelings of responsibility are diffused among them. In cases where
there is anonymity (as is usually the case in pay-it-forward contexts),
the chances of free riding increase (Kerr and MacCoun 1985). This
is especially true when there is no overt communication among
participants, since interpersonal interaction promotes cooperation
(Dawes 1988). Building upon this stream of research, we suggest
that an individual who receives a free coffee from either a distant-
other or a close-other is equally likely to pay-it-forward when
the queue is short. However, when the queue is long, individuals’
likelihood of paying it forward will be suppressed if the giver and
the recipient belong to the distant-other group, but not if the giver
and the recipient belong to the close-other group. This is mainly due
to individuals’ feeling of responsibility towards the receiving group.

Three experiments support our proposed effects. Study 1
featured a 2 (social distance: close-other vs. distant-other) × 2
(queue length: short vs. long) between-subjects design, using 131
students from a southern university. Participants were first instructed
to imagine waiting in a queue at a coffee shop for a beverage during
a sports event. Social distance was manipulated through school
affiliation: in the close-other [distant-other] conditions, other people
in the line were from the same university [different university] as the
participant. Queue length was manipulated by visually depicting the
participant in a queue with either 15 people or 1 person behind him.
After reading the scenario, participants rated their likelihood to buy
the person behind them a beverage (0%=no chance, 100%=certainly).
We conducted a 2 (social distance) × 2 (queue length) ANOVA, with
participants’ likelihood to pay-it-forward as the DV. Consistent with
our expectations, the interaction was significant (F(1,130)=6.01,
p<.01). Participants in close-other conditions were equally likely
to pay-it-forward regardless of queue length (Mshort=73.25% vs.
Mlong=68.21%, F(1,130)=.48, p>.45). However, those in distant-
other conditions were less likely to pay-it-forward when the queue
was long (Mshort=76.00% vs. Mlong=58.71%, F(1,130)=12.35, p<.01).

Study 2 replicated study 1’s findings using a neutral manipulation
of social distance, thus ruling out rivalry between the opposing teams
as an alternative explanation of our findings. It also demonstrated
feelings of responsibility as the key mediation. The study design and
the procedures were similar to those in study 1, except for the prime
for social distance, done by asking individuals to write about 10
similarities (vs. 10 dissimilarities) between themselves and others at
the coffee shop. After deciding whether or not to pay forward a free
coffee, participants reported the degree to which they felt responsible
for keeping the chain going. We performed a 2 (social distance) ×
2 (queue length) ANOVA with likelihood to pay-it-forward as the
dependent variable. Consistent with study 1’s findings, there was
a significant interaction between queue-length and social-distance
(F(1,128)=7.25, p<.01). Individuals primed with similarity were
equally likely to pay-it-forward despite the queue length (Mshort=72%,
Mlong=67%, F(1,128)=.49, p>.45). However, those primed with
dissimilarity were less likely to pay-it-forward when the queue
was long (Mshort=71.00% vs. Mlong=44%, F(1,128)=15.1, p<.01).

Mediation analyses revealed that the extent to which individuals felt
they were responsible to keep the chain going mediated the interplay
between queue length and similarity on paying-it-forward.

Study 3 was replicated the effects of study 2 in a task-splitting
procedure using 129 participants from mTurk. In this study, we exam-
ined how likely individuals were to pass forward good tasks depend-
ing on similarity/dissimilarity with others and the number of people
behind them. In all conditions, participants were told that they had
to divide four tasks (two word-association and two vowel-counting)
between themselves and a future participant: they could complete two
word-association tasks, two vowel-counting tasks, or one of each.
The word-association tasks were easy to complete, while the vowel-
counting tasks were difficult. They were told that the person before
them had chosen to pass onto them two easy tasks that they would
need to complete in addition to the ones they were left with, after de-
ciding what would be passed onto the next person. They then actually
completed all tasks. The DV was a binary value of whether they chose
to pass forward both the easy tasks or not. In the high [low] similarity
condition, the participants were asked to rate two products—Apple
iPhone and the Samusng Galaxy—on ten different attributes. They
were then told that the person who was completing the study next had
a very high degree of match or 75% [low degree of match or 25%]
in their responses to the attribute questions like them and hence were
very similar [dissimilar] to them. In the short [long] queue condition,
the participants were told that their actions would affect two [ten]
people behind them. Consistent with earlier studies, the interaction
was significant (χ²(1,128)=3.79, p<.05), with individuals who had
been primed with similarity showing equal proportion of passing for-
ward under short (34%) and long (32%) queues; while those primed
with dissimilarity showed a lower tendency to pass forward under
long (7%) than under short (29%) queue.
REFERENCES
Theorising Digital Consumption Objects

SESSION OVERVIEW

The objects we call our own increasingly exist in digital form, a trend that has been well documented (Belk, 2013; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Lehdonvirta, 2012; Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2012; Siddiqui & Turley, 2006). Scholars have observed the ‘dematerialisation’ of objects such as photographs, books, and music recordings as they develop digital counterparts, whilst we are witnessing the emergence of an ever broadening array of digital consumption objects that lack a direct material equivalent, such as social networking profiles, text messages, blogs, apps, avatars, and wishlists. As consumers accumulate growing quantities of such digital items consumer researchers are faced with the task of theorising this new form of consumption object.

Scholars have drawn attention to the importance of theorising materiality – i.e. articulating the assumptions made about subjects, objects, and their interrelation (see Borgerson 2005, 2013; Miller 1987, 2005, 2010) - and Borgerson (2005) has discussed the importance of explicitly conceptualising the ontologies of consumer subjects and consumption objects within consumer research. Subsequently studies of consumption have become increasingly concerned with the role of consumption objects (e.g. Epp & Price, 2010; Watson & Shove, 2008; Shove & Pantzar, 2006), including emerging discussion of their ontology (e.g. Badje, 2013; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006). Digital consumption objects open up new avenues for exploration, presenting significant distinctions from the material consumption objects that consumers and consumer researchers have become accustomed to. In this session we present four papers that begin to tackle the task of theorising these entities, exploring the materiality of digital consumption objects, examining their distinct ontological characteristics, and discussing implications for consumer-object relations in terms of both the meaning and value digital consumption objects may come to hold and their role in extending consumers’ capabilities.

The first paper draws from an empirical study of ‘digital possessions’ in order to conceptualise the ontology of digital consumption objects. Whilst material consumption objects are typically conceptualised within consumer research as singular, stable, inert, and spatiotemporally fixed, in this paper Watkins demonstrates that digital consumption objects, in contrast, can be transient, fluid, and unstable, discussing ways in which these characteristics may shape consumer-object relations. In the second paper Kedzior further extends our understanding of digital consumption objects. Drawing from data gathered during a four-year immersion within online virtual worlds, Second Life this paper presents phenomenological themes in consumers’ experiences of dealing with digital materiality and in doing so demonstrates the importance of explicit conceptualisations of digital materiality for consumer research.

The third paper raises questions surrounding the value and meaning of digital consumption objects. Belk proposes that the digitisation of film, photos, and music leads to an abundance that erodes their value in comparison to their physical counterparts. Finally, Denegri-Knott, Jenkins and Molesworth draw from the notion of the extended mind to examine ways in which acts of comparing, remembering and even desiring can be delegated to digital consumption objects such as apps and websites, extending consumers’ capabilities. Particularly salient is the question of what happens if these digital platforms fail and such hybrids are broken down (particularly given the instability illustrated in Watkins’ paper).

This special session contribute to consumer research by theorising key aspects of digital consumption objects and exploring resultant shifts in consumer-object relations, noting consequences for consumers and for consumer culture. Our intention is to stimulate broader discussion of digital consumption objects and the ways in which they prompt us to revisit and re-consider established understandings and assumptions within consumer research, and between them the four papers presented establish an agenda for future research aiming to theorise digital consumption objects.

Conceptualising the Ontology of Digital Consumption Objects

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Material objects punctuate studies of consumption, featuring prominently in discussions of consumption rituals, marketplace cultures and consumer identity projects. Consumer research has long been concerned with the ways in which consumer-object relations unfold post-acquisition, in particular the ways in which material consumption objects are appropriated as possessions, become receptacles of private and public meanings and assist in constructing, maintaining, and expressing consumers’ identities (e.g. Belk, 1988, 1991; Ahuvia, 2005; Kleine et al., 1995; Kleine & Baker, 2004; McCracken, 1986, 1994). Within such work consumers are seen to form enduring attachments to material possessions, which become enduring identity anchors that give permanence to the self. There has been some recognition that consumers may form different types of relationships with possessions based on their age (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), gender (Dittmar, 1992), and lifestyle (Bardhi et al., 2012), yet we hold little understanding of how various consumption objects themselves might invite, encourage or prevent particular types of possession. Indeed, Zwick and Dholakia (2006) argue that existing theories of consumer-object relations are limited in that they fail to conceptualise the ontology of consumption objects. Responding to Zwick and Dholakia’s (2006) call to turn theoretical attention to the ‘object’ in consumer-object relations, and speaking to Borgerson’s (2005, 2013) broader call for consumer researchers to turn their attention to materiality based assumptions, this paper explores the ontologies of digital consumption objects.

This paper demonstrates that our understanding of possession is grounded in an understanding of possessions as material consumption objects, which are typically assumed to be ontologically singular, stable, inert, and spatio-temporally fixed. With digital con-

Paper #1: Conceptualising the Ontology of Digital Consumption Objects
Rebecca D. Watkins, Cardiff University, UK

Paper #2: Digital Materiality – A Phenomenological Exploration
Richard Kedzior, Bucknell University, USA

Paper #3: Image and Sound in a Digital Age: The Inflation of Symbols and the Erosion of Value
Russell Belk, York University, Canada

Paper #4: Human/Digital/Material Hybrids as Consumer Mind Extensions
Janice Denegri-Knott, Bournemouth University, UK
Rebecca Jenkins, Bournemouth University, UK
Mike Molesworth, University of Southampton, UK