



**HAL**  
open science

# ”How About Giving My Things Away Over The Internet? ” When Internet Makes It Easier To Give Things Away

Valérie Guillard, Céline del Bucchia

► **To cite this version:**

Valérie Guillard, Céline del Bucchia. ”How About Giving My Things Away Over The Internet? ” When Internet Makes It Easier To Give Things Away. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 2012, 40, pp.630. hal-00909262

**HAL Id: hal-00909262**

**<https://audencia.hal.science/hal-00909262>**

Submitted on 10 Dec 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **“How about giving my things away over the Internet?”**

## **When Internet makes it easier to give things away**

Valérie Guillard, Paris Dauphine University, France

Céline Del Bucchia, Audencia Nantes School of Management, France

[ to cite ]:

Valérie Guillard and Céline Del Bucchia (2012) , "How About Giving My Things Away Over the Internet? When the Internet Makes It Easier to Give Things Away", in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 40*, eds. Zeynep Gürhan-Canli, Cele Otnes, and Rui (Juliet) Zhu, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.

*The present article looks at the meaning of gift-giving when it is performed via free online recycling websites. Underpinned by research on the difficulties inherent to giving, our paper illustrates how these websites remove the difficulties inherent in giving to kith, kin or to charities.*

### **Introduction**

Many studies have explored the way people dispose of items they no longer want (Jacoby, Berning and Dietvorst 1977; Cherrier 2009; Arsel and Dobsha 2011) either through the market economy (Chu and Liao 2009; Sherry 1990), the kith and kin gift economy (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000), charities (Bendapudi, Singh and Bendapudi 1996) or online (Nelson, Rademacher and Paek 2007; Arsel and Dobsha 2011). Studies investigating online recycling have generally looked at the trend from a community perspective, concluding that giveaway websites are underpinned by a mechanism of generalised reciprocity. However, these websites have a specific feature that makes it interesting to analyse the online giving process from an individual slant since, unlike giving possessions to charities, free recycling websites enable the giver to *meet* the unknown recipient and, unlike gifts to close friends or family, they allow the giver to meet a *stranger*. In short, free recycling websites offer a new channel whereby individuals can give things away to a stranger in person, a factor that is likely to change the way givers perceive gift-giving. Underpinned by research on the difficulties inherent to giving (Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000; Lastovika and Fernandez 2005; Marcoux 2009), our paper illustrates how recycling websites resolve the tensions that the giver may otherwise be confronted with when giving, by offering an encounter with an alien recipient.

### **Review of the literature**

Many studies have highlighted the romantic aspects of giving (Belk and Coon 1993; Joy 2001), but the process also has a darker side (Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993; Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999; Marcoux 2009). Gifts to kith and kin can lead to unease in both the giver and the recipient. The giver is not entirely free when giving, but is trapped in a web of

constraints and norms. Giving to friends and family not only means that the giver gives, but also that the recipient must receive (Gouldner 1960) or must reciprocate (Godbout and Caillé 1992). Giving to charities, on the other hand, presents fewer constraints, and is underpinned by a notion of solidarity (Frémeaux and Michelson 2011). However, it can also be a source of frustration for the givers who have no idea what happens to their donations. In effect, some people need to meet the future beneficiary in order to be able to detach themselves from their possessions (Roster 2001; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). While previously, only the market enabled two strangers to meet in the circulation of second-hand goods (Herrmann, 1997), today free recycling websites also offer this possibility. Our aim is to explore what this encounter means to the online giver.

## **Methodology**

To understand how givers experience online recycling and what it means to them as individuals, we conducted 27 long interviews (McCracken 1986), adopting a phenomenological approach (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). The respondents were recruited through the managers of the free recycling websites [www.recupe.net](http://www.recupe.net), [www.donnons.org](http://www.donnons.org) and [www.recupe.fr](http://www.recupe.fr), who put us in touch with givers. The interviews began with the question “*Can you tell me about the different options you choose when you decide to get rid of something?*” and then focused on online recycling and how this is experienced by the giver.

## **Findings**

In addition to the practical and environmentally-friendly nature of the practice (Nelson, Rademacher and Paek 2007; Arsel and Dobscha 2011), our analysis led us to identify two central factors that give insights into the meaning of the online recycling experience: first, givers experience it as spontaneous gift-giving rather than just an opportunity to get rid of unwanted clutter. Second, the gesture is given its full sense through the encounter with the unknown recipient. This specific feature of online recycling removes the obstacles inherent to the three-way gift-giving process that arise in other forms of gift-giving (Mauss 1924): i.e. the giving, the receiving and the return.

With regard to *giving*, online recycling means that the giver does not run the risk of a refusal as may be the case when giving to friends or family, or to a charity. A refusal is often painful for the giver: by refusing an object, individuals signal a rejection of the relationship. Refusal is very rare in online recycling as recipients are aware of the state of the items they will find at the givers’ beforehand. Consequently, givers are able to give ‘everything away as they are not worried about being judged for the ‘poor’ quality of their objects. With regard to *receiving*, the giver chooses the future beneficiary he or she will meet in order to give them the object, along with its history, its wear and tear and its special way of working. In listening to the giver, the recipient implicitly makes a promise to take care of the object, thereby reassuring the former (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). Finally, with regard to the *return*, the interaction with the recipient makes the giver feel (s)he exists and is recognised. Online recycling fulfils the need of givers for recognition, without necessarily creating a bond of dependence: the meeting is a brief, one-off situation, and reciprocity is immediate. The desire not to get involved with the recipient, that is also reflected in other studies (Bajde 2009), can be seen in the way the items are passed on: some givers will place the items in a neutral space like the hallway or the corridor (Korosec Serfaty 1988) to ensure that the recipient does not trespass on the giver’s privacy.

## Conclusion

This article adds to current research on the circulation of second-hand goods (Lucas 2002; Cherrier 2009) in several ways. The study contributes to our understanding of the topic by analysing online recycling websites from the perspective of the individual. This is interesting in view of one specific feature of such websites, namely the *encounter* with an unknown recipient.

The article also illustrates how free recycling websites remove the difficulties inherent in giving to kith and kin or to charities. Such sites offer givers the potential for rewarding interaction with the recipient that is also liberating. It is rewarding since they are recognised for their gesture, unlike giving objects to charities. At the same time, it liberates the giver as, even if there is a meeting with the recipient, it is brief, reciprocity is immediate and it does not create a relationship or a bond of dependence in the same way as a gift to family or friends. At the same time, the study enriches the model proposed by Marcoux (2009): by removing the obstacles linked to giving, free recycling websites offer individuals the possibility to remain in the gift economy. The gift economy and the market economy are two options that free individuals from the obligations inherent to other forms of giving, although they are not mutually exclusive.

The article has implications with regard to three pillars of sustainable development: i.e. economic, as the free flow of objects facilitates the decision to replace them (Roster and Richins 2009); social, as free recycling websites help people to find what they need at less cost, while developing social links, and finally, environmental, as free recycling websites contribute to reducing the volume of waste.

Finally, our research opens up several potential avenues for further research to enhance our understanding of online recycling. While our study focuses on givers, an investigation of the recipients could raise some interesting questions: what signals does the recipient put out that the giver picks up as recognition for his or her gesture, for instance? How does the recipient receive a gift via the Internet? Why does the recipient use free recycling websites apart from the obvious reason of getting something for free?

## REFERENCES

- Arsel, Zeynep and Susan Dobsha (2011), "Hybrid Pro-social Exchange Systems: The Case of Freecycle," in *Advances in Consumer Research*, forthcoming.
- Bajde, Domen (2009), "Rethinking the Social and Cultural Dimensions of Charitable Giving," *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 12 (1), 65-84.
- Belk, Russell W. and Gregory S. Coon (1993), "Gift Giving and Agapic Loves: An Alternative to the Exchange Paradigm Based on Dating Experiences," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20 (December), 393-417.
- Bendapudi, Neeli, Surendra N. Singh, and Venkat Bendapudi (1996), "Enhancing Helping Behavior: An Integrative Framework for Promotion Planning," *Journal of Marketing*, 60 (July), 33-49.
- Cherrier, H el ene (2009), "Disposal and Simple Living: Exploring the Circulation of Goods and the Development of Sacred Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 8 (6), 327-39.
- Chu, Hsunchi and Shuling Liao (2009), "Buying While Expecting to Sell: The Economic Psychology of Online Resale," *Journal of Business Research*, 63 (9-10), 1073-78.
- Fr emeaux, Sandrine and Grant Michelson (2011), "No Strings Attached: Welcoming the Existential Gift in Business," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 99 (Springer), 65-75.
- Godbout, Jacques T., and Alain Caill e (1992), *L'esprit du don*, Paris: La D ecouverte.

- Gouldner, Alvin W. (1960), "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement," *American Sociological Review*, 25 (April), 176-77.
- Herrmann, Gretchen M. (1997), "Gift or Commodity: What Changes Hands in the U.S. Garage Sale ?" *American Ethnologist*, 24 (4), 910-30.
- Jacoby, Jacob, Carol K. Berning, and Thomas F. Dietvorst (1977), "What About Disposition?," *Journal of Marketing*, 2, 22-28.
- Joy, Annamma (2001), "Gift Giving in Honk Kong and the Continuum of Social Ties," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28 (September), 239-56.
- Korosec-Serfaty, Perla (1988), "La sociabilité publique et ses territoires - Places et espaces publics urbains," *Architecture et Comportement*, 4 (2), 111-32.
- Lastovicka, John L. and Karen V. Fernandez (2005), "Three Paths to Disposition: The Movement of Meaningful Possessions to Strangers," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (March), 813-23.
- Lucas, Gavin (2002), "Disposability and Dispossession in the Twentieth Century," *Journal of Material Culture*, 7 (5), 5-22.
- Marcoux, Jean-Sébastien (2009), "Escaping the Gift Economy," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36 (December), 671-85.
- Mauss, Marcel (1923-24/2000), *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Society*, trans. W.D. Halls, New York: Norton.
- McCracken, Grant (1986), "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13 (June), 71-84.
- Nelson, Michelle R., Mark Rademacher, and Hye-Jin Paek (2007), "Downshifting Consumer: Upshifting Citizen? An Examination of a Local Freecycle Community," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611 (1), 141-56.
- Price, Linda L., Eric J. Arnould, and Carolyn F. Curasi (2000), "Older Consumers' Disposition of Special Possessions," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27 (September), 179-201.
- Roster, Catherine A. (2001), « Letting go, » in *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 28, ed. Mary C. Gilly and Joan Meyers-Levy, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 425-30.
- Roster, Catherine A. and Marsha L. Richins (2009), "Ambivalence and Attitudes in Consumer Replacement Decisions," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19, 48-61.
- Ruth, Julie A., Cele C. Otnes, and Frederic F. Brunel (1999), "Gift Receipt and the Reformulation of Interpersonal Relationships," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25 (March), 385-402.
- Sherry, John F., Jr. (1990), "A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (June), 13-30.
- Sherry, John F., Mary Am McGrath, and Sidney J. Levy (1993), "The Dark Side of the Gift," *Journal of Business Research*, 28, 225-44.
- Thompson, Craig J., William B. Locander, and Howard R. Pollio (1989), "Putting Consumer Experience Back into Consumer Research: The Philosophy and Method of Existential-Phenomenology", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16, 133-46.