2015

"A Give and A Take": Lived Experiences in a Real Sharing Economy

Lauren F. Phipps
Pitzer College

"A Give and A Take":
Lived Experiences in a Real Sharing Economy

Lauren Phipps

In Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in
Environmental Analysis
&
Sociology

April 2015
Pitzer College
Claremont, CA

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis contrasts a "real" sharing economy with the commonly held understanding of this new mode of exchange. By examining the lived experiences within a successful example of sharing, we can see its true value and acknowledge where other businesses fall short. Based on in-depth interviews with users of freecycle.org, this thesis illustrates the importance of motivation within a real sharing economy, highlighting the existence of generalized reciprocity, the value of community, and altruism between members of this gifting platform.

Keywords: Sharing economy, Sharewashing, Freecycle, Generalized reciprocity, Gifting

Introduction

In 2011, *Time* named "Sharing" one of the "10 Ideas That Will Change the World," citing Netflix, Zipcar, and Airbnb as pioneers of a new form of "collaborative consumption" (Walsh, 2011). Based on a preference of access over ownership and facilitated by Internet innovation, sharing presumably represents the bright future of our economy. This is the story that has dominated headlines, business trends, and associated legal debates over the past few years. The buzzword "sharing" evokes a warm feeling of community and trust, bringing a social ethic to the core of an often-heartless economic system. What's not to like? Now we can all drive back to our Airbnb rental homes in our Zipcars and watch a movie on Netflix. Usually, the conversation stops here.

When we give something a new name we not only change its appearance, but we also deliberately alter the way it will be perceived by the public. Renaming, however, does not improve the practice itself. Consumers navigate this marketing strategy daily as corporations like Walmart and BP have rebranded themselves as tree-hugging leaders in sustainability (Mitchell & Ramey, 2010). False eco-friendly corporate advertising, or greenwashing, allows companies to take credit for consciously tackling major environmental issues without actually doing anything different (Laufer, 2003). In this same way, businesses are capitalizing on the public's widespread enthusiasm for the sharing economy, leveraging an ambiguous definition through a process of "sharewashing." Even though timeshares, car rentals services, and video rental stores have been around for decades, it was only when presented under the guise of "sharing" that these business models became new, exciting, and successful, as well as lucrative. According to the Harvard Business Review, the global sharing economy market is worth $110 billion (Cannon & Summers, 2014).

Ironically, beneath a layer of share-colored paint lies a real sharing economy to behold. But unregulated taxi services (e.g. Uber and Lyft), glorified home rentals (e.g. Airbnb) and micro-entrepreneurship (e.g. eBay and Craigslist) have diluted the public's acknowledgment and celebration of what I will define as leaders in "real" sharing, a vital distinction that is based on underlying motivation. While business as usual masquerades as socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable, people tend to overlook the sharing platforms that actually embody these conscious practices. This thesis contrasts a "real" sharing economy with the commonly held understanding of this new mode of exchange. I interviewed users of Freecycle, an example of real sharing, in order to ground a theoretical distinction in empirical evidence. By examining the lived experiences within a successful example of real sharing, we can see its true value and acknowledge where other businesses fall short.

The new form of exchange examined in this thesis is known by a number of different names: "the collaborative economy" (Owyang, 2014), "the mesh" (Gansky, 2010), "collaborative consumption" (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), "the sharing economy" (Schor, 2014), and refers to a great range of activities from swapping and renting to lending and gifting, and utilizes an online platform to facilitate offline interactions. But we have no shared definition of the sharing economy, and no one seems to agree on where sharing ends and conventional business begins. Within public discourse, BMW's new car-sharing program and Etsy fall under the same sharing category as Couchsurfing (a popular free hospitality exchange website) and TimeBanks (an organization that facilitates trading time and skills rather than money). These businesses and organizations are nothing alike.

The intent of this thesis is not to vilify "pseudo-sharing" (Belk, 2014) platforms; it is beyond the scope of this project to dismantle the capitalist system. Rather, one aspect of this

academic investigation is to recognize the appropriate use (and misuse) of the term sharing and the implications thereof within this hyper-ambiguous rhetorical arena.

On one end of the spectrum, these "sharing" platforms are examples of conventional profit-driven commerce (e.g. Uber, Airbnb); on the other end are exchanges based on community-building, social solidarity, and altruism. I argue that underlying motivation behind "sharing" in its many forms distinguishes real sharing from its sharewashed counterpart. But in its present state, "self-definition by the platforms and the press defines who is in and who is out," (Schor, 2014) when it comes to defining the sharing economy.

I will begin by contextualizing this thesis within the larger scholarly conversations about traditional sharing and gifting communities. I examine the transformation of sharing in the Internet age, and finally present research on the current state of the sharing economy. By integrating theoretical and practical definitions within the related scholarship in sociology, anthropology, and business, I propose a working definition of this fundamentally new social and economic mode of exchange.

I will then present my case study of Freecycle.org, a prominent example of what I call a real sharing economy. I will briefly outline the history of this goods redistribution platform, describe my methodology, and present my findings from interviews with Freecycle users. Finally, I will discuss the implications of my results as they relate to defining the real sharing economy. It is important to acknowledge that this thesis is not hypothesis-driven; there are no independent and dependent variables. Rather this is an exploratory investigation of a novel social phenomenon, researched for the greater understanding of the real sharing economy.

Review of the Literature

Given the trans-disciplinary nature of the study of sharing economies, the relevant literature is both diverse and disparate. The term "sharing" or "share" economy itself was only coined in 1986 by economist Martin Weitzman who asserted that an increase in sharing profits among market participants would accordingly increase universal social welfare (Weitzman, 1986). The term "Sharing Economy" has only recently taken hold within the literature as a widely employed description of a great array of sharing activities (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Owyang, 2014). Not only does the application of the term "Sharing Economy" diverge greatly from its original use, but it has also been used to refer to an incredible range of activities. This is where the trouble begins.

The literature wholly lacks a shared definition of sharing economies, a disjunction that even transcends the scholarly examination of this topic. Therefore, while the literature on sharing economies uses this term to refer to a variety of different trends, behaviors, and activities, so too does its popular discussion. The section will begin by grounding this modern phenomenon within the fundamental literature on sharing and gifting communities. I will then briefly present some of the research on virtual sharing. Finally, I will synthesize the perspectives on online and offline sharing communities and discuss research on this new and growing field of study. An academic investigation of the sharing economy has been conceptualized within the fields of sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, marketing and consumer research; no one study or academic perspective has brought together the range of existing literature. This section will conclude by developing a working definition of the sharing economy based on empirical and anecdotal evidence.

Foundational Perspectives on Gifting Communities

Sharing is by no means a new phenomenon. It has been practiced forever, and studied and theorized for centuries. I will briefly review the relevant classical and contemporary perspectives on sharing and gifting in order to provide a theoretical background for the study of a modern sharing economy.

Sharing has been characterized as "the most universal form of human economic behavior" (Price, 1975); all cultures around the world engage in sharing activities (Agyeman et al., 2013). However, its academic analysis only began in the last century. In his seminal investigation of gift giving among the native inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands, Bronisław Malinowski (1922) highlighted the role of reciprocity—a corresponding give and take—within an exchange. Malinowski noted that gifts could be placed on a continuum from a pure gift with no expectation of receiving anything in return, to gifting akin to a market trade or barter with an associated aim of maximized profits for individuals. He observed that closer social relationships corresponded with free gifting. Conversely, Malinowski found an increased expectation of reciprocity between socially distant individuals. In both cases, Malinowski presents gifts as antithetical to a commodity exchange, despite market similarities.

Criticizing the theoretical assertions made by Malinowski, French sociologist Marcell Mauss (1923) wrote one of the best-known examinations of gift giving in his essay, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Mauss asserted the namely symbolic value of gifts, suggesting that such exchanges are not based on individual altruism. Rather, patterns of reciprocity lead to increased social cohesion and a subsequent expectation of sustained giving. Georg Simmel (1950) described this system as coercive, and discussed the negative repercussions of failing to reciprocate within a gift-based economy. Mauss' critique of

the utilitarian motivations behind giving and receiving presented a novel perspective on the age-old dichotomy between self-interest and altruism.

Since the work of Malinowski and Mauss, the ideas of reciprocity and altruism have been central to the heavily debated topic of modern gift-giving and sharing in both western and non-western settings (Adloff & Mau, 2006; Komter, 2005). Alvin Gouldner (1960) hypothesized that reciprocity is a "principle component of moral code" and must be understood as a universal norm of social life, and located within a moral economy rather than a monetary one (Cheal, 1988).

Building off of the many case studies specific to "archaic" (Mauss, 1923) societies, Berking (1999) provided a modern sociological interpretation of sharing in his *Sociology of Giving*, looking at the ways in which gifting has transformed in contemporary Western culture. Berking (1999), Cheal (1988), and Komter (1996) have located gifting primarily within the private sphere, focusing on present giving. In a modern context, these authors understand the exchange of presents (i.e. birthday gifts) as a primarily utilitarian example of reciprocal exchange. Cheal (1988) suggests that such reciprocation is based heavily on obligation. However, like most social phenomena, reciprocity differs according to its social context (see Sahlins, 1972; Silber, 2012).

Highly relevant to an examination of contemporary sharing economies is the idea of generalized reciprocity. This non-dyadic version of gift giving involves indirect multi-party exchanges (Giesler, 2006) and is considered to most effectively encourage social solidarity and connectedness (Lévi‑Strauss, 1969; Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1925; Sahlins 1965). All members of the sharing or gifting community engaged in generalized reciprocity rely on one another for the associated benefits of sharing (Sahlins, 1972). According to Sahlins' theoretical framework, generalized reciprocity can be contrasted with balanced and restricted reciprocity; it does not

function based on the expectation of an immediate return or discrete peer-to-peer exchange. Ekeh (1974) and Yamagishi and Cook (1993) have even found that reciprocity can be carried out within a sharing community different than that of the original exchange. Historically, much of the research on generalized reciprocity has focused exclusively on families and small communities, rather than between strangers.

However, a growing body of research that stems from the field of economics exists on the experience of generalized reciprocity between strangers, made possible through the group enforcement of norms that encourage this type of exchange (Bó, 2007). These findings are consistent with research on the role that reciprocity itself plays in constructing and reconstructing platforms for exchange (Adloff & Mau, 2006) as well as the way in which sharing produces and reproduces social relations (Belk, 2010). Not only does reciprocity make social exchange possible, but it also increases social connectedness.

The relationship between social integration and reciprocity has become a key focus of recent research on modern sharing economies, and will be discussed within the final section of this literature review. Although the relevant literature on gifting and sharing provides a necessary foundation for the examination of the contemporary phenomenon of sharing economies, these perspectives are limited in their scope. Equally as important as the element of physical communities and tangible gift giving within the study of contemporary sharing economies is the corresponding online feature of these exchanges. The importance of the Internet in the facilitation of gifting and sharing defines this modern phenomenon. I will now briefly discuss the research on online sharing.

(Re)Learning to Share: Online Gifting in Web 2.0

The rise of the Internet age and the corresponding increase in virtual communities has created a new and evolving topic of research within the last twenty years. Most recently, the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 has marked a change in the way people communicate, interact, and participate in online space (see O'Reilly, 2007; Phipps, 2007). Scholars understand Web 2.0, or the Social Web as a fundamentally new forum for online participation and user-engagement, as opposed to the static nature of read-only web pages within the theoretical realm of Web 1.0 (Anderson, 2007; Dippelreiter et al., 2008). The new age of Internet participation depends on the growing number of users that "voluntarily engage in collaborative work" (Prilla & Ritterskamp, 2008, p. 35, as cited in Zhao, 2013), and participate actively in these virtual communities. As a result, Belk (2010) has proposed that the Internet, specifically Web 2.0, has "ushered in a new era of sharing" (p. 715).

Sharing within a digital context introduces a number of Internet-specific considerations not previously associated with this ancient and universal human behavior. A virtual community allows for connection without the face-to-face element that is central to the classical literature on gift-giving communities. Despite the non-physicality of interactions and critiques of Internet communities as "faceless and fleshless" (DeGraff, Wann, Naylor & Robin 2001, p. 61, as cited in Parmentier, 2009), online interactions facilitate the creation of a shared identity and interpersonal connection (Anthenunis et al., 2012; Ellison et al., 2007). Many internet-based communities are limited to varying degrees of membership, which produces and perpetuates binding social norms (Resnick, 2002). Additionally, a lack of geographical boundaries allows individuals to connect and organize communities based on mutual interests as opposed to shared spaces (Wellman et al., 1996).

Considering the unique features of online communities, scholars have investigated the ways in which virtual exchanges both align with the literature on offline interactions, as well as where they diverge. In a fascinating application of the old to the new, Markus Giesler (2006) looked at the interpersonal dynamics on Napster, a peer-to-peer (P2P) music file sharing website and what he considered an online "consumer gift system." Geisler collected netnographic and ethnographic qualitative research on Napster, noting the way that users shared resources within this gift-giving community. Napster users engage in a non-dyadic system of gift-giving, and employed a norm of reciprocity and social solidarity, despite their online context and lack of regulation. However, in response to legal battles over intellectual property rights on Napster and similar P2P file-sharing online platforms, many websites have implemented tracking software to balance uploads and downloads, enforcing a systematic give and take (Aigrain, 2012). Contrary to Geisler's (2006) original findings, Napster and the like are therefore no longer governed by the social norms reproduced through reciprocal exchange, which are by definition voluntary (although the expectation to do so is often tacit).

Many online communities do function solely on co-creation. Wikis, websites defined by their collaborative process of information generation (e.g. Wikipedia) and social-networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc) are premised on voluntary contributions, and accordingly governed by social norms rather than official rules. Just as the research on offline gifting has suggested a positive correlation between generalized reciprocity and social solidarity (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1925; Sahlins 1972), so too has the research on online gifting.

A brief note on diction: in an online context, sharing and gifting are virtually identical. Sharing a photo really means giving others access to this information, although both members of the exchange are able to use and own the image at the same time. Thus, the rules of ownership

that govern the giving and sharing of tangible goods do not apply when it comes to online exchange. John (2013) makes a distinction between types of things shared within the context of Web 2.0, consequently problematizing the use of this term in an online context. John suggests that oftentimes the term "share" involves no sharing at all, noting that by "sharing" we often really mean "spreading." So, while there is a great deal of literature that heralds the value and power of online sharing communities, it often misses the point.

Andreas Wittell (2011) explores this contradiction in *Qualities of Sharing and their Transformations in the Digital Age*. Recognizing that pre-digital conceptions of sharing emphasize the social, mutual, and reciprocal aspects of exchange, Wittell asserts that the virtual "sharing" does not foster these same communal values. So-called sharing that takes place only online lacks a degree of individual sacrifice (Gielser, 2006), given that online information, music, photos, etc. can be circulated and utilized simultaneously by an infinite number of individuals. With tangible items, this is impossible.

Thus, largely missing from the research on internet-based sharing is the distinction from its offline counterparts. A central feature of the new sharing economy must be the existence of an online as well as an offline interaction. Therefore, a technology-specific theoretical framework for sharing activities that take place offline inappropriately disconnects the virtual from the tangible. It would be impossible to understand Uber, Airbnb, Couchsurfing, Freecycle, etc. as distinctly technological phenomena when their use takes place without the technology that originally facilitated the interaction. The final section of this literature review will present the research on the sharing economy, understood by both its online and offline components.

The Real Sharing Economy

Although we lack a shared definition of the term "sharing economy", its use is quickly increasing (Fig. 1). This semantic ambiguity will become ever more problematic considering this upward trend. Not only do these modes of exchange go by a variety of names, but the activities that they refer to also vary between contexts.
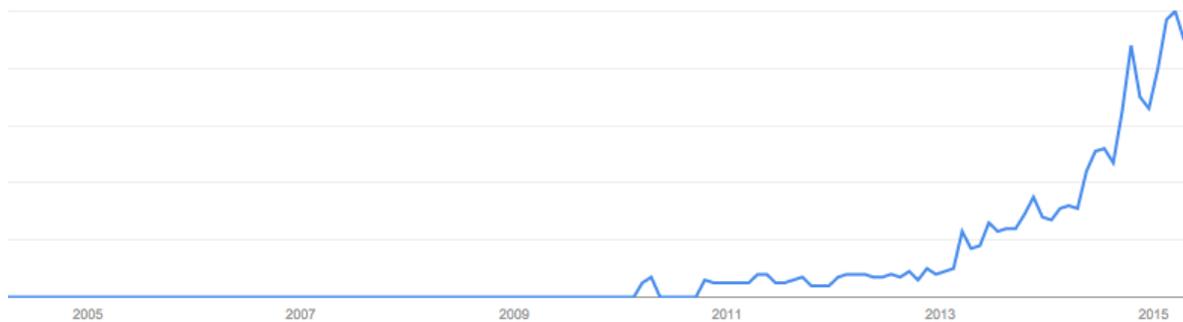

Fig. 1: Increase in the online use of the term "Sharing Economy"
Data Source: Google Trends (www.google.com/trends)

While a meticulous explanation of the great range and diversity of activities within the sharing economy is beyond the scope of this thesis, I will briefly summarize their extent. Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers (2010) wrote the first book on modern-day sharing economies, which has been celebrated by scholars and non-academics alike. Botsman and Rogers identify four principles of collaborative consumption: trust between strangers, the power of idling capacity, belief in the commons, and critical mass. A detailed examination of sharing activities and typologies can be found in this popular book, as well as in Lamberton and Rose's *When Is Ours Better Than Mine?* (2012), and on Jeremiah Owyang's (2014) pictorial representation, *Collaborative Economy Honeycomb Framework*. However, it must be noted that these sources also define sharing differently.

Recently, some scholars have looked closely at individuals' motives for participation and experience engaging with new forms of "sharing." Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) study of Zipcar

found that members did not feel attached to other users, the organization, or even the cars themselves. A comparable study by Fenton (2013) noted that users of RelayRides shared a similar experience, describing interactions as "anonymous" and "sterile" (as cited in Schor, 2014). These studies are just two examples of sharewashed companies falling short of the interpersonal value created within the real sharing economy, further suggesting the need to clarify this theoretical distinction.

Determining genuine from sharewashed within the sharing economy is not a straightforward task. Botsman and Rogers (2010) opt for an extremely inclusive definition, which they apply to nearly every imaginable type of exchange. Others have defined sharing by its preference for access over ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Gansky, 2010). While Agnew (2003) constructs commoditization to be in opposition with sharing, the development of many new self-defined sharing businesses (Benkler, 2004; Dervojeda et al., 2013) further compounds the definition. On a more basic level, many scholars have even treated gifting and sharing as separate categories of exchange (see Price, 1975). However, I contend that these definitions are insufficient, superficial, and do not get to the heart of the real sharing economy. They ignore the fundamental value in sharing itself (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1925). A definition of the real sharing economy must therefore emphasize the centrality of the user's motivations and experiences.

Thus, in the context of this thesis, an understanding of the real sharing economy is based primarily on the motivations that drive these interactions. *It refers to a diversity of exchanges (i.e. lending, renting, swapping, gifting, bartering, sharing, etc.) between a network of connected individuals, communities, or organizations, and utilizes an online platform to facilitate offline exchanges, interactions, and experiences*. But most importantly, to qualify as real sharing, *an*

activity must have an altruistic and community-minded motivation rather than a profit-driven one at its core.

Anthropologist Russell Belk (2007; 2010; 2014a; 2014b) has written profusely on the sharing economy, and is the only scholar that distinguishes between real sharing and its "pseudo-sharing" (Belk, 2014a) counterpart. Belk explains, "the key intention in sharing is not granting or gaining access, but helping and making human connections (p. 17). However, this assertion is based on speculation and a superficial analysis of sharing and pseudo-sharing platforms rather than on empirical evidence. This thesis will bolster these unsubstantiated claims by grounding Belk's theorized experience of a real sharing economy in the actual experiences of people that engage in one, as revealed by my fieldwork.

My case study looks at users of Freecycle, a sharing platform that some scholars have examined in the past. These studies, despite analyzing Freecycle through a different theoretical lens, can provide a jumping-off point for my examinations of the experience in a real sharing economy. Most recently, Hamari et al. (2015) employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore individuals' motivations for using Freecycle, citing personal enjoyment, economic gain, and sustainability as key drivers for participation. These findings do not completely coincide with those of Nelson and Rademacher (2009), who investigated Freecycle as an example of a traditional gift system. This netnographic and survey-based study highlighted the experience of generalized reciprocity between its users, which is reinforced through the website's structure, social norms, and a feeling of community. Nelson et al. (2007) also looked at Freecycle in order to examine the correlation between the downshifting of consumption and civic engagement of its users.

In a comparative case study of Freecycle and Craigslist, Willer et al. (2012) distinguished between these two platforms in their discovery of a high level of social solidarity and organizational identification among Freecyclers that was not present between Craigslist users. Belk's (2014) assertion that, "money profanes the sharing transaction and transforms it into a commodity exchange" (p. 19), would theoretically distinguish Freecycle, a gift-based platform, from Craigslist, a monetary one. However, the findings of Willer et al. (2012) suggest that it is in fact the user's detached and impersonal experience that "profanes the sharing transaction" (Belk, 2014, p. 19).

Empirical evidence has shown the interpersonal value created by gift giving within a closed community, and scholars have acknowledged the process of creating and recreating social solidarity and connectedness through the norm of generalized reciprocity. Online sharing can produce similar social outcomes as well, although the potential for such connections is limited. The existing literature on what I define as the real sharing economy does not ground its theoretically associated motivations and values in the actual experiences of its users, a gap in the literature that this thesis begins to fill.

Background on Freecycle

Large and small rocks excavated from a garden bed, baby clothes, pecan tree saplings, a birdhouse, furniture, tools, a half-eaten box of breakfast cereal. People exchange all sorts of items on freecycle.org. This website virtually connects people with no longer wanted tangible things. An example of the "real" sharing economy, Freecycle provides a window into this fundamentally new mode of exchange.

I spoke with Freecycle users in order to gain insights on the individual's experience within the sharing economy. Because of Freecycle's lasting success, I chose to conduct a focused case study of this particular sharing platform. Since its establishment in 2003, The Freecycle Network has grown to serve seven million users with over five thousand localized groups in eighty-five countries (History & Background Information). Unlike many related platforms that have recently gained recognition for engaging in the sharing economy, Freecycle has successfully, and quietly, operated for twelve years.

The official mission statement of Freecycle is, "to build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources & eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to benefit from the strength of a larger community" (History & Background Information). All transactions are entirely gift-based; there is no exchange of money on Freecycle. Membership is also entirely free, voluntary, and requires only an email address and username to join. Once a registered member of Freecycle, users can join one or many local groups and begin "freecycling."

To exchange goods, users post "offers" and "wants" on their local group's board (Fig. 2). An "offer" is an item that a user has and would like to give away; a "want" is an item that a user

is looking for. It is then up to individuals to respond to a post and coordinate with one another to arrange an exchange.
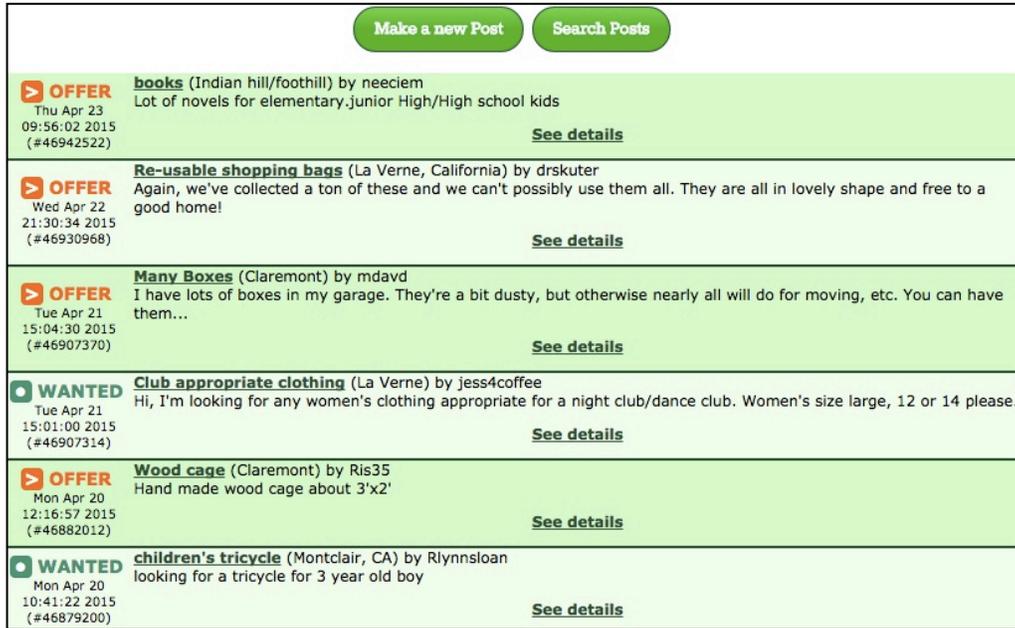

Fig. 2: Screen capture of Claremont Freecycle board
Source: www.freecycle.org

Imagine I have a bed frame that I no longer want, for one reason or another. I post to my group's board: "offer: queen bed frame, good condition." Within a couple of days, I receive six different responses to my post. Some include stories about why they need this bed; others just express their interest. I respond to the earliest message that I received, and provide a couple of times that they could come pick up the bed along with my home address. Within a few days, we arrange a day and time for pickup. I set the bed against the side of my garage when I said that I would, and it's gone within a couple of hours. On the surface, it's pretty simple.

There is no official expectation of reciprocity on freecycle.org. Voluntary moderators in local groups monitor posting activity for commercial offers, illegal activity, and spam. Otherwise, local groups are entirely based on individual posts and responses.

Methodology

Given the complex social, functional, and symbolic dimensions of Freecycle, I deemed qualitative methods most appropriate to fully understand the individual's lived experience using this sharing platform. I conducted ten in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of active users on local Freecycle.org networks in February and March of 2015. I spoke with individuals from three nearby Freecycle Networks (Claremont, Rancho Cucamonga, and San Dimas) within a ten-mile radius of Claremont, CA. I recruited interviewees by responding to recent posts on the local group's page, both "offers" and "wants." Participants were therefore bounded by geographical location and limited to the self-selected members in these groups. My recruitment email (Appendix I) explained the academic nature of my investigation, and my request for an in-person interview.

I met interviewees at a mutually agreed-upon location, including the Claremont Colleges and La Verne Libraries, Pitzer College campus, and Starbucks. All participants signed a consent form at the start of their interview verifying that they were above the age of 18, aware of the interview's purpose, and agreeing to have the interview voice recorded. One interviewee elected to not have the interview recorded. Interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes and one hour in time and were conducted individually, with the exception of one couple with whom I spoke at the same time. No respondents received compensation for their participation.

My interviews with Freecycle users followed a basic interview schedule, but most flowed more like an open-ended conversation. However, given the specificity of the topic, the majority of interviews did remain focused on the individual's use of freecycle.org. I asked all interviewees to describe their experience using Freecycle, how they began to use it, and why they continue to

actively post. I also asked about the best and worst experience that users had on this website, how their use has changed over time, and if or what they tell others about Freecycle.

After conducting in-depth interviews with ten Freecycle users, I transcribed the recordings of these conversations. Transcriptions included all Freecycle-related experiences and opinions, but did not contain irrelevant tangents or small talk before and after the Freecycle-related conversation.

All results and conclusions are based on the focused coding of transcripts and notes from the ten in-depth interviews. I repeatedly read through my transcriptions and compiled a list of prominent themes that emerged from the interviews. Once I had a comprehensive list of these themes, I slowly read through each transcription again, highlighting the quotes that corresponded with each theme. Once the transcriptions were comprehensively coded, I pulled out the related sections from individual interviews, and compiled a document of quotations organized by theme rather than by interview. I then analyzed the compilation of quotations, drew connections between individual interviews, and situated these results within the larger scholarly conversation on the topic.

In-depth interviews allowed me to gain personal insights, opinions, and stories beyond the limited format of a questionnaire. I employed a qualitative approach to my examination of Freecycle users in order to understand the individualized experience and personal motivations associated with using this sharing platform. Although results are not statistically significant, they provide a unique window into the experience of a group of Freecycle users.

I conducted interviews with eight women and two men, all of whom were over the age of thirty, most of whom were over the age of fifty. Eight of the ten interviewees were Caucasian, one was Chinese, and another Filipina-American. It is important to note that the age and race of

interviewees is consistent with demographic trends of the Claremont area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Participants were neither selected randomly, nor based on any identification criteria aside from their recently posting on one of the local Freecycle groups. Accordingly, this method of selection is convenience-based and limited to the perspective of individuals that I was able to contact and interview. Findings are therefore non-generalizable to the greater population and do not represent the experience of all Freecycle users.

A representative study of Freecycle users would have required me to obtain a master email list of its seven million members, and randomly selected individuals around the world to interview. The convenience sampling method that I employed allowed me to interview users within a limited timeframe of data collection and within a convenient geographical radius, making the project feasible for an undergraduate senior thesis. Consequently, this study can by no means provide a comprehensive understanding of the generalized experience using Freecycle.

I was able to interview users with the time and ability to speak with me, which was further limited by the lack of tangible incentives provided to interviewees. Additionally, I recruited only actively posting users and not individuals who may only respond to "offers" and "wants", which further qualified the experience of users included in this study. While this non-random sampling method did reduce the diversity of perspectives included in this study, it allowed the project to be carefully executed in light of the temporal and geographical limitations.

Given the self-selecting nature of participants and limited number of interviews, a comprehensive understanding of Freecycle users is beyond the scope of this research. Rather, this project provides a window into the local Freecycle user's experience.

Results

There is no one reason that people use Freecycle. In various different interviews and within individual conversations, Freecyclers shared a diversity of motivations, perspectives, and opinions on their use of the website. In this section I will share some of their stories. Through their anecdotes and personal reflections, I will capture some of the experiences of Freecycle users. Although every interview was unique, a few prominent themes emerged during all or most of my conversations with Freecycle users. I will begin with a discussion of these shared experiences.

"Too much stuff"

Regardless of the socioeconomic background, age, or Freecycle experience of the users that I interviewed, everyone agreed: we have too much stuff.

> "I have too much stuff of my own."
> "We have a house full of stuff."
> "Oh my goodness I have all this stuff and I just want to get rid of it!"

An acknowledgment of excess came up in every one of my interviews, but for the sake of avoiding repetition they will not all be quoted here. Users unanimously not only observed their overabundance, but also placed a value judgment on it. Interviewees framed excess as a negative and as something to resist.

Linda is a single mother in her sixties with three grown children. She has used Freecycle for about five years, posting mostly "offers" and a couple of "wants." Linda has given away luggage and a birdhouse, among other items, and received a number of plants for her garden. As a hard worker with a small but sufficient income, Linda described her relationship with the things she owns:

I'm pretty over stuff. I don't need more stuff. So that's what I'm doing now. Downsizing is what you'd call it. Going to a smaller scale than someone in a three-bedroom house. And I've never been a stuff person. I've never wanted stuff. I've never been able to afford stuff…Especially for someone who does cleaning for a living. I don't need more stuff to clean. Oh please. No.

Even though she does not have a large income, Linda expressed a strong desire to reverse her lifelong accumulation of unnecessary items, and uses Freecycle to do this. Other Freecycle users shared Linda's desire to "downsize."

Joan, the most active user of Freecycle that I interviewed, expressed a similar outlook on her experience with overabundance. Joan lives a self-defined "voluntary low-impact lifestyle" with her sister in Upland. By riding her bike, dumpster diving, and having used Freecycle over 100 times, Joan actively chooses to live simply and consciously. Joan shared her perspective:

We have too much stuff and it's a burden. Many people have these rental spaces where they put stuff, and you forget what's there, and then you go buy the stuff again and you have 2 or 3 of the same things. We constantly see things that look nice…but we don't have any more space. You reach the limits of everything! Freecycle has helped with that.

Joan uses Freecycle to tackle her overabundance of things. It is a way to not only manage her acquisition of goods, but also to keep her home in balance. Nelson et al. (2007) consider downsizing, or "downshifting" as they call it, to be a defining characteristic of all Freecycle users. This downshifting attitude was also present in all of the Freecyclers that I interviewed.

Many Freecycle users attributed the experience of excess to their age. They described being in a certain phase in their lives to downsize and minimize their accumulation goods from years of life. As previously noted, most interviewees were over the age of fifty and therefore do not represent the perspective of all Freecycle users. Regardless of generalizability, the concept of downsizing in a particular "life phase" came up in four of my interviews, despite the presumed association between youth and the sharing economy (Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

Melissa is a retired librarian and looks the part. A sweet and thoughtful older woman, Melissa only uses Freecycle to give things away. She told me, "I'm at an age and a stage in my life when I have more stuff than I need and I would like to get it to someone who can use it."

Karen, a self-proclaimed "lunch lady" with three kids also spoke about the relationship between age and accumulation. She told me, "I'm in a stage of my life where I'm cutting down; I don't bring anything home unless I know I'm absolutely gonna use it." Whether this was a result of an empty nest, or simply a shift in consciousness for these Freecycle users, they all shared the same perspective on tackling the excess of items in their lives. Even the rhetoric used, coldly referring to possessions as "stuff," echoes their explicit motivations.

Regardless of why Freecycle users have an overabundance of things, my interviewees unanimously expressed a desire to downsize. However, there are a number of different ways to accomplish this task: users could donate to Goodwill or other charities, sell items on eBay or Craigslist, have a yard sale, or simply throw things in the trash. But they choose to use Freecycle instead. The following section will present some of the most common motivations expressed in my interviews in order to understand why people use Freecycle and more generally engage in the real sharing economy.

"The right thing to the right person"

The concept of use, for an item to be actively utilized, came up in every one of my interviews with Freecyclers. Although two Freecycle users, Emily and Karen, referenced the colloquialism, one man's trash is another man's treasure; the things that people exchange on Freecycle have a lot of life left in them. Freecyclers approached the concept of use from both

sides of the exchange: they wanted to use other peoples' neglected items and expressed a desire to give their own unused goods to a good home.

Karen, the warm and friendly "lunch lady", put it best:

I know they're perfectly usable, but it's hard to give them away…If they're willing to come to my house to pick it up they must want it, so that's always good. It's going to a good home…I mean, I'm not looking for a sob story, but I like to know that people have got a use for it instead of just, who knows, stacking it up somewhere.

As Karen suggested, it is far easier to give something up, to let go of personal belongings, if we know that they will end up in a good home. Nine of the ten Freecyclers shared the same perspective. This commonly held desire to get the right thing to the right person is rooted in both material attachment as well as interpersonal awareness. The people that I interviewed struggled to give up their items because of the connection they felt to these things despite their acknowledging that they no longer wanted or needed them. What quelled the uncertainty of giving was a consideration of where it would go, or rather to whom.

While some Freecycle users "offered" their items chronologically to whoever responded to their post first, others were pickier in order to ensure that their items went to a good home. Daniel, a middle-aged man preparing for his retirement, told me about his experience giving away a "beautiful flowering plum tree" that had outgrown his front yard. When I met Daniel for our interview, he handed me a printout of the email that someone had sent him inquiring about the tree:

Are you still looking for a home for your flowering plum tree? I think I could provide it with a nice slope and distant views. Thank you for sharing your living plants with the world.

Daniel smiled when he told me about this email, mentioning multiple times how nice this tree was. He explained, "I [usually] try to go sequentially, but this guy was kinda cute. Offering a

good home for the happy tree." Daniel felt better about giving away the tree from his front yard that he looked at every day, knowing that it would go to a good home, or hillside.

Melissa discussed at length her approach to giving away items on Freecycle:

I think, as a retired librarian, I like a good story...Sometimes I'm not in a hurry so I'll wait and listen...I had a day bed that was very pretty and would be perfect for a little girl and I wanted to get rid of it, and I ended up giving it to a man who came with his daughter. They had been homeless and they had just gotten a place to live and this was going to be her bed. So that was a happy ending story for me, so I liked that very much.

Although sometimes she prefers to get items out of her home quickly, Melissa often waits for a compelling story to ensure that her things go to a good home. She also told me about a 12-cup food processor that she held onto for weeks, justifying her patience by telling me, "I'm really all about get the right thing to the right person." Daniel, Melissa, and others expressed a concern for the fate of their items, and for the people who would own them, not wanting to give away valuable things haphazardly. Other interviewees focused less on the items themselves, and acknowledged the role of reciprocity in their Freecycle use.

"*A give and a take*"

Freecycle differs notably from other online "sharing" platforms in its nonexistent official expectation of reciprocity. There is no built-in requirement of both giving and taking, of being on both ends of the exchange, like money-based "sharing" platforms such as Uber and Airbnb (Benkler, 2004; Dervojeda et al., 2013), or online file-sharing websites like Napster (Geisler, 2006). However, more than half of my interviewees emphasized their experience of reciprocity. As Linda put it, Freecycle is "a give and a take."

Emily moved to Southern California from China two years ago with limited resources and two babies to take care of. Her husband still lives in China, so for now Emily works as a

paralegal to support her family. Emily, told me about how helpful Freecycle was when she needed it most:

> First when I moved into the house I needed furniture, electric items, and a lot of things. But after a few months I found it all. Then found that I didn't need this item or that item…so now I can give it to someone, anyone else, who needs it…After my babies grow up I will give away these items, the car seat, too.

Emily was able to furnish her apartment, clothe her babies, and obtain everything she needed for her new home. Now Emily has been in the US for a couple of years, and settled into her new life, Emily has begun to give things away on Freecycle that she received in the past, even though there is no formal expectation of her to do this.

Rose, a middle-aged woman in the process of planning her retirement with her husband, Daniel, also told me about her experience of giving back on Freecycle. Rose explained her and her husband's relationship with the website:

> We were really poor when we were first married. We used cardboard boxes for furniture. So we know what it's like to not have much money and kind of struggle along, so we thought if we could help somebody like us, why not? Because we've been there. When we were that poor, anything we had, we had gotten from somebody giving it to us. Helping people who were in the same position we were, you know being young and not having that much money and needing stuff, it's nice to be a part of that.

Even though Rose did not get items on Freecycle when she needed them—Freecycle did not exist at that time—she expressed a desire to help people in the same position that she and Daniel once knew well.

As Emily and Rose discussed, this notion of reciprocity, of a give and take, is not limited to a dyadic understanding of equal exchange between two individuals. The "give and take" experienced between Freecyclers functions based on a delayed expectation of return, and is not limited to a discreet P2P exchange (Sahlins, 1972). Consistent with Nelson and Rademacher's (2009) recognition of generalized reciprocity between Freecycle users, my interviewees shared

this same experience. Although gives and takes do not correspond directly to one another, in a vaguely "karmic" sense, users believe that they are returning the favor. Emily intends to give away, to give back, the baby clothes and car seats that she received on Freecycle once her children grow out of them. Because Rose received so much in the past, she wants to give back to people that are in her same position. Just as Ekeh (1974) and Yamagashi and Cook (1993) found that generalized reciprocity can be carried out within a sharing community different than that of the original exchange, so too is this possible on Freecycle. Although these studies examined offline communities, the findings are consistent with Rose's experience of Freecycle.

Similarly, Melissa described her experience of circulating goods through Freecycle:

I think of it as sequential ownership. I had it, and now it's somebody else's time to own it. I mean, those jars from canning, what am I going to do with those jars? I'm past that time in my life. And somebody is going to do it and they're gonna can for a few years, then they're gonna get tired of it and pass them on again.

Melissa and others conceptualize items through impermanent ownership that functions almost as an extended borrow, emphasizing the cyclical nature of giving on Freecycle. Melissa understands reciprocity as an integral part of using Freecycle, even though it is not an explicit expectation of the website. Just as Nelson and Rademacher (2009) suggested, it seems that generalized reciprocity is made possible on Freecycle through a sense of community and associated social norms, examined in the next section.

"A different type of network"

Although the foundational perspectives on gifting and sharing emphasize the creation of social solidarity within sharing communities (Malinowski, 1992; Mauss, 1925; Sahlins, 1972), literature on virtual communities has found mixed results. While Napster users expressed a feeling of social solidarity when engaging in this online network (Geisler, 2006), other scholars

have refuted the assertion that online "sharing" can foster these same communal values. Therefore, as the integration of online connection and offline action is a defining feature of the sharing economy, it creates a unique opportunity for interpersonal connection, or a lack thereof.

The sense of community created on Freecycle is not obvious, or even visible from an outside perspective. Many of the exchanges happen without Freecyclers even meeting one another; they leave items outside to be picked up without a face-to-face meeting. This structural potential for anonymity and separation was found between users of Zipcar and RelayRides (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Fenton, 2013, as cited in Schor, 2014). In these studies, a feeling of connection or community was absent. However, more than half of my of the Freecycle users that I interviewed experienced a sense of community, connection, and shared identity through their exchanges.

According to Freecycle users, community and connection does not necessarily mean intimate friendship. Although to some, it did manifest in an interpersonal relationship. Nancy is a stay-at-home mom in her early thirties with two adorable kids and a working husband. She started using Freecycle a couple years ago to get rid of things, but discovered it to be a valuable channel for connection:

> For a while there I was getting a lot of plants, because I like to garden. And that helped me, having a newborn and then having two little toddlers, it just gave me some outlet to just, ugh, I would meet all these other gardeners who were willing to share their plants and give me cuttings, and I met some really nice people. So to me that was a really nice…You just meet some really nice people.

Living a busy and seemingly lonely life, Nancy valued the brief exchanges she made with other Freecyclers. She enthusiastically told me about repeatedly chatting with one woman in particular when she responded to her offers of plants every few months.

Amanda, a charmingly cynical retired woman, has used Freecycle for two or three years. She has given away little jars of paint and many plants, and received a sleeping bag for her granddaughter, a nightstand, and other "odds and ends." Amanda told me about the people she met through her Freecycle exchanges:

> I've gotten to know a few people…a younger woman, kept coming for the plants, keep coming back. You see the names popping up and you get to know, you get to recognize them, the same people…It's community in the sense of the guy down the street that you don't even know. It's the other lady that lives in the neighboring community I would never have met before, you know.

I asked Amanda about the woman who picked up plants, mentioning that I had interviewed a Freecycler named Nancy with a similar story. Cracking the first smile of our interview, Amanda beamed, "Oh Nancy! She's a good one, reliable, very enthusiastic and appreciative."

During my interviews I realized that I could trace the connection between half of my users through their exchanges on Freecycle. I could start to see the invisible network before me. Joan, who I initially connected with by responding to an "offer" of blue-eyed grass, reflected on the connections she has made:

> You just get to know people around the community and make contacts with them…One person has a very large backyard that is zoned for animals, and she has given away a lot of horse manure to Freecyclers. Another person we have made contact with is a rabbit foster family…So they give away he straw mixed with the rabbit poop. Both of those things have been helpful to our garden. We have fairly regular pickups for the rabbit poop. So, very useful things. Useful contacts with people, friendly relations with people, developing community.

Although her connections on Freecycle seem to be rooted in a more utilitarian appreciation of cycling resources, Joan acknowledged the community her contacts create as a result. Karen shared a similar perspective:

> It's a different type of network. I can't say I've built any lasting relationships, but I have this one lady and I can go back to her now and say, hey you want some eggs, or, she has some California native blue eyed grass and she said you want some of these? So it's kind of nice meeting people.

Referring to a repeated give and take with Joan, Karen noted the interpersonal value that is created through these functional exchanges. In my interview with Linda, she did not experience a sense of intimate connection or community on Freecycle. However, she did tell me about finding new clients for her pet-sitting business through exchanges, sharing Joan and Karen's utilitarian understanding of networking. Although community may not manifest itself in a traditional way on Freecycle, it does seem to exist in one form or another.

One tangible way that Freecyclers experienced and expressed this sense of connection was through gratitude. In six of my ten interviews, Freecyclers told me about giving and receiving additional gifts or notes beyond the arranged exchange. Joan often drops off flowers from her garden, Karen brings over eggs from her chickens, a number of people have knocked on Melissa's door to say thank you in person, and Daniel has received multiple appreciative emails. He told me, "it's nice to get that feedback and know that somebody benefitted from it." These additional gifts serve as symbolic expressions of appreciation, suggesting that the generalized reciprocity experienced on Freecycle is not predicated on a coercive social expectation (Simmel, 1950). Rather, they illuminate the feelings of connection and altruism between Freecyclers, and serve to encourage these continued exchanges.

Expressing different levels of connection with other Freecycle users, a kind and generous sentiment ran through each one of my interviews. On a personal level, every Freecycler I spoke with generously and enthusiastically offered their time, and expressed a great curiosity in my project as well as a desire to know how it turned out in the end. One interviewee even asked to take a photo with me and invited me to join her for dinner at her home. The unique network created on Freecycle is deeply intertwined with notions of trust, especially considering that its users are total strangers before an exchange. The next section discusses the negative side of

Freecycle, and the feelings of trust that users share despite the potential for disappointment or even harm.

"It's the chance that you take"

Perhaps a consequence of growing up in the Internet age, I am always skeptical of the potential for 'stranger danger' when connecting online. Especially on a website with no system for rating other users and therefore no way to hold users accountable for their actions, Freecycle initially seemed ripe for disappointment, misuse, and abuse in this gift-based arena. In every interview I asked the question, "what's the worst experience you've had using Freecycle?" and everyone had an answer. Most users discussed their disappointment when others did not follow through on their exchange; Linda responded:

> Just them not showing up when they say they're going to…But you know, it's the chance that you take with something like Freecycle. There's always gonna be bad somewhere in something good. It's just life. Nothing is one hundred percent except death and taxes, you know, you just roll with the punches.

Melissa shared a similar frustration:

> The most negative thing that happens is that people say they're going to come get something and then they don't. And I've responded to everyone else and said sorry it's been taken, I go in and remove the post and they don't take it away, so it just sits there. And that's a little frustrating. But that's not too bad of a frustration. I could live with that.

I could have quoted any one of my interviewees on the topic of frustration. But even though these incomplete exchanges left Freecyclers disappointed, they qualified these stories with both empathy and forgiveness. The acceptance of Freecycle's imperfections reinforces its users' interpersonal connection. In spite of disappointment, their overall experience of exchange served to "help make human connections" (Belk, 2014a, p.17), which defines the real sharing economy.

Four users did recount specific negative experiences using Freecycle. Joan told me the story of leaving two Peruvian lilies on either side of her garage, affixed with the names of the two users that had been promised these valuable plants. But when the second Freecycler arrived to pick up her lily, it was gone. Joan told me, "obviously the first person came and took both plants, even though we said one side of the garage. It's a very popular plant, so she lied," leaving Joan disappointed. However, she continued on to tell me about her own occasional thoughtlessness on Freecycle, sometimes forgetting to pick up an item or leave something outside. "Overall," Joan reflected, "most people have been very accommodating." Karen, William, and Amanda shared similar stories of disappointment with me, although they also justified the flaws of Freecycle. As Karen explained it, "that was probably the worst thing that's happened to me, but it's never really bad."

Considering the convenience sample of perspectives presented in this thesis, it must be noted that there may be ex-Freecycle users with overwhelmingly negative experiences that are not reflected here. But according to my interviews, Freecyclers have had an overall very positive experience using this website and expressed a deep sense of trust in other Freecycle users. In one of my favorite anecdotes from an interview, Joan told me about the time that she bought a new kind of breakfast cereal, ate a serving, and decided that she did not like it. So, she posted it on Freecycle and immediately got several responses. She reflected:

> People are willing to give it a try, trusting, trusting us that we haven't put ground glass or something into what we've giving away….I think basically what you decide is that most people are trustworthy and there are only very few people who abuse the system.

The idea of trust came up in nearly every interview, always following my question about negative experiences. Freecyclers choose to believe that people use the website for the right reasons. Nancy explained:

> I just don't see why anyone would want to go on that site if they don't mean well…I just assume that the other people who are doing it do it for good reasons like I am. I just trust that they wouldn't do that, do anything harmful.

Despite the disappointment and frustration felt by all of my interviewees, trust and compassion outweighed these negative experiences. The research on what I define as sharewashed businesses does not express the same sense of community, understanding, and social solidarity between its users (Belk, 2014a). The anecdotes in this section and the community-oriented experience that they demonstrate serve to illuminate the key distinction between real and "pseudo-sharing" (Belk, 2014a). Although other aspects of the Freecycle experience do not necessarily help to clarify this distinction, they are relevant to the people whom I interviewed and will therefore be discussed in the following sections.

"I'm not going into business"

When it comes to the economic benefit of engaging in Freecycle, interviewees expressed a range of financial concerns. Some people use Freecycle because it is just that: *free*. Nancy discussed the value of receiving free goods in light of her financial status.

> It's good for poor people who are just like me. I grew up poor. My parents are from the Philippines, and we didn't have much, so we had to take care of things. We were always taught to just keep everything clean and keep everything in working order. Because it's not easy to go and just buy another pair of shoes, or another jacket, or another tool. So, yeah. I try to share that with my kids, letting them know that it's okay if you get something that's used. It doesn't need to be brand new. Because it's like, you're not gonna get it anyway, for one, and two it's like, it's just as good and somebody didn't like it or outgrew it. It still works.

Joan shared a similar appreciation for the novel concept of getting things without having to pay for them.

> It's very good for people who have a very limited budget like I do now. The economy forced me out of semi-retirement. So I'm very careful about spending money on things that I don't have to. If I can get it for free, well, hey, that's right up my alley.

The gifting model of Freecycle is clearly a distinct benefit for Nancy and Joan, two users who do not have a lot of money to buy new items. However, both users discussed posting "offers" as well as "wants," and expressed an appreciation for the multifaceted benefits of Freecycle. If financial status were the sole motivator for Freecycle use, Nancy and Joan would likely only receive and never give.

Other Freecycle users expressed a lack of concern for the gift-based model of Freecycle. They were not interested in the potential profit that they could make by attempting to sell these items. As Melissa told me, "I mean, I'm not going to start selling stuff on Amazon and shipping it across the country, I'm not going into business." Similarly, Daniel acknowledged, "I could run an ad and try to sell it on Craigslist but, eh, it's not worth the time. We don't really need the money that much." Amanda agreed, "I don't want to bargain over a stupid price of money that I don't really need." Financial need did not play a role in their Freecycle use.

However, a few of the Freecycle users I spoke with did express a desire to sell their items if it were easier and more fruitful to do so. Joan reflected:

> I haven't had much luck selling things. Our neighborhood has had an annual fall garage sale, which has been fairly popular…I just haven't managed to sell many things. You sit out there for 3 hours. You can also use a variety things, the Craigslist or eBay, I just haven't moved much stuff.

Although she would like to be able to make a bit of money on her items, Joan notes that it is not worth her time or effort to do so. Linda shared a similar perspective:

> If I can sell it and make money, I'll do that. But a lot of stuff you just can't. It's not worth the hassle where I live to have a yard sale. It's too much of a pain…It's too much work. I've done those and it's like, no, I just want it out of here.

Freecycle is not the only form of exchange that Linda or my other interviewees use; some also sell used items online and all buy some things in stores. In this way, it is important to

acknowledge that Freecycle cannot be conceptualized as an all-encompassing alternative that is outside of the capitalist system. Further, its users do not advocate for a solely gift-based economy. Rather, Joan, Linda, and others acknowledge the value in both monetized and non-monetized exchanges.

This perspective is not incompatible with my definition of a real sharing economy; money does not necessarily "profane the sharing transaction" (Belk 2014a). However, it does suggest that users engage differently with Freecycle, and appreciate its benefits to varying degrees. This finding is consistent with those of Hamari et al. (2009), and acknowledges the potential for the economic gain of Freecycle users. However, according to my interviews, this was never the sole motivating factor.

"I hate wasting"

Freecycle was founded on the premise of, "reuse and keeping good stuff out of landfills" (History & Background Information), a namely environmental cause. However, a consideration of the environmental impact of Freecycle was never the primary reason for membership, although four interviewees did acknowledge this added benefit. As Nancy expressed, "it's hard to see it wasted. I can't just pick up something and throw it away when I know it's still usable. I hate wasting."

Emily also told me about her environmental concern for keeping goods out of the landfill; "It's better to recycle these things, better than just treat them as trash. Not just throw them in the garbage." Similarly, Rose reflected, "I hate to think of it all going to the trash dump when somebody else could use it." William agreed that regardless of users motivations for engaging in Freecycle, "in any case, it's not going into a landfill." Environmental consideration as an

associated benefit, rather than the primary driver of use aligns with the findings of Hamari et al. (2015). In their study, this attitude was only present in Freecycle users' motivations when couple with positive attitudes of collaborative consumption. But regardless of whether or not this was an intended result, Freecycle users actively engage in keeping usable goods out of landfills.

Despite the unique anecdotes and perspectives that people shared with me, this section has illuminated some of the common experiences and motivations of the users in a local Freecycle network. While everyone agreed that we have too much stuff, Freecyclers were motivated to use this sharing platform for a variety of reasons. Freecycle allows its users to give and receive either based on convenience, altruism, concern for the fate of their items, or a combination of these motivations. Encouraged by a tacit social norm of generalized reciprocity, Freecyclers continue to cycle their things through this network. They trust, forgive, and question, thinking about themselves and others users.

However, to a certain extent teasing out individual motives is a futile exercise considering the way that these experiences serve to produce and reinforce one another. For example, generalized reciprocity reinforces a feeling of community on Freecycle, which encourages trust and further promotes generalized reciprocity between its users. This relationship is only a speculative one rather than statistically causal. Nonetheless, it suggests that the multifaceted experience of a Freecycle user must be understood holistically.

Not explicitly discussed or reflected in these stories was the overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic sentiments expressed nonverbally during my interviews. The candor with which these Freecycle users discussed this network, the smiles and intonations, are necessary to acknowledge. I will conclude this section by sharing Emily's explanation of why she uses

Freecycle. I consider Emily's reasoning to be representative of the collective experience and

perspectives shared by the other Freecycle users that I interviewed. Emily told me:

> If I just give something to a friend, like this cup (Emily points to my mug), they will not
> really appreciate it. Instead, I can give it to someone who really needs it. My friend has
> cups, so it doesn't make sense for me to give it to her. But if someone really needs a cup,
> they will post it on Freecycle and I will give it to him or her. And they will be very
> happy, you see? It's not just an item, it's happiness.

Conclusion

By examining the experience of Freecyclers—by understanding the motivations of people who engage in a real sharing economy—the process of distinguishing real sharing from its sharewashed counterpart is not such a tedious task. The perspectives presented by these Freecycle users are neither statistically significant nor generalizable beyond their specific context. However, a greater appreciation for what it means to engage in real sharing, illustrated by these interviews, begins to clarify a distinction that has heretofore remained a theoretical one.

While the scholarly literature and media's representation of "sharing" have debated over 'the what' in defining the sharing economy, this thesis argues that a greater emphasis must be places on the question of 'why?' In the end, obsessing over what we call something, whether it is real sharing or a sharewashed disguise, is less important than acknowledging from where this disagreement really stems. This debate is symbolic. Defining the real sharing economy is a process of recognizing worth that is not valued in dollars and cents, a shift that threatens the foundation of our capitalist economic system.

In the context of this thesis, an understanding of the real sharing economy is based on the underlying motivations that drive these interactions. It refers to a diversity of exchanges (i.e. lending, renting, swapping, gifting, bartering, sharing, etc.) between a network of connected individuals, communities, or organizations, and utilizes an online platform to facilitate offline exchanges, interactions, and experiences. But most importantly, to qualify as real sharing, an activity must have an altruistic and community-minded motivation rather than a profit-driven one at its core.

Although a great range of activities falls within the realm of the sharing economy, they do not all operate in the same way that Freecycle does. Given the gift-based model of this

sharing platform, it is likely that many people will discount its value and view Freecycle as too idealistic. It was with a little cynicism and a lot of skepticism that I too began my exploration of this particular example of sharing. While Freecycle may fall on one end of the sharing spectrum, the values expressed within it define the real sharing economy.

According to my interviews with Freecyclers, people use this sharing platform for a combination of reasons: to tackle an overabundance of stuff, to get the right thing to the right person, to engage in generalized reciprocity, and to feel connected to a unique network of individuals, to name a few. While some of these motives stem from a more selfish perspective (i.e. financial gain or material attachment), altruism, social solidarity, and community lie at the heart of Freecycle users' motivations for engaging in this gifting platform. We can contrast the social ethic embedded within real sharing (i.e. Freecycle) with the singular profit motive of conventional businesses that masquerade as socially, environmentally, and financially sustainable (e.g. Zipcar, Airbnb, etc.).

Despite the negative implications of corporate rebranding, the rise of pseudo-sharing might actually suggest something promising about this trend: people like to share. Companies have started to both recognize and mimic sharing platforms in light of their success and growing demand. And just as consumers have begun to regulate corporate greenwashing (Marquis & Toffel, 2014), so too will they hold businesses accountable for sharewashing. Such imitation suggests that sharing is something worth promoting. This thesis contends that sharing is also worth defending.

This novel social phenomenon is ripe for further trans-disciplinary investigation beyond an analysis of motivations for engagement. Considering the presumed contradiction of increased altruism within a highly individualistic society, further research would benefit from exploring the

cultural implications of this shift. As Freecycle users suggested, giving is a symbolic action. The resurgence of sharing within Web 2.0 and its associated potential for transnational connectedness provides a new forum to investigate the navigation of sharing, a culturally relative practice, within a culturally ambiguous space.

Discussions of the sharing economy often tackle the notion of access versus ownership, an acknowledgment of privileged access is wholly absent. The sharing economy is largely understood as a predominately white, upper class mode of exchange, and ignores its socioeconomic, racial, and age-specific implications. Therefore, further research also ought to investigate the injustice that may be perpetuated by the sharing economy.

Rather than attempt to determine who is "in" and who is "out" of the real sharing economy, this thesis has asserted why this distinction is necessary. A community-minded motivation, not a profit-driven one, defines real sharing from its sharewashed counterparts, and its benefits extend beyond specific transactions. Sharing presumably represents that bright future of the economy. But in the end, whether we continue to own or access, to give or share, we must first acknowledge why.

Appendix I

Participant recruitment email sent in response to "offers" and "wants" on local Freecycle board:

Hi—I'm a senior at Pitzer College interested in learning more about the experience of people who use Freecycle.org. I am contacting you because I see that you have been active on the local group recently. I am writing a senior thesis and interested in hearing about individual experiences within "sharing" and "gift" economies. Would you be willing to share your experience with me in an interview?

If you respond to my email I will follow up to arrange an in-person interview at a mutually agreeable location (such as the Claremont Colleges Library or a coffee shop) that will take no more than an hour of your time. Your responses will be kept confidential and with your consent, the interview will be taped.

Thank you for your time and valuable perspective!

References

Adloff, F., & Mau, S. (2006). Giving social ties, reciprocity in modern society. *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, *47*(01), 93–123.

Agnew, J. C. (2003). The give-and-take of consumer culture. *Commodifying everything, 11-39.*

Agyeman, J., McLaren, D., & Schaefer-Borrego, A. (2013). *Sharing cities*. Friends of the Earth Briefing.

Aigrain, P. (2012). *Sharing: Culture and the Economy in the Internet Age*. Amsterdam University Press.

Andersen, P. (2007). What is web 2.0?: ideas, technologies and implications for education (Vol. 1, No. 1). Bristol, UK: JISC.

Antheunis, M. L., Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2012). The quality of online, offline, and mixed-mode friendships among users of a social networking site. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *6*(3).

Bardhi, F., & Eckhardt, G. M. (2012). Access-based consumption: the case of car sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *39*(4), 881–898.

Belk, R. (2007). Why not share rather than own? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *611*(1), 126–140.

Belk, R. (2010). Sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *36*(5), 715–734.

Belk, R. (2014a). Sharing versus pseudo-sharing in web 2.0. *Anthropologist*, *18*(1), 7–23.

Belk, R. (2014b). You are what you can access: Sharing and collaborative consumption online. *Journal of Business Research*, *67*(8), 1595–1600.

Benkler, Y. (2004). Sharing nicely: on shareable goods and the emergence of sharing as a modality of economic production. *The Yale Law Journal*, *114*(2), 273–358.

Berking, H. (1999). *Sociology of Giving*. SAGE.

Bó, P. D. (2007). Social norms, cooperation and inequality. *Economic Theory*, *30*(1), 89–105.

Botsman, R., & Rogers, R. (2010). *What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*. Harper Collins.

Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 210–230.

Cannon, S., & Summers, L. H. (2014). How Uber and the Sharing Economy Can Win Over Regulators. Retrieved April 27, 2015.

Cheal, D. (1988). *The gift economy*. London: Routledge.

Dervojeda, K., Verzijl, D., Nagtegaal, F., Lengton, M., Rouwmaat, E., Monfardini, E. & Frideres, L. (2013). The sharing economy: accessibility based business models for peer-to-peer markets. *Enterprise and Industry*. Case Study No. 12.

Dippelreiter, B., Grün, C., Pöttler, M., Seidel, I., Berger, H., Dittenbach, M., & Pesenhofer, A. (2008). Online tourism communities on the path to web 2.0: an evaluation. *Information Technology & Tourism*, *10*(4), 329–353.

Ekeh, P. (1974). *Social exchange theory: The two traditions*. London: Heinemann.

Fenton, A. (2013). Making markets personal: Exploring market construction at the micro level in the car-sharing and time bank markets. Unpublished manuscript. Harvard University.

Gansky, L. (2010). *The Mesh: Why the Future of Business Is Sharing*. Penguin.

Giesler, M. (2006). Consumer gift systems. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *33*(2), 283–290.

Gouldner, A. W. (1960). The norm of reciprocity: a preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review*, *25*(2), 161–178.

Graaf, J. de, Wann, D., & Naylor, T. H. (2005). *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (2nd edition). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Hamari, J., Sjöklint, M., & Ukkonen, A. (2015). *The Sharing Economy: Why People Participate in Collaborative Consumption*. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

History & Background Information. (n.d.). Retrieved March 2, 2015, from https://www.freecycle.org/about/background

Horowitz, D. (2005). *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979*. Univ of Massachusetts Press.

John, N. A. (2013). The social logics of sharing. *The Communication Review*, *16*(3), 113–131.

Komter, A. E. (2005). *Social Solidarity and the Gift*. Cambridge University Press.

Lamberton, C. P., & Rose, R. L. (2012). When is ours better than mine? a framework for understanding and altering participation in commercial sharing systems. *Journal of Marketing*, *76*(4), 109–125.

Laufer, W. S. (2003). Social accountability and corporate greenwashing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *43*(3), 253–261.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Beacon Press.

Malinowski, B. (2002). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Routledge.

Mauss, M., & Halls, W. D. (1954). *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Marquis, C., & Toffel, M. W. (2014). Scrutiny, norms, and selective disclosure: a global study of greenwashing. *Harvard Business School Organizational Behavior Unit*. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

Mitchell, L. D., & Ramey, W. D. (2010). Look how green I am! An individual-level explanation for greenwashing. *Journal of Applied Business and Economics*. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

Nelson, M.R. and Rademacher, M.A. (2009). From trash to treasure: Freecycle.org as a case of generalized reciprocity. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 39, 66-67.

O'Reilly, T. (2007). What is web 2.0: design patterns and business models for the next generation of software. *Communications & Strategies.* Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

Owyang, J. (2014). Collaborative Economy Honeycomb 2. Retrieved from http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2014/12/07/collaborative-economy-honeycomb-2-watch-it-grow/

Parmentier, Marie-Agnès (2009). Consumer entrepreneurs: a netnographic study of Facebook's next top model. *Advances in Consumer Research.* North American Conference Proceedings, 36: 906- 908.

Phipps, L. (2007). Web 2.0 and social software: An introduction. Retrieved April 27, 2015, from http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20140614192009/http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/briefingpapers/2007/web2socialsoftwarev1.aspx

Price, J. A. (1975). Sharing: The Integration of Intimate Economies. *Anthropologica*, *17*(1), 3–27.

Prilla, M., & Ritterskamp, C. (2010). The Interplay of Web 2.0 and Collaboration Support Systems: Leveraging Synergies. In D. Randall & P. Salembier (Eds.), *CSCW to Web 2.0: European Developments in Collaborative Design* (pp. 193–218). Springer London.

Resnick, P. (2002). Beyond bowling together: sociotechnical capital. (pp. 647–672). *HCI In the New Millennium.* Addison-Wesley.

Sahlins, M. (1965). On the sociology of primitive exchange: the relevance of models for social anthropology. *The Relevance of Models for Social Research.*139, 236.

Sahlins, M. D. (1972). *Stone Age Economics*. Transaction Publishers.

Schor, J., & Fitzmaurice, C. (2014). Collaborating and connecting: the emergence of a sharing economy. *Handbook on Research on Sustainable Consumption*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK (forthcoming).

Silber, I. F. (2012). The angry gift: A neglected facet of philanthropy. *Current Sociology*, *60*(3), 320–337.

Simmel, G., & Wolff, K. H. (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Simon and Schuster.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Claremont, CA, State and county quickfacts. Retrieved from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0613756.html

Walsh, B. (2011, March 17). 10 Ideas That Will Change the World. *Time*. Retrieved from http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2059521_2059717_2059710,00.html

Weitzman, M. L. (1984). *The Share Economy: Conquering Stagflation*. Harvard University Press.

Wellman, B., Salaff, J., Dimitrova, D., Garton, L., Gulia, M., & Haythornthwaite, C. (1996). Computer networks as social networks: collaborative work, telework, and virtual community. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *22*, 213–238.

Willer, R., Flynn, F. J., & Zak, S. (2012). Structure, identity, and solidarity: a comparative field study of generalized and direct exchange. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *57*(1), 119–155.

Wittel A (2011) Qualities of sharing and their transformations in the digital age. *International Review of Information Ethics*. 15: 3–8.

Yamagishi, T., & Cook, K. S. (1993). Generalized exchange and social dilemmas. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *56*(4), 235–248.

Zhao, Y. (2013). Conceptual analysis of web 2.0 technology use to enhance parent–school relationships. *Education MRP*.