Research in Consumer Behavior

Emerald Book Chapter: When Online Recycling Enables Givers to Escape the Tensions of the Gift Economy

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WHEN ONLINE RECYCLING ENABLES GIVERS TO ESCAPE THE TENSIONS OF THE GIFT ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose − *The present article explores a relatively new way for consumers to dispose of items they no longer use, namely free recycling websites. Online recycling is based on an encounter with an unknown recipient to give something away 'in person'.*

Methodology − *A phenomenological approach was used to understand the meaning of giving through free recycling websites. Placing the focus on the donor's perspective, we analysed Internet postings and conducted 27 in-depth interviews.*

Findings − *Our research shows that (1) when the object is given, the online giver is less concerned about the risk of refusal, since the recipient has deliberately made the choice to take the item; (2) when the item is received, the encounter with the recipient removes the anonymity of charities and (3) in return, the encounter with the recipient offers the*

giver acknowledgement for the gesture without committing them to a relationship with the recipient in the way a gift to kith or kin might do.

Research implications − *While former literature has highlighted certain tensions in the gift economy, this study shows how free recycling websites can help to alleviate such tensions.*

Social implications − *The research highlights how this system of object disposition enhances social interactions between two strangers that share an interest in the same object.*

Originality − *The article shows how this new form of gift-giving relationship is both rewarding and liberating: it is rewarding thanks to the interaction with the recipient (unlike donations to charities) without necessarily creating a bond of dependence (unlike giving to someone you know).*

INTRODUCTION

How do individuals dispose of their possessions when they no longer need them? The way second-hand objects are disposed of is one of the stages in the consumption process (Jacoby, Berning, & Dietvorst, 1977) and, as such, can be analysed in the light of the theory of social exchange (Bagozzi, 1975; Sherry, 1983). Having overcome the potential difficulties in deciding to separate from a possession (Cherrier, 2009; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005; Roster, 2001), there are a number of options available to individuals to pass on discarded items (Jacoby et al., 1977): they can sell them online (Chu & Liao, 2010; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2009) or in flea markets (Herrmann, 1997; Sherry, 1990), give them to family or friends (Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000), to charities (Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996; Sargeant, 1999) or over the Internet (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Giesler, 2006). Our study explores the process of giving items away via the Internet.

The first free recycling websites[1] appeared in the United States in 2003 (http://www.freecycle.org). They then spread across the world, including France (i.e. http://www.recycle.net; http://www.donnons.org;

http://faites-vos-dons.fr/donner.php; http://jedonnetout.com) and the United Kingdom (http://www.recycle.co.uk). They are growing fast: http://www. recupe.net, for example, attracts 15,000 visitors for a volume of 300 donations a day, while http://www.donnons.org counts around 60,000 visits a day. These free recycling websites have a specific feature compared to other forms of donation as they put the givers and recipients, who are strangers but live relatively close to one another, in touch. In other words, it is a local donation system whereby the recipient comes to pick the articles up from the giver's house. Online recycling is different from giving things away to friends and family as it involves meeting a *stranger* to exchange the goods, but it is also different from giving to charities as it involves *meeting* the stranger so as to give them the item personally.

To date, studies that have investigated online recycling have adopted a community perspective to analyse this system (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Giesler, 2006; Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007). However, because of this specific feature, namely the meeting with an unknown recipient, adopting an individual perspective raises new questions that enrich our understanding of gift-giving today: why give to strangers rather than to friends or family if it involves giving the article directly to the recipient? In short, what does meeting a stranger via online recycling generate or resolve for the giver compared to other forms of giving? Existing work on the topic has so far failed to come up with answers to these questions.

Moving away from existing work (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Giesler, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007), we adopt an individual perspective that adds to our understanding of giving to strangers in several ways. On the one hand, it contributes to the model proposed by Marcoux (2009) by highlighting a movement within the gift economy that runs parallel to the market economy and sidesteps the difficulties of giving to friends and family or to charities. At the same time, our study shows that online recycling can be both rewarding and liberating for givers: unlike giving to charities, it nurtures the recognition that some givers seek thanks to the interaction with the unknown recipient, and yet, unlike giving to family or friends, it does not create a bond of dependence.

The article is structured as follows: the first part presents a review of the literature on online giving and on the tensions inherent to giving in general. The second part describes the methodology and the third section analyses the results. In the last section, the results are discussed in the light of the existing literature in order to identify the study's theoretical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tensions Inherent in the Gift Economy

Gift-giving is often romanticised as it provides an alternative to the market economy and the logic of the capitalist system (Marcoux, 2009; Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999; Sherry, McGrath, & Levy, 1993). However, one of the focuses of the consumer behaviour studies investigating gift-giving (Belk, 1979; Belk & Coon, 1993; Joy, 2001; Price et al., 2000; Sherry, 1990) has been on the tension a gift can create between the giver and the recipient (Marcoux, 2009; Ruth et al., 1999; Sherry et al., 1993). Underpinned by anthropology and sociology (Godbout & Caillé, 1992; Godelier, 1996; Mauss, 1923; Sahlins, 1972; Weiner, 1992), these studies explain that while there is no financial transaction involved in gift-giving, the gesture is not entirely disinterested in that it puts an obligation and a feeling of indebtedness on the recipient. Unlike the market economy, which is based on equivalence (Sahlins, 1972), the gift is underpinned by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) even when the giver does not expect any form of reciprocity (Belk & Coon, 1993; Frémeaux & Michelson, 2011), the giver may feel the need to give in turn (Godbout & Caillé, 1992). Reciprocity implies a set of rules and obligations that underpin the exchange and link a gift with a return. These rules incorporate moral standards that ensure solidarity and social stability. The norm of reciprocity therefore helps to keep the relationship alive and creates an extension between the giver and the recipient. The state of subjection that arises from reciprocity allows the relationship to exist and to endure as each gift is followed by uncertainty with regard to the return gesture (Godelier, 1996). The obligation to give back may take the form of immediate reciprocity when giver and recipient have known each other for a short time, longer-term reciprocity when both parties know each other well (Osteen, 2002; Sahlins, 1972) or negative reciprocity. In the case of giving to charities or giving objects away online via website communities like Freecycle, researchers have highlighted a generalised reciprocity ('I give because one day I was given') (Nelson et al., 2007).

So-called traditional gift-giving concerns gifts to friends and family (Godbout & Caillé, 1992). This form of giving is sometimes constrained by family ties or the idea of transmission within the family. The recipient often has no choice but to accept what he or she is given so as, if not to be the user, at least to be the guardian who will in turn transmit the gift to future generations (Cherrier, 2009; Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004; Price et al., 2000). In traditional gift-giving, the recipient generally feels obliged

to accept the gift as refusing would violate the social norm and could be considered as a rejection of the relationship with the other (Roster, 2001; Schwartz, 1967; Sherry, 1983). In short, traditional gift-giving can be constrained by personal interest or a sense of duty.

Modern gift-giving involves giving to strangers (Godbout & Caillé, 1992). Godbout (2000) identified three kinds of gifts to strangers: giving to total strangers where there is absolutely no link between the giver and the recipient; giving to 'known' strangers, characterised by a direct and one-off contact and giving to acquaintances which is closer to the idea of giving to friends and family. Online recycling belongs to the category of gifts to 'known' strangers as there is contact between the giver and the recipient, whilst giving to a charity fits into the category of gifts to total strangers because of the absence of contact with the recipient. Giving to strangers can also generate certain tensions between the giver and the recipient in that it is difficult to spontaneously give an object to a stranger. The latter will probably feel suspicious and may even display aggressive behaviour if offered an object: they may refuse as they cannot make a reciprocal gesture − apart from the highly specific case of beggars who are generally already in a position of demand (Hill & Stamey, 1990). To offset this relational imbalance, giving to strangers needs to be framed by a structure such as a charity or, today, a free recycling website that will organise the circulation of objects. Giving to charities also involves tension: charities do not always state where the donated items will go (Bendapudi et al., 1996) and this lack of information can leave a gap in the giver's imaginary (Bajde, 2009). When giving via an intermediary, the gift does not involve an obligation towards another person as would a gift to friends or family, but is instead linked to a notion of solidarity (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Douglas, 1990; Giesler, 2006). Giving through a charity or a recycling website implies social membership to a community of givers (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Giesler, 2006; Godelier, 1996), or at least to an imagined community (Bajde, 2009), which may not be enough for some givers.

As givers seek to free themselves from the tensions of giving, Marcoux (2009) identified a move away from the gift economy and toward the market economy (Fig. 1). Asking for something, whether a service or an object, can be embarrassing and can create a feeling of obligation. This explains why some people move away from the gift economy to the marketplace. In the past, only flea markets (Herrmann, 1997; Roster, 2001) enabled individuals to meet a stranger in order to pass on an object directly. What do we know from the literature about this meeting in the case of online gift-giving?
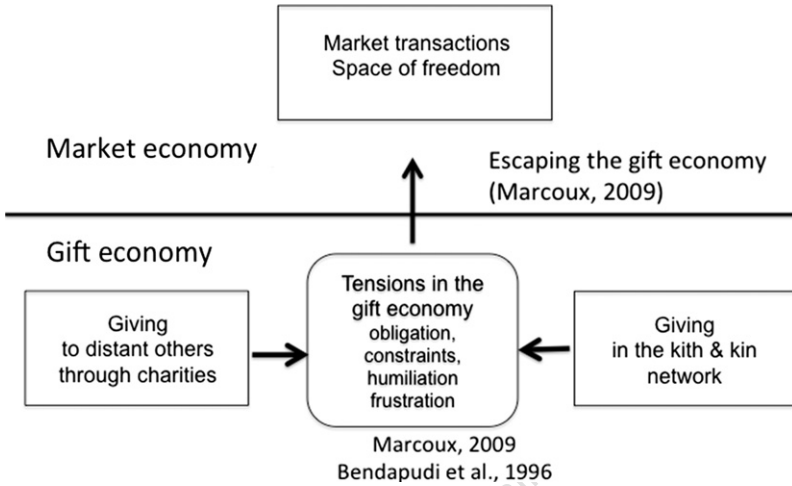
Fig. 1.   Movements in the Gift Economy.

Online Gift-Giving

Online gift-giving has previously been studied in the framework of online communities (Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003; Kozinet, 1997; Okleshen & Grossbart, 1998; Tambyah, 1996), from the sharing of specific objects like music (Giesler, 2006) to material objects (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Nelson et al., 2007). With a focus on the community aspect, these studies explored how a gift system can develop via the Internet. The introduction of gift-giving websites, whatever the nature of the items given, generates (1) new relations with recipients (Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003), with specific relation-ships between web surfers as members of a community and (2) new forms of reciprocity: giveaway websites like *Freecycle* facilitate the non-reciprocal exchange of objects between users who are not looking for immediate per-sonal benefit (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Nelson et al., 2007). They offer a gift system based on generalised reciprocity, which allows the system to exist, to grow and not to be experienced as a form of debt.

Despite their interest, studies on online gift-giving have tended to focus on the community aspect and the ensuing generalised reciprocity (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Giesler, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007). While free recycling websites create a community of givers and recipients, they also promote a meeting between the giver and the unknown recipient. This specificity and

our analytical approach from the perspective of giver raises other questions that enhance our understanding of online gift-giving: in what way do give-away websites remove certain difficulties inherent to the act of giving? What does the encounter with the recipient nurture in the giver which is not nurtured by other forms of giving? Current research has so far failed to answer these questions.

METHODOLOGY

The present study focuses on the experience of people who give away their belongings via free recycling websites. Adopting a phenomenological per-spective approach (Creswell, 1998), we explore the sense of gift-giving for individuals who use such websites to give away their possessions. Our approach was twofold. We first set out to discover these individuals in their 'natural' environment of free recycling websites, in other words online, by analysing Internet postings. Secondly, we sought to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon through in-depth individual interviews with 27 gift-givers.

In the initial exploratory stage, we analysed postings by givers who dis-cussed their online recycling experience so as to become familiar with the ins and outs of online giving. The aim was to understand more about the phenomenon via the comments posted online. This stage enabled us to observe individuals who had experienced online giving, and the interac-tions which followed, without getting involved in any way. The postings came from a variety of giveaway websites (http://www.freecycle.fr; http://www.donnons.fr; http://www.recupe.net; http://www.recupere.fr; http://www.co-recyclage.fr) as well as from other discussion forums (http://www.deedeeparis.com; http://www.consocollaborative.org). We analysed 140 postings made between September 2010 and March 2011 by an active and attentive reading of the data.

Then, to grasp the depth and complexity of the process, we conducted 27 'long interviews' (McCracken, 1988). In line with our research objective, we only chose people who had already given things away online. We selected our respondents firstly with the help of managers from giveaway websites that we had met several times. The sample population thus devel-oped by snowball sampling: in all, we interviewed 12 women and 15 men. The respondents' age ranged from 18 to 85. Some of them only give things away online, while others also give things to their relatives and/or to charities.

The interviews took place at the givers' homes or at the university. The average duration was 90 minutes. The interviews were designed to facilitate interaction and to help the respondents tell their story in their own words (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The aim was to get them to talk about their online recycling experience in the context of the different options available when they decided to dispose of an object. The interviews thus began with a grand tour question (McCraken, 1988): 'Can you tell me about the different options available when you decide to give?' The accounts of giving away possessions were discussed in depth from both a personal and a collective perspective: questions included the last time an item had been given away and the best and worst experience. We finally turned to online gift-giving as experienced by the informant, with questions relative to the givers' experience, as well as their choice and motivation. The interview was conducted as a dialogue (Thompson et al., 1989) and the questions invited the respondents to give examples, to develop, compare and explain. The interviews were fully transcribed for a data-centred analysis (Thompson et al., 1989). An emic approach was taken as the researchers used empathy to try to enter the subjective world of the interviewee in order to understand the meaning behind their verbatim. Two researchers independently reviewed the transcribed data in order to identify global themes. The analysis began with the very first interview, and involved repeated and in-depth readings of each interview, followed by a systematic comparison between interviews. This enabled us to identify a central point that was common to all the interviews and that underpin the significance of the experience, namely the meeting with the recipient.

FINDINGS

During the 27 interviews conducted, we noted the recurrence of the instrumental nature of giving via the Internet: recycling websites were considered as a practical way of getting rid of objects. We also noted ideological and social reasons, such as being environmentally friendly (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012), avoiding waste, helping others (Nelson et al., 2007) and a form of resistance related to anti-consumerism (Cherrier, 2010). In addition to the practical, social and ideological aspects, our analysis shows that recycling websites provide givers with 'something else'. This 'something else' is found in the relationship with the recipient, as the giving process is enhanced by giveaway websites largely through the meeting with the recipient. Thus,

even when the initial aim is simply to get rid of an object, the transaction can be experienced as gift-giving by the donor. The findings indicate that the encounter with the receiver plays a key role in the three-way gift-giving process described by Mauss (1923): giving, receiving and returning. Our analysis focuses on what the meeting between a giver and an unknown recipient offers at each stage of the gift-giving process.

During the Giving Process: Meeting the Recipient without Risk of Refusal

Giving away objects is a complex process: you have to find a recipient and you have to dare offer an object which is not necessarily in a good state of repair. In addition to such complexities and difficulties, givers may fear that the object will be refused by the recipient: this means that their object, which is part of the extended self (Belk, 1988), is not recognised but instead is rejected. Even charities sometimes refuse objects that they cannot sell or give away. Such an object costs money as it has to be dealt with as waste. Giveaway websites provide a means for the giver to avoid this rejection experience as Hélène explained:

> The last time I gave to a charity, it was horrible. I arrived with my bag of clothes and the lady took them and tipped them out all over the counter. This made me feel uncomfortable for a start as I hadn't bothered to iron everything. And there, in front of everyone, she began to sort through them, saying, "that's good, not that . . . no one will want that, it's too worn and old-fashioned." Everyone was looking. It was awful, I just wanted to disappear! I was really embarrassed, it was as if I wanted to pass on all this ghastly stuff to other people. With the internet, it's different. I offer something and if people aren't interested then they don't get in touch. You don't get this sense of rejection through the object, no one's going to write and say: "no thanks, I don't want it" because I'm not giving it to anyone in particular. (Hélène, 27 years old, student).

Hélène's experience clearly illustrates the fact that not finding a taker is less painful via the Internet than in a face-to-face situation, whether giving to friends or family or to charity. If you do not find a recipient through a recycling website, it is not experienced as a rejection of the self, since the objects are proposed to a group of unidentified people: '*I'm not giving to anyone in particular*' she explained. Recycling websites mask the potential rejection of objects, a rejection that the giver is entirely unaware of. Giving an object to friends and family or to a charity is different: individuals offer an object to someone (kith and kin, or a volunteer who makes a selection) who may turn it down. As was the case for Hélène and her clothes, this rejection can give rise to embarrassment and shame which, as a social

emotion, impact on their identity. Moreover, Hélène experienced this rejection as if she was being blamed for a lack of respect towards the beneficiaries by wishing to pass on her old clothes.

Making a gift while not offering it to anyone in particular liberates the giver who is then free to give 'all kinds of objects', in other words, to pay less attention to the items than if they were giving to a charity or to the circle of friends and family. Henri, for example 'offers a wood and leather settee, leather seat torn in several places but structure fine, to be removed before 4 October, thanks', http://www.recupe.net. In the case of online giving, the giver knows that if the meeting takes place, it is because the recipient knows in advance what he or she will find. The giver thus has no qualms about giving 'anything at all' as long as someone can use it. The main thing is to describe the object on offer as precisely as possible. Unlike a kith and kin gift, the object symbolises neither the relationship nor the other (Belk & Coon, 1993) and it does not always have a market value that some charities might expect (Sargeant, Ford, & West, 2006). The giver's identity is therefore no longer in danger of being damaged by refusal as the recipient knows exactly what to expect and accepts the gift with open eyes.

During Reception: Meeting the Recipient to Accompany the Object's Transfer

If the object has been described as objectively as possible in the ad and is valued for its utility, then during the meeting, it loses its neutrality: it is an object that has lived a history. The meeting is characterised by the rituals of separation (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005) which, depending on what the object represents for its owner, may include an account of its history and/or advice on how to use it. For the giver, the aim is to pass on the object and its history, to facilitate the transfer of the object to another person (Roster, 2001), to feel sure it will be used and also, thanks to the encounter, to imagine or discover the object's future. This is what differentiates online gift-giving from giving to charities. The latter give very little information about the future of the donations or about their beneficiaries (Bajde, 2009; Sargeant et al., 2006) and this is a problem for some givers, as Christine explained:

> When I give something, I like to know who it's going to. When I gave my computer away, an old one but it worked well, I wanted a student to have it as I had it when I

was a student. I needed to tell the person that at the time, I'd broken the bank to buy this computer to help me pass my exams. I needed the person to understand that. It was unthinkable for me to give it to someone who'd take it to pieces or who only needed one part. When you go to a charity, they don't care about all that. Even if the volunteers are friendly, it's not the same as seeing the future owner in person and talking to them about the object. When you ask them what they're going to do with it, they often can't tell us. (Christine, 34 years old, Air Hostess).

These findings are consistent with those of the literature (Belk, 1988; Herrmann, 1997; Price et al., 2000; Roster, 2001): by giving an object directly to the recipient, the giver makes sure that it will be used and appreciated. The challenge is to find the 'right person', the one who, by taking the article, implicitly agrees to take care of it. The respondents mention various criteria regarding how they choose the recipient: same age, same values, same history, same passion or interest in the object, same utilisation, same social situation, or the first who answers the ad, the one who does not make a spelling mistake, who explains how they will use it, who lives nearby or who is interested in fighting pollution, or else the person who expresses gratitude. Christine, for example, needed a recipient who reflected herself in order to physically separate from her computer. So, in line with the notion of shared self (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005), she looked for someone 'like her' who had the same experience, the same needs and use for the computer. Sometimes givers feel the need to leave their stamp on the object, their 'essence', in order to remain the symbolic owner. Only a meeting with the recipient can meet this need, as they are able to narrate the object.

Recycling websites create a new dimension in the relationship between the giver and the recipient. They nourish the giver's affectivity by arranging a meeting with a stranger who will in turn have the freedom to use the object as they wish because they will not see the giver again. This ritual of separation is as important for objects with strong sentimental value (Price et al., 2000) as for more utilitarian objects where explanations to the future recipient allow it to be used more productively. Deciding to give an object to a stranger rather than to someone close is not insignificant: the giver is aware of the power he or she has over the object and does not want to exercise any form of control over the object, which could reduce the recipient's freedom. Recycling websites in this case enable people to give without worrying, unlike giving to kin, and to pass on the object personally, unlike giving to charities.

Givers are nonetheless ambivalent about the meeting with the future beneficiary of their objects. This is because, unlike giving to charity, when

using the Internet, the recipient comes to pick up the article from the own-er's. This means that the giver must open up their privacy to a stranger. On the one hand, they say they use the Internet to meet or to choose a recipient; on the other hand, some of them keep the recipients at bay by placing the objects near the exit. This ambivalence is interesting as it char-acterises the type of interaction that givers wish to have with the recipient when they choose to give via the Internet. The reluctance to show their pri-vate life to a recipient shows that the meeting remains a simple encounter and is rarely transformed into a relationship, in other words, a bond with another. This often reveals a desire to limit the relationship with the other, and a feeling of vulnerability with regard to the stranger.

During the Return: Meeting the Recipient so as to be Recognised as a Giver

While in the first two phases, the movement is from the giver to the recipi-ent, in this stage, we see the giver transformed into the recipient via the mechanism of reciprocity. This reciprocity is not a materiel 'return' (Mauss, 1923), as the giver does not expect the recipient to reciprocate with another object, but is instead displayed by gratitude (Godbout & Caillé, 1992). This gratitude may exist when a gift is given to friends or family, and can help maintain a relationship in the long term (Caillé, 2007). Lisa's account highlights the extent to which the direct meeting with the recipient gives meaning to the gift.

> It's really silly, but when the person comes to get something, they say thank you. I enjoy making people happy. When you take something to a recycling bin, it's anony-mous, it's cold, no one thanks you, no one knows that you've given anything. I could take it to a charity . . . it's true you meet someone but even if they say thank you, it's not the same . . . it's odd but I'm tempted to say that it's still anonymous. I'd say that you're not always acknowledged for what you do. The last time I gave something away over the internet, I got a text message the next day saying they were using the chair, I really felt that they were pleased, I really did, I don't know, it was the way they looked at me and the way they said goodbye. And then the next day I got this text message say-ing they were using the highchair I'd given them, and I was so pleased (. . .). Once, a per-son I'd given a small piece of furniture to even brought me some pots of home-made jam. I wasn't expecting it but it was a really nice gesture. (Lisa, 28 years old, Teacher).

Lisa's need for affectivity is nurtured by online recycling. She wants her gift to be recognised. This recognition, often expressed as simple thanks to the giver, begins when the object is received. As Godbout and Caillé (1992) argue, the recognition is twofold, first as the gratitude expressed by

the recipient to the giver and second, as the gratitude of the giver to the recipient who has shown an interest in their object (and thus, indirectly, in the giver). This gratitude is often relatively subtle: a smile, a look, an expression of emotion. In donations to charities, on the other hand, the giver cannot see any emotion in the recipient since the charity serves as an intermediary between them. However, unlike giving to kin, this recognition does not generate a bond of dependence or a relationship with the other. With online recycling, the givers know that the return will either be immediate or will not occur as, generally, the giver and recipient will never see each other again.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study, which contributes to knowledge on disposition behaviour (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Cherrier, 2009; Herrmann, 1997; Jacoby et al., 1977; Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005; Roster, 2001; Sherry, 1990), set out to assess a new form of circulating objects, namely free recycling or give-away websites.

How does online recycling liberate givers compared to giving to friends and family or to charities? Experienced as gift-giving by the giver, online recycling removes the relational difficulties of giving to relatives or to charities in three ways. First, giveaway websites remove the risk of refusal on the part of the recipient. As soon as an agreement has been reached over the Internet with regard to the object, the meeting finalises the object's acceptance. When giving to friends and family, the recipient is more or less obliged to accept the gift. Refusal implies a rejection of the social relationship (Mauss, 1923). Our study shows that recycling websites provide givers with an alternative that circumvents the risk of refusal that can occur with relatives, or even some charities that can be highly selective regarding the quality of the objects accepted. Givers have more confidence and freedom when making a gift if they are not afraid the recipient will refuse. Second, the meeting with an unknown recipient, which was only previously possible via the market (Herrmann, 1997), enables the giver to be present when the object is passed on, and to ensure that the recipient is interested in the object and that it will be (well) used, thus avoiding the anonymity of charities which gives no information about the object's destination. Third, an analysis of the data shows that the meeting with the recipient leads to an expression of spontaneous gratitude, which enhances the giver's self-esteem

without engaging them in a bond of dependence (Godbout, 2000). By nurturing a personal need to be recognised as a giver, online recycling is a form of gift-giving that, like others (Mauss, 1923; Sherry, 1983), fits into the theory of social exchange (Bagozzi, 1975). Finally, online giving minimises the risk of refusal for the giver (unlike giving to relatives or even to charities). The giver meets the recipient in order to pass on the object (unlike giving to charities), and the gift is given value by the instant recognition obtained (unlike giving to charities), without engaging the giver in a relationship of debt (unlike giving to friends or family).

Contributions to Consumer Research

Marcoux (2009) argues that some recipients move away from the gift-giving economy and turn to the market so as not to bother their friends or family or experience the humiliation of a refusal. The marketplace thus acts as a gift of absolution (Marcoux, 2009). Our study shows that recycling websites, like the market, remove the difficulties inherent in giving for the giver while nonetheless offering individuals the possibility to remain within the gift economy. Although they are not mutually exclusive, recycling websites and the market are different: gift-giving is underpinned by a moral economy and selling a monetary economy (Cheal, 1988). The market works according to the rules of equivalence: the relationship between a buyer and a seller ends when the transaction is finalised. The market thus allows the giver to exit the interpersonal relationship at any time (*exit*, Hirschman, 1970) and there is no obligation of reciprocity, unlike gift-giving. Thus, according to their needs and the type of relationship that the individual wishes to have with the future beneficiary of the objects, they can choose between online recycling and the market to avoid the difficulties inherent in giving. By focusing on the existence of a new option which eliminates the difficulties inherent in gift-giving, we enrich the framework of the analysis proposed by Marcoux (2009). Fig. 2 summarises the movements in the gift economy analysed by the literature and the new contribution of this study.

In identifying the importance and the meaning that can be generated by an encounter with an unknown recipient, our study also contributes to the theoretical framework of gifts to strangers (Bajde, 2009; Godbout & Caillé, 1992). Gift-giving is based on the link with the other (Cova, 1993; Godbout & Caillé, 1992; Mauss, 1923): if the recipient has not returned the gift, the relationship will continue as long as there is the hope of a return.
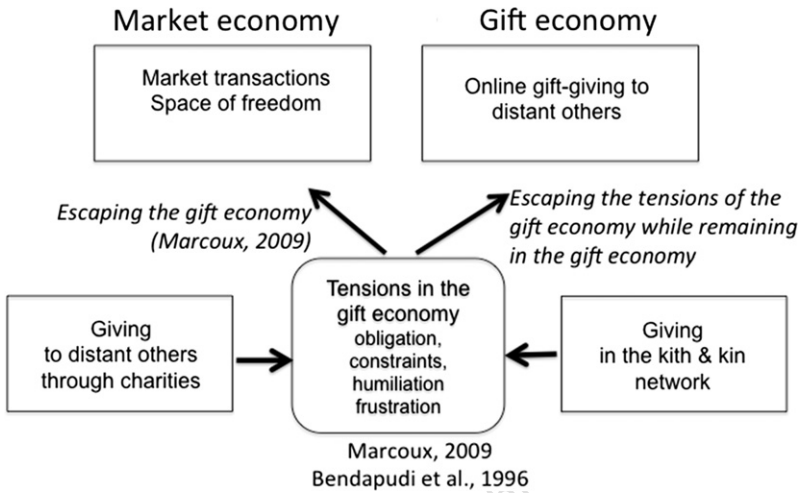
Fig. 2. New Movements in the Gift Economy.

This reciprocity is generalised in the case of online gift-giving systems (Arsel & Dobscha, 2012; Giesler, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007). It is based on a sentiment of community membership where each person gives in order to nurture and keep the community alive. Our study took a different slant, based on an individual perspective, which indicates that in the case of online recycling, it is the encounter with the recipient that gives meaning to the gift-giving process. Initially underpinned by the notion of social solidarity (Giesler, 2006), this gift to a stranger is in fact fuelled by the interpersonal encounter. Some charities have understood this need and provide a partial response by sending the children's school reports to donors who finance their schooling. Our study transcends and adds to these findings by showing that some givers want more: they need a physical encounter with the recipient in order to be recognised as a giver. As Ricoeur (2004, p. 401) pointed out, 'recognition is as much the vision one has of one's own capacities as those of others (...). Interaction is thus necessary to look back at oneself, in other words, for subjectivity to operate'. In online recycling, recognition is not built on the relationship as is the case when giving to friends and family (Caillé, 2007), but rather on interaction. Unlike giving to friends and family, recognition for the online gift does not engage the giver in a long-term relationship. Recognition for the gesture is not expressed within a more or less long timeframe as in the case of kith or

kin, but, on the contrary, gives rise to immediate and spontaneous recognition that is expressed at the moment of giving. In this sense, online recycling can be liberating for the giver, concluding the relationship for the latter in the same way as a commercial transaction, although there is nonetheless a difference: while the recognition is liberating, the spirit of the gift remains (Mauss, 1923).

Future Research Avenues

Our study raises new issues about gifts to strangers. It shows that online recycling, which involves giving to strangers, is embodied in the interpersonal via the meeting with the recipient. This raises questions about the charity model which is based on anonymity and morals. When should there be direct contact between the giver and the recipient? How can recognition be shown for a gift if there is no meeting? It also raises questions about the choice between the gift economy and the market. For example, how do individuals choose between giving and selling via the Internet, as the 'cost' is the same (writing an ad, uploading a photo, choice of buyer/ recipient, interaction with the buyer/recipient, etc.). In other words, which situations lead to a certain choice, which objects are involved, what is the profile of individuals who give and/or sell their objects via the Internet? Lastly, the present study focused on givers, but a study on recipients would open up new perspectives: what signals does the recipient emit so that the giver perceives recognition for his or her gesture? How does the recipient receive a gift via the Internet? Why does the recipient use giveaway websites apart from the obvious reason of getting something for nothing or resistance to mass consumption? How do recipients react if they meet the giver in the street by chance? Do they feel that they owe the giver 'something'? Answers to these questions would contribute to the few studies that have looked at the issue of recipients to date (Otnes, Lowrey, & Kim, 1993; Ruth et al., 1999).

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NOTE

1. The websites we are interested in only concern donations between individuals: charities are not involved and, unlike some minor websites such as http://www.kidonaki.be, for example, do not receive donations.

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