

On the crossroad of Self, Market, and Society

By

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisors:

Professor Prem Kumar Rajaram

Professor Jakob Rigi

Budapest, Hungary

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A (n)ethnography of Freecycle in Romania

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Abstract

Somebody offers twenty books on mathematics. Someone else raises the stakes with a Walkman from the pre-digital era. Maybe you need some cat litter or a couch with signs of usage? Or a small counter or skis or clothes or functional or not so functional computers? A multitude of different objects. Why throw away an object when you can give it away as handout? The Freecycle Network comes with a pertinent response.

All these offerings of objects do not take place in a mall or in a market somewhere at the end of town. They all happen in your email inbox. And in the inboxes of the other few thousand members of the Freecycle Network in Bucharest. Freecycle is a simple Yahoo group that makes connections between people who have objects for which they do not have a usage anymore and want to get rid of, and people who have a usage, if not even a need for those objects. The purpose for all of this? To keep objects that are still good in usage, to not permit objects that can become second-hand to end up in the trash, thus minimizing wastefulness, and, why not, giving a hand to the salvation of our planet. “Recycling through Freecycle renders people the time and money that otherwise would be spent on the manufacturing or acquisition of objects, it makes the planet cleaner and induces, in both donators and receivers, the feeling of gratitude for a good deed”¹.

¹ <http://www.freecycle.org/>

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1. Introduction

The world today can be described as a materialistic consumer society, where post-consumer waste is rapidly and permanently increasing. Let us take a few examples. A good start would be the IKEA products. A company that produces cheap (cheaper than most, at least) furniture for the masses and that has spread all around the world. The concept behind it is simple: producing cheap articles of furniture that have a limited life span. That means their products are easy accessible by the public, over and over again. A customer that buys furniture from IKEA or similar other companies will eventually be put in the situation where that article of furniture breaks. In this situation, there are two options: repair or discard and buy a new one. And seeing that, as said before, the products are cheap, and the process of repairing an object is not very simple, usually people prefer just to buy a new article and not have to deal with the repair of the old one. Another example would be the mobile phone industry. Every day, new models of phones appear on the market, and people are encouraged through different means (from publicity to peer pressure) to buy the last model and discard the old one. There are thousands and thousands of similar examples all around the world, and it is enough for any individual to look outside the window, watch a few commercials or look at the capitalist market to realize the truth about the modern, materialistic, consumerist society we live in.

Many researchers, starting with Mary Douglas, Brian Isherwood, Arjun Appadurai, Ian Holder, Christopher Tilley in the 1970s – 1980s, and continuing with Elizabeth Shove, Jean Baudrillard, Daniel Miller, Ian Woodward to name just a few, have written extensive researches on the subject of material culture and consumption.

The most important similarity between these researches is the fact that all agree modern, developed, capitalist societies are described by material culture and over consumption, as opposed to less developed societies.

In order to better understand how this work, we need to understand the concepts of material culture and consumption. Material culture refers to the physical objects, spaces and resources that individuals use in order to define their culture. In other words, anything from homes, churches, stores, offices to tools, products, means of production or goods. And the list can continue. Miller² proposed that, in order to understand how material culture works, we have to look at the relation between the material objects and their users (subjects), and not only at the objects as such (mass culture is “the dominant context through which we relate to goods”³). He also argues that in the context of mass culture and overall mobility, the classic social categories (gender, race, class etc.) are not enough anymore to describe individuals. They have to be supplemented by the modalities of consumption and other aspects of mass culture⁴. In the words of Ian Woodward, “the term ‘material culture’ emphasizes how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity”⁵. The same Woodward states that “by studying culture as something created and lived through objects, we can better understand both social structures and larger systemic dimensions such as inequality and social difference, and also human action, emotion and meaning. Objects might be seen then, as a crucial link between the social and economic structure, and the individual actor. If we think of the material culture of consumer societies, they are in fact the point where mass-produced consumer objects are encountered and used by individuals, who must establish and negotiate their own meanings

² Miller, 1987

³ Miller, 1987, p. 4

⁴ Miller, 1987, p. 8

⁵ Woodward, 2007, p. 3

and incorporate such objects into their personal cultural and behavioral repertoires, sometimes challenging and sometimes reproducing social structure”⁶. We can understand that objects represent social markers, markers of identity, sites of cultural and political power.

In other words, material culture analyzes the relations between objects and subjects, thus revealing how culture is transmitted, received and produced.

Consumption refers, in a general sense, to the satisfaction of needs. Individuals are non-self-sufficient and have various physiological, psychological, social and cultural needs. Any type of activity that has as purpose the fulfillment of one or more of these needs can be referred as consumption. On the other hand, consumption is not related only to needs, but also desires: consumption is spending tangible and intangible values that are ventured to meet some demand, whether real or fake. In other words, consumption means to have (own) a good or service and to use it in any way necessary in order to satisfy a need. Through consumption, individuals can position themselves among the others and acquire status⁷. Gabriel and Lang⁸ identify five different approaches of consumption. First of all, it can be seen as the way to have a good life and achieve freedom, power and happiness. People are free to choose whatever products or services they desire in order to make them happy. Second, consumption (side by side with work, religion and politics) is one of the ways social status and distinction are achieved. Third, it is the search for an even higher standard of living. This way, global development and capitalism are justified. Forth, it can be seen as a social movement, trying to protect the consumers and their rights (the quality and price of goods and services). Fifth and last, consumption can be described as a political way to gain power. States are no longer providing for the society, but privatize services to corporations.

The capitalist society with its overproduction eventually led developed societies to overconsumption. The economy of sharing, participatory consumerism, gift economies,

⁶ Woodward, 2007, p. 4

⁷ Baudrillard, 1998

⁸ Gabriel and Lang, 1995

sustainable consumption, communities of practice – all of them have in common the fact that they represent different viable alternatives to capitalist market and overconsumption. For the purpose of this paper, I will later refer to all of them by “marginal economies”.

There are many different ways in which people have managed to avoid overconsumption. Inspired by need (economic), by ecology or by different other aspects, people have managed to create ways in which they consume less, by buying at lower prices, exchanging objects and service, reusing objects and so on. These new types of consumption are spreading all over the world, from second hand shops to communities of practice like Freecycle.

In his celebrated book, Marshall McLuhan has already pointed at the crucial role of communication in framing both individuals and societies⁹. From a different perspective, Jack Goody insisted in his turn on what he explicitly calls “communication technologies”, considering them as playing the role Marx attributed to the means of production¹⁰. In this respect, present CMC (computer-mediated communications) are by all means such a new “communication technology”, framing both social relations and personal meanings via what Stone calls “technosociality”¹¹. In their turn, fieldwork methods also adapted to this *sui generis* field, shifting from classical ethnography to what Robert Kozinets has coined in the early ‘90s as “netnography”¹², further aiming at the ideal of a “thick description”.¹³

In this perspective, *Freecycle*¹⁴ is a borderline social network, in-between virtual and “real”, personal interactions and object circulation. It has started as a non-profit ecologic-minded organization in 2003, in Tucson, USA and the concept has since spread to over 85 countries, with over 8 million members around the world organized in 4,903 local

⁹ McLuhan, 1962

¹⁰ Goody, 1977

¹¹ Stone, 1992

¹² Kozinets, 2009

¹³ Elliot and Jankel-Elliot, 2003

¹⁴ <http://www.freecycle.org/>

“communities”. The main purpose is to use objects for as long as possible by changing the owner, thus “changing the world one gift at a time”¹⁵. The objects circulating via these networks and the reasons behind them are extremely diverse.

As such, Freecycle can be considered a crossroad of social constructions and meanings much beyond just the virtual-real inbetweenness. It embeds the “social life of things”¹⁶ as they move between domestic space and market, profit, need and/or pleasure-driven, mixing the logic of gift and exchange, bridging identity and sociability in emerging “communities”.

Although there are abundant researches on marginal economies (as specified before, from sustainable consumption to communities of practice), an online search showed that Freecycle Network as such has not been very well covered. Moreover, Freecycle Romania, with its peculiarities, has never been researched.

¹⁵ <http://www.freecycle.org/>

¹⁶ Appadurai, 1986

2. Research questions

The main purpose of this paper is to make a case study on Freecycle Network. In order to do this, the (n)ethnography that will be conducted has to give answers to a few important questions:

First of all, what is the magnitude and structure of the Freecycle phenomenon in time and space? Second, what are the real practices inside the network? Third, what are the meanings of these practices for its users? In order to respond to these last two questions the research will be limited to the Bucharest Freecycle Network. The next aspect this paper will try to explain is related to the needs that the practices inside Freecycle Bucharest respond to. Next question relates to the way these practices fit the historical and socio-economical context of Romania. And last but not least, how do the practices fit the general context of marginal economy?

3. First contact

Early in 2010 I was living in a small apartment in Bucharest and working as a qualitative research analyst for a big research company. The financial advantages, especially seeing that this was my first job after finishing college, were amazing. One could say that I was “living the life”: I was monthly buying new items for myself or for my apartment, going on trips, and basically spending my entire salary. I did not have the worry of tomorrow and did not think in advance to save money for rainy days. I was overconsuming.

“It is not normal to go bankrupt just because we cannot restrain ourselves from this cycle of buying cheap and throwing away fast” (Lucian Sandor, Bucharest Freecycle administrator). I did not realize how true these words were until, in 2010, the company I was working for went bankrupt. And in that moment everything changed - money became scares, and what I had I spent only on the necessary, like food and housing. No more new gadgets, no more expenses on worthless objects. Something stopped working, something else broke? My new motto was do not throw away, try to fix it.

At one point after I remained jobless, my bed broke. It was impossible to buy a new one, so I started to search for alternatives. In a short time, the solution came from a friend: Freecycle.

New to the concept, I started to search for information about the network, and shortly after decided to join. At the beginning I had no expectations and thought that mainly the members of Freecycle exchange worthless objects that no one can use. How wrong I was. In just a few hours I was familiarized with the rules of the network and was browsing the emails from the members. To my surprise, during that month three beds were on “offer”: two of them had already found their ways to new owners, but the third was still there, just waiting for someone to take it. I sent a reply, asked if I could have it, and the next morning I received the

confirmation. In the afternoon, with the help of a friend, I took possession of my new bed, which was in almost perfect condition. When I asked the owner why he was giving away an expensive object in good condition, the answer took me by surprise: “I just bought a new one, and I don’t have time to get rid of the old one; this way, it’s easier, and anyway you seem to need it more than I do” (Male, around 50; name escapes my memory).

Although, initially, my only purpose was to find a bed for my apartment, after the acquisition, something kept me as a member of Freecycle. I did not take any more objects, nor gave objects to others. But from time to time I kept checking the community, in order to see if there is something interesting to be had. Just like going to a big fair, but without leaving the comfort of my home.

One year later, in 2011, after deciding to apply to a master abroad, the idea for this paper came from the same friend who introduced me to Freecycle: “Why not make a study on Freecycle as an online community? You are already a member, and it is right on your alley” (B.I, male, 29). From that moment, Freecycle Bucharest became for me more than just a way to spend time, it became a field of research.

4. Methodology

“The new social world is online. Internet penetration rates continue their global climb. Reasonably, we can say that over a billion people now participate in various forms of social media. We are in the midst of a technology-led communal revolution”¹⁷.

Robert Kozinets, as a PhD student in 1995, realized the importance of online communities for marketing and research, and became interested in creating a method for Internet based marketing research, which he called netnography.

“One methodology recently introduced in the consumer research literature is that of netnography, an interpretive method devised specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet. Netnography can be defined as a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology”¹⁸.

In many ways (from where the name), netnography is the same as ethnography, but adapted to fit the peculiarities of the online communities.

“In netnography, online interactions are valued as a cultural reflection that yields deep human understanding. Like in person ethnography, netnography is naturalistic, immersive, descriptive, multi-method, adaptable, and focused on context. Used to inform consumer insight, netnography is less intrusive than ethnography or focus groups, and more naturalistic than surveys, quantitative models and focus groups. Netnography fits well in the front-end stages of innovation, and in the discovery phases of marketing and brand management”¹⁹.

¹⁷ Kozinets, 2010

¹⁸ Kozinets, 1998

¹⁹ Kozinets, 1998

There are five stages a netnographic research has to pass to in order to be complete: Research focus, community identification and selection, engagement, immersion and data collection, analysis and interpretation, and finally findings.²⁰ After choosing the topic of the research and identifying and selecting the community as a field of research, the next step is to enter the community as a new member and not as a researcher and start contributing to that community. After establishing oneself as a member of the respective community, the netnographer must take in consideration the ethical aspects: identifying and explaining the reason of research, asking for permission, consulting with the experts, citations, cloaking and crediting.

There are three types of data the researcher can collect: archive (which is done without the researchers involvement), elicited (done in collaboration with the members) and field notes (observational and reflective notes). In some cases, computer assisted programs may be used in order to gather, classify and analyze the data.

Netnography presents a few advantages in comparison to classic ethnography: more cost-effective and less time consuming (it can be done exclusively online, removing the space frontiers and allowing more time to be invested in the research), less obtrusive (as it is more natural, without the need to invade the subject's private space), easy accessible (as many online communities are) and with easy access to the past (archives for example).

On the other hand, it also has limits: "The limitations of "netnography" draw from its more narrow focus on online communities, the need for researcher interpretive skill, and the lack of informant identifiers present in the online context that leads to difficulty generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample"²¹. Because of this, the researcher

²⁰ Kozinets, 2010

²¹ Kozinets, 2002

must not generalize the results of the study to any other off- or on-line communities and “must reflect the limitations of the online medium and techniques”²².

In order to achieve my objective, I have followed the classical steps of anthropological fieldwork adapted to the specificities of this CMC field. While avoiding placing a priori my enquiry in a preliminary and fixing theoretical frame, I have tried to follow the “roads” mentioned above. Thus, I have started with “learning the language” by an immersion in the local Bucharest Freecycle “community” while keeping a “field diary” of my encounters with the “locals”. Once familiarized with this universe, I have tried to produce a “thick description”²³ of the actors and their practices, both in the virtual and the “real” world (who are the people engaged in Freecycle – out-ruling the “tourists” and keeping in mind mainly the “insiders”²⁴ (active members) – what and how they exchange, their rituals and discourses about these behaviors. I have conducted in-depth interviews with 18 members of the Freecycle Bucharest Network; also, small discussions have taken place when giving and receiving objects to and from the community. I have tried to provide “object biographies”, following the empirical and symbolical trajectories of some exchanged objects. Unfortunately, the short period of time when the research had taken place made it quite difficult for the objects I was keeping an eye on to change their owner. All these data will be interpreted referring to the peculiarities of the Romanian post-socialist society and its *longue durée*, with a focus on the still existing preserving behavior and kin limited exchange practices.

The limitations of this research are the ones given by the method used. Although it is probable that there are many similarities between the Freecycle networks in Romania (and many differences regarding the ones from other countries), the results can only be applied to the Bucharest Freecycle community, the only one that was researched.

²² Kozinets, 2002

²³ Elliot and Jankel-Elliot, 2003

²⁴ Kozinets, 2009

This research has not taken into consideration demographic data, as it is almost impossible to gather such information online, without the help of a quantitative research. The elements studied were: exchange practices, the relations created around these practices and the reasons behind these practices.

5. The field

5.1 The rise of Freecycle

In 2003, American Deron Beal was working for a small non-profit organization called RISE. At that time, RISE was providing recycling services for the city of Tucson, Arizona. RISE's employees were driving around town in teams and recycling different objects that were thrown away by the locals. Sometimes, perfectly good objects that could have been used for many more years were found just lying on the street. Realizing the objects they had found could have been re-used, Deron and his team tried to give them to different non-profit locals. Unfortunately for them, this was a complicated process that was taking too much of their time. At that point, trying to find a better solution for the reallocation of the objects recycled, Deron Beal came with the concept of Freecycle. On May 1st 2003 he created a small community of 30-40 friends and some nonprofits in Tucson through a group of email, thus starting the Freecycle Network.

Since its beginnings, The Freecycle Network has spread to 85 countries around the world, organized in thousands of local groups and grown to more than eight million users world-wide.

Freecycle does not have as a purpose the idea of donating only to the poor. Nor does it promote receiving as many objects as possible just because they are free (although, inevitably, this is one of the results). Although through its written rules it condemns the idea of making a profit through the gathering of free objects, sometimes these practices happen.

Freecycle Network is all about reducing the amount of usable objects that get thrown to the garbage. Through it you can give away objects as gifts and at the same time get rid of the unwanted objects, objects that other people may be interested in.

Without any obligations, Freecycle members create a feeling of generosity while consolidating the bonds in and between the local community and promote the sustainable environment development and the re-usage of resources.

Freecycle as an international Network has become, since its beginnings, one of the biggest environmental communities. As it is said on the main site, Freecycle is all about “changing the world one gift at a time”.

The reasons for which members all around the world use the Freecycle Network are numerous: some do it to save the environment, some in order to gain personal financial advantages (trading the objects gathered elsewhere), some because they want to get rid of useless objects, some as reaction to the consumerist trend, some because they are in need for different items that they cannot obtain through purchase (for different reasons, usually financial), some just for the fun of it, some because they are not used or do not want to throw away objects that can still be used and some just to make a good deed and help others.

5.2 Freecycle Romania

In Romania, the first Freecycle group was representing the entire country and had three members, one in Bucharest and the other two in a town far away from the capital. Lucian Sandor, a member from Bucharest, who later became the administrator of the Bucharest Freecycle Network, believed in the concept behind Freecycle and promoted it as much as possible, mostly to students. Since then, Freecycle Network has spread in Romania to fifteen cities and more than ten thousand members (more than half of them being members of the Bucharest group).

Today, the Bucharest Freecycle Network is composed of 7200 members, who everyday are involved in a process of “exchanging” objects. All members have to agree when

joining the group with the specific rules. In case they break these rules, the moderators of the network can ban them from the group, for a limited time or for good.

The rules are related to the types of objects that can be exchanged and to the methods that have to be used in order to give/ ask for objects. Also, there are a few pointers explaining how a Freecycle community should work.

First of all, “maintaining order assures the efficiency of the group. The success of the group is given by everyone’s effort. We have to fulfill our roles and keep calm”²⁵. Second, the group has to “remain free, legal and accessible to minors”. “Objects have to be tangible and irreversibly pass from one owner to the next. One cannot ask for services, advices, opinions, rentals, jobs, sales [...] Money and similar values (ticket concerts, coupons) can be offered but not requested [...] One cannot ask or offer cigarettes, alcohol, illegal substances, weapons, prescription medicine, legal or illegal”. Another important rule is “no exchanges, only donations”. Also, “one cannot ask or offer an object more than once per month”. The list continues with different advices, from the Freecycle etiquette (how one should act in a politely manner) to solutions of using Freecycle’s maximum potential.

Once a new member agrees to these rules, he or she can start using the network with no restrictions. And as long as the members do not break the rules, they can continue to do this for as long as they desire. On the other hand, if a member breaks the rules, he or she will be kicked out from Freecycle. There are three moderators for the Bucharest Network, a main one (Lucian Sandor) and two other who help the main one. Their responsibility is to check each and every email sent from the members, to see that all rules have been respected and to “maintain order” in the community. Other Freecycle Networks around the world have many more moderators, but also more members. Seeing that the Bucharest one only has 7200

²⁵ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xDyMZo-nNLTOmVUSXiv0hH4oVT38LBhw3mq5TSEktK0/preview?pli=1>

members and around 250 emails per month, three moderators are more than enough to keep the group working.

So how does Freecycle actually work?

As presented above, Freecycle works on an email platform. Members can ask or offer an object as a donation through an email sent to the entire group. The emails have to be written in a specific way described in the rules. This applies mainly to the title of the email, but also has suggestions related to the contents. There are only four types of emails one can send to the entire group. The titles for these should look like this:

- a. Giving: [object name]
- b. Given away: [object name]
- c. Looking for: [object name]
- d. Taken: [object name]

Any other type of message will be removed, and the one that sends it is risking to be banned forever from the network.

The member who first starts a topic (is giving away or requesting an object) is responsible to close the topic when the donation has taken place. Two years of observation have led to the conclusion that this does not happen in all cases. Sometimes topics remain open even if the actual donation has finished and the object in question has found a new owner.

Regarding the contents of the emails, there are no clear rules (different than the ones described above), but there are a few pointers that make everything go smoothly and that everyone follows. These pointers relate more to the offered objects, and not to the ones that are requested. If one requests an object, it is enough to write it in the title (looking for a bed for example). Only in rare cases more information is needed and added in the actual email. In the case of offered objects on the other hand, the email should present more details about the

object(s) in question, with pictures if possible, and with information regarding the place from where the object(s) can be taken (the area where the giver lives, or where the object can be found).

No personal information is given in these four types of emails that can be seen by everyone. This only happens when two members agree on a donation: the one that gives away an object (either because he or she started the topic about the object in question, either because he or she responded to a demand for an object) chooses who to give it away to and offers exact information on how and where the donation will take place. Once the object has changed owner, the topic is closed through another email sent to the entire group.

5.3 Disposition and acquisition of second-hand objects

The disposition and the acquisition of second hand objects are two different practices that present different motivations and habits. On the other hand, they are both part of a bigger picture of the cycle of reusing objects. In order to better understand them, these two practices will be treated separately.

Let us first take the example of a second hand shop. Here, the processes of acquisition and disposition of second hand objects (from clothes to furniture) are two distinct actions. On one hand, people who, for one reason or another, decide to dispose objects that they own, only have to go to a second hand shop and sell them at a (usually) low price to that company. They get in, they sell their object, thus increasing, even if only by little, their budget. And the process ends here. The object that wasn't needed anymore is out of their lives forever, and also their budget has increased a little. The same thing happens with the acquisition of objects. With the same idea in mind of being careful with their budget, people decide to buy from second hand shops the objects that they have a need for. They prefer this solution to the

acquisition of new items mainly for financial reasons. The only thing that these two practices of disposition and acquisition of second hand objects have in common is the actual second hand space where the transactions take place. The seller and the buyer of the same object never meet, and no social relations are created.

Freecycle Bucharest Network is an online second hand space that is not based, like most second hand spaces (real or online), on a financial transaction, but on the idea of donations. The processes of acquisition and disposition of objects are much more connected than in the case of second hand shops. This happens because Freecycle is not a company that has profit in mind and thus acts only as a platform, a means for people to be able to donate and acquire second hand objects for free. Because the donor and the receiver have to meet face to face in order for the donation to take place, Freecycle Network, as opposed to second hand shops, also presents a social characteristic: social relations take place with every donation, and sometimes, strong bonds and even friendships are created.

Up to the moment this paper has been written, on Freecycle Bucharest there were almost 14.000 emails sent. As we saw before, in order for an object (or a group of objects) to change owner and the topic to be closed two emails need to be sent to the entire network. This means, in theory, that since 2005 when the group was first created, around 7000 objects or better said groups of objects (members usually offer more than just one object in the same email) have found their way to a new owner. In the first four years, until 2008, only 250 emails were sent, and not all the objects managed to change owners, seeing that the group was very small. Since 2009, the group has started to become bigger and bigger, and thus the number of emails sent and of objects donated has risen exponentially. Today, around 150 objects or group of objects are donated every month, with a lowest point of around 100 objects per month and a maximum of 225 per month (fig. A).

Fig. A²⁶

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2013	297	215	222	233	229	309	324	47				
2012	248	227	290	262	260	200	193	248	238	263	217	218
2011	281	274	240	191	227	226	287	213	226	326	232	194
2010	449	271	271	227	301	247	286	257	349	334	285	228
2009	110	136	147	186	200	148	179	248	239	269	240	223
2008	7	9	2	14	10	8	23	25	30	32	45	27
2007				1			1	2		4	1	
2006	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	1		
2005				1	3	2	4	1	2	1	1	2

As opposed to the second hand shops, when an object is disposed by a member, it requires an immediate acquisition of that particular object from another member. Freecycle does not act as a deposit box where objects are stored by the ones who wish to dispose them and then acquired by the ones that need those objects. It just offers the necessary connection for two members to make the “exchange”. The rest is up to the members.

Out of the 7000 existing topics inside Freecycle, more than two thirds represent dispositions. To give an example, in 2013, out of almost 1000 topics created around 700 represented dispositions of objects. This suggests that the disposition of second hand objects is a more important aspect on Freecycle than the acquisition. Because most Freecycle users give away objects and do not ask for them, it also suggests that the financial aspect is less important than, for example, the need to get rid of an object or the desire to increase the life of an object.

The objects donated through Freecycle Network are very diverse, but can be inserted in a few categories. The next two charts will present the categories of objects that are most donated (fig. B) and requested (fig. C).

²⁶ http://groups.yahoo.com/group/freecycle_bucuresti/

Fig. B

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Babies	Everything baby-related
Written	Books, magazines
Clothes and accessories	Any type
Electronics and appliances	Different devices, working or broke
DIY	Tools, materials
Furniture	Household furniture
Home	Furnishing, equipment
Music	CDs, amps, instruments
Toys	Toys and games, all ages
Cars	Anything car related

Fig. C

Furniture	Household furniture
Babies	Everything baby-related
Clothes and accessories	Clothes all ages
Electronics and appliances	Especially useful home appliances

As we can clearly see, many more categories of objects are offered for donation than they are requested. This could be happening for different reasons that will be discussed further, but also because there are so many objects offered that the people who are in need of

them do not need to post their own requests; they just have to browse the emails and usually find what they need.

5.4 The actors and their practices

The lack of a quantitative research on Freecycle Bucharest Network makes it impossible to reveal the demographics of the group. On the other hand, observation and interviews revealed a few typologies for the actors that are involved in this community. The first difference that has to be made is between the insiders and the outsiders (tourists)²⁷.

The outsiders represent a small part of the Freecycle Bucharest Network and can be divided into two categories: long time tourists and the short time profiteers.

The long time tourists are those users who, just like me in my first two years of membership to the community, prefer to stay behind the scenes and just browse the offers, from time to time, out of curiosity. These users have entered Freecycle out of curiosity for this new type of “market”. They usually do not respond to donations and almost at all do not offer their own donations. From time to time they do respond to requests, if by chance they possess the required object and do not have any use for it (or better said the particular object occupies their space for no good reason). The main reasons that drive these users to keep their membership are the curiosity for the multitude of objects that other users donate and the fact that Freecycle is a free community that anybody has access to as long as they respect the rules. And because the long time tourists usually do not create their own topics for donations, it is quite impossible for them to break the rules and be kicked out of the network. In other words, one can say that, after the initial curiosity for this new type of “market”, long time tourists remain as members out of inertia. “I entered in 2008, I wanted to know what is all

²⁷ Kozinets, 2009

about [...] I have responded to four requests since then and gave away some electronics that were occupying my living space for no reason [...] that's it.." (G. H., male 34). "I don't know why I'm still on Freecycle. It's just... [short pause] well why not?" (M. P., male, 19).

The short time profiteers represent a very small, but permanent percent of the actual community. This type of users is present in every type of market possible, Freecycle making no exception to this rule. The profiteers are those users who use Freecycle for one purpose and one purpose alone: to obtain material benefits through the donations. They try to keep a low profile in order not to be kicked out of the community, but fortunately the moderators are keeping their eyes on everything that happens online on the Freecycle platform, and receive tips from the other users, the insiders. This is why I have added the notion short time to the category of profiteers: they usually do not last long, because at one point or another they are discovered by the moderators and banned from all Romanian Freecycle Networks. Although I did not get the chance to meet someone from this category, I have met insiders that have had experiences with them: "[the profiteer] came to pick up an old computer I had laying around, he said he collects all kind of objects and demanded to see what else I have to give [...] it looked suspicious so I sent an email to the moderator about it" (G. I., male, 31).

The insiders represent the biggest part of Freecycle Bucharest. They are those users who are really involved in the community, who donate objects, who chose who to give them to, who browse the platform on a weekly basis. Observation and interviews led to different typologies for the insiders.

First of all we have the classic insider. Most insiders fall into this category. Their reasons are very diverse, and usually intertwined (from economic reasons to practicality to the need of disposal). The classic insider generally donates groups of objects, around once per month. From time to time requests are made, but only for specific objects that were not found through the browsing of the topics created by others. The classic insider does not depend on

the donations made inside Freecycle, but prefers to have access to it, for those moments when acquiring a new object does not seem to be a rational choice (the same object, although second hand, may be found on Freecycle, and there is no need for it to be new) or for when objects he or she owns have to be disposed of (and through Freecycle it is the easiest way).

Second we have the student and/ or the family on a low budget. This type of user uses Freecycle mainly out of an economic reason. With low budgets (be them students or families), acquiring new necessary objects is not always a possibility. Because of this, alternatives to the classic consumption patterns have to be discovered. Seeing that Freecycle works on the idea of (theoretically) unilateral donations, it represents the best solution for this category of users. “I cannot afford to buy new stuff, I can barely manage to put food on the table [...] Freecycle is the only solution for me to acquire the things I want or need but do not have money to buy” (A. I., female, 26). Although the student/ family on low budget does not always have objects to spare, he or she is very grateful for the donations received and feels the need to give back, somehow, something, to the community. Through donations, objects change their owner. After the donation has taken place, the new owner usually keeps that particular object forever (or until, being second hand, it breaks and cannot be used anymore). In the case of this category of users on the other hand, objects tend to change more than two owners. This means that they request or receive a particular object (for example, for the families on low budgets, baby related items; or for the students, books and articles) and when there is no more need for that particular object, they offer it back as a donation to the community. “One year ago someone gave me clothes for my little girl [...] now she is bigger, does not fit into them anymore, so I will be giving it back to whoever needs them more” (J. A., female, 36). This way, the same object is invested with a longer life and a lot more personal stories and feelings.

The third type of insider is the big hearted user. This user normally does not request objects nor does he or she respond to donations from others. For this user, Freecycle is a platform that is not used in order to acquire objects nor is it used to dispose of objects because it is easier this way. The big hearted insider uses Freecycle in order to help other users who do not have any other means of acquiring the things they need. “I have a good life, no financial problems, my kids have grown up [...] everything that is not used anymore in our family, from old toys to clothes, I donate to the needy through this [Freecycle]” (R. M., female, 38). This type of user browses the Freecycle platform on a weekly basis, searching for posts with requests or adding own donations. Also, the aspect of choosing who will receive the donation is very important here. The receiver must be a person who actually has a need, and not only a desire for a specific object. “When I make a post [topic] I always wait a few days before deciding who to give it to [...] if you give it [the donated object] to the first comer, maybe later you will regret you have not waited more and gave it to someone that needed it even more” (R. M., female, 38).

The forth type of user is the keeper and represents an important part of the community. The saver does not have big financial problems and can afford to buy new. Even so, the saver will always prefer to step out of the classic consumption patterns, of the capitalist market and try to use objects for as long as possible, by repairing them or changing owners. “I have never thrown away a usable object. I repaired them. I reused them. Over and over. And if I had no need for the, than I sent them to my family. Or friends. Or someone that needed them. Now I use Freecycle.” (V. L., male, 64). “Why should I buy a new armchair from Ikea when I can have one in good condition for free?” (H. M., male, 39). The saver is the one that uses Freecycle for both donating and requesting objects, basically with no differences. When a need or desire for an object appears, a request is made; and when an owned object is no longer needed, it is offered for donation. The saver also sees Freecycle as a market regulator: “Most

of all, I see in Freecycle a mechanism of market regulation. You cannot sell furniture that lasts for one year, if the market has access to durable and free furniture” (Lucian Sandor, Freecycle Bucharest administrator).

In fifth place we find the lazy user. This type of user resorts to Freecycle mainly in order to get rid of unwanted objects in an easy manner. Because the one who receives the donation has to go to the one that offers it, it represents a very simple modality to get rid of the objects that are no longer needed and occupy space for nothing (especially big objects, like furniture). “I live with my brother for three years now [...] we have received from the start a lot of things from our parents and grandparents [...] now we have too many things we do not use, so we have to get rid of them [...] to get rid of a massive library, seeing that we live on the 7th floor.. it is not easy. But it becomes very easy with Freecycle” (M. P., male, 19). The lazy users usually never request for objects, nor do they respond to donations offered by other members.

The sixth type of user is the collector. Although the collectors are not numerous, they are very consistent. They use Freecycle in the same manner they would use a second hand shop or a market fair or anything else that sells or exchanges objects. The important aspect for this type of user is not the fact that Freecycle is free; more important is the fact that it offers the possibility to find old objects that may fit with their collecting desires. “[...] I love computers, especially the old models. I love to make them work again [...] it is my passion! I go to fairs, second hand markets, anywhere I can to find old computers. Freecycle is just another way for me to obtain what I want, and I have to admit it is easier this way” (G.I, male, 31).

Freecycle worldwide has started as an ecological movement and has mainly worked on this premise: recycling. This means that there should be a seventh type of users, the

ecologists. The interviews conducted and participant observation on the other hand led to a different conclusion.

Out of eighteen interviews, none of the respondents has mentioned an ecological reason for using Freecycle. When pressed about the matter, most of them agreed that the network favors a more ecological behavior. This was though just a discourse, prompted by my interest in the subject. In reality, none of the interviewees has the ecological aspect as a driving reason for the exchanges they make.

When discussing this matter, some of the interviewees drifted towards the idea of what seems to be anti-consumerism - again, we go back to the administrator of Freecycle Bucharest: “It is not normal to go bankrupt just because we cannot restrain ourselves from this cycle of buying cheap and throwing away fast”. Others embraced the mentalities from the past – “I have never thrown away a usable object. I repaired them. I reused them. Over and over. And if I had no need for the, than I sent them to my family. Or friends. Or someone that needed them. Now I use Freecycle” (V. L., male, 64).

5.5 The social aspects

The social component of Freecycle is a very important one: Freecycle acts like a combination between community and society and gives its members the comfort of belonging to one.

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies makes a distinction between community (*gemeinschaft*) and society (*gesellschaft*). These two forms of cohabitation present two distinct forms of will. The community is characterized by an organic, instinctual, natural, original will that comes from the vital needs, while society is based on a reflective, rational, utilitarian will. “It is a community everything that in the creation of thought or social

representation of people is natural or spontaneous; society, everything that is the effect of art”²⁸. “The relation itself and thus the social bond is conceived either as real and organic life – this is the being of community, either as an ideal and mechanical construction – this is the concept of society”.²⁹ This way, community is based on customs and common experience, while society is a complex, but artificial aggregate based on public opinion, legislation and conventions. Community forms are in his vision the only ones that can preserve memory and tradition, while social forms are indifferent to collective memory. The community is realized by all parts involved, while in society everyone is for him/ herself.

The Freecycle Network is described on the official page as being an “entirely non-profit movement of people who are giving (and getting) stuff for free in their towns”³⁰ organized in groups (one city, one group). Each of these groups represents a community by itself, with no other relation to the other groups other than the common goal and way of organization.

Durkheim³¹ differentiates community and society based on the type of solidarity it has. In Freecycle groups, people share common values and beliefs that constitute a collective conscience that works internally in every individual in order to cause them to cooperate. When talking about common values between the members, the reference is made only about the insiders, and not about the tourists.³² The insiders share the same goals, values and/ or beliefs: these are, as the Freecycle Network suggests, to “change the world one gift at a time” (recycling, getting rid of objects without destroying the environment), the desire to help individuals more unfortunate than them, the simple need of getting rid of one’s old belongings as fast as possible without having to put a lot of work into it; another motive is the need of belonging to a community, to a group of people who share the same values. No matter what

²⁸ Tonnies, 2001

²⁹ Tonnies, 2001

³⁰ <http://www.freecycle.org/>

³¹ Durkheim, 2001

³² Kozinets, 2009

the motive of belonging to this group is, it is clear that Freecycle, using Durkheim concept, can be declared as a community. On the other hand, if we go further with the analysis, we realize that Freecycle is also characterized, on a certain level, by organic solidarity (the need of the individuals for one another's services), which means it can also be described as a society. If every member would only ask for objects, than the group would collapse quickly. So members need to cooperate and use each other's services. Also, society needs rules in order to exist. Freecycle is not a group without norms and regulations, as we saw before.

Durkheim's approach on community and society, if applied to Freecycle, makes us realize that this group cannot be considered as being part of only one of these concepts. It is a combination between the two of them, mixing mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity, common goals/ needs/ values with clear rules and regulations.

Weber, on the other hand, believes that community is created by "the subjective feeling of participants to belong to the same community"³³, and not necessarily by proximity or co-existence. Looking through the objects that are given away on Freecycle, one can see clearly that a lot of times, the objects are insignificant (a t-shirt, a broken wooden toy and so on). Sometimes, people try to do their best to help the community by offering even worthless objects in order to feel part of a greater world, part of a community that is there for them, and which at its turn will offer help and recognition of being part of a community (that maybe is lacking from their real lives, in the modern society).

A more important concept from Weber, for Freecycle, is the distinction he makes between domestic communities and propinquities. Again, as in the case of Durkheim and his distinction between community and society, Freecycle presents elements from both of them. On one hand, it is a domestic community because there is no repartition model, each member contributing with anything he/ she has to offer and obtaining the satisfaction of what he/ she

³³ Weber, 1978

may need. On the other hand, Freecycle presents some of the main characteristics of propinquity. Weber defines economic brotherhood as “mutual help offered in the absence of any type of sentimentalism”.³⁴ Most of the times, the mutual help offered inside Freecycle is done without any sentiments. Of course there are members that offer different objects in order to help someone in need, so involving sentiments; or that some people invest feelings in some of the objects that they are giving away. But at the end, Freecycle is mostly based on the concept of I help you, you help me (in an abstract way, in the sense that one does not expect a return directly from someone to whom they have passed something on, but nonetheless expect to receive something in return, at one point). So we can say that economic brotherhood is a concept that is part of Freecycle, even that it is one of the concepts on which this community has been established. Another common aspect between Freecycle and propinquity is the fact that the more responsibilities the propinquity takes (in our case, the Freecycle community) the more developed and big it becomes, and at the same time the domestic units become smaller (in our case, the members); in other words, the propinquity (Freecycle) can easily survive even if it loses some of its members.

A last aspect to mention is the concept of *mutuum* that Weber also discusses. This type of exchange (gift and counter-gift) is something that in a way is present in Freecycle. Although it is not mandatory (it is not established by norms), we can talk about some sort of exchange. People may only give or may only receive an object, it is true, but more likely it is a continuous process: members take objects from the community, and at one moment they probably give back objects to the community.

The interviews conducted with active members of the Bucharest Freecycle Network revealed an important similarity with my own case from when I was a new member. Although the reasons for entering the community varied from member to member (curiosity, need,

³⁴ Weber, 1978

academic reasons), the reasons for staying as a member seem to share similarities in all cases. Most members interviewed joined Freecycle after learning about it from friends or family. All of them joined this network with a very clear goal in mind: in most cases, to obtain possession of a needed or desired good (most of all, furniture). After their initial goal was solved though, theoretically they had no more reason to stay as active members in the community; the logical solution (for me at least) would have been to stay in the network as an outsider. If the case presented itself and the need for a specific object (to give away or receive) appeared, with just an email the need could have been resolved, and the member could have gone back to being just an outsider. This was the path I chose for my first year of membership to Freecycle, before deciding to make a research on it.

I was very surprised to observe that Freecycle users usually do not follow this path. After joining and resolving their personal agenda, new members are somehow drawn to the community, and most of them become active users. Why is this happening? Why are they becoming so involved in this community, even if they do not make “exchanges” very often?

Is it because, as Weber stated, of “the subjective feeling of participants to belong to the same community”? Or maybe because the organic/ mechanic solidarity Durkheim was talking about? Or because of the concept of economic brotherhood described by Weber?

Interviews and participant observation revealed that, regarding to the elements described above, an important reason for which Freecycle members become active members and contribute, in some way or another, to the community is the feeling of belonging to a community that understands and respects them. An important aspect to mention here is the fact that we are referring here to a different type of belonging, which I will call “unbounded belonging” (or “freelance belonging”). That means nobody is constrained to belong to the community (like it is, for example, in the case of families). Users can chose if they want to belong and for how long to belong to the community (they can decide, for example, to be a

part of the community for some time, as insiders, then take a break and become outsiders, and then come back, with no negative consequences).

The intertwine of virtual and real space creates bonds and relations between the users. Out of the eighteen interviews conducted, five of them revealed that friendships were created through exchange practices. Yes, the object exchanges and opportunities that the network offers to its members are an important aspect; without them, the community would collapse. But on the other hand, if that would be all that this community had to offer, Freecycle Bucharest would not have as many active members. Exchanges would still take place, but without creating relations and meanings. It would be just an economic transaction.

McLuhan³⁵, although exaggerating the importance of the means of communication in framing societies and individuals, was right. People started to act in a more individualist way, thinking more and more of themselves in the detriment of others. The appearance of the digital means of communication created a base for a different type of communities to appear: virtual communities. Destroying the boundaries of time and space (instantaneous channels of communication, the obsolescence of geography), virtual communities like Freecycle also destroy the notion of individualism, working on the principle I help you, you help me. As one of my informants was stating, “I wake up, go to work, come back home, eat and then sleep; every day is the same; I don’t have time to socialize as much as I want. But with Freecycle... with my first exchange [three books on art] I also made a friend. We still keep in touch” (A. S., 42). Because of the lack of boundaries mentioned above and because of the social connections created in both virtual and real space, Freecycle offers its members the comfort of belonging to a community and the possibility to create bonds and relations in an easy manner. As a member, you give and get back from the community, so you feel that you belong in

³⁵ McLuhan, 1962

something bigger than you. Also, you can develop relations, in both virtual and real space, much easier.

5.6 A never ending circle

Participant observation led to the conclusion that the exchange practices taking place in Freecycle Network are similar to a circle: they never end. Once members start to “exchange” objects, they never stop. In order to better understand why this cycle never ends I will be discussing Marcel Mauss’s book „Essai sur le don”³⁶, where the author argues that gifts are never free, but actually rise to reciprocal exchanges.

From Levi-Strauss to the Mauss movement, anthropologists have shown that gift exchanges have a much more important aspect than the actual exchange. It is true that the offering or the receiving of the gift is important for both individuals involved in the exchange, but much more important are the social ties that these practices create, develop and sustain.

The core of Mauss’s book, “Essai sur le don”, is the gift as an economical form, seeing that the first economical contract was the gift, and not the barter. Mauss argues that archaic economy was organized, in different societies, not around the idea of producing and conserving scarce resources (like the capitalist societies), but the opposite, on the idea of mutual gift exchanges and ritual expenses (like the famous potlatch).

“In Scandinavian societies and numerous others, exchanges and contracts are made in form of gifts, theoretically as a form of good will, in reality offered and mandatory given back”³⁷.

In these archaic societies, exchanges and contracts were made between collectivities and not between individuals. Any social contact started with a potlatch, a gift exchange which

³⁶ Mauss, 1993

³⁷ Mauss, 1993, p.37

was only apparently a ritual of introduction. In reality, the one that was giving more was always situating himself on a superior social position. Gifts, as a manifestation of superiority, were levers of growth and maintaining the social status.

What is exchanged does not resume only to riches and goods; the exchange has at its base formulas of politeness, rituals, military services, women, children dances and many others.

“The refuse to offer, the negligence of inviting, the refuse to receive equivalents to a declaration of war; it means to refuse alliance and friendship. We offer gifts because we are obliged, because the one to which it is offered has the right of property on everything that belongs to the donor. This property is expressed and considered as a spiritual bond”³⁸. The main difference between the archaic form of economy and the modern economies consists, most of all, in this spiritual bond. [...] “potlatch has an effect not only on the people who vie in generosity, not only on objects that are transmitted and consumed, on the dead who assist and take part at the events and of which people claim their names, but also on nature”³⁹.

The gift is an object with utilitarian or symbolic value, offered or received as a mean of social relations, from friendship, cooperation, vicinity, prestige, hierarchy to even rivalry. The gift does not exist in its pure form, but actually takes synthetic form of the exchange. The gift - counter-gift couple manifests itself through three obligations: to give, to receive and to give back. Here, the gift is part of the system of total performances, because it expresses at the same time all types of laws, from religious, juridical and moral to political and familial. Gift – counter-gift is not just an economical transaction, but a social fact that creates significance between individuals, thus creating the base for social connections.

When I first entered Freecycle, for the first year, after resolving my immediate need for a bed, I acted like an outsider. From time to time, as an activity to pass the time, and from

³⁸ Mauss, 1993, p. 55-56

³⁹ Mauss, 1993, p. 58

curiosity, I was skimming through the offers and the requests for different objects. When I decided to make this research, I “upgraded” my membership to an active one. I started to exchange objects more often, usually giving away books I did not need or finding ones that I was interested in. With every “exchange”, I felt more and more that I am part of a bigger community that offers different advantages to me. And I also felt a little guilty for not giving back to the community as much as I received.

When interviewing active members of Freecycle, I found similar lines of thought in their discourses. Freecycle is somehow based on the principle of gift and counter-gift. Once started, the process cannot be stopped. “I started by acquiring a few necessary objects for my home [...]; after that, I started to look through the house to see if there is anything I can give back, if not to the people that gave my goods, at least to the other members of the network” (A. I., female, 26).

The statement “I help you, you help me” is found at the base of Freecycle. “I received so much from Freecycle, how can I not give back what I can?” (A. I., female, 26). As Mauss argued, gifts are never free, but they rise to reciprocal exchanges.

The main difference between Mauss’s theory and the reality of Freecycle is that inside this community, nobody or nothing is forcing its users to give back. There are no written or unwritten laws about it. If one desires, one can only take objects from the network, as many and as frequently as they want. So, although nothing is forcing them, Bucharest Freecycle Network members keep the community alive by constantly donating objects. Are the members keeping this never ending circle of exchanges only because they feel they belong to a community, or because they need to give back to the community as much as they received?

Mauss’s concept of gift and counter-gift, with its’ rules of giving, receiving and giving back, does not seem to fit in the context of this community. One could just receive objects and never give back anything. Other could just offer objects and never expect something in return.

On the other hand, Freecycle Bucharest Network members have realized in time, without knowing of Mauss's theory on gift and counter-gift, that in order for the community to work and not collapse, it is necessary to permanently have these exchange practices: you give to the community and the community at one point or another gives back to you ("Think about it, if I wouldn't give objects, and X wouldn't give objects, and Y wouldn't give objects.. how do you think Freecycle would survive?!" A. I., f, 26). This way, there is a never ending flow of objects being "exchanged" that makes the community develop and sustain itself. Taking this into consideration makes one relate Mauss's concept of gift and counter-gift to the core of the Freecycle Bucharest Network.

Mauss further argues that more important than the exchange itself are the social ties that are created, developed and sustained. A.I. is not the only interviewee who declared that she developed and sustained a friendship with the help of Freecycle exchange practices. After the initial contact and exchanges based on need, members remain involved in the circle of exchanges. Usually they give away small objects they do not need any more or believe someone else might enjoy more (books, clothes, small and old electronic gadgets, old furniture). With every "exchange" they make comes the unavoidable face to face meeting between the giver and the taker. Most of these meetings are short and goal oriented ("I arrived, I took the object and left", M.P, male,19). Some of them, on the other hand, can last for hours and result in bonds and personal connection ("I work in a repair shop for computers, and I like, in my spare time, to construct and deconstruct old machines. It was a Sunday, I had nothing important to do, so I went to this guy to take an old computer he was giving away. To my surprise I found out C. had the same interests as me; we stayed and talked for almost two hours about computers, and we are friends for three years now", G.I, male, 31).

Bonds of friendship are not the only type of bonds that are created through Freecycle. One other type discovered through interviews was the "emotional bond". "One day I was

giving away some clothes for children under the age of four. A woman in her 30's came to receive the items, and we started talking about children. I found out that she had two small boys; she was a widow and had a very small income. That's why she was using Freecycle. I liked her and was happy that I was able to help. Since then, when I'm giving away objects that she may need, I am always contacting her first to ask if she wants them..." (R. M., female. 38).

Doing a categorization of the objects exchanged through the Bucharest Freecycle Network reveals that almost half of them can be integrated in the category of useful objects like clothes, furniture and home appliances. In other words, objects that everybody needs, but not all can purchase. These types of objects do not last more than a few hours after they are presented on the network and very fast find their way to new owners. Freecycle members have realized the importance of these types of goods and are acting on this emotional bond, in order to help other members from their community (some of them admit it is one of the main aspects that makes them keep their active membership on Freecycle).

The exchange practices taking place in the Bucharest Freecycle Network can also be explained through Sahlins' concept of reciprocity.⁴⁰ Sahlins distinguishes between three types of reciprocity, according to the type of materials exchanged and the social distance between the actors.

Generalized reciprocity⁴¹ refers to actors involved in intimate relations (example: family). This type of reciprocity creates solidarity without imposing the obligation to return what was received. Still, reciprocity is a given, even if in a moral form: close kin are expected to help and support other members of the family. This type of reciprocity is basically an altruistic transaction: the material side of the transaction is repressed by the social side of the

⁴⁰ Sahlins, 1972

⁴¹ Sahlins, 1972, p. 193-194

transaction, and thus the need to give back is removed. Even if the receiver does not give back, the giver will not stop giving.

Balanced reciprocity⁴² makes a balance between goods and services exchanged, is more economic and characteristic to trade relations. The last type of reciprocity, the negative one⁴³, refers to the situations when attempts to receive an advantage at the expense of the other take place.

Freecycle works on the idea of generalized reciprocity. It is a community where its members exchange objects among them. The activity of giving an object is unilateral, and does not imply the need to receive something back instantly. But, still, reciprocity exists, and is somehow understood from the beginning: you receive something from the community and feel the need to give back something in return, in order for the community to continue to exist. The generalized reciprocity refers only to the insiders, the active and involved members of the community; the Freecycle network has a permanent number of outsiders for whom the reciprocity does not apply.

⁴² Sahlins, 1972, p. 194-195

⁴³ Sahlins, 1972, p. 195

6. Situating Freecycle

6.1 Economy

One of the most important reasons people search for alternatives to the classic consumption patterns is related to the financial status. The capitalist market has created huge gaps between social classes. While some prosper and can afford new products and services (needed and/ or desired), others have to find solutions to overcome their financial problems in order to fulfill their needs (and, secondly, if possible, their desires).

Freecycle as an international network has started on the idea of ecology, saving the planet by keeping objects in circulation for as long as possible. As we saw in an earlier chapter, Freecycle Bucharest does not follow the same idea. Although it represents a plus, the ecological aspect is far less important than the others. One of the important motivations of the Bucharest Freecycle Network (along with generosity, so similar to other second hand spaces) is the economic one. The economic necessity of using the network can be split into two parts. On one hand, some members do not have any other possibility to acquire a needed object and thus have to use Freecycle or similar second hand spaces (free) in order to, basically, survive. On the other hand, there are many other members who use it out of a need or desire to save money. Usually these members are also using other types of marginal economy (car sharing⁴⁴ and couchsurfing⁴⁵ to give just two examples) and thus change completely the way they consume by saving money from different needs and desires.

⁴⁴ <http://www.zipcar.com/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.couchsurfing.org/>

6.2 Stepping outside the market

“Why should I buy a new armchair from Ikea when I can have one in good condition for free?” (H. M., male, 39). “There is enough for everybody’s need, but not enough for anybody’s greed” (Ghandi).

As discussed before, consumed objects (from vehicles to clothes and mobile phones) are an important part in the acquisition of status. Because of this, usually people consume objects and services in order to satisfy their desires and acquire a higher status without thinking or realizing that this process will never ever end. This happens because every day new products and services appear, and in order to maintain their status, individuals have to acquire the new versions of the products they probably already own.

There are on the other hand people all around the world, who even if they have the financial power to buy new goods, decide to step outside the capitalist market and find more sustainable ways of consumption. From communities of practice like Freecycle to participatory consumerism like car sharing and couchsurfing, these individuals search and find other solutions for consumption. All these practices also offer them something that cannot be found in the classic consumption patterns: a powerful social component. Freecycle is not the only network that offers this; car sharing and couchsurfing imply sharing goods and services with others (share a car to work, or share your couch with a tourist who will later share his couch at home with another one, thus the circle never ending), thus creating social connections.

Downshifting⁴⁶ is another means people have started to use in order to change their lives and consume less; realizing that overconsumption does not actually offer them what they

⁴⁶ <http://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/4749922/2008752328/name/Downshifting,+Taming+The+Devil+Within.pdf>

need, individuals have started to renounce to personal possessions and live a simpler (and apparently more enjoyable) life.

6.3 When stepping out becomes ideology

“Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption”⁴⁷.

As presented in the sub-chapter above, stepping outside the market, in some way or another, is a growing concept. It can stay at this level (there are other solutions for consumption, so why not chose them instead of the classic ones?) or it can “upgrade” to an ideology of anti-consumerism.

The anti-consumerism is a socio-political ideology that opposes consumerism. At its core, it is based on the idea of discouraging the more and more growing purchase and consumption of material goods. In other words, buying lots of objects does not make one necessarily happy, and the world is much better off when less objects are used and discarded.

“Don’t buy goods, use them as much as possible and “exchange” them through the community” (A. I., female, 26). “Most of all, I see in Freecycle a mechanism of market regulation. You cannot sell furniture that lasts for one year, if the market has access to durable and free furniture” (Lucian Sandor). His comparison of Freecycle to a mechanism of market regulation fits in the general context of the anti-consumerist ideology: “if we don’t buy from Ikea, and take what we need from here [Freecycle], than they will become less interested in producing and selling their goods” (H. M., male, 39).

⁴⁷ Lebow, 1955

Observation and interviews revealed that inside Freecycle Bucharest, the members who have an anti-consumerist discourse (buy less, try to repair and reuse objects and not discard them) always relate, in one way or another, to the economy of shortage⁴⁸ from the communist period before 1990.

In “Cultura penuriei: bunuri, strategii și practici de consum în România anilor ‘80”⁴⁹, the authors describe the goods, the strategies and the practices of consumption in Romania before the fall of communism in 1989. In other words, the economy of shortage.

In those times, necessary goods were in short supply (from bread, meat and vegetables to coffee, cigarets and chocolate). The nationalized means of production were bureaucratically controlled by the technocrate elite (experts), by the bureaucratic elite (administrative, managers) and by the nomenclature of the Communist party. The economies of shortage worked in a specific way. The central planification was not well planned, nor was it strictly controlled by the center power. The enterprises were overestimating deliberately the costs of production (the necessary quantity of prime materials, means of production and labor) in order to satisfy the planned norm (the plan of production). The purpose of an enterprise was to produce (to effectuate or exceed the norm that was decided on) and not to sell (marketize) the products; thus, the managerial preoccupation was to assure production and not commercialize the products in a profitable manner. Because products were scarce, the competition was between the buyers and not between the producers or sellers. In other words we can say that, although the financial aspects were not necessary an issue, the acquisition of necessary goods and products was, to say the least, difficult. Because of these, people had to solve this problem in other (informal) ways. There were two ways to obtain the necessary goods, besides the formal official one (stay in line for hours and hours and receive just a very small quantity from the desired good): on one hand, they could have been obtained from family and friends, and on

⁴⁸ Concept first created by Janos Kornai in his 1980 book “Economics of shortage”

⁴⁹ Chelcea, Liviu și Lățeș, Puiu, 2004

the other, on the black market. Entire networks of distribution of the rationalized products were created around family relation, work relations or personal relations (friends, acquaintances).⁵⁰ Unfortunately, these informal networks of distribution were not enough. It was not always a safe bet that one was able to obtain goods, no matter the means used. Because of this, people had to adapt even more, and find other ways through which they could obtain different goods. When discussing any other type of goods except aliments, the solution was to keep objects for as much as possible. Nothing was thrown away, and everything was used and reused until its death. The wrappers from different products were reused as markers of status, objects were used in a symbolic way, besides their initial utility, collecting objects (matches, pens, wrappers) was almost a national sport, and the same with activities of DIY. Anything to keep objects for as much time as possible. “I was especially interested in the (re)usage, maintaining, repairing and renouncing of these objects of consumption, because from the interviews it became clear they were the key strategies in the economy of shortage”⁵¹.

The economy of shortage from before 1990s and the anti-consumerist ideology have the same concept at its base, although for different reasons: buy less, try to repair and reuse objects and not discard them.

6.4 Life of the objects

One interesting aspect observed while navigating through the Freecycle Bucharest archives is that old objects in good condition are in real demand. Furniture from the ‘70s, old and still running computers, collection items like stamps or coins, these are just a few.

Why are people so interested in this type of objects? Asking myself this question I remembered a story of a friend, also a Freecycle user, back from 2010. M., a young girl just

⁵⁰ Chelcea, Liviu și Lățea, Puiu, 2004, p. 133

⁵¹ Chelcea, Liviu și Lățea, Puiu, 2004, p. 166

out of college, was searching for a bicycle. After some time spent on Freecycle, she found another user, a woman in her 50s, that was giving one. After contacting her and asking if they can make the deal, she received the confirmation. Early one afternoon she went to the givers' house to take possession of the bicycle. To her surprise, the "deal" did not happen as fast as she thought. Instead, the discussion lasted for almost two hours, starting with questions from the owner related to the way in which M. will take care of her new bicycle and ending with a long life story about how much that bicycle meant to the owner. Years later, in 2013, I was interviewing M. regarding Freecycle and remembered this story. During the discussion I found out she still had the bicycle, and asked her how come she did not buy a new better one, seeing that now she is employed and has no financial problems. The answer was short and simple: "Do you know how much this bike has seen? Five years with me and a hole other lifetime with her previous owner" (M. M., f, 27).

It made me think on all the objects that are being "exchanged" through this network: hundreds and hundreds of things, from which probably most of them have a story to tell about the past.

By focusing on culturally defined aspects of exchange and socially regulated processes of circulation, Appadurai⁵² argues that people find value in objects and objects give value to social relations.

The life of an object starts in the moment in which it is produced, but continues in a natural way with the activity of consumption made by the user. The user possesses and personalizes the object in a specific, unique way. Thus, the object born through a technological manner receives a life of its own, passing through a few stages.

Objects have a passive role in our lives but help us marque social differences, tastes, preferences and so on. More than that, simple objects receive a social character: the meanings

⁵² Appadurai, 1986

people attribute to objects derive from human motivations, mostly referring to the way in which the respective objects are used and transmitted.

For Appadurai, an object is not defined through the way it was built or through its material qualities; it is more related to the category through which objects pass, changing status and value.

Appadurai provisionally defines commodities as “objects of economic value”⁵³. “The value of an object is not represented by its inherent property, but by a subjective judgment of that particular object”⁵⁴.

“Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is politics, construed broadly. This argument... justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives”⁵⁵.

The idea of social life of objects refers to their mobility, idea that contrasts with the presupposition that an object belongs to a fixed category of goods. For Appadurai, objects are important because they can reveal many aspects about the relations between people and between objects and individuals; the trajectories of objects can be analyzed in order to reveal “transactions and human calculations which give meaning to things”⁵⁶.

In order to better understand the social life of the objects exchanged through Freecycle I wanted to construct object biographies, to trace their trajectories as they moved between domestic space and market, profit, need and/or pleasure-driven, mixing the logic of gift and exchange, bridging identity and sociability in these emerging community. My initial idea was to offer a few items on Freecycle and try to track them down while they move (maybe) from user to user. The lack of time made this endeavor impossible. Luckily though, another

⁵³ Appadurai, 1986, p. 3

⁵⁴ Simmel in Appadurai, 1986 p.3

⁵⁵ Appadurai 1986:3

⁵⁶ Appadurai, 1986, p.5

solution was found. During the interviews I asked the interviewees to show me the objects that they have obtained from other Freecycle members and to tell me a little bit about them. To my surprise, when discussing about these objects, the new owners (ten out eighteen) focused more on the “life of the object” from before it came to their possession. “Do you know what this is? It’s a TRS-80 from Radio Shack, first built in 1977. I got it from a retired doctor a few months ago. When I saw the post on Freecycle, I thought it was fate, you know how much I love computers. And it’s 46 years old. It belonged to the doctor’s father, who was something or other in the communist party. When his son turned 18 he gave it to him. The doctor used it all along through medical school, he was telling me that he was the only one with a computer among his friends and that it helped him with girls [he laughs] and after he finished medical school he bought another one and forgot about it. The TRS stayed hidden in a basement until one year ago, when the doctor found it” (G.I., male, 31). Or, “this set [of books on art] belonged to V., a very nice lady. I met her when I was searching for books to help me with my studying [art major]. She told me how she was teaching her two daughters about art, by reading to them every evening before bed and showing them famous paintings. One of them works now in an art museum, and the other is across the ocean studying at California College of Arts. V. knows the set by heart, and when we met she told me that she wants to give it to someone else, someone who can use it as she and her daughters did” (A. C., female, 22).

These are just two of the stories, just parts of the life of these objects. All eighteen interviewees had stories about the objects received through the network. Eight of them though were not able to tell me almost anything about the respective objects’ past life. The only thing in common between these eight users? They did not stay with the giver to talk; they went, they took possession of the object and left. The other ten, on the other hand, decided, for one

reason or another, to ask questions about the object they wanted to receive. From this to long life stories (of the object and of the owner) there was only one step.

As we are able to see, in the process of receiving / giving an object, which takes place in the real space, sometimes connections are made between the giver and the taker. Of course it does not happen all the time, but still, from time to time, real connections and bonds between individuals are created. When a bond like this is created, it always leads, as we were able to see from the interviews, to more information about the objects, about their past and about how the initial owner has used them and invested them with his or her feelings.

As a conclusion one can argue that the exchange of objects (that always come with a life story, in case there is anyone interested in it) is a practice around which everything else develops: relations, bonds, connections, life stories, object biographies. Freecycle Bucharest Network facilitates the exchange of specific objects between specific interested individuals based on specific desires and likes (for example, the exchange of computer parts between two individuals interested in computers), thus facilitating the possibility of a bond, a connection to be made between the two parties that are interested in the same domain (the case of A. C. and V.).

7. Zoom out: Marginal economy

As discussed before, in the context of capitalist societies there are different types of “marginal economies” that are gaining more and more fans each day.

Sharing economy (also called peer-to-peer networks and collaborative consumption⁵⁷) is a new type of business based on the concept of sharing the resources. The idea behind this is that there is no point in buying a good or service if it is going to be used only rarely. In this case, the better solution is that of sharing the same good or service with others. Although this was and still is a common practice among family, friends and neighbors, it has just begun to move from a community practice to a real business. Examples of this practice are car sharing (people share the same car in order to go to work for example - zipcar⁵⁸) and accommodation rental (renting other people’s homes for a limited time - airbnb⁵⁹).

Sustainable consumption (or better said the idea of rethinking market itself) was defined during the Oslo Symposium of 1994 as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations”. It refers to the fact that the world population is rapidly growing, while resources become more scarce. Because of this, new ways of production, consumption, increasing the use of renewable energy sources and so on have to be created in order for the world to maintain the same standards of life.

Participatory consumerism refers to new consumer behavior patterns that lead to purchasing habits that keep in mind the respect for the environment, other contemporary people and next generations. The role of this type of consumerism is to create more equitable

⁵⁷ Bostman and Rogers, 2010

⁵⁸ <http://www.zipcar.com/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.airbnb.com/>

communities and societies based on the idea of a market that is characterized by peace, justice, security and freedom⁶⁰.

Communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”⁶¹. There are three main characteristics: the domain, the community and the practice. The domain refers to the fact that communities of practice are defined by a shared domain of interest. The community characteristic is related to joint activities and discussions members engage in on a permanent basis, thus creating relationships that help them learn from each other. The practice is a key element and refers to the “shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice”⁶².

Marginal economy, in its many forms, free or not, represents the beginning of a new modality of consumption that is spreading quite fast in many places around the world, and especially in the more developed countries. The reasons behind this new practices are different from one type of marginal economy to the next, but share some main ideas: financial reasons, generosity, ecology, the thoughts about the future and the next generations that will have to deal with less resources as the world population grows, the realization that consumption of goods does not define individuals and that the social indicators that they represent are not actually very representative.

⁶⁰ http://www.consultmcgregor.com/documents/research/PARTICIPatory_consumerism.pdf

⁶¹ Wenger, 2006

⁶² Wenger, 2006

8. Conclusions

The present paper constitutes a (n)ethnography of the Freecycle Network and offers an insight on what this phenomenon represents both worldwide and in the particular case of Romania. Through participant observation, interviews and data analysis it offers descriptions of the objects exchanged, the actors, their practices and the meanings behind them and analyzes the phenomenon from the historical and socio-economical point of Romania's peculiarities. Last but not least it places Freecycle into the larger field of marginal economy, together with other forms of "sharing economy" that developed in the last decades. As far as I know, it represents the first research on this topic in Romania.

The idea of Freecycle has appeared in the United States in 2003 as an ecological movement and has since spread all around the world, becoming one of the biggest movements of this type. In Romania it has started in 2005 but begun to really develop only after 2008, reaching over 10,000 members divided into 15 groups (cities). Freecycle offers alternatives to the classic way of consumption by focusing on the donation of second hand objects and by prolonging the life of objects.

The Bucharest Freecycle Network is "inhabited" by insiders and outsiders. On one hand there are *long time tourists* that rarely get involved in the actual donations and *short time profiteers* who do not last? long before being banned. On the other the insiders present more differences among themselves than the outsiders; there are *classic users*, *lazy users*, *collectors*, *students and families on a low budget*, *big hearted users* and also *keepers* who are involved in a continuous process of acquisition and donation of second hand objects. Freecycle is not a homogenous community and does not have the same meanings for all the users.

Freecycle is somehow based on the principle of gift and counter-gift, which requires reciprocity. Once started, it does not stop: objects change owners and meanings on a daily basis. The type of reciprocity involved in this process has its peculiarities in comparison to the principle of gift and counter-gift or the one of generalized reciprocity: in Freecycle, nobody forces the members to continuously donate objects. Still, the users realize that exactly this entire process of donations is the one that keeps the community alive. An essential aspect is related to the social ties that the Freecycle platform facilitates: users have the subjective feeling of belonging to a community. It is a different type of belonging, particular only to the insiders; one that can be best described as *unbound* or *freelance belonging*, referring to the fact that the user has a choice of how, when and for how long to be part of the community.

Using Freecycle can be seen as a kind of why-not-alternative to the classic capitalist market; sometimes, it represents more than just an incidental alternative: it can become an ideology of anti-consumerism that drives the members and gives meanings to the process of donations. No matter the reason, Freecycle Bucharest lacks ecological stakes: users do not see in ecology an actual reason to belong to the community and donate or acquire objects.

In the case of Romania, Freecycle is rooted also in former practices of economy of shortage and even peasant domestic economy, where objects were used, re-used and circulated as much as possible, not only out of economic reasons but also due to a moral taboo of wastage.

Freecycle, as all the other types of marginal economy, does not represent a real challenge to market economy and consumption. Nevertheless, it offers to individuals a meaningful personal and optional domestication of consumption that more and more people are drawn to.

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