

**DEAR SANTA, MY WISH LIST IS IN YOUR INBOX:
RE-DEFINING THE GIFT IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES
THE CASE OF REDDIT'S ONLINE SECRET SANTA EXCHANGE**

by
Poyzan Nur Sahiner

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Supervisor: Andreas Dafinger
Violetta Zentai

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean “to gift” in online spaces? Why do people mobilize material resources for strangers on Internet? This ethnographic study aims to understand the meaning and the motivations of gift giving in reddit.com’s Secret Santa Online Gift Exchanges. The case offers a puzzling challenge to the gift exchange literature, which assumes mutual reciprocity, established relations of intimacy between the parties of the gift exchange. Behind the larger question of the meaning of gifting in online spaces, this study scrutinizes complex mechanisms of giving and receiving, through the discussions on the gift as an object, online identities and online communities. It suggests online interactions bring about novel perspectives of gifting. Without the assumed prior relations between the giver and the receiver, the gift as an object gains utmost importance defining exchange. The ceremonial gifting becomes a puzzle solving activity about the receive may want. Benefiting from the methods of ethnographic fieldwork, this case also contributes to the anthropological studies of online spaces. It offers new methodological approaches to ethnographic studies of online spaces.

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Introduction

“... [The] people who are just greedy and not understanding *the spirit* of what we’re doing are, you know, maybe turning people who haven’t done it yet away. I think it’s [r/SecretSanta exchanges]* about giving and receiving from complete strangers across the world in an anonymous setting... It’s about the spirit of what we’re participating in...”

(u/gimmeyourbadinage*, reddit user, in discussion with the author, April 23, 2015)

With this quote, u/gimmeyourbadinage summarizes the puzzle posed by reddit.com’s¹ Online Secret Santa Exchanges; what is the motivation of gifting strangers? Since December 2009, reddit² users organize online gift exchanges under the subreddit called r/SecretSanta. Though it reminds of the holiday time exchanges at schools or workplace, reddit takes it to another level and engages thousands of strangers to send each other real gifts, all year long. On the simplest level, every exchange works as follows: users signup for the proposed gift exchange, they fill a form with their likes and dislikes; after the signups are closed, an algorithm running according to closest location, matches the participants anonymously to one another. All are asked to send their gifts until a certain deadline, provide proof and post a picture of the gift they receive. This study sets off to understand the meaning of giving and receiving to r/SecretSanta participants as put by my informant u/ gimmeyourbadinage; what are *the spirit* or the motivations of these exchanges, and how does these people participate in an anonymous gift exchange with strangers they do not know?

The case of redditgifts presents a challenge for the classical understanding of the gift exchange. It also offers a specific example to user interactions in online communities. With this study, I would like to re-define the meaning of gift through different sets of relations between the gift, the individual and the community online.

* Notation “r/” implies the name of a subreddit and “u/” refers to user of reddit. This jargon will be explain in the second part of this chapter and will be analyzed in chapter five.

¹ reddit.com is a social news website, which operates by the user facilitated content. The second part of this chapter will provide detailed description of the website and the exchanges. For further information see: <http://www.reddit.com/wiki/index> (Accessed on June 5th, 2015)

² According to the website, reddit is always written in lower case. Please see: <http://www.reddit.com/about/alien/>

This thesis is constructed around two main frames; namely the gift literature and newly emerging readings of online communities. Undoubtedly, the fundamental text on gifting is Marcel Mauss's groundbreaking work "The Gift" (1926), which analyzes gift as the means to social interaction and economic exchange in so-called primitive societies. In comparison to the Western world of his time, Mauss believes gift economy at its golden age functions through obligations to give, to receive and reciprocate. Following this schema, the gift literature dominantly enforces a necessary relational tie between the parties of the gift exchange; it either exploits a web of relations or establishes new ones³. (Carrier, 1991) It also reproduces a clear-cut separation between gift and commodity exchanges, based on the idea that the mentioned relational link differentiates the gift from the commodity (Carrier, 1991; Osteen, 2002). Here, I first oppose the idea of necessity of relational links for gift exchanges. I adopt the early works of James Carrier, who proposes to see the gift exchange and commodity exchange in a spectrum, rather than two separate poles (Ibid).

Secondly, I focus on the discussions of online communities. Virtual world (Hine, 2005; Boellstorff, 2008; Coleman, 2010) is still a contested medium of study. There is a tendency, left from the early studies in 1990s, to define the limits of online worlds and to propose boundaries between real and virtual realms. I adopt the criticisms to this divide (Boellstorff, 2008; Garcia et al., 2009) and propose that there are specific ways in which people interact in online spaces; they establish and reproduce discourses of community; and these discourses have to be evaluated in context. Therefore, while taking online communities as extensions of "real-life" interactions, I offer an ethnography work of an online community. The case of r/SecretSanta stands at the intersection of literatures on gift exchanges and online communities, and this study aims to contribute to the understandings of the material gifts in online spaces.⁴

³ Laidlaw presents an exceptional ethnography of *dan*, the giving of alms to Shvetambar Jain renouncer, which can be read as free gift. Please see, Laidlaw 2000.

⁴ The focus of this study is the real-life gifts that people exchange through online spaces. However I am aware of the literature of non-material, information sharing on Internet as a gift economy.

This thesis is the final result of a month long intensive fieldwork conducted in April 2015 and 4 month long background research prior to it. It mainly uses ethnographic methods of research offered by Boellstorff (2008) who underlines the importance of analyzing online interaction, particularly in the online settings. Following his approach, I also bounded of my fieldwork with the information on reddit.com. I did not try to acquire, or used the personal information of my informants, I inevitably learned. In this sense, doing ethnography of the online was a challenging, yet advantageous task. Classical ethnographic approaches are limited and restricting when faced with the fundamental differences of online human interaction. The practice of participation and observation has to be revisited and adjusted to the main medium of communication online, the text. With an extensive methodological analysis of this work, I also aim to contribute to the discussion of ethnography of the online.

The following part of this chapter will provide a descriptive overview of reddit to make better sense of the case of Secret Santa exchanges. Important features of reddit and functioning of r/SecretSanta exchanges will be explained in detail to provide a background to the study. In the second chapter, I will engage in the methodological debates of ethnographies of online spaces. As mentioned previously, I will argue that online mediums need finely adjusted ethnographic tools to access and analyze the nature of online interaction, which function through text and anonymity. The third chapter will discuss the gift as an object in the process of these exchanges. It will visit the classical gift literature, focusing on the idea of the perfect gift through the main arguments on obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate. The following chapter will focus on the individual motivations of giving and different levels of expected receiving or reciprocity in r/SecretSanta. I will analyze the various interactions between participants and try to make sense the different discourses of giving gifts to strangers. The fifth and final empirical chapter will be on the community construction processes of r/SecretSanta. Here I make connections between the reddit.com as an online community and

functioning of these gift exchanges. The thesis will conclude with the discussions of cultural implications of r/SecretSanta, American culture, gendered consumption and reddit as a business, including suggestions on further research.

1.1. Entering the Field: r/SecretSanta

“reddit.com” is currently one of the biggest social news websites on Internet. As of April 2015, reddit has nearly 170 million unique users, monthly.⁵ Named after a word play “read it”; reddit is an online forum where people can share any type of content, in the form of a text post or a direct link to elsewhere. This content may vary from serious ideas to pictures and videos, to information or personal experience sharing. The users operate under semi-anonymous nicknames. A reddit user is called a redditor. The entire content on reddit is provided and voted by the registered users. The popularity of a posted content is determined through the voting system of upvotes and downvotes⁶. As the content gets more upvotes, the more visible and accessible it becomes on the front page.⁷ The posts are organized through the focused discussion pages, called subreddits. Every subreddit runs pretty much the same way according to the rules and purpose, which are explained on the side bar on the right hand side of the page. Access to reddit is free, yet registration with a username is required for any action, such as posting or voting. To put things in context, I will expand on the case of this work r/SecretSanta, as a subreddit.

r/SecretSanta is subreddit founded by u/kickme444, “...to provide a secret santa for the reddit community. [They] have since expanded to many gift exchanges.” (r/SecretSanta,

⁵ Please see: <http://www.reddit.com/about/>

⁶ Reddit has slightly complicated voting system, which does not allow heavily upvoted popular posts to overwhelm the others. It’s importance will be visited in chapter 5.

⁷ Front page is the main page of reddit, which provides a combination of posts from various subreddits. Users can tailor the content chosen for this page by subscribing the subreddits of their interest. For further information please see: http://www.reddit.com/wiki/faq#wiki_what_is_reddit.3F

sidebar) In 2009, u/kickme444 made a post⁸, suggesting the idea of this gift exchanges. Despite the critically concerned voices about individual security and reliability of people, after some discussion, they created the basic rules and guidelines, which are still in use with small exceptions. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, they organized the first exchange by matching the signed up participants and sending real-life gifts. The first attempt succeeded with 4507 people and 96% participation rate. That is to say, the people kept their promises of sending a gift to a stranger, and spent \$182,707 in total. In the following five years to come, under the larger name RedditGifts, they organized nearly 200 gift exchanges⁹. RedditGifts sets Guinness World Records for the last three years, as the largest online Secret Santa exchange¹⁰. In a period of five years, over half a million people spent nearly 20 million US dollars in these exchanges. The biggest exchange recently completed in January 2015, with participation of 212,722 people from 188 countries.

It is never easy to acquire demographics on websites. Particularly in this case, since reddit does not collect any data on personal or demographic information, this study relies on external data sites. According to the Alexa.com, overwhelming majority of reddit is young adult male users, dominantly between the ages 18-25. Even though females are represented above the Internet average, it is assume nearly two thirds of reddit users are males. Despite the questions of representation and sample size, the online survey I conducted suggests that the case is opposite for r/SecretSanta subreddit. Among the 500 participants, 77% declared that they are

⁸ u/kickme444 made this post on r/Askreddit, which is a community where redditors share their ideas, questions and suggestions in a general format, so that everyone can relate and contribute. To Access the post:

http://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/a2xy8/would_anyone_be_interested_in_a_reddit_gift/ (Accessed on June 4th, 2015)

⁹ For examples please see: <https://www.redditgifts.com/exchanges/#/select/other/> (Accessed on June 5th, 2015)

¹⁰ For further please see: <http://redditgifts.com/blog/view/reddit-guinness-world-record/> (Accessed on June 5th, 2015)

females. There were 333 people who declared they live in US territory, which constituted 64.9% of the overall sample size. These indicators will be addressed in the final chapter of this work.

The Exchange: The Santas, the Giftees and the Re-Matchers

r/SecretSanta exchanges are organized through redditgifts.com, a website linked to the subreddit. In order to participate r/SecretSanta exchange, one must register redditgifts.com with their reddit username and a valid email address. Approximately every 6 weeks, a new batch of exchanges is announced. To sign up to an exchange, participants fill a simple form talking about themselves, their likes and dislikes, and preferences; and provide information about their “real” identity, or social media accounts like Facebook or Twitter. In a way, they are asked to virtually introduce themselves to their Secret Santa.

In order to prevent the potential cheaters who may sign up to exchanges without sending anything in return, redditgifts adopted a credit system. Every redditgifts account is given 1 exchange credit, and each exchange at least costs 1 credit. If an exchange is successfully completed, which means admins verify the proofs of sent and received gifts, the user receive the spent credits back with an additional one. The details and versions of credit system will be analyzed in Chapter 3.

On r/SecretSanta, the givers are called the santas, the receivers are the giftees of a match. The re-matchers are the volunteers who sign up to be santas for the people who did not receive their gifts, though they know they will not receive anything in return. After signups are closed, it is only possible to be a re-match Santa. At this point, participants are randomly matched with their giftees by an algorithm. The matching creates large circles of people, where one gifts to another, and receives from a third person. Therefore, this is not a one-to-one exchange. People are expected to send a gift, within the suggested budget of usually 20 US dollars (though it varies with the concept of the exchange), and send it before shipment deadline in two to three weeks. All santas are expected to provide proof of shipment. More importantly, for the final

step of the exchange, when giftees receive their gifts from their Santa, all are expected to post a thank you note to the gallery, with the picture of their gift. As mentioned before, participants are only provided with the personal information that their giftees provided and nothing more. The system does not reveal the identity of the Secret Santas to the giftee's, including the shipment address. Thus, it is always up to the santa to provide their real identities or even anonymous usernames to their giftees. Different levels of anonymity will be addressed in Chapter 4.

The gallery is the place where r/secretsanta functions like every other subreddit on reddit. Redditors make posts about their gifts, thank you notes and the community of the subreddit comment on these posts. Majority of the gallery posts on r/SecretSanta are direct links from redditgifts.com gallery. Occasionally users share their excitement or ask questions, which are often answered by the moderators. The moderators operate independently from the organization crew of admins of redditgifts.com; regulate the flow of discussion in the subreddit.

Moderating is organized on a voluntary basis. When a subreddit is created the founder automatically becomes the moderator of the community. Users can be added as a moderator or chosen later by the current moderators as well. This position enjoys a relatively important role shaping the discussion of the subreddit. Along these lines, moderators of r/SecretSanta check the posts, provide technical information if necessary, or impose sanctions such as removing of posts or banning users, when the post is not suitable for discussion.

This section lays out the basic functioning of reddit and r/SecretSanta exchanges. Lastly, it is important to note that r/SecretSanta exchanges are not unique on Internet. There are many similar exchanges organized by online forums, on tumblr or by other interest groups. Yet, r/SecretSanta is a very particular case in its scope and scale. It should also be considered as a private enterprise; since in 2011, it was acquired by reddit.com, and u/kickme444 and u/5days

are currently employers of reddit company¹¹. The potential implications of redditgifts being privatized are addressed in the final chapter of this work. The following chapter will discuss the methodological approaches to online spaces.

¹¹ On reddit acquisition, please see: <http://www.redditblog.com/2011/08/reddit-acquires-redditgiftscom-to.html> (Accessed on June 5th, 2015)

II. Ethnography Going Online: New Methodological Perspectives and Challenges

It is agreed that anthropologists are latecomers to the field of digital and online studies. (Boellstorff, 2008: 66; Garcia et al: 2009: 53; Coleman: 2010; Ardevol: 2011; Keegan: 2010). Though, the machine and human interaction drew attention as a research field in the second half of the 20th century, especially in disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, or neurology; the considerable literature on the social implications of the technological developments in daily life has been produced in 1990s by scholars like Haraway (1991), Escobar (1994), Turkle (1995), Appadurai (1996), Castells (1996) and many more. However, the dominant discourse in these works painted a post-modern new age vision of faster and better world, which is fundamentally alternating the way we lived (Coleman, 2010: 489, quoting Castells 1996:31). The cyberspace was conceptualized as a relatively autonomous and abstract entity, where things happen *differently* compared to the “real” world, which is tangible and physical (Ardévol: 2011: 75). The later tendencies brought the virtual-real divide to the ground and suggested that people’s online sociability are not much different, on the contrary deeply connected to each other (Miller and Slater: 2000, Garcia et. al, 2009, Ardévol: 2011). The consensus shifted towards an entangled treatment of the “virtual” and “real” division, where there is a single social reality in which people operate in and out of both traditional and new technological mediums of communication (Garcia et. al, 2009: 54). Subscribing to the latter, this study approaches “reddit.com” as a site of communication, yet borrows their own usage of the term “reddit as an online community.” The term online community indicates a group of people who create and participate a unique social space on Internet, rather than claiming an online and offline dichotomy.

Anthropological studies of the online call for further inquiry on different levels. There still is no consensus over the terminology or the name of the field. Studies either justify the choice or use the terms interchangeably as cyberspace, online space, or virtual world in relation

to actual, real or offline. Ardevol underlines “...online/offline dichotomy should not be the a priori assumption of the ethnographer but is something that needs to be explained. What matters then is how participants create, bound and articulate different social spaces.” (2011:76). Boellstorff hesitates the use of virtual vis a vis the real, since it connotes some level of abstractness and elusiveness for the online. Yet, even though he opposes an ontological divide between online and offline worlds, he underlines it is impossible to disregard the social implications and consequences of interaction on Internet. (2008: 5, 20-21) Thus many users, as well authors on the subject feel the need to reinforce the online/offline binary, using “actual or real world” when referring to their offline lives.

Referring back to Ardevol’s point on earlier, it is ethnographer’s task to understand and define the limits of field online. In *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff repeatedly underlines that he chooses to limit ethnography of Second Life game to the virtual. “Perspectives doubting the possibility of studying virtual worlds in their own terms miss how as virtual worlds grow in size, ethnographic research in them becomes more partial and situated, much like ethnographic research in the actual world... Actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops on its own terms; it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it.” (Ibid, 63). Particularly, in semi-anonymous settings like reddit, there is a conscious choice of separation between the online and offline identities. In this case, pushing to go beyond the wall of pseudonyms does not only seem unnecessary, but also potentially misleading. In most cases, users do not meet in offline or even get interested in “real” identities. At the same time, huge numbers of participants makes an extensive search practically impossible on a personal level. Thus, virtual sociality has to be understood in its closed cultural space, though should not be treated in isolation.

In the light of these conceptualizations of online spaces, this chapter aims to revisit the methodological terrain to online ethnographies. Focusing on the fundamental differences in

interactions online, the following sections discuss participation and observation methods; considers the impacts of text-based interaction on Internet; and access to community. This is not a call to revolutionize or to reject ethnography's golden tool of the past century, the participant-observant method. Rather, it is an attempt to point to the necessary adaptations, which ethnographies of the online need. Considering the mass use of Internet, social media and communication technologies, other fields of work may also benefit from such online ethnographic research tools.

2.1 Participant-Observation Revisited

Gupta and Ferguson end their analysis of anthropological fieldwork in a spirit of a manifesto for a new kind of ethnography by quoting Malinowski "... such a tradition must be aggressively and imaginatively reinterpreted to meet the needs of the present." (1997: 39-40) In the same fashion, the need of the present of online studies is to re-define the implications and the advantages of the signature method of ethnography: participant observation (Boellstorff, p.71) In an ideal world, participant observant method tries to achieve a level of analytical gaze to the subject of study by becoming a part of it The major advantage is that it goes beyond the assumptions and generalizations in the field and tries to grasp the *spirit* of the case in question. The aim is to clear "... the deceptive transparency [that] obscures the complex processes that go into constructing it" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 5). However, it is never possible to experience such a perfect balance of the two acts: participating as an observant implies that the observers are external additions to the event in question and their existence changes the natural state; whereas observing as a participant implies that the status of participation changes for an internal member and refers to a change of interest in the act.

In my case, I position myself as an observant who is participating as a researcher. Thus, I notify the community as every other researcher does. The difference of online spaces, at this point, either way my existence is not noticeable or affects the flow of actions. I am not visible,

nor any other participants are. Participant observation method is based on the inferences that the researcher makes from the implicit or taken for granted details in the field. Yet, the information on the online is direct, visible and accessible at the equal level to the researcher and “the native.”, if one may say. Garcia et al. offers a new suitable term: “The use of the term “experienter” instead of observer is helpful because in the online support group there is no opportunity to directly observe the other members of the group; the researcher can, however, experience what it is like to participate in the group by reading and posting messages to the group.” (2009: 58) I agree to a certain extend that “experienter” is a suitable suggestion; yet it implies a holistic approach to the field. Like most occasions in life online events are partial and it is not possible to have a complete experience, unless the field is relatively restricted and isolated, such as Second Life ethnography of Boellstorff or studies on World of Warcraft. Thus, though I subscribe to the reasoning, I am skeptical to adopt the term.

The following three sections of the chapter will visit various aspects of online interaction through participant observant methodology; text as a medium of communication, the lurking and access to the community.

The Written Interview: Nature of Text on Internet

Even though Internet offers huge variety of forms of representations, such as images, videos, animated work; most of the communication is conducted through reading and writing. (Garcia et. al, 2009: 59). The development of emoticons shows the power of text and can individually be a subject to study. The major difference between text and a face-to-face communication is “... the lack of physical presence means that understanding and perceptions of others have to be negotiated by text (Markham, 2004; quoted by Kivits, 2005: 40) the simple gestures of nodding, agreeing or eye interrogation are, for instance, not possible through emails” (Ibid). Observation as a method is more natural and implicit in its nature. Text on the other hand, has to be analyzed and decomposed. A simple print out of a chat room dialogue may not

be able to convey the full meaning of a conversation, if not evaluated in context. (Ibid, 62)

Similarly, most researchers of chat rooms and similar settings mention the hardship of following a lengthy dialogue, since it does not have a sequence and it is hard to trace a single interaction. However, this does not apply to the particular case of reddit.

On reddit, the communication among the users is facilitated through a commenting mechanism. People can post and comment either their independent questions relevant to the subreddit, or share their comments under the posted images. The interface is designed to keep the dialogues in order. Every reply creates a ladder like thread of discussions, where new comers comment and extend the ladder or branch out for new topics.¹² At the same time, voting mechanism, which was mentioned in the previous chapter, also applies to comments. Thus, the popular comments move top of list and become more accessible.

The importance of the text based communication in online forums like reddit is twofold; for the researcher, it is a medium to get access, develop analytical and technical skills to develop; for the informants, it is a preferred medium of communication. Particularly for this case, I was already accustomed and had knowledge on the reddit's jargon and acronyms¹³. Being able to relate to these terms and write in a way that is appreciated by reddit is important for accessing the community. It was also important for my analysis to understand "the approved" form of communication, such as writing in a very friendly and positive way.

On the side of the users, overwhelming majority of my informants expressed their hesitation to talk to me verbally, some mentioned their limited language skills, and some just

¹² Typical reddit post:

http://www.reddit.com/r/secretsanta/comments/1t7i4r/bill_gates_got_me_in_the_exchange_thank_you_so/ (Accessed on May 30th, 2015)

¹³ Some examples for common reddit acronyms: (TIL) Today I Learned, a referenced post about an interesting fact; or (TL;DR) Too Long, Didn't Read, a necessary summary note after a long post. For more examples, please see: https://www.reddit.com/wiki/faq#wiki_what_do_all_of_these_acronyms_mean.3F (Accessed on May 30th, 2015)

believed that they communicate better in written form. On a Skype interview, u/Albatross states the advantages of text communication on reddit as:

“...when things are in text, instead of a normal conversation, when they are in text, you can edit them. I think people have more time to think about what they really wanna say and people are less likely to make mistakes socially.”

This also shows what text as a form means for users as well, which makes the analysis more important. Even though I was skeptical in the beginning to the written form of communication for my in-depth interviews; I was surprised by the lengthy and detailed responses I received from my informants. At this point, I realized, communicating in text was also meant following the rules of the community and culture of reddit.

The Perfect Observation: Lurking

The nature of observation changes due to the previously mentioned limitations of reading and writing in online spaces. Most often, ethnographic works include the detailed descriptions of the physical conditions of the setting, impressions and reactions of the informants or routine of the field; where online spaces lack them all. According to the Garcia et al., this nature of online data “... requires different set of technical skills” (2009: 57) *Lurking* is a technique suggested by Garcia et al, as well as a common term for the “invisible” users on Internet, who rarely or never comments but constantly comes back to check the website. (2009: 58) Lurking enables the researchers to constantly be in and out of the online discussion and help them to keep track of the dynamics of the website without being intrusive. However, the researcher has to be aware of the potentially serious ethical issues lurking may create, which will be addressed later. Even though I personally participated and involved in every process of the exchanges, my existence did not have an impact on the bigger picture.

Thus, it can be claimed lurking is the ideal form of observation, where the observant does not disrupt anything, and can access without the need of normalization of his/her existence

in the environment. However, Miller and Slater (2000) argue that dialogue and engagement are the strengths of ethnography. Since lurking is a one-way process, it does not really allow to unpack multilayered aspects of interactions. As a reddit user, I dedicated four months for preliminary research on r/SecretSanta. I visited the subreddit on a daily basis, and “lurked around” to see active users, famous events and got acquainted with the community. Yet, after the field experience, I realized, I was not able to grasp many aspect that I acquired through discussion on my interviews.

Getting Access to Community

Entering the field and a community is a delicate matter to anthropology. As accessing to every community, building up an online identity and gaining credibility in an online community requires serious investment of time and other resources. However, in the case of online communities, every member was an outsider once. The processes of constructing communities are relatively traceable; the process itself is preserved as archived data or videos in most cases. A history of an online community less complex and accessible compared to “a classical Malinowskian ethnographic site”. Question of “going native” is irrelevant in most cases, since there are no real natives in online communities.

Having a trustable account on reddit means high numbers of “karma points”, where a user have high score of up-votes coming from other users when they applaud his/her contributions. For my case, I had a relatively new account, and I did not post often, thus my account did not claim such credibility. I was planning to provide my real identity in case of a discussion of trust during my field. I never encountered such a problem, even after I announced my research with a reddit post.

Another dominant question of the discipline is to getting out of the field as well. On one hand, Internet allows constant and unrestrained access to the field site. I check reddit every time I open my computer. On the other hand, Internet is a space where myriad of comments, text

and conversation are exchanged every day. My post on reddit, informing the community about my research, was a success on the day I posted. Now it is one of the thousands of archived posts, which are not easily visible unless a user intentionally looks for it. Therefore, constant access may seem like an advantage in the first place, yet keeping that access and staying connected requires time and effort.

2.2 What is Public Information?: The Ethical Boundaries

The fuzzy boundaries on Internet create new ethical dilemmas on privacy and confidentiality (Garcia et. al, 2009: 73). One of the greatest ethical problems over Internet research is informing the participants of the study. Lurking as a research technique creates a constant state of surveillance among the users of the website, without their specific knowledge. In order to prevent major problems, I posted an explanatory note, disclosing my identity as a researcher, and notifying both the users and the owners of reddit.com about the study, though this is not a guarantee that all the users are informed.

On a second level, even though users' information are shielded by a username, their accounts are public. However, even if they consent to participate to my research, my access to their skype names, Facebook accounts, or personal emails cross a boundary in their online activity. One user mentioned that they are willing to talk to me, but they cannot jeopardize the real identity and lead to a possible connection between the user name and actual name. Thus, responding to these concerns, I only use the usernames of participants who explicitly accepted that I could use their pseudonyms. Secondly, I did my best to prevent any connection between real-life information I acquired about my informants and their usernames. I avoided using any indicators of their real identity, so I use "s/he" for the necessary pronoun. Similarly, during my Skype interviews I never initiated the camera talk unless the other party requested, in a way to respect their limits of privacy. Interestingly, it was only at my seventh Skype interview that my informant turned on the camera at the beginning of the call, for the first time.

Lastly, beyond the researcher field relationship, the similar concerns over privacy are present between users. One my informants also expressed similar concerns over their access to other's public information. One informant mentioned the distress they have gone through because of their giftee was posting their nude photographs on reddit. Further discussions of trust over community will be addressed in Chapter 5.

2.3 Finding Focus in Abundant Data

One of the greatest advantages of working online is the easy access to data, which can be utilized by many other studies. Big data analysis techniques are useful and can be adopted. However, even if the research is restricted to ethnographic methods, new technologies allow us to preserve every single detail of the fieldwork. This creates an abundant supply of data, and as Boellstorff warns, it is sometimes hard to work with thousands of pages long comments and dialogues. (2008: 75)

At the end of my fieldwork, I faced the similar situation with the large amount of data to be analyzed in less than a month. I conducted an online survey filled by 523 reddit users; 21 interviews, 9 Skype calls, 2 Facebook chats and 10 message exchanges over email or reddit private messages (PM). Due to limited time, I could not conduct an extensive analysis of posts and comments. However, as mentioned earlier, I visited r/SecretSanta on a daily basis, which provided me with a certain level of familiarity with the posts, frequent users, famous events in the last 5 years, as well as the jargon of the subreddit. Though not extensive, there will be sections where I will refer to my personal experience.

My initial visits to the subreddit acquainted me with the general atmosphere. Before making a public post, I decided to ask permission about my research. I contacted u/kickme444, whom I take as an official from reddit as the founder of r/SecretSanta and an employee of the company. Later I continued to check every public announcement with the rest of the reddit and

admin group of r/SecretSanta. This provided me with some legitimacy and prevented any possible conflicts.

The post, which I notified the community about my research, was a small success. It stayed on the first page of the subreddit nearly for two days, and the survey was filled by over 500 people¹⁴. Using the basic demographics, I grouped the participants according to their age, gender and country. I created two lists for these groups with people who had over 15 or more exchanges, and less than 5 exchanges. I used reddit messages to contact them for further interviews. All my informants very extremely generous with the information they provided. On average, I had hour-long conversations over Skype, and nearly 10 pages long written responses via messages.

On a final note on positionality, I believe I was treated more like a researcher than a fellow redditor during my interviews. As I underlined earlier, it was partially due to the fact that I was not a very active reddit user. My informants did not have much information from my reddit account, whereas I accessed various aspects of their lives.

¹⁴ For the survey, please see:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1kov6cUunrWLhDW3wsas9n9f2nYNDYezoAWsAQSi6PyE/viewform?usp=send_form

For the post, please see:

http://www.reddit.com/r/secretsanta/comments/32lrkq/hello_secret_santas_of_reddit_im_writing_my/

III. Solving the Puzzle: Gift as an Object

Marcel Mauss still casts a long shadow on the current understanding of gift and gift exchange. We are far from the gift economy of potlatch that he described; yet, gift is still a complex subject, full with paradoxes. Under the umbrella of larger debates of highly individualized modern society and perils of the decreasing social ties and social exchanges, the idea of giving and sharing calls for a revisiting of the literature. In “The Enigma of the Gift”, Maurice Godelier points out this call through a long description of the modern Western lifestyle and new motivations of charity. “The giving of gifts has become an act that creates a bond between abstract subjects: a donor who loves humankind and a recipient who, ... embodies the world in distress.” (Godelier, 1980: 5) Three decades later, the gap that Godelier described is much wider and people have the ability to become invisible subjects of new communication technologies.

Mary Douglas notes in the foreword of the recent English edition of “The Gift”, that Mauss’s work altered the idea of gift-free gift, and charity as a truly altruistic act, which dominated the Western Christian thinking. (In short, Maussian frame offers a system of interlocking obligations to give, to receive and to reciprocate, which are particularly coercive to keep a level of social prestige. (Osteen, 2002: 4). In this paper, the gift is not considered as a closed economy; instead, the emphasis is put on the individual exchanges. The question raised here is, to what extend is reciprocity a bounding feature of gift exchanges? If there is no free gift, what can anyone expect from a person they have never met?

Carrier adopts a very Maussian understanding of gift in his own work. As mentioned before, he believes that gift exchanges are highly associated with the giver, whereas in commodity exchanges the object is already detached from both parties. The giver is done with the object as the transaction completes; and the recipient is not obligated to keep the object, he is also entitled to engage in another transaction with it. Therefore, in gift exchanges, obligation

defines the nature of the relationship; in a way, it reaffirms the relation: the gift is inalienable (Carrier, 1991: 124). Further, the gift is a double-sided coin in Emerson's conceptualization. On one hand "the common gift" responds to the needs of the recipient, putting him/her in a position of obligation and inferiority. On the other hand, "the gift of affection" is personal: "...gift is a portion of thyself ... is right and pleasing, for it restores societies in so far to its primary basis, when a man's biography is conveyed in a gift." (Emerson, 1983: 94, quoted in Carrier, 1995: 147).

Mauss underlines in the last chapter of "The Gift", that the potlatch is the defining feature of the pre-modern societies vis a vis the commodity exchange, which is at the core modern societies (Mauss, first published in: 1926). This view has been challenged by many (Gregory, 1980; Carrier, 1991; Yan, 2012): for his followers, Maussian dichotomy between gift and commodity does not necessarily represents a differentiating quality for a society, and these two exchanges can co-exist in one coherent whole. (Carrier, 1991: 125). Mauss's dichotomy presents another sharp differentiation between the gift and commodity exchange as former being the relational and the latter individualistic respectively. (Mauss, 1966) In this sense, an object is categorically moved from being a commodity to the gift because of the existence or the establishment of relations between the two parties. I follow Carrier's opposition to this dichotomy: "...the pure gift relationship and the pure commodity relationship, are polar terms that define a continuum along which one can place existing transactions and relationships." (1995: 189) An object cycles along this continuum in relation to the meaning attached to it by the giver and the recipient.

Thus, I ask, what is the meaning of a gift to a stranger? According to the common understanding of gift, the relational aspect mentioned above does not need to be established prior to the gift; but the gift itself creates the relationship. *r/SecretSanta* agrees that they do not provide what people need, as Emerson's common gift suggest. Yet, there is no affection or

relation between the parties either. Gift represents the power of the giver over the receiver and obliges the latter to respond in correspondence. But what if, the gift cannot bring people together and does not establish such relations of power? Is it still possible to call this a gift?

The following sections of this chapter will try to unpack the relations of receiving and giving on the level of the object. After evaluating the idea of perfect gift, it will ask what is reciprocity in r/SecretSanta, what makes us choose the best gift, spend more time, effort and money on a stranger? The last section will conclude with a brief discussion of idea of charity.

3.1 The Idea of Perfect Gift

The ideal gift represents the giver as well as the taste of the recipient. Quoting Noonan's work, Carrier argues:

“A gift...is meant as an expression of personal affection, of some degree of love. It is given in a context created by personal relations to convey a personal feeling. The more it reflects the donee's interests and the donor's tastes the better. The more completely it is a gift the more completely it declares an identification of the giver with the recipient ... The size of what is given is irrelevant. What counts is how much the donor expresses identification with the recipient. The gift once given is wholly the donee's and no one else's—it is with this donee and not someone else that the donor identifies....” (Noonan 1984: 695, quoted by Carrier, 1995: 146)

Following the definition of Noonan, what happens when the two parties of the gift exchange does not have the necessary acquaintance to create the perfect gift? The idea of the perfect gift becomes stronger than the relation itself. In Noonan's terms, donor's identity is produced through the limited clues provided to solve the puzzle of interests of the donee. At the same time, it lacks the previous connection to feed from in order to get the perfect gift.

The real addicts of the SecretSanta exchanges, as they call themselves, create these connections, even though they are temporary. Many of them try different ways to make this puzzle of finding the perfect gift interesting. u/Albatross offers a game for her Santas. S/he adds a small link to his/her personal blog call “redditgifts” and provides the address of the personal blog on the likes/dislikes list. If the Santa manages to find this link and send a personal

message to u/IAIbatross, s/he awards them with a “redditgold”¹⁵. Interestingly, /u/IAIbatross adds more than half of the exchanges are disappointing, since people do not take their time to “find out her preferences”.

Further inquiry of the idea of puzzle solving shows that the perfect gift in r/SecretSanta is not about the giver, it is solely related to recipient, unlike what Noonan suggests. Since santas lack the personal connection and information of their giftee, they “dig in” giftees’ accounts and their online identities to “figure them out”. u/koryisma notes that “I spend more time trying to think of a perfect strangers' gift than my own friends and family, which is weird. It's part puzzle, part game, part connection, and part community.”

The perfect gift does not imply affection in the case of r/SecretSanta. These people are not friends, family or even acquaintances, yet it does represent the time and effort the santa devotes to the giftee. u/koryisma also adds “I do this for the experience. The sense of pride and accomplishment I get for finding/sending the "perfect" gift for someone is great, but it boosts my ego as much as it makes them happy”. The emphasis on self-fulfillment will be addressed in the following section. However, it is important to point how u/koryisma articulates the achievement that comes with “finding the perfect gift”; being able to temporarily access the other’s life gives a satisfaction. During our interview, u/threedice reminded me two times that redditgifts is not to find friends, it is not “... I sent you a gift and now we are friends forever”. There is no affection and love relation to be dominant, not even newly established relations; instead r/SecretSanta creates a temporary state of acquaintance to exchange the perfect gifts.

3.2 Types of Reciprocity

Reciprocity is generally taken for granted as a mutual reciprocation, where two parties respond to each other. However, in r/SecretSanta model, there are two channels of reciprocation.

¹⁵ redditgold is the virtual reddit gold, by purchasing it the users support reddit servers and get a little gilded icon next to the recipient’s username.

Since the exchanges are not symmetrical, when participants send a gift, they know that they will only receive a thank you note from their giftee, not a gift back. Thus, the first type of reciprocity is an expectation of recognition and gratitude for their effort, both by the giftee and the community. Secondly, every participant ideally receives a gift from another person. So system of the exchanges create a second type of reciprocity. This section outlines these two processes.

Importance of Gratitude

Simmel calls gratitude as the foundation of social behavior, “the moral memory of mankind”. Yet at the same time, gratitude is a burden, which is “irredeemable and inevitably generates or solidifies power inequities between giver and receiver. (1996: 48, quoted in Osteen, 2002: 14). The former part of Simmel’s argument is very solid, and I would claim socially embedded despite time and space. Nearly without exception, all my informants stated that they get disappointed if they do not receive a gift, but they always get upset if they do not receive a thank you note. When asked about the most negative experience on r/SecretSanta, a user wrote to me the following: “One (Giftee) did not appreciate the gift that I sent to her (and I was a rematch santa) so she did not post a picture and provided a very laxidasical description. The second (Books) still has not posted receipt. I continue to do it because, not everyone has home training.”

However, though the latter part of Simmel’s formation still holds, it brings about interesting consequences. A number of my informants noted that they always get motivated for the coming up exchanges, if they receive a really good reaction from their giftee. u/frozen_cactus says that after the first experience:

“I felt like my first gift could have been better. And I read a lot of r/secretsanta posts about how the entire point of secretsanta is about “giving” gifts and not “receiving” gifts. That small adjustment to the way I thought about the exchanges helped to open up my mind and be more thankful for anything I got and made me focus on being a better gifter. It has also made me a better giftee because I know I like to read if my giftee liked their present.”

Similarly, another user thinks that it should not be a priority, yet there is always the rightful expectation of a simple recognition: “Apocalypse match didn't post pictures. I know it's ridiculous but it made me sad, since I made something, and also gave her a really cool Masai dagger that I had gotten in Kenya and had for a few years. I was hoping she'd like it enough to post pictures... though I know that's silly.”

On another level we can question who is the evaluator of the perfect gift, who do we expect the gratitude from? In other words, is it only the receiver or the giver who are involved in the gift exchange? Or does the process include the larger community around? The perfect gift expects applause from the larger community as well.

Redditgifts's rating mechanism is more visible compared to the face-to-face relations. Instead of trying to make meanings of the smiling faces and gazes at the gift, redditors upvote it. As a part of the gifting process, people are asked to show their gratitude by posting “thank you” notes along with the photos of the gift; and the larger “reddit community” constantly votes for the both parties. Sometimes the receiver is awarded for the deep and sincere gratitude; other times the giver for their talent of choosing the most suitable gift. Nearly without exception, my informants on r/SecretSanta believes that the community always upvote the gifts that goes “above and beyond”. The very expensive gifts, or objects coming from celebrities are always among the top rated posts list. Top gifts of the gallery include voluminous photo albums, where giftees “go above and beyond” to appreciate their gift. Among the most popular gallery posts there are videos, very long thank you letters or photo albums with special narratives.

Gift is a Lottery Ticket

All analytical deductions aside, opening up a wrapped present is always exciting and delightful. Thus, r/SecretSanta exchanges are full with surprises, even on the very surface. Yet,

here I point to a different type of expectation, in which participants evidently feel before even they decide to participate the exchanges.

/u/meow_cat claims that people are not being honest with themselves and they want to believe SecretSanta is about giving. S/he thinks both giving and receiving is about how people want to see their online entities. Though I take this as slightly a radical claim, considering the larger picture of the statements I receive, I also agree people tend to see their gifts as a lottery and investment. When participants sign up, it is like a lottery ticket, which offers the possibility of being matched with a very dedicated giver, a celebrity or someone who will really understand them well. Even if it is little, there is a chance in the next exchange that they can be the one, who make it to the front page by receiving a personal note from Bill Gates. The stories on the top voted posts make the entire exchange system more attractive. There is always a possibility that handmade gifts, expensive electronic devices, music instruments or actual money may come with the next delivery.

Some participants choose to increase their chances of getting matched with a dedicated person, by choosing plus-exchanges or reddit elves memberships. If a participant chooses plus-exchange and agrees to spend 3 or 9 credits per exchange, instead of the usual cost of 1 credit, redditgifts promises to match this person with participants with previous experience. In the case of reddit elves, users agree to pay currently a rate of \$9.99 for 3 months of membership; they get matched with other elves during the exchanges. These choices do not guarantee receiving a good gift or a gift at all. Yet, both motivate people to expect more.

At the same time, the gift is a bet on what people will receive. As one informant claims “...when I receive a bad gift, the worst thing is I spent 20 dollars on a bad gift, but if I receive something good, it is the best thing ever”. The interesting part is the money in question is “wasted” for a person, when the bad gift is received from another participant. In other words,

this logic of thinking does not associate gifts with the people, but think them in terms of objects in flow.

3.3 “What Makes An Object A Gift?”: Commodity and Gift

Osteen conceptualizes the ambiguous nature of modern gifting as the following: “Contemporary depictions of gifts as free and unconstrained merely import the autonomous self of neoclassical economic into another terrain. Although the idea of the “perfect” or free gift is very rarely carried out in practice, the ideology remains, and may prevent donors and recipients from understanding their own motives and actions.” (2002: 21) Even though we do not believe in perfect gifts, we continue to give them. It makes us feel ungrateful if we reject, or do not appreciate a gift we receive. It is important to realize that r/SecretSanta exchanges are agreements between people on they will exchange material goods. Yet, when these objects are introduced as gifts, the paradigm changes along with the entire set of relations.

When I ask my informants what makes the gifts they receive more than an object from a stranger, u/frozen_cactus replies as: “...usually gifts from reddit exchanges feel more personalized because people are honing in and analyzing one small comment I made on a thread of some obscure subreddit. So, for me it’s more than an object from a stranger because a stranger wouldn’t know these things about me. They had to investigate me in a sense and come to know me through my online persona.” Even though many participants state that they feel this way, when I further question what they do with the gifts they do not like some say they immediately give it away *to someone in need*, whereas some claim they keep it at least for some time.

A gift is at a different status than a mere commodity, since the relations in question attach degrees of meaning and sentiment to the object. In a way, the gift is untouchable, inconsumable, a protected object because it is supposed to carry the memory, affection and relations of the loved ones. Here, it is evident that the received object is not considered merely

a material resource to be exchanged again. At the same time, it is not a pure gift either, since it does lose its meaning over time, and join the cycle of exchanges again. (Appadurai, 1986)

Following Carrier's conceptualization of gift and commodity spectrum, I conclude that the position of the r/SecretSanta on this spectrum is highly related to the success of the puzzle solving activity. Unlike in an established relation of family, friends or similar circles; the fact of being a foreigner to each other affects how santas and giftees attach meaning to the gift. When santa cannot achieve the goal of perfect gift, the object is not perceived as a gift by the receiver.

IV. The Semi-Anonymous Self Online

This chapter aims to analyze how people construct the boundaries of the interactions between the gifts and the strangers and where does their relation start and end through the exchanges. The first section will explain the ways in which participants present themselves and their wishes. It focus on how pseudonyms, which further strengthen the feeling of strangeness between giftees and gifters, actually utilized as a channel to formulate the material expectations. Second section will be dedicated to people's reactions to these formulated expectations, in the forms of likes and dislikes lists or to reddit histories of their giftees. Final two sections will underline redditor's rhetoric of being good-doers on r/SecretSanta.

4.1 The “Real” Identity versus The Semi-Anonymous Username

Most of my informants tend to make a comparison on the difference between gifting their real life friends and reddit gift exchanges, even if I do not ask for such a comparison. They mention both getting anxious when they get a gift for a close friend or a relative; as well as getting disappointed by the gift they receive. u/burstapart says:

“A lot my relationships, my mom, my friends, stuff like that... I don't do gifts. This is a thing! A lot of people know this. I'm really bad at buying gifts for people, so it helps a lot when I do redditgifts and people give me a list of what they want, or they like. It's easier for me to shop.... I get disappointed easily, I think my friend should know me better and they don't! (Laughs) And they get me things I don't like. So, for birthdays and stuff we just buy each other means or write each other a card. That's a lot more personal.”

Here, s/he draws a very clear line between expectations from a “real-life” relation and a stranger. In 2012, Sherry Turkle delivered a TedTalk named “Connected, But Alone?” on modern human relationship and communication technologies. She called human relations messy, “... and we want to clean them up with technology.” u/burstapart want to prevent a potential disappointment from close circle of friends and family. The close relations come with high and sometimes implicit expectations and obligations. Interactions with strangers do keep the

magical and intriguing part of the gift, yet frees both parties from the risky moments of disappointment.

Advantage of pseudonyms

This inclination towards “the clean” relations as Turkle suggests is a further reflection of what is already constructed through our online identity. It is important to underline I do not claim that these apply to Internet in general, and r/SecretSanta particularly forces people engage with strangers, or pushes them to state of solitude.

As u/somelikeitkumquat claims this interaction is a choice, which reddit facilitates easily: “...[reddit] has that built-in user base with people who want to interact with strangers over the Internet.” The use of pseudonyms on reddit creates and protects a brick wall between the real identities and online interactions of people. On one hand, it allows a space where people can claim and adopt a personality without restraints; on the other, it is a space of where people can be evaluated relatively free. In an additional note u/burstapart send me after the interview:

“... the redditgifts likes/dislikes section and my reddit profile in general is the most complete profile of myself I present anywhere (at least for the general exchanges like secret santa and arbitrary day). In real life I feel like version of me people know is tailored to my relationship with that person, according to how much they'll judge me for certain things, but the anonymity of reddit means I can []then everything about me...I think the system of subreddits or at least being able to talk about yourself, under the guise of anonymity, sort of fuels a degree of closeness you might not find elsewhere.”

If this quote is analyzed together with the previous quote by u/burstapart, it is evident that r/SecretSanta is a way to cross the taboos of gift exchanges. It is not appropriate to tell what you want, let alone to ask for a gift in the first place. However, redditgifts exchanges are *mutual agreements* for asking for gifts. The anonymity on reddit allows users to express their material wishes, thus frees them from burdens and mess of “real-life” relations. Thus, r/SecretSanta left with the ideal, fun, and emotions of the gift.

4.2. “The Friendly Lurking”: Solving the Puzzle of What a Stranger May Want

Many do not like the idea of their privacy being compromised. When asked, people do not like to be *investigated* by others. The gaze of a stranger makes people feel vulnerable. However, acts of lurking and stalking are not just a major, but also a necessary part of r/SecretSanta gift exchanges. The essence of the solving the puzzle for the perfect gift is constructed around finding out about the other. In contrast with the advantages of anonymous setting proposed above, u/IAlbatross suggests a different perspective:

“One of the things I like is reddit and redditgifts establishes a history in text. That’s one of the thing I like, getting to know [people] ... when you met a stranger, they don’t feel like a stranger because you can go and look at their profile, you look at where they’re posting, what forums, what they’re interested in, you look at what they post, you get their opinion, you get what they are passionate about... and so they don’t really feel like a stranger anymore.”

u/IAlbatross’ take on the issue is not concerned with the real identity of a person, it is even irrelevant. What matters in r/SecretSanta exchanges are to what extend people are willing to get to know the other party.

Some users say they only provide very specific information on their likes/dislikes list to their santas, to hint to very particular objects that they want to get in that exchange. Whereas, a majority of them prefer to provide a general profile of their likes/dislikes, but add a little note that they want something “which will remind them of their unknown Santa”. After the exchange is done, most claim they always can differentiate when their Santa go the troubles of friendly lurking and crafted a specific idea or just pick the first thing they google on the theme of the exchange. According to /u/frozen_cactus:

“It’s interesting to see how people view me based solely on my online presence. My family usually tends to deviate towards certain gifts because they’ve known me for so long ... We’re intrigued by how good a gift from an absolute stranger could be. If people got really terrible gifts their first year they might not continue. But after a couple exchanges I found that I didn’t really need anything but if there was an exchange I knew a bit about then I would join because I knew I could get a good gift for someone.”

r/SecretSanta givers cross the boundaries created by the pseudonyms without really compromising the anonymity.

4.3. I Like Making People Happy: Gift versus Charity

Even though, r/SecretSanta participant seems to weight the importance of giving and receiving a gift differently; their first inclination is to say they like *giving*. /u/j_webb says: “I prefer sending gifts rather than receiving gifts myself. I enjoy learning the interests of other reddit users also participating in the current exchange, and I enjoy seeing the giftee's reactions to my gifts.” However when asked further, most of the time, people underline their worst experiences are when they do not receive a gift.

Among nearly 200 exchanges, there are only 3 exchanges, which are organized as charity in principle, namely The Teachers Exchanges of 2012, 2013 and 2014, with an exception of relatively unsuccessful reddit troops exchange for US army. The Teachers Exchanges are organized to provide signed up public school teachers with school supplies. It is agreed that r/SecretSanta exchanges are not organized for charity purposes. The aim is not to help the ones in need and it is also highly recognized by the participants that it is not an altruistic act.

Without exception all my informants emphasized over and over the importance of giving in r/SecretSanta exchanges. However, when I pose the question of “why would anyone choose the gift exchange over a charity if the motive is to give?”, my informants stressed a different reasoning. Some mentioned that charities and gift exchanges are completely different phenomena and they cannot be compared. I do not agree with this argument since the main motivation of the question was informants’ testimonies on emphasis on giving, in the first place. The first common answer was pointing at the mistrust in the institutionalized charities. Many underlined that they do want to exactly know where they money go. Secondly, majority emphasized the importance of appreciation. According to u/purpletulip9:

“When you give to a charity, you are giving to an organization to provide services to a group of people. The people are unknown, they don’t have actual faces, profiles or something that makes the experience personalized. So, the giving is general and although it does make ones day to give to a charity the level of gratification is different than giving to someone that

you are specifically purchasing something for and giving it to them personally. The level of recognition (their joy, gratefulness and excitement) that is being received by the gifter is also personal and not generally stated. If I give to a charity, I am generically thanked and recognized for my giving. If I gift someone I am genuinely thanked for my “efforts” in giving.”

Thus, in the context of r/SecretSanta, gift and charity are two separately motivated acts.

However, if these are compared on the basis of giving as an act, the differentiating point is that the gift receives appreciation on a personal level. The next chapter will scrutinize various aspects of individual expectations and motivations of gifting in r/SecretSanta.

Re-matching as a “moral” obligation

This work majorly focused on the relations of the gift exchange. I do not want to overlook an equally important aspect of redditgifts, the rematchers. As mentioned before, rematchers are volunteers, who signup to give without receiving anything. After the shipment deadline, a second round of matches are arranged for the ones who did not received anything, “shafted” giftees as called in the subreddit, and the rematchers. All my informants emphasize rematchers are dedicated people who are willing to give more. A user mentions that s/he felt *morally* obligated to rematch another, after receiving a pretty amazing gift for an exchange.

For Secret Santa Exchange 2014, u/threedice decided to go “above and beyond” and rematched 20 different people:

“The downside is that there are people who abuse the system. There are people that will signup for no reason other than to get a gift and go away. And that really stinks. Which is why this year, and I only did it for this year ... I decided I was going to go, over and above of reddit rematchings ... I contacted the moderators and I asked what is the most that any person has ever rematched? (The answer is 15) For this one year only, I would like to be a rematcher for 20 shafted giftees and we came to an agreement. They [moderators] would spread them out so that I would not get overwhelmed with 20 gifts at once. And they also made sure I was not to use it as promotional for myself. ... I couldn’t say it after the 20th gift was delivered.”¹⁶

When I asked the reason why u/threedice preferred to rematch this year; s/he replied that people forget that r/SecretSanta is about giving before receiving and continues, “I was hoping that post

¹⁶For further information, see:

http://www.reddit.com/r/secretsanta/comments/2uz4r1/a_2014_secret_santa_who_rematched_for_twenty/

would inspire somebody “Hey! Why don’t you try to break my record? I’ll get 25 exchanges!” Even in the inspiring example of u/threedice, reddit’s particular style of challenges and fun is evident.

Rematching is also a reaction to an inappropriate behavior in reddit community. As u/threedice underlines in ensure the act of giving before receiving. The idea of reddit as an online community will be discussed in the next chapter.

V. “r/SecretSanta is a friendly community.”

The early works on Internet are in a tendency to approach the cyber space as a relatively autonomous and abstract entity, where things happen *differently* compared to the “real” world, which is tangible and physical. (Ardévol. 2012: 75) However, with the turn of the millennium, the consensus shifted towards an entangled treatment of the “virtual” and “real” division, where there is a single social reality in which people operate in and out of both traditional and new technological mediums of communication (Garcia et. al, 2009: 54).

Boellstorff claims insistence of real-virtual world dichotomy comes from “... the misunderstanding of actual-world sociality” (2008: 180). He criticizes the mystification of face-to-face communication, which is often seen as a necessary basis of the social interactions. This view cannot escape the conceptualization of community as a closed, homogenous group of people. (Ibid.) Thus, the term online community indicates a group of people who create and participate a particular social space on Internet, rather than claiming an online and offline dichotomy. This chapter is focused on the means and mechanisms in which r/SecretSanta is created, constructed and reproduced as an online community by the redditors.

This chapter opens with a brief outline of reddit as a community and their rhetoric of sharing culture. It will follow with analysis of r/SecretSanta gallery and its role on community building process. Lastly, I will try to answer the question of who do we trust in these online gift exchanges, to the people or to reddit?

5.1. “Sharing Culture” of reddit

According to “the official definition” reddit as a noun means “a type of online community where users vote on content”, but reddit as a verb means “to take part in a reddit community”¹⁷. This section aims to understand the implications of the ways in which redditors *reddit* on reddit.

¹⁷Please see, <http://www.reddit.com/about/>

Most users agree that reddit is the larger umbrella for the real communities of subreddits; or as reddit official site underlines they “power communities.” u/threedice summarizes the sharing on reddit as “...people with like interests who also have the ability to share what they know, and what they bring.” Some of the larger subreddits like r/AskReddit or r/todayilearned (TIL) have nearly 8 million subscribers. The sharing mechanisms of reddit.com have utmost importance to understand reddit as a community. As heavily stressed in the introduction of this work, the content of reddit is provided by the users. Thus, if people do not post, or do not comment on reddit, the idea of community turns into an invisible group of people. Many tend to see this fact as a crucial difference from face-to-face communities, in a necessary comparison. However, there is no ideal community where all the members are in constant interaction and acquaintance. The idea of a community is an abstraction and a sense of belonging. There are three ways in which reddit produces this idea.

u/burstapart says “Everyone knows what reddit is, but not everyone *knows* reddit... I don’t understand this format at all... You have to put into effort to get into reddit.” One of the first that needs to be acquired is the language on reddit. As mentioned before, reddit has a particular jargon developed through the years, mostly by using acronyms. Even though (TIL) Today I Learned refers to a subreddit, it can also be used in colloquially as a reaction to some interesting fact. Similarly, “Not Safe for Work” NSFW is a necessary tag if the user is posting sexual or violently inappropriate content. This particular jargon, which sometimes can be hard to acquire is constantly used and developed by the community¹⁸.

Secondly, one needs to understand how reddit really works as u/burstapart suggests. Even though reddit often underlines that it is a free space and every idea is welcomed, it is highly regulated in itself. Apart from the occasional instances where reddit team face allegations of censoring user contents by their users, it is truly a free space as long as the

¹⁸ Please see, footnote 12.

relevant information goes to the relevant subreddit. Every subreddit has a rubric on the sidebar, which lists certain set of rules determined by the voluntary moderators. It also states the conditions limitations, and sanctions if a person does not bind by these rules. Most of the times moderators have a right the delete the content, and ban the user if necessary. A content deleted from a subreddit can be posted to another relevant place. Although it is never desired for moderators to police around the discussion or abuse this position; they reinforce the limits of sharing on the particular subreddit, according to the rules set in the beginning. Moderators devote a serious amount of time and effort to the subreddits, especially in the larger communities.

Thirdly, the community collectively creates and maintains a level of reliability as well as control over the content through this system of voting. The upvoted content becomes visible, as it moves up in the list of posts. It is necessary to have the user participation to have the desired level of interaction on reddit. As the comments or post get voted, users receive “karma point” for their submissions. The karma points reflect the activity and popularity of a user. Having a trustable account on reddit means high numbers of “karma points”, meaning a user have high score of up-votes coming from other users when they applause his/her contributions to community.

These are the three already established ways that reddit community functions in every subreddit, including r/SecretSanta. This is a very common system of calculated reliability on Internet, which can be similarly observed in any forum with comments, including Yahoo!Answers or Amazon customer reviews. However, the twist on reddit is the content is keep getting updated and becomes visible. Thus, it reflects a collective taste and opinion.

5.2 “Giving Back to Community”: The Importance of Gallery

Dan McComas (u/kickme444), in his 2013 TedxDePaulU talk defined the purpose of r/SecretSanta gallery as the following:

“We provide a mechanism for which somebody go send a gift to a stranger and we provide a mechanism for that stranger post thank you notes back to the receiver. They are *giving back* to the receiver. Not something physical but in the form of a thank you note. But the best thing is that everybody gets to appreciate that thank you note.”¹⁹ (Emphasis added).

Following the discussion above, the same system applies for r/SecretSanta as well. What is appreciated on the subreddit in the forms of gifts and thanks you notes, creates a culture of sharing. Here, Dan McComas stresses that they give back to community: yet, as it was discussed in the previous two chapters, when santas do not receive proper appreciation for their gift, their efforts are not visible on the subreddit. On one hand, at the most simple level, people do expect a simple acknowledgement. On the other hand, a successful post facilitates further discussion, which is encouraged through the gallery.

Interestingly, on the contrary to the way reddit functions, gallery directs the appreciation to the receiver of the gift instead of the sender. When a post is made on reddit, the upvotes and other possible means of appreciation benefits the owner of the post, in the form of karma, redditgold or other awards. Whereas in the gallery, since the receiver posts the picture of the gift, when the gift is applauded, thus upvoted, the receiver gets the awards on reddit, instead of the sender who is the one that spent the effort and money. I believe this mechanism suggests a collective culture of sharing that can be specific to r/SecretSanta on reddit; as it prevents self-promotional posts, which is always frowned upon the subreddit.

Truly devoted giftees make photo albums or videos to thank their santa. u/knoekie says that it is a learning process as well: “I think sometimes people are copying each other because the ideas are good! I also note some gifts online for my friends” redditgifts gallery has a separate selection of awards, which appears next to the post when the community appreciates the submission.

The gallery is the memory of the community, every submission, and event is archived and accessible, if not deleted by the user or moderators for some reason. The best way to get to

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phoUVH05kEg>

know a new subreddit is to check the top and the controversial posts. In the case of r/SecretSanta, most of the posts are proofs and discussions of successful, memorable events, which are praised in the community.

5.3 The Good versus The Bad Redditor

If interaction can be narrowed down to a unit of analysis, it would be the posts and comments on reddit. With the exceptions of occasional questions and thank you notes, overwhelming majority of the posts at r/SecretSanta are link submissions. These links either directs the user to the photos and thank you notes of giftee's on the exchange gallery on redditgifts.com or to ingur. A quick comparison, between the top and the most controversial posts reveal an implicit tension between the r/SecretSanta. The top posts are obviously "above and beyond" gifts that surprised the community in the last five years; whereas the controversial posts are generally belong to users who did not like their gifts, or complained about an unfortunate gift exchange. The r/SecretSanta community clearly punishes this attitude through comments and votes.

On the issue, u/Albatross offers a critical perspective, by pointing that reddit voting system may obscure the negative posts.

"...the bad is you don't get to be completely honest. Sometimes I'll see something, I'll feel critical and not in a mean way; sometimes its constructive criticism... on reddit there is definitely a culture, people don't like negativity, they do not like criticism, unless your criticism is very very good or dramatic."

When people do not like a post, and downvote, they enforce a collective power to condemn that opinion. Occasionally, my informants shared various experiences, where they did not like their gift, and they could not express it because it would be taken the wrong way by the community. Yet, despite this controversial aspect, most of my informants tend to think r/SecretSanta is a more positive and "kind" place compared to general attitude on reddit.

5.4 Who Do We Trust Here? : reddit.com or People?

I concluded most of my interviews with a question on the role of reddit in r/SecretSanta exchanges. I asked my informants whether r/SecretSanta would work on another website but reddit? Without exception, they named the reddit community as the facilitator of the exchanges. One of the r/SecretSanta moderators u/The_Opus summarized the role of reddit as following:

“The way that reddit works is definitely conducive to the concept of exchanges gifts. reddit is an exchange of ideas and there are conversations that take place in the comments. It does present the impression of more of a "community". I don't think that it would work very well on a site that did not have user interactions.”

Further, most participants stressed that they do trust the people on reddit. For them, this trust meant that redditors would not use their address to “come and kill them”. Even though some still do hesitate to share their address and other personal contacts, many believe that all these information is already available on Internet, if a person insists to find them with “bad intentions”. Secondly, participants mentioned that they do trust reddit as an institution. They believe that reddit is a controlled place, and inappropriate behavior is rightfully sanctioned by the moderators. In more serious situations, such as identity theft, fake accounts on redditgifts or free-riders on exchanges, users again trust that reddit.com will take necessary actions as a company to investigate such situations.

Conclusion: What Does the Puzzle of Gift Offer?

It is always possible to write completely different ethnographic works from the same field experience. Human interaction, under the larger umbrella of “culture” is too complex to simplify on limited pages. I chose to approach my case of r/SecretSanta as a culture and a space, in which people tailor and practice a particular type of gift exchange. I set off to scrutinize the gift exchange in the context of online interactions. Even if I did not claimed human interaction is fundamentally different in online setting, I started with the assumption that people would relate and expect different things from each other.

During my field experience, I first realized that the medium of text alters the people interact and inevitably affects ethnographic fieldwork. Communicating through writing with strangers has strong and complex implications. In the light of this observation, I tried to re-evaluate doing ethnographic fieldwork of the online. I emphasized that observation needs to be adjusted to the opportunities that Internet offers, such as lurking, and re-contextualized with the limitation it poses, such as lack of physical spaces to observe. I suggested that further work on ethnographies of the online could also be utilized as a methodology by other disciplines.

Interaction on virtual spaces offers a possibility to re-define what relations mean socially. Thus, I focused on relations of gift exchange at different levels in this work. I concluded that r/SecretSanta presents three new perspectives to the gift literature. First, the Internet as a medium creates a gift exchange, which is cleared from the obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Since, the fundamental features of gift exchange loses their force, the idea of the perfect gift is glorified. Secondly, due to obscure relations the gift constantly shifts on a spectrum of gift and commodity. A object can be meaningful gift for the Santa, but may not resonate with the giftee, and still be a mere commodity to be exchanged. Lastly, on r/SecretSanta, the ceremonial gift exchange is turned into a game of puzzle solving. It becomes an ongoing event, which reproduces the gift on a sentimental level, instead of system of social

solidarity as it is proposed in the classical literature. r/SecretSanta sets rules and creates a culture of gift giving, reminding a game, where participants enjoy and challenge each other on a puzzle of solving activity. With established mechanisms of interaction reddit embraces, and reproduces the feeling of a community among r/SecretSanta.

Alternative Approaches

Yet, I had to limit and focus my interest in r/SecretSanta to a single paper. I would like to mention three main concepts that should not be overlooked and may suggest new approaches to this case: the heavy effect of American culture on reddit, the gendered consumption on r/SecretSanta and reddit as a business model.

reddit.com is not just a US-based company, but overwhelming majority of the users also live in US. It connotes an alternative, “nerd-culture”. It’s interface does not have any simplifications or basic functions that large social media websites like facebook adopt. Despite it’s size, which according to Alexa.com was ranked 10th among top US websites by June 2015, it is still considered acquired taste in popular culture. Particularly in the case of r/SecretSanta, the exchanges are also tailored to the American popular culture. Here, I give justice to overall impact of American popular media culture on Internet and Western culture. Yet still, it is unlikely to see folkloric exchanges on r/SecretSanta, even though the participants are dispersed over 180 countries. r/SecretSanta exchanges protect this culture identity by organizing exchanges on famous TV shows, Halloween, Zombies and similar concepts. It is also evident that the exchanges are named after Christmas and Santa Claus, which shows a deep attachment to Christian and American culture. Some of my informants suggested that r/SecretSanta could even be reflection of nostalgia of old Christmas memories, where people want to remember the feeling of community and sharing. Though I do not think this is an evident aspect of r/SecretSanta, since reddit is diverse and complex to pin down to a single culture: it may have some implications that are worth further inquiry. I would like to note that my purpose is not to

engage in an essentialist claim which will indicate that r/SecretSanta is all about American pop-culture, but point to a new perspective on reddit.

Secondly, as some of my informants mentioned, and my small online survey suggests there is a discrepancy between the overall gender ratio on reddit and r/SecretSanta. reddit has a relatively young adult male population, whereas overwhelming majority of r/SecretSanta are female. With all honesty, this was not something I was able to observe before I realized it on my survey and heard it from other informants. However, this discrepancy may suggest a gendered consumption, which would be revealing to focus on further.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that reddit is an open-source private company. Since 2006 reddit is owned by the mass media group Condé Nast, and currently operating under its parent company Advance Publications. On June 2008, reddit co-founder Huffman announced the open sourcing the website: “It seems only natural that we give you all in that community a chance to contribute back to reddit and make it a better place for everyone. We know reddit's success has less to do with our technology than it does with you, our community, and now we want to let our community improve our technology.” r/SecretSanta is probably the only subreddit connected to a website “redditgifts.com”, which reddit acquired in 2011.²⁰ Until recently, redditgifts had a marketplace, which was running as an invite-only merchandise place online. In the first half of 2015, there were attempts to create a reddit branch of crowdsourcing, called redditmade. All these initiatives are exceptional to r/SecretSanta when compared to majority of subreddits. Considering reddit as a business model surely reflects a complete different picture, which requires intense interaction with the company, instead of users.

Further suggestions

r/SecretSanta is a rich field site that offers many opportunities. As I mentioned before, due to the limited time and resources, I could not conduct an in-depth analysis of the thousands

²⁰ <http://www.redditblog.com/2008/06/reddit-goes-open-source.html>

of posts and comments on r/SecretSanta. Engaging with big data analysis tools, redditgifts may reveal very interesting perspectives for linguistic analysis.

Secondly, for further research, I would like to conduct a visual analysis of the gifts posts on the gallery. I believe it can suggest interesting patterns on how people visualize and present a gift that is a courtesy of a stranger and something matters to them.

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