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Exploring the Russian Online Gift-Exchange Communities: The Results of Nethnographic Approach

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Abstract

This paper reports on a two-week nethnographic (online) observation of four online gift-exchange communities – virtual platforms, where participants conduct barter exchange of different daily objects such as books, children's products, furniture, home ware and others. These communities as case of informal economy initially do not have formal attributed rules. It is essential to find out (1) which rules and mechanisms exist in this type of economy; (2) what motivates people who are not acquainted with another to exchange gifts; and (3) understand the way this community exists. The conclusion is drawn that social capital is the basic engine of investigated communities. The social capital accumulated by users increases the community commitment and cohesion by interpreting gifts as a set of resources to distribute fairly. The giving, the receiving and the exchanging are forms of communication that cause further communication and interworking outside of gift-giving situations. These gift-exchange communities are mainly based on the communication and consumption solidarity among individuals.

Keywords

Cultural Studies, Online Communities, Gift-Exchange, Nethnography, Mixed of Online and Offline Methods, Mobility of Domestic Items, Commodity, Social Solidarity, Consumption

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Exploring the Russian Online Gift-Exchange Communities: The Results of Nethnographic Approach

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This paper reports on a two-week nethnographic (online) observation of four online gift-exchange communities – virtual platforms, where participants conduct barter exchange of different daily objects such as books, children's products, furniture, home ware and others. These communities as case of informal economy initially do not have formal attributed rules. It is essential to find out (1) which rules and mechanisms exist in this type of economy; (2) what motivates people who are not acquainted with another to exchange gifts; and (3) understand the way this community exists. The conclusion is drawn that social capital is the basic engine of investigated communities. The social capital accumulated by users increases the community commitment and cohesion by interpreting gifts as a set of resources to distribute fairly. The giving, the receiving and the exchanging are forms of communication that cause further communication and interworking outside of gift-giving situations. These gift-exchange communities are mainly based on the communication and consumption solidarity among individuals. Keywords: Cultural Studies, Online Communities, Gift-Exchange, Nethnography, Mixed of Online and Offline Methods, Mobility of Domestic Items, Commodity, Social Solidarity, Consumption

Online Gift Exchange Phenomenon

The gift-exchange is a process, which traditionally builds intergroup solidarity. The fact of community existence is defined by gift-exchange practice. Based on Mauss (1990), we cannot specify any group of people as kind of community without gift-exchange relations. Therefore, gifts and their circulation are the core public processes at the micro-level. *To give* and *to get* gifts is one of the base principles at interpersonal interactions. However, how we can explicit group of people, which are living in online environment and were formed by the gift-exchange idea?

The dynamic nature of the internet increases the level of social mobilization, and makes social networks more flexible, resourceful and larger. The internet platform has adapted private patterns of gifts exchange. Previously unknown people share presents (products, items) on barter basis. Online gift exchange communities have spread all over the world. There are virtual platforms, where participants exchange of different daily objects. The internet makes it possible for gift exchange community members to share information about the gift, but the meeting with gift givers take place in real (offline) world. The key words in naming these kinds of communities are “give for free,” “give a gift.” Number of these communities has been increasing globally and the population of members is growing significantly. This is not a local Russian phenomenon: English-speaking gift exchange communities, where participants are represented mainly by residents of European countries, are also popular. For example, one English-speaking gift exchange community (www.freecycle.org) counts 9 million participants all over the world (2015) and other community (www.redditgifts.com), which began activity in 2009 counted 89,400 users in 2013. Since 2008 after the global financial crisis, the Russian gift-exchanging communities have expanded. It increased in their number and characterized by

significant growth for participants. The pioneer network was founded in the 1990s and consists of 24,000 participants (2014). The most popular communities include 289,000 participants and exchanged more than 2.5 million gifts at 2015 (darudar.ru). At the moment many Russian-speaking communities are international, because their members are citizens of former Soviet Union countries.

The phenomenon of online gift exchange is sufficiently widespread. These communities as part of informal economy do not have formal rules. It is essential to find out what rules and which mechanisms exist in this type of economy; what motivates people who are not acquainted with one another to exchange gifts and the way this social structure operates. The answer helps to identify the form of social reality. Hence, the research objectives are: (1) to give an analytical description of reciprocal online communities; (2) to reveal and analyze their social structure.

Networking Based on Gift Exchange Practice

In the literature, the gift-exchange phenomenon correlates with categories like *trust*, *joint consumption*, *social capital*, *social networks* and *ecological consumption*. For instance, Bialski and Batorski (2009) in the works “From Online Familiarity to Offline Trust: How a Virtual Community Creates Familiarity” and “Trust between Strangers” and Botsman, Rogers and Folei (2010) in the work “What’s Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption” all defined the principles of joint consumption a large number of community members, their unclaimed consumer durables and common values availability and the presence of trust between strangers. Relationship of gift-exchange communities are under no control by formal institutions and have specific networking nature. According to Castells (2001), communities are not static groups with a defined population, structure and group dynamics. The concept of a “network” consists of a varied number of actors, with blurred borders and with a flexible character of relationships (Castells, 2001).

Gift-exchange websites are examples of community “multimodal social worlds.” They are communities, which exist both in online and offline spaces. These types of communities are some of the most interesting and dynamic for social researcher. The good example is Couchsurfing – a global community of “hospitality” with 10 million participants in more than 200,000 cities who share their living space and experience. Couchsurfing connects travelers with a global network of people (www.couchsurfing.com). Researchers of Couchsurfing phenomena Rosen, Lafontaine, and Hendrickson (2011) set out to understand, what community structure increases cooperation, and among which types the problem of “gatecrashers” or “social dependents” arises most frequently. They defined two types of exchange structures that affect the community’s productivity.

The first type of community, “group-generalized,” is characterized by a system of the common pool (center), where all members of a community make their contribution to the common pot and appeal resources when they need them. The second type of community is called “network-generalized.” It presumes a network exchange, where all members of a community take active participation in an individual exchange process. As a result, the data confirmed that individuals within communities, characterized by the second type, give to the community more than those from communities of the first type do. In other words, cooperation in the second case is much greater.

Indeed, some researchers were originally members of the studied communities. They observed community from own already existing accounts. Another part of the observers were registered as new members. These different levels of experiences have allowed researchers to study the community in two registers – both locals and newcomers.

Observed gift exchange practice located in online (meeting) and offline (exchanging) spaces. Participants of most powerful community have regular personal offline meeting, high level of self-organization as well as network- generalized nature of community is obtained. For instance, the structure one of the communities includes the role of “postman” – a very respectful position of participants who help to deliver gifts from givers to recipients.

Refer to our further empirical evidences.

Data Collection, Ethics and Analysis

Our analysis is based on the authors' empirical data, which was systematically collected from the four most popular Russian gift exchange websites. The nethnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010), or online ethnographic observation, was used as method of data collection from the four Russian websites. Nethnography is a new term for researching different types of online communities and cultures (Kozinets, 2010). Generally, nethnography is ethnography realized in an online space. The subjects of nethnographic research are following: investigating of new online cultures and communities, understanding what people are “really doing” online, the study of relationships in online communities (Kozinets, 2010). Generally, there is strong cohesion between nethnography and traditional qualitative methodology and ethnography. They are close in terms of strategies and tactics – field access, sampling, data collection using interviews and observation, ethics and analysis (Polukhina, 2015). The main difference is the online space as location of the study. The subject of most nethnographic research is not the virtual world as a special reality, but the online and offline practices and behaviors, and their mutual influence. In this aspect, the equality between nethnography and “online ethnography” as areas investigating the virtual world is not quite correct. In order to obtain reliable data it is necessary to conduct parallel studies in both virtual and offline spaces. Thus, additional resources, and the possibility of combining virtual and offline communication produces more reliable data.

As our observations went on, online interactions were registered every second day for two weeks in July 2012. The sample of communities was selected on the basis of a uniform protocol form, containing information about social norms, patterns, conflicts, rituals, and roles that inherent to these types of networks. Collected data consisted of eight protocols, with two described communities by two different researchers. We also used external data sources about community practices, for instance, the social-network documentary about the investigated communities (www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHQKRdnk3e0).

In order to increase the level of credibility of our data *we mixed online and offline research methods*. We have conducted personal (offline) interview with representatives of the communities. Since gift-exchange communities are “multimodal” social communities, the offline-meeting took place after online-communication. We set up online appointments to meet offline and exchange the gifts with participants in order to interact personally with them. First, we arranged the gift exchange as ordinary users, then, during the private meeting, we mentioned our research interests and conducted informal interview. So, during the exchange we informed the participants about our research task. We asked them about desire to share their experiences in the community in an interview format. All participants endorsed the proposal; there was no refuse. Six interviews in Moscow with five women and one man were conducted and the age of informants varies from 18 to 55 years

Based on the current ethical research practice in Russia we required to obtain oral and \ or written agreement to participate in the study. Usually the researcher also explains the objectives of the project, procedure of data usage and guarantee of confidentiality of the personal data. Most researchers and research organizations in Russia are not required special documentations, but the general protection the personal information always applied and

declared to the informants. In our interviews, we also informed the participants about the use of the materials for research purposes, and only then the interview was conducted.

Blurring public and private in the online world raises ethical questions about data access, methods of privacy protection. When discussing these questions, the researchers come to the conclusion that we need to learn how to use the standard principles of human rights protection online, despite the fact that this environment differs from offline research (Garcia, Standlee, & Bechkoff, 2009, p. 53). So, the generally accepted standard is to provide anonymity of private data of every member. All names, nicknames, avatars, URLs, social networks, unique messages of this network, which make possible identification of users must be hidden or completely removed.

In order to maintain privacy and having consider our ethical position, it is important “to hide” communities names and their online addresses. Our research role in this work was “hidden,” i.e. we did not announce that we were monitoring online interactions. The exchange initial assumptions were: (1) a priori publicity and openness of communities, and (2) expected changes in both the interaction of participants and the articulation of the researcher’s presence. Nevertheless, four communities analyzed are represented in the text with the required privacy level, but the community type and city were given.

Data analysis in nethnographic research is similar to the methods of text analysis. Indeed, most of the materials have a text format, while others, produced by the researcher during interaction, acquire a text form as well (the diary or the protocol of observer). Thus, analyzing gift-giving communities we used the procedures of grounded theory – open and axial coding.

Online Gift-Exchange as Interaction

Online gift-exchanges include interactions such as simple (nonreciprocal) gifts of items and services exchange, looking for items and services an offer and request for items. Most gifts refer to categories of clothes, accessories and products for children. The vast majority of items are for women, and the gift givers are also women. Women take the inventory function of domestic items, clothes and other goods more often than men, that's why they sort items by “necessary” and “unnecessary,” but useful for gift-exchange.

Sometimes the choice of recipient is based on the principle of “first come, first served,” but sometimes gift-givers are guided by subjective logic:

...give it to whom I like, take that thing which I like ... the phrase “I give to those I want to” is quite frequent in gift orders. [Researcher’s B. diary, gift-exchange community, Moscow]

We find certain traditional situations encouraged group solidarity and encouraged people to search for gifts, give goods or exchange them. The most common situation is when moving house. As a result, “...useless items that people want to rid off or free, appear to be valuable in good condition” [Researcher’s D. diary, gift-exchange community on the livejournal.com website, St. Petersburg]. When people rent a property they traditionally search for new items for that property (“... have rented a flat without furniture, looking for something to sleep on”). Worrying about acquaintances or sometimes strangers may be a reason:

...seeking items for a 5 year old boy as a gift ... he’s a son of our concierge, we are neighbors, and I always see him wearing the same clothes.” Finally, there may be critical life events (“I’m a single mother, my husband has left and I need clothes for my children. [Participant of gift-exchange community, Moscow]

Also the “gifts” are accepted as a way to prolonging items life. The reluctance to dispose an item it is associated with the need to preserve its “life” and its history. By giving items to others, they act as a key element of “multiple” consumption in terms of esthetic, memorable and economic value (Appadurai, 1986, pp. 3-63). Note, that such attitude to things can be seen in economic practices similar to gift-exchange too: selling items in second hand shops or flea markets, where each thing has its unique history.

Online Gift-Exchange as Group-Generalized Community

Our analysis revealed that gift-exchange contains two main senses for its participants. The first is *gift-exchange as target-rational action* where users have a formalized procedure of liberation from “necessary” and obtaining “unnecessary” items. Rules institute a community and wire people more than other factors. That is why rules are not to be disputed and the community should be used as it is supposed to.

The notion of gift-exchange as a target-rational action assumes a *group-generalized community type*. In this case, the internet arises as a platform for obtaining information, where the rules are strongly regulated and controlled by community moderators. Community rules are legitimate and are not to be disputed. The work of European and American researchers Rosen, Lafontaine, and Hendrickson (2011) found such communities to be less viable. Active and fast-growing communities pay special attention to the reciprocity of gifts and to the idea of exchange (including not equal, but symbolic exchange), and create special instruments to appoint them as a social order.

The second type of gift-exchange communities we can describe as network based upon *value-rational action*. In this case, people take advantage of the possibility to find mutual support as well as the privileges based on their membership. Such a sense of gift-exchange assumes frequent contacts between members both outside the discussions of gifts itself and their exchange (e.g., message boards, comments to blogs and private conversations that may appear on such platforms), and outside the network (regular informal meetings of members). It is important for the giver to choose the most appropriate receiver for a gift. For this purpose, administration of an exchange resource makes it possible via a comments system. This keeps the interaction between members more open. Moreover, commenting on a gift is a required procedure for a recipient because his motives and reasons for receiving the gift are usually made clear in such comments. So before moving on to direct “face to face” contact a gift-giver has to choose what reason seems to be more appropriate for a candidate to receive the gift.

The reasons for giving may be feeling some “value of self,” value of their actions or desire to experience symbolic power. In addition, the process of “gift giving” is perceived as a way to extend the life of an item. A reluctance to “throw something out” is associated with the need to preserve that items “life” and history by giving it as a gift to somebody, and with the need to reduce one’s own “ecological footprint.” In such communities, all of its members take an active part in individual “*network-generalized*” exchange processes. The basis for existence of such a community is trust, the value of communication and acceptance of the legitimacy of the existing order.

Social Capital Is the Basic Engine of a Network

Each member of a gift exchange community has a level of *social capital* – a certain kind of resource available to the individual who makes their actions easier inside the social structure (Coleman, 2001, p. 124). The higher the level of social capital provide the greater the chance of receiving the required gift. Commonly, social capital refers to social networks and systems of repute. In our opinion, social capital is a base engine of network mobilization. It

includes previous virtual social experience namely, the total amount of “given” gifts, ratings, comments, number of friends, and the duration of membership in a community. The most active Internet users convert profiles from one social network to another and demonstrate higher “indicators” of social capital as a result. So we can conclude that gift-exchange is not only the practice of deprived groups, but also the form of communication and consumer solidarity of individuals. It is important to mark that besides obtaining material things, participants get positive emotions from communication with each other, pleasure that they have made somebody happy and done a good deed.

Mostly those users who have got significant social capital obtain access into communities where gift-exchange is considered to be a value-rational act. For example, only users with a good reputation in the community can invite new users. In other words, there is some kind of selection of potential members.

In the opinion of the organizers of such communities, an important condition is the invitation of the most “proven” users to the community.

It is most important that so called “virtuals” are very unreliable. They may come to a meeting, or may “forget” to. In most cases, they are ephemerals with recently created journals. Almost all of them only ask or accept; I don’t remember the case that they make offers. (Moderator of gift-exchange community on livejournal.com platform, St. Petersburg)

It is clear that the category of trust is not fundamentally important for casual, disposable acts of gift giving or acceptance. But if we discuss regular gift-exchange community membership, the trust is in the foreground, as one of the most important features of social relations. This is the most important characteristic of novices who face such type of social interactions for the first time.

The most important tool of creating trust is the mechanism of interactive reputation. After the gift-exchange has taken place, participants leave a comment that allows identification of the most and least “trusted” users. It takes place directly on the page of the gift, which has a special graph of “gratitude.” In this part, users describe their opinions on the gift received. This gratitude is also displayed in the general list of gifts. Comments help the community to generate feedback, which is necessary to keep the network working. Users also have the possibility to offer friendship to other users, which leads to the formation of micro-communities inside the gift-exchange community.

The system of reputation created by community members allows users to communicate with those who have a good reputation:

...the fear to get broken or defective item as a gift, the fear to have a private meeting with strange person. I was very worried about this part of the research. However, my doubts were minimized after reading the comments from the profile of the participant. (Researcher’s B. diary, gift-exchange community, Moscow)

Similar to any other social relations, the possibility of conflicts between users inside the gift-exchange communities is not excluded. As a rule, conflicts do not appear in comments to gifts, but every user has the possibility to comment on another. These comments may be both positive and negative and they are displayed separately from each other. So looking at the profile of every user we can see both positive and negative comments displayed in the graph of “reviews,” and they are visible for all members of this community. Negative comments are mostly related to a broken promise of the gift transfer, compared to the amount of items given

or exchanged. So most conflicts are transferred from the private sphere into the common space of the community, where they may affect the status of this member of the community.

As a result, unlike to most reputable community members, unfair users are “rejected” by the community. Due to public control within the community (negative comments), moderators may exclude users both from exchange relations and communications with other users. During monitoring, the system of control over the execution of formal rules inside community was seen to become more detailed and well organized while community grows larger. Moreover some members of the community independently organize their own blacklists of those users who are not reliable, and also in the most significant cases. Conversations describing conflict situations are created on the forum of community. The people who are most trusted are those who have greater virtual social capital due to longer membership in the community, and a higher reputation rating.

Conclusions

Apart from its practical sense, the practice of online gift-exchange emerges as a significant social phenomenon and a type of relationship between people. So people who weren't been acquainted before found each other and began to communicate, and exchange gifts free of charge. For community members such activity becomes a way of expanding their social networks, and also enhancing their personal prestige through the formation of a virtual status, which tends to be appreciated in the community. As a result, there is a growing social mobilization, a sealing of social “tissue,” and a birth of a new type of sociability.

Mastering the rules that regulate interactions inside gift-exchange communities is supposed to lead to the formation of specific competencies of these community members. In this case, competencies are knowledge which was practically realized by the experience of indirect interaction. For example, regular practices of exchanging items and also gift-giving and receiving, help individual to produce their own value scale for consumer practices (for example, which things are consumed quickly and which are convenient to reuse), and also expand his knowledge about time-management, finding their balance between the ration of time spent and gained profit from exchange and trips for gifts. The experience of participation in exchange situations and giving of gifts may develop connectivity and conflict resolution skills. The experience in community moderation can also develop management skills. In turn, the set of these competencies as “positive consequences of sociability” builds up the social capital of an individual.

As follows from our data analysis, the higher the social capital of the member of a gift-exchange community, the greater the chance of receiving “desired” gift he has. Social capital is the basic engine of network mobilization. It includes the previous virtual social experience, such as total amount of “given” gifts, ratings, comments, number of friends, duration of membership in community. Each community member is labelled with a certain numeric character, indicating the participants rating and position in the hierarchy. The most active Internet users convert their profile from one social network to another, and as a result show higher social capital indicators. So, gift-exchange represents not only a practice among deprived groups in society, but also a form of communication and consumption solidarity among individuals.

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