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Nonmonetary and nonreciprocal freecycling: Motivations for participating in online alternative giving communities

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Abstract

This research examines consumers' participation in a nonmonetary, nonreciprocal form of online consumer exchange wherein consumers may decide to give only, receive only, or both give and receive. Given the lack of financial incentives or relational norms that would traditionally drive participation in this societally beneficial consumption activity for which we advance the term *alternative giving*, this research examines consumers' participation motivations. Are consumers, as prior research suggests, motivated to participate in alternative giving activities on the basis of prosocial motives or for other reasons? Through a content analysis of the online Freecycle Network, we found that participation is driven primarily by fundamental consumer needs and wants, though other prosocial, less materialistic factors are also drivers. Our findings also identify an inconsistency in product categories between what givers offer and what receivers seek, suggesting that supply–demand imbalances can emerge within alternative giving communities.

1 | INTRODUCTION

> I would like to brighten my children's holiday but money is tight so if anyone has a Christmas tree or decorations, toys etc. that they have laying around. We have lost my mom and grandma in the past few weeks and the holiday is looking bleak, I hate to ask but I would love to see their faces light up.
>
> Frances, Freecyle.org

This is an example of many related posts by over 9 million consumers in over 5,300 online groups across over 110 countries within the Freecycle Network wherein consumers share their stories, request goods from strangers, and exchange without expectation of reciprocation or payment. By facilitating nonreciprocal and nonfinancial giving and exchange between its members, the freecycling social network prevents approximately 1,000 tons of products from entering landfills daily, turning the conclusion of a product's lifecycle with one consumer into a new beginning with another (The Freecycle Network, 2019). This online network demonstrates a shift in consumers' patterns of exchange, sharing, acquisition, disposal of, and collaborative consumption of products. We refer to this nonreciprocal, nonmonetary form of exchange as "alternative giving."

Alternative giving must be discussed in the context of its principal enablers. As an indicator of their transformational capability, several literature reviews have examined the impact of social media and social networking on society and marketing (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; Kapoor et al., 2018). The fundamental role of social media is in facilitating consumer interactions, both socially and commercially (Hawkins & Vel, 2013; Rathore, Ilavarasan, & Dwivedi, 2016). In this capacity, social networking and media are also redefining sharing, gifting, and communal consumption—and, in so doing, they are also facilitating alternative giving.

Interactions facilitated by social media and networks have led to the rapid growth of consumer involvement in collaborative consumption communities and nonmonetary markets. With the rise of social media, social networking has expanded rapidly (Mehar, 2017). Explorations of the "sharing economy" (Belk, 2010) have increased alongside consumers' sharing activities. Billions voluntarily share personal content on LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media and networking sites. Across these domains, researchers have studied collaborative consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Lamberton & Rose, 2012; Möhlmann, 2015), sharing (Belk, 2007, 2010), gift giving (Giesler, 2006; Lowrey et al., 2004; Moufahim, 2013), intracommunity gifting (Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012), alternative marketplaces

(Albinsson & Perera, 2012), the hybrid economy (Scaraboto, 2015), recycling or "unconsumption," or other (alternative) nonmonetary consumption practices such as downshifting, simplification, and disposing (Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek, 2007; Etzioi, 2009; Albinsson & Perera, 2009, 2012; McDonald et al., 2006; Arsel, 2010; Arsel & Dobscha, 2011; Ture & Ger, 2011; Cappellini & Parsons, 2011; Black & Cherrier, 2011). Regardless of the form of gifting, collaborative consumption, or sharing, prior research focuses on joint ownership and/or reciprocal exchange.

Consumers can, however, join a collaborative consumption community in which ownership is transferred but reciprocity is neither assumed nor required, a little-studied form of exchange. Echoing the 21st century activist and sustainability movements (Albinsson & Perera, 2012), consumers' collaborative consumption activities can consist of large-scale nonmonetary, nonreciprocal giving and taking, a phenomenon we refer to as "alternative giving." For instance, CouchSurfing.com is akin to Airbnb (which involves paid services) in that it is a home-sharing social network but exists in a new form of exchange, or lack thereof, as there is no expectation of monetary exchange between its 14 million hosts and guests (couchsurfing.com). Online alternative giving communities like this align with the focus of this research. Specifically, this research enriches the literature of collaborative consumption and gift giving from a nonmonetary, nonreciprocal perspective and connects to emerging research in digital, social media, and mobile marketing (e.g., Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

Like collaborative consumption research, gift-giving research tends to focus on giving, receiving, and reciprocity (Giesler, 2006; Mauss, 1925). Because nonmonetary markets are defined on the basis of a nonassumption of reciprocity, these markets are thus outside the umbrella of gifting frameworks. Therefore, we advance an "alternative giving" framework in which consumers may opt to give only, receive only, or both give and receive. Through an analysis of consumers' digital interactions collected from a large alternative giving community (freecycle.org), we examine and uncover differences between givers' versus receivers' (a) motivations for participating in alternative giving market activities (b) and the implications for joining an alternative giving marketplace. We also identify supply and demand imbalances between goals of givers and receivers. This research contributes to this domain by identifying and comparing motives of givers and recipients, as well as providing practical feedback for sustainable community organizers and policymakers.

To examine these areas, we first present a literature review of the key conceptualizations of gift giving, sharing, and collaborative consumption, which provides the theoretical background for examining alternative giving and demonstrates the need for a new conceptualization. On the basis of this review, we advance a conceptualization of "alternative giving." Next, we examine this framework along with consumers' motivations for alternative giving participation through a content analysis of users' public online comments on freecycle.org. Finally, marketing, societal welfare, and consumer welfare implications are discussed.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: FROM TRADITIONAL GIFT GIVING TO ONLINE ALTERNATIVE GIVING

In this section, we describe traditional gift-giving, sharing, and collaborative consumption. We provide this review to explain why and how alternative giving represents a unique phenomenon relative to other forms of consumer exchange.

Gift giving is a universal mode of exchange that strengthens human relationships and integrates society (Sherry, 1983). Gift giving functions through ongoing exchanges between two gifting partners (Giesler, 2006; Malinowski, 1922) and is governed by reciprocity norms, a set of rules and obligations that build a complex pattern of give and take (Gouldner, 1960). Accordingly, gift giving includes three central requirements: give, receive, and give back (Mauss, 1925) between two partners. Hence, the model of consumer gift giving explains neither exchange that is nonreciprocal nor that is between more than two persons.

Unlike gifting, sharing is a "nonreciprocal pro-social behavior" (Benkler, 2004). Nonreciprocity (Benkler, 2004) and the dissolution of interpersonal boundaries imposed by possession attachment are fundamental characteristics of sharing. Prototypes for sharing are "mothering and the pooling and allocation of resources within the family" (Belk, 2007), and most people share their homes, food, resources, and belongings with other household members (Belk, 2014). Globalization and technological shifts, however, have expanded traditional definitions of sharing. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube have unlocked a new era of sharing embraced by billions, though the core definition remains the same. Sharing assumes that a resource is collectively consumed, owned, or used; ownership may be extended, but not transferred, to others (Belk, 2010). Observing that ambiguities may arise between gift giving, sharing, and commodity exchange, Belk (2010) notes that gift giving imposes an obligation of reciprocity whereas sharing and collaborative consumption do not.

Collaborative consumption includes "events in which one or more persons consume economic goods or services in the process of engaging in joint activities with one or more other" (Felson & Spaeth, 1978, p. 614). This definition comprises concepts such as redistribution markets, renting services, and collaborative lifestyles (Botsman & Rogers, 2010) and sharing activities (Belk 2007, 2010, 2014). It can include activities such as speaking on the telephone, drinking beer with friends, or using birth control during sexual intimacy. Botsman and Rogers's (2010) examination of collaborative consumption centers around concepts including "traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping," which relate to the coordination, acquisition, and distribution of a resource for a fee. From this perspective, collaborative consumption or collaborative lifestyle includes companies like Airbnb (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). For Belk (2014), "collaborative consumption is people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation" but not activities without compensation such as those embraced on couchsurfing.com or freecycle.org. So albeit

related, collaborative consumption and sharing are distinct from each other (Belk 2007, 2010, 2014) and also nonmonetary markets.

As an ad hoc form of nonmonetary collaborative consumption or sharing, free markets are known as "alternative marketplaces" organized by "consumers for consumers" (Albinsson & Perera, 2012). In investigating organizers' and participants' participation motivations, Albinsson and Perera (2012) identified the importance of community as key factor. Focusing on participants' decisions and experiences in "clothing exchange" marketplaces, they identified five modes that regulated consumers' disposition activities: sharing, exchanging, donating, recycling, and ridding or trashing (Albinsson & Perera, 2009). We advance the term "alternative giving" to capture this nonconventional nonmonetary, nonreciprocal form of exchange.

Alternative giving is distinct from conceptualizations of gift giving, sharing, and communal consumption. Traditional gift giving represents a continuous cycle of "giving, receiving and giving back" (Lowrey, Otnes, & Ruth, 2004; Mauss, 1925) founded on reciprocal relationships. Alternative giving, by contrast, tends to be practiced without reciprocity requirements (Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012). Though somewhat consistent with "collaborative consumption" (e.g., Belk, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2010), which occurs when people coordinate acquisition and distribution of a resource for compensation, alternative giving is generally performed without compensation or reciprocity. Third, whereas Belk noted "what is ours to others for their use" to illustrate joint ownership in sharing, alternative giving includes ownership transfer. Recent studies (Albinsson & Perera, 2012; 2009; Arsel & Dobscha, 2011) on nonmonetary, nonreciprocal types of collaborative consumption discuss notions and/or forms as "disposition (disposing)," "goods sharing/swapping" or "sharing in non-monetary marketplaces," and "pro-social exchanging." Table 1 clarifies the four types of commodity exchange including definition, involved parties, media types, and examples, which distinguish "alternative giving" from other constructs and enrich the social media marketing literature.

In the next section, we propose a framework of alternative giving and discuss the context that we studied it in: an online community that includes nonreciprocal and nonmonetary exchange, the Freecycle Network.

3 | THE FRAMEWORK OF ALTERNATIVE GIVING AND THE FREECYCLE NETWORK

On the basis of the definition of "alternative giving" and the nature of involved parties in the community, its conceptualization involved multiple givers and recipients, as specified in Figure 1. The alternative giving practice emerges within nonmonetary-oriented markets, including in-person markets (Albinsson & Perera, 2009) and in online markets such as the freecycle.org social network examined herein. As Figure 1 illustrates, "alternative giving" community participants can choose to give only, to receive only, to give and then to receive, to receive and then to give, or to give and to receive simultaneously.

Although alternative giving marketplaces have been studied in limited prior research (Albinsson & Perera 2009, 2012), this study explores unique aspects of alternative giving (and receiving) consumer behavior in an online community. Social platforms have made nonmonetary alternative markets accessible to local communities on a global scale. As noted in Section 1, our study focuses on the nonprofit Freecycle Network that consists of over 5,300 groups and 9.3 million members who give and receive free things in their own communities (Freecycle.org), which reduces waste that might otherwise go to landfills.

The Freecycle Network has received attention from public media and literature since its founding in 2003. Arsel and Dobscha (2011) conducted an analysis using blog mining, archival search, and interviews with Freecycle participants and identified tensions arising from the mismatch between institutionally imposed norms and community participation. While engaging in "recycling," people often practice

TABLE 1 Types of commodity exchange

| Type of exchange	Definition	Involved parties	Type of media	Example
Alternative giving	Nonmonetary, nonreciprocal market economy online (Nelson & Rademacher, 2009; our proposal) and offline (Albinsson & Perera, 2009, 2012; Arsel & Dobscha, 2011);	Multiple	Social media and offline	Freecycle, Couchsurfing, and Really Really Free Market
Traditional gift giving	Reciprocity and mutuality (Lowrey, Otnes, & Ruth, 2004; Mauss, 1925)	Dyadic	Offline	One-to-one gift giving
Sharing	Joint ownership; Nonreciprocal, prosocial behavior (Benkler, 2004; Belk, 2010)	Multiple	Social media	Youtube and Facebook
Collaborative consumption	Resource distribution for compensation (Belk, 2014; Botsman & Rogers, 2010)	Multiple	Social media and offline	Zipcar and Airbnb
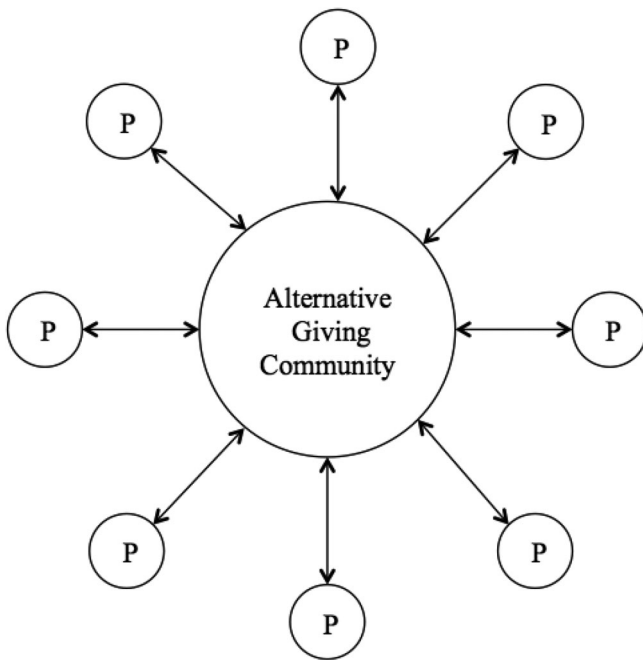
FIGURE 1 How participants engage in an alternative giving community.
The "P" in small circles represents participants who can be givers and/or recipients

"political consumption" (e.g., buycotts). This alternative form of consumption is also argued to be a new form of civic engagement (Nelson et al., 2007), but people may participate for different reasons. Quoting founder Deron Beal, a New York Times article concluded that the Freecycle Network attracts people who, rather than tree-huggers, just have something they would like to get rid of (Walker, 2007). Nelson and Rademacher (2009) pinpointed a "generalized" reciprocity in freecycle.org, where goods are given with no expectation of any return and subsequently satisfies altruism and the egoism of commoditization. In contrast, Aptekar (2016) found that green-washed convenience rather than altruism leads to giving instead of selling, donating, or throwing away belongings. Other research explored how reusing goods disrupts three binaries: consumption/production, digital/material, and mainstream/alternative (Eden, 2017). Our research examines consumers' motives for participating in alternative giving, as what occurs within the Freecycle Network.

Notwithstanding the above findings of the Freecycle Network, no prior literature has conceptualized this behavior and conducted an analysis of the online content. Therefore, this study seeks to advance an alternative giving framework and uncover consumers' motives for engaging in alternative giving communities such as the Freecycle Network.

4 | METHODOLOGY

Although netnography as a form of online ethnography collects and interprets data from internet, interview, and field notes (Kozinets, 2002, 2010), content analyses have been utilized to extract patterns

by categorizing and analyzing content that consumers post online (Qu, Zhang, & Li, 2008; Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011). Content analysis procedures include recording and coding qualitative posts or content into quantitative data, which include formulating the research question, determining units of analysis, developing a sampling plan, constructing coding categories, coding and checking intercoder reliability, and data collection and analysis (Neuman, 2011). A content analysis of online posts by members of freecycle.org was conducted.

The content analysis included all available publicly posted interactions between participants posted on the site over the 7-month period between September 2012 and March 2013 within an Orlando, Florida freecycle community. Data were accessed after one of the researchers joined the community. At the time of the data collection, the United States was in the midst of a significant recession, which likely increased participation and the volume of posted data. Local participants could (and still can) act as givers, recipients, or both. Items are usually picked up by recipients after both parties communicate through messaging, emailing, or phone calls.

We first identified and downloaded the texts of posts from the Freecycle Network website, which then included 7,397 Orlando-area members during the research period. In total, 1,295 posts were collected and analyzed, which included 225 posts of "offers" (from givers) and 1,070 posts of "wants" (from recipients). The online files (posts) were retained for later scrutiny and analysis. Two of the authors independently reviewed, coded, and analyzed the text of participants' posts following Saldana's (2009) coding steps. Specifically, data files were precoded as subcodes in the initial readings, subcategories were connected and formed from the codes, and a coding scheme of main themes emerged from subcategories. Finally, codes were analyzed and organized into relevant themes and categories: type of posts, examples of posts, main themes, items, and product categories (see Table 2). Themes and product categories were independently coded by the first and third authors and agreed with a sufficient reliability of over .80. This process allowed us to categorize motivations and align them to the motivations of givers versus receivers and link these motivations to the types of goods offered.

5 | SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

On the basis of the themes that emerged through data coding and analysis, we next discuss participants' motivations for engaging in an alternative giving community, specifically freecycle.org. Second, we explore the link between these motivations and the product categories that participants seek to give versus receive. Third, each motive is discussed through the lens of participants' comments.

5.1 | An overview of participants' motivations

It is important to understand the underlying consumer motivations within social media and other user-generated content in terms of entertainment, social connection, and information dimensions (Heinonen,

TABLE 2 Examples using Saldana's coding system

Type of posts	Example posts	Theme	Item	Product category
Offer	I have a 7 month old black lab/pit bull mix that needs a good home. She is very friendly with people and tries to play with our cats.	Hedonic needs	Black lab mix	Pets
Offer	Plastic Christmas tree stand in decent shape. Downsizing stuff. Would like it to go to someone who wants to put up a tree this coming year.	Anticonsumption and alternative giving	Christmas tree stand	Other household items
Wanted	In need of furniture. Single family with sick child. Will accept anything in good shape.	Utilitarian needs and alternative giving	Furniture	Furniture
Wanted	Anything for newborn boys. We still need crib bedding, travel system stroller/car seat, baby bath and clothes, anything else too that would help!	Utilitarian needs and change in life stage	Baby boy stuff	Baby stuff

2011). Moreover, while consumers build social ties through word of mouth and online marketing tools, their motivations can inform an understanding of others' needs (Berger, 2014). Thus the content analysis of online posts provided evidence of consumers' motivations for participating in alternative giving communities.

Nine primary motivations emerged: (a) "alternative giving" that highlights the cycle of giving and receiving among different givers and recipients; (b) "anti-consumption," described by participants advocating downsizing and simplicity; (c) "creative recycling," which leads to multiple uses of goods; (d) "social ends," which is generally related to environmental conservation; (e) "utilitarian needs" that capture participants' practical needs and (f) "hedonic needs" linked to psychological and social needs and wants; (g) "ownership repurposing," which is related to switching ownership in which givers suggest potential users encouraging the pass on, whereas receivers remind people of donating their unwanted goods; (h) "life stage changes,", for example, changes in their lives such as getting new jobs, moving to new houses, or having newborn babies; and (i) "monetary exchange," an infrequent occurrence.

Next, we discuss some of the needs that emerged.

5.2 | Factors motivating participation

One of the most important findings that arose through our coding of participants' needs was the frequency of utilitarian needs. Examples of these basic needs can be seen below:

> I'm in need of a computer - large or small, any manufacturer, desktop or laptop. Just need to be able to access the web and use e-mail.

> I am in need of a printer. Nothing fancy just your basic printer so I can print of papers for school.

In contrast, the hedonic element, as the other basic need, emerged less frequently and later in requests.

> My elderly dad lives in Kissimmee and can't afford to buy a computer on his small retirement. The computer

is how he gets to see his grandkids most (Skype) so a monitor would be great!

Beyond fundamental needs and wants, secondary nonproduct-related factors emerged as participant motivators. "Utilitarian needs" could, for instance, concurrently be categorized as "creative recycling" or "anti-consumption." Many online posts, such as the example used at the beginning of the introduction, were thus categorized with multiple themes:

> I would like to brighten my children's holiday but money is tight *so if anyone has a Christmas tree or decorations, toys etc. that they have laying around*. We have lost my mom and grandma in the past few weeks and the holiday is looking bleak, I hate to ask but I would love to see their faces light up.

This recipient's post was coded into three themes: alternative giving (nonreciprocal goods request), utilitarian needs (Christmas items sought), and hedonic needs (brightening the participant's children's holiday and reducing sadness). The requested products were coded into the Crafts and Baby Stuff categories. Prosocial, less materialistic factors in motivating the participants' online engagement also emerged.

5.2.1 | Alternative giving

Broadly construed, *alternative giving* is a generalized concept, having to do with nonreciprocal and nonmonetary consumer exchange behaviors, actions, or practices occurring in a free marketplace. This theme is used to highlight nonreciprocal giving and taking among different givers and recipients, sometimes with an emphasis on the continuation of this cycle. Givers and receivers were driven to participate in free market events on the basis of this motivation coupled with altruism, as noted in this giver's post:

> I have about four bags of young men's size small and medium and some boy's size 16 clothes. There

TABLE 3 Summary of themes in freecycle.org (in percentage)

Posts of consumers offering goods		Posts of consumers wanting goods	
Theme	Occurrences	Theme	Occurrences
Alternative giving	2.3	Alternative giving	2.6
Anticonsumption	0.8	Anticonsumption	0.6
Creative recycling	3.1	Creative recycling	6.4
Social ends	0	Social ends	1.3
Utilitarian needs	**71.1**	Utilitarian needs	**40.7**
Hedonic needs	**12.1**	Hedonic needs	**14.7**
Ownership repurposing	9.0	Ownership repurposing	25.1
Changes in life stages	1.6	Changes in life stages	6.4
Monetary exchange	0	Monetary exchange	2.3

Utilitarian needs and hedonic needs are the main drivers that motivate consumers to participate in online alternative giving communities.

TABLE 4 Summary of product categories in freecycle.org (in percentage)

Posts of consumers offering goods		Posts of consumers wanting goods	
Product category	Occurrences	Product category	Occurrences
Furniture	16.4	Furniture	22.2
Electronics	13.2	Electronics	10.5
Transportation	1.4	Transportation	6.0
Kitchen and appliances	10.0	Kitchen and appliances	10.3
Office and media	10.5	Office and media	5.4
Other household items	9.5	Other household items	4.5
Clothing	8.6	Clothing	7.3
Crafts	4.1	Crafts	5.0
Sports and activities	3.2	Sports and activities	8.5
Pets	5.5	Pets	2.8
Baby stuff	9.1	Baby stuff	10.0
Home remodeling and outdoor gardening	8.6	Home remodeling and outdoor gardening	7.6

are shirts, bathing suits, pajamas, hoodies, and a couple of pants. First to respond may have them but must pick up all and re-freecycle what you can't use.

Recipients were sometimes similarly motivated.

We are fostering a Great Pyrenees mix who was rescued from a kill shelter. We need a really BIG crate for him. Needs to be XL, for a Great Dane, St. Bernard, Mastiff, etc. … After he's found his fur-ever home, the crate will be donated to A New Beginning Pet Rescue. Would so appreciate this if you have one to spare.…

5.2.2 | Anticonsumption

As a motivator, the theme of *anticonsumption* was less common (see Table 1). Consumers motivated by anticonsumption commonly seek to live a downsized and simple life, though other factors such as prosocial motivations emerged.

I have 2 storage units. Each is 18x18x31 and will store 90 14-16 oz of canned food from the grocery store. *They are homemade and fairly heavy. They are designed to rotate your stored food and dispense the oldest first.*

5.2.3 | Creative recycling

Participants motivated by *creative recycling* sought to enable multiple uses of goods through sequential ownership. Participants' sub-motives included frugality, sustainable consumption, and simplicity.

I have a used diaper bag. It's black and green. I used it for a girl baby but could be used for either boy or girl. In good condition just needs to be cleaned.

I am looking for old, broken, or unwanted Metro PCS or Metro PCS flashed phones. Don't throw them away. I will recycle them for you.

Givers and (potential) receivers supported a cycle of repeated goods usage and hold positive attitude toward recycling and see

freecycling as "a viable alternative to donating the items to local thrift shops" (Nelson et al., 2007). For the giver, recycling is a good way to simplify their lifestyle by reducing surplus or unwanted goods. For recipients, receiving goods can support a frugal lifestyle. These activities parallel research related to sustainable consumption (Corral-Verdugo, 1997; Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010).

5.2.4 | Ownership repurposing

Unlike sharing that stresses "joint ownership" (Belk, 2010, 2014), participants who embraced *ownership repurposing* saw value in transferring ownership to someone else without expectation of reciprocation. Some givers, however were motivated by indirect reciprocity wherein the giver encouraged the cycle of passing goods onto others. Evidence for ownership repurposing was abundant in Freecycle community members' interactions through posts involving diverse product categories including dishes, clothes, books, and more expensive items such as electronics (i.e., computers and coffee makers), cars, and so on (see Table 4). For illustration, we provide several posts below:

> Have two unopened 8 oz containers of powdered milk. This formula has Enflora LGG for Hypoallergenic infants. *Will give one container to two families. Trying to help as many as I can.*

> Looking for any baseball or softball equipment to donate to Bithlo Community Park leagues.

> If you're upgrading and want to donate your old car to someone who needs one, I'd greatly appreciate it.

> I have two boys who love using mega blocks to build using their imagination *if you have any unwanted mega blocks or legos that you want to get rid of I would love to pick them up.*

5.2.5 | Other prosocial factors

Some participants were motivated by improving the welfare of relatives, friends, or acquaintances and sought timely and "urgent" help.

> Desperate need... children's clothing... a friend of mine is taking care of two children (4-year-old girl and 6-year-old boy) they seriously need clothes...family was in a car accident and dad was killed, their mom is still hospitalized... if you have anything it would help.

Table 3 provides a summary of these themes and their frequency of occurrence. To determine the relative importance of these

TABLE 5 The matrix across themes among givers (in percentage)

Product category theme	Furniture	Electronics	Transportation	Kitchen and appliance	Office and media	Other household stuff	Clothing	Crafts	Sports and activities	Pets	Baby stuff	Home remodeling and outdoor gardening
Alternative giving	16.7	-	-	-	16.7	-	33.3	-	16.7	-	16.7	-
Anticonsumption	-	-	-	-	-	50.0	-	-	-	-	50.0	-
Creative recycling	-	25.0	-	-	12.5	-	12.5	12.5	25.0	-	-	12.5
Social ends	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Utilitarian needs	17.2	15.6	1.6	13.4	11.3	10.8	10.2	2.2	0.5	-	7.5	9.7
Hedonic needs	3.2	-	-	-	3.2	6.4	-	16.1	16.1	38.7	12.9	3.2
Ownership repurposing	8.7	4.3	-	4.3	8.7	13.0	8.7	4.3	8.7	21.7	8.7	8.7
Changes in life stages	14.3	-	-	14.3	-	14.3	14.3	-	-	-	25.6	14.3
Monetary exchange	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Utilitarian needs and hedonic needs are the main drivers that motivate consumers to participate in online alternative giving communities.

TABLE 6 The matrix across themes among recipients (in percentage)

Product category theme	Furniture	Electronics	Transportation	Kitchen and appliance	Office and media	Other household stuff	Clothing	Crafts	Sports and activities	Pets	Baby stuff	Home remodeling and outdoor gardening
Alternative giving	5.7	9.4	5.7	1.9	7.5	1.9	9.4	13.2	9.4	1.9	26.4	7.5
Anticonsumption	27.3	18.2	-	-	9.1	18.2	-	-	9.1	-	9.1	9.1
Creative recycling	2.4	14.4	3.2	4.8	12.8	8.8	4.0	20.8	10.4	1.6	4.0	12.6
Social ends	-	-	4.2	4.2	16.7	16.7	-	12.5	29.2	4.2	4.2	8.3
Utilitarian needs	29.8	11.9	7.4	12.9	4.0	3.4	9.4	1.0	2.4	0.6	10.9	6.5
Hedonic needs	2.6	5.2	2.2	1.1	7.8	4.9	3.4	16.8	25.7	9.3	11.9	9.0
Ownership repurposing	19.2	10.7	6.0	9.3	6.8	4.5	6.8	5.0	8.9	3.1	12.2	7.4
Changes in life stages	33.3	4.1	4.9	5.7	0.8	1.6	6.5	2.4	5.7	-	32.5	2.4
Monetary exchange	19.1	6.4	4.3	10.6	8.5	8.5	6.4	2.1	10.6	-	17.0	6.4

Utilitarian needs and hedonic needs are the main drivers that motivate consumers to participate in online alternative giving communities.

motivations, the frequency of each theme's occurrence is represented as a percentage on the basis of both consumers offering and wanting goods. Again, one of the key findings relates to the relative frequency that utilitarian and, to a lesser degree, hedonic needs emerged within participants' comments. As 83.2% (71.1% + 12.1%) of consumers offering goods and 55.4% (40.7% + 14.7%) of consumers sought goods on the basis of utilitarian and hedonic needs, it is clear that fundamental consumer needs and wants represent a key motivator (see Table 3).

To understand how these needs motivated engagement, we grouped these categories into 12 groups of six utilitarian (furniture, electronics, transportation, kitchen and appliances, office and media, and household stuff) and six hedonic (clothing, crafts, sports and activities, pets, baby stuff, and home remodeling and outdoor gardening) categories (see Table 4). Interestingly, an inconsistency emerged between product categories offered versus sought. Categories of "office and media" (10.5% vs. 5.4%), "pets" (5.5% vs. 2.8%), and "household stuff" (9.5% vs. 4.5%) were offered more frequently than sought (see Table 2 below). By contrast, categories of "furniture" (16.4% vs. 22.2%), "transportation" (1.4% vs. 6.0%), and "sports and activities" (3.2% vs. 8.5%) were sought more frequently than offered.

The subsequent section examines the relationship between participants' motivations for participating and product categories that participants offered versus sought.

5.3 | Fundamental needs that motivate participation

A matrix that examines motives (Table 3) across product categories (Table 4) illustrates relationships between participants' motivations and products sought or offered. An examination of Tables 5 and 6 indicates an alignment between participants' motivations and utilitarian/hedonic products. Givers with utilitarian motives more often gave utilitarian goods (around 70%, obtained by adding up the first six percentages in Theme Row 5) versus hedonic goods (30%, obtained by adding up the latter six percentages in Theme Row 5—similarly hereinafter). Similarly, hedonically motivated givers offered more hedonic (87%) than utilitarian goods (13%). Recipients' motives also matched their requests. Individuals motivated by utilitarian needs requested more utilitarian (69.4%) than hedonic (30.8%) goods, whereas hedonically motivated consumers requested more hedonic (76%) than utilitarian (23%) goods (see Table 6). In sum, participants' motives drove the types of products offered or sought.

That participants were driven by primarily utilitarian and hedonic needs is particularly meaningful, as prior research suggests that societal concerns or anticonsumption motives are the primary reason for the existence of collaborative consumption communities (Belk, 2014; Albinsson & Perera 2012). In contrast, the data suggest that engagement is driven by fundamental consumer needs and wants, much like traditional consumer behavior.

6 | DISCUSSION

The Freecycle Network has attracted attention from both business practitioners and consumer researchers. Unlike the model of Zipcar and Airbnb that create profits, the Freecycle Network encourages anonymous consumers to give through an online platform rather than donate or throw away products. For consumers who have usable products that no longer have use to them, alternative giving provides an identity and environmentally friendly disposal activity. Although previous work points out that the framing of freecyling as a "gift economy" is not appropriate and should be referred to as a hybrid form (Arsel & Dobscha, 2011), no literature has uncovered consumers' underlying motivations for participating in this virtual marketplace. In this research, we first explore this phenomenon by offering a conceptualization for "alternative giving," a distinct form of consumer exchange, nonreciprocal and nonmonetary in nature, wherein consumers may give, receive, or both (see Figure 1). We subsequently illustrate how alternative giving differentiates from conceptualizations of gift giving, sharing, and collaborative consumption (Belk, 1998, 2007, 2010, 2014; Giesler, 2006; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Nelson et al., 2007; Albinsson & Perera, 2009, 2012), as they exclude exchange that is nonmonetary, nonreciprocal, and between multiple recipients.

In addition to this framework, our research uncovers many of consumers' motivations that drive alternative giving. Because of its societal benefits, prior researchers claimed that these downshifting consumers are less materialistic and tend to engage in civic and political consumption (Nelson et al., 2007). In contrast, other researchers argue that the altruism and solidarity found in freecycling appear to be secondary motives (Aptekar, 2016) and that consumption through freecycling instead is only part of the mainstream consumption (Eden, 2017). In line with the recent literature, we examined consumers' fundamental motivations for participation in the Freecycle Network. Through a content analysis of consumers' public online comments in a local alternative giving community (freecycle.org), we demonstrate that consumers' motivations are more varied than prior research indicates and, interestingly, are driven primarily by utilitarian and hedonic needs and, to a lesser degree, prosocial motives. This finding is consistent with other socially responsible consumption decisions.

Though consumers generally prefer to make socially responsible decisions if all else is equal, most prioritize quality and features over social responsibility in making product evaluations and will not sacrifice their core needs in lieu of prosocial ones (Biehal & Shenin, 2007; Johnson, Mao, Lefebvre, & Ganesh, 2019). It is understandable that although consumers' alternative giving decisions represent a form of consumer-based social responsibility, consumers' motivations are nuanced, and social responsibility is secondary to other needs. Consequently, our research suggests that those who seek to support and enhance consumers' adoption of recycling, prosocial, and alternative giving practices should concurrently focus on consumers' utilitarian and hedonic needs, as prosocial factors, anti-consumption, and other values-based needs are apt to represent secondary motivations.

The finding that people participated in alternative giving on the basis of fundamental (utilitarian and hedonic) needs also indicates that consumers' focus is more self-oriented rather than other-oriented even in the context of prosocial consumption. Whereas existing literature has found that positive emotions induce prosocial behavior toward others (Cavanaugh, Bettman, & Luce, 2015; Wang et al., 2016, 2017), perhaps ironically, the best way to motivate people to do good is to focus on their self-oriented needs (e.g., solving a problem and finding a product) but with a secondary focus on others or societal benefits. As some recent work started to explore that self-oriented motivations instead of moral emotions elicit happiness among ethical consumers (Hwang & Kim, 2018) and that consumers may seek socially responsible consumption when thinking of others (Johnson, Lee, & Ashoori, 2018), more research will need to explore the association between moral or prosocial consumption and self- (rather than other-) orientation.

Last but not the least, this research provides insight into how policymakers, business people, and organizers can work to satisfy basic consumer needs and contribute to social welfare in online social networks and communities. Worldwide, consumers currently produce 1.3 billion tons of landfill waste each year, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, so expanding freecycling communities and engaging consumers in alternative giving activities can act as one lever to stymie global waste production. In fact, alternative giving as expressed through the Freecycle Network has already reduced tens of thousands of tons of waste in landfills, as over 9 million members of the Freecycle Network are gifting more than 30,000 items every day on a global local basis. If an improvement in understanding this consumer activity further reduces this accumulation of waste within landfills, this paper may have a meaningful impact on society and public policy. In addition, our research may help to adjust the imbalance between supply (what givers offer) and demand (what receivers seek) within alternative giving communities, as this could be "a step toward creating social connection and community" and would "lead to healthier consumers, communities, and economy in the long-term" (Albinsson & Perera, 2012, p. 311), both physically and virtually.

7 | FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

As the finding that alternative giving participants were motivated by utilitarian and hedonic rather than prosocial motives seemingly deviates from prior studies, it will be important to explore this finding further in future research. This finding is, however, consistent with community characteristics that emerge within the analogous field of consumption communities (Canniford, 2011; Kates, 2002), as members differ considerably in their internalization of community values (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Johnson, Massiah, & Allen, 2013). Rituals, reciprocity, and highly enjoyable group experiences are essential for engendering a common community consciousness (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Allen et al., 2008), activities that did not surface in participants' public online comments. Much as consumers' adoption of brand community or subculture of consumption values

develop through acculturation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) that takes time, consumers' participation motives may likewise evolve from utilitarian or hedonic needs towards value- and identification-based motives.

Our findings about online alternative communities would be strengthened through qualitative and hermeneutic data analysis processes via triangulation embracing observations, interviews, and online document reviews. Prior to the online analysis of the Freecycle Network, we conducted an exploratory study to observe and interview an on-site, in-person alternative giving community, the Really Really Free Market. Out of the nine themes that emerged from our main research, six came from the preliminary exploratory study, which provides qualitative triangulation of the findings. For instance, one active participant described his experience during an interview: "I came here last free market, knowing I needed a small step stool. And there was a small step stool, the small step stool I was going to get. It happens more often you had imagined," confirming that utilitarian needs lead to his participation in the alternative giving community.

Despite our effort on substantial data analyses, longitudinal research projects that follow up virtual alternative communities may elicit factors that sustain alternative giving practices. For example, if motives differ between infrequent and frequent alternative giving participants, what are the motives that continuously engage participants in the circulation of giving and receiving used goods? Would those factors lead to consumers' inner emotions such as happiness and satisfaction? It would also be valuable in future research to collect survey data directly from online participants that can be used to examine how sustainable consumption activities such as alternative consumption contribute to consumer well-being and culture, as extant research tends to focus on areas such as advertising, electronic word of mouth, customer relationship management, branding, consumer behavior, customer adoption, and organizations' perspective (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017).

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