Exploring the Russian online reciprocal communities: the results of nethnographic approach

Elizaveta Polukhina, PhD
Anna Strelnikova, PhD
Department of Sociology
National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE)
Russia, Moscow

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Context. Exchange is changing:

traditional practice & virtual space
Types of exchange

What (service / commodity)

How – level of reciprocity (paid/unpaid and gift / exchange)

Where (online / offline)
Exchange in Soviet time

Planned economy (products deficit) created the system of paper-based announcements.
Example of online gift-exchanging activity
Evolution of exchange relationship

- Peer of strangers
- Deficit product

- Strangers from network
- Gift

Soviet

Post-Soviet
Over the past few years reciprocal communities have a significant growth.

The pioneer network was founded in the 1990s and consists of 24000 participants.

According to one of the largest Russian-speaking gift exchange communities, the number of its members almost doubled annually. 2014: more than 230 thousand members, more than 2 million gift exchanges.
Подушка «Морячок»
Два подушки размером 50х50 и 40х65 прекрасно подойдут для любого помещения. В коричневой стеганой ткани, в которой морячка, две обеих узелковые подушки (сшитые отделкой 100% хлопком, вшив 100% полиэстер). В них много мелких отростков для этой смены. Чем не снеговик, но их вместе с подушками можно спать. Внизу просвечивает внутренняя подушка стегана.
Два снимка обеих подушек. В комментариях: 7.

Благодарственное письмо за подарок «1 доллар Новой Зеландии (Гора Кук)»
Дорогие Волонтёры! Спасибо за прекрасную и светлую память - да будет исцелено твоё здоровье. Желаю успеха на пути возвратной операции.
С уважением, [Имя].
Our research focus

- Segment of **virtual informal economics**, which implies gift exchange relations between its participants.

- The **online gift-exchange communities** – are virtual platforms, where users make free of charge (or based on individual equivalence valuing) exchange of different daily demand objects: books, children's products, interior items, dishes and others.

- The key words in nomination of such kind of communities are “give free”, “give a gift” etc.

- Internet makes possible for gift exchange communities members **to share information about gift**, but the meeting with gift giving take place in real (offline) world.
Research questions

• to give an analytical description of reciprocal online communities,
• to reveal their social order in terms of social structure.

What rules and mechanisms exist in this type of informal economy?

What motivates people not acquainted with one another to exchange gifts?

The way this social structure operates?
Research strategy

• **Ethnography.** The research team systematically observed 4 of the most popular reciprocal communities in Russia. Communities was described on the basis of a uniform protocol

• **Personal (offline) semiformalized interview (6)** with representatives of the communities. So the informants became those who were involved in gift exchange right at the moment
Theoretical framework

- Transit the consumption practices to Internet
- Transit to new type of consumption culture (redistribution of resources)
- **Post-materialism** as economic and socio-cultural paradigm (R. Inglehart; L. Milbrat)
Gift exchange communities
structure & mechanism
Types of gift-exchanging communities

- Instrumental
- Value-based

- Constant rules
- Homocentric
- Free Access

- Regular contact
- Flexibility
- Polycentric
- Difficult Access
Gift-exchanging communities

Instrumental

• «We do not have democracy. We practiced democracy once (see question about cats), and more will not do such a stupid thing»
  [Moderator, reciprocal community based on livejournal.com, Moscow]
• «...“Virtuals” are very unreliable. They may come to meeting, or may “forget” to. In most cases, they are ephemerals with just made journals. Almost all of them only ask or accept; I don’t remember the case that they make offers»
  [Moderator, gift-exchange community based on livejournal.com, St-Petersbourgh]

Value-based

• «...what is the any-time, any-place gifts exchange? This is space of the maximum trust to each other. It is a general belief in the nobility and honesty person. This means that everyone will do what he can, and to get what he really needed»
  [Developer of international Russian-speaking community of the gift exchange]
List of participants
(sorted by number of gifts)
Women are the main actors

- Hard life situations, which naturally “include” group solidarity, stimulate people to search gifts, give goods or exchange needless with needful:
  - relocation (“have rented a flat without furniture, looking for something to sleep on”),
  - critical life situations (“I’ve remained alone with my children, the husband has gone, and children’s clothes are needed”)
  - etc
Reciprocity is a **continuation** the life and history of things [Appadurai, 1986].

**Things:** durables, books, items for babies, clothes etc.

Opportunity for **moneyless** consumption
Commodity from home to home. Appreciation system
Accumulated social capital

The most honorable participant

YzyFpykT 3757

Blocked participant

Kristina-83 516

История блокировок сообщника Kristina-83

Период блокировки: 29 дек 2010 г. — навсегда
Нарушение норм этики и морали при общении с людьми
Злоупотребление доверием сообщников в корыстных целях.
Извращение целей и миссии сообщества, для удовлетворения личных амбиций.
Roles and hierarchy in the community

**Developers** - create free gifting service for different people who can make gifts to each other - with a maximum benefit and pleasure

- **Caretakers** help participants to hold communities traditions, to communicate with each other in the most difficult situations in order to use the tools of free gifting service. They have its own code, the main principles of which are "Help" and "Do No Harm"

- **Postmen** help donors (gift makers) to transfer the gifts to other cities, saving them time and money, and unite participants, living in different cities

- **Patrons** and many other participants’ help developers maintain service, and improve it further...[Quote from the developers of international Russian-speaking community of the gift exchange]
Motivations

Gift-exchange is not the practice of deprived groups, but the form of communication and consumer solidarity of individuals.
Russian online gift-exchange communities

Conclusion
Practice of resource redistribution

A kaleidoscope of needs and possibilities for people with different level of “capital”.

1) Minimizing (from over-consumption to smart)
2) Normalizing (from under-consumption to normal)
3) Maximizing (from under-consumption to over)
4) Balancing (“horizontal" strategy)
New type of solidarity

The practice of online gift-exchange:

• indicator of growing social mobilization, the birth of a new type of sociability

• way of expanding social links, additional criteria for the "scale" of personal prestige through the specific status appreciated in the community
• **Practice** with the especial values, norms and repute systems, self-control and trust inside the group.

• **It cannot be reduced** only to a forced "naturalness" of economic relations in the conditions of lack of money resources.

• Mastering the rules inside gift-exchange communities can produce **specific competencies of their members**
Thank you for your attention!