Consumer Gift System: Netnographic Insights from Napster

MARKUS GIESLER*

This article develops a critique of the dyadic model of consumer gift giving and an extension of the classic paradigm of gift giving as elaborated in fundamental anthropological and sociological texts. I conceptualize and present empirical evidence for the notion of consumer gift system, a system of social solidarity based on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers. Social distinctions, norm of reciprocity, and rituals and symbolisms are defined as key characteristics of a consumer gift system and evidenced in peer-to-peer music-file-sharing at Napster. Implications for extant research on solidarity, gift giving and consumption are discussed, and future research directions are provided.

Although originally conceptualized in classic anthropological and sociological studies as a fundamental *social system* (e.g., Mauss [1925] 1990), gift giving in the consumer literature has been traditionally conceived of as an aggregate of dyadic gift exchange rituals. First developed in Sherry's (1983) influential analysis of consumer gift giving in anthropological perspective, this reductionist theoretical perspective has become ubiquitous in consumer research on gift giving (e.g., Sherry and McGrath 1989; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Joy 2001; Lowrey, Otnes and Ruth 2004). As a consequence, some of the most important sociological dimensions of consumer gift giving have remained unexplored.

To redress this key theoretical oversight, I develop the notion of consumer gift system, a system of social solidarity based on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers. The empirical context of my study is the Napster music file-sharing network. I use five years of netnographic data to show how Napster's consumer gift system transcends the dyadic structures, and the motivations and actions of individual gifting partners that were the focus of prior consumer research on gift giving. As I will later discuss, the netnographic formulation of music file sharing at Napster as a consumer gift system offers important theoretical implications for the classic gift-giving paradigm as elaborated in fundamental anthropological and sociological literatures.

The article is organized as follows. The relevant classic and contemporary literature on gift giving is reviewed, three traditional gift system markers are identified and the key problematics of the dyadic consumer gift paradigm are summarized to provide the theoretical groundwork for the investigation. Netnographic methods and Napster as an empirical site are introduced, followed by the presentation of data that evidence Napster's consumer gift system and some of its theoretical key facets. The discussion section presents the implications of this research for extant theories on gift giving and consumption and discusses future research directions.

GIFT SYSTEM

In its basic social science form pioneered by anthropologists Marcel Mauss (1925) and

Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), gift giving is viewed as a fundamental social system. Adding up to

more than just an aggregate of dyadic exchanges, gift giving becomes a "total social fact" that affects

the economic, legal, political, and religious spheres of society and fulfills important functions in their

development and continuity. According to Douglas ([1925] 1990), "the theory of gift giving is a

theory of human solidarity" (p. x). Gift systems are so important because they are systems of social

solidarity (Komter 2005) that help shatter the ego-bonds of the alienated self (Hyde 1983) and

establish and maintain the essential vitality, viability and identity of the society in which they are

embedded (Cheal 1988).

Accounts of gift systems abound in the classic and modern literatures of anthropology and

sociology. Malinowski (1922), for instance, has described the long sea voyages that South Pacific

islanders undertake to trade decorative seashells in the *Kula* gift system (see Leach and Leach 1983).

Mauss (1925) has analyzed the *Potlatch*, a periodic gift system of Indian tribes in the Pacific

Northwest, as a status competition in generosity and waste. A gift system can be viewed as consisting

of at least three theoretical key elements in terms of (1) its social distinctions, (2) its norm of

reciprocity, and (3) its rituals and symbolisms.

The first and most important characteristic is the existence of its social distinctions. Social

distinctions are demonstrated through patterns of interaction that give rise to, and subsequently

reinforce, gifting partners' self-identification and gifting outsiders' confirmation of the difference

between the gift system and its social environment. Malinowski (1922) first proposed the

dichotomous notion of gift versus commodity whereby gift exchange must be understood as an

oppositional economy to that of market exchange. Following Cheal (1988), gift giving constitutes a moral economy that is distinguished from the political economy of monetary transactions. The second key indicator of a gift system is what Gouldner (1960) calls a norm of reciprocity, a set of rules and obligations that builds the complex pattern of give and take, and helps establish moral standards of social solidarity. Mauss (1925) first discussed the existence of an elementary morality of reciprocity in gift giving based on three obligations: to give, to receive, and to repay. The third fundamental marker of a gift system is the existence of rituals and symbolisms. Rituals are defined as rule-governed activities of symbolic expression by which the collective representations of gift giving are instilled into its members (cf. Durkheim [1915] 1965; Geertz 1973). Rituals in gift giving can have many faces. Caplow (1982), for instance, has developed the ritualized giving of Christmas gifts in kin networks as a vital mechanism for reinforcing social relationships that are highly valued but instable.

Consumer Gift Giving

Gift giving and consumer research have developed a close reciprocal relationship as well. In a pioneering *JCR* article on gift giving in anthropological perspective, Sherry (1983) has developed a processual model of gift giving that serves as the conceptual springboard for subsequent consumer studies on gift giving (e.g., Sherry and McGrath 1989; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Otnes et al. 1993; Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth et al. 1999; Joy 2001; Lowrey et al. 2004). Sherry views gift giving as a continuous cycle of reciprocities, and theorizes the gift exchange process as a dialectical chain of gift and token gift transactions between two gifting partners. Three stages - gestation, prestation, and reformulation - specify the gift transaction through which donor and recipient progress.

The gestation stage integrates behavior antecedent to the exchange, including, on the donor's side, the expression of motivation, the internal and external search for and the purchase or creation of a gift. Most existing consumer theorizing is located here. Sherry and McGrath (1989), for instance, have investigated shopping behavior and gift choice during the Christmas/ Hanukkah season in two Midwestern American gift stores while Fischer and Arnold (1990) have examined the role of gender in Christmas gift shopping. Otnes et al. (1993), in turn, have developed gift selection behavior for easy and difficult recipients. The prestation stage marks the substance of the gift transaction and involves the recipient's response and the donor's evaluation of the response. In this phase, Joy's (2001) continuum of social ties that bind gifting partners in Hong Kong is as much located as Belk and Coon's (1993) study of agapic ("unselfish") gift giving among lovers. The reformulation stage concerns the disposition of the gift, its consumption, display, storage or exchange, and maybe its rejection. Gift reciprocation results in the realignment of the gifting relationship and the exchange partners' role reversal. Here, Ruth et al. (1999) have explored the influence of recipient perception on relationship alignment. Likewise, Lowrey et al. (2004) have presented a taxonomy of 10 social factors that influence donors' gift behaviors and motivations over time.

While Sherry's (1983) dyadic model has established gift giving as an important area of scholarly investigation in consumer research, it presents two key theoretical oversights. First, it offers an overly atomistic approach to gift giving. Gift giving is effectively reduced to a single gifting spiral that processually integrates social relationships informally as a dyadic interaction ritual. This reductionist perspective is reflected in subsequent studies' entirely microscopic discussions of the motivations and actions of individual gifting partners across different stages of exchange. Second, Sherry's dyadic model of social ties through direct or indirect recompense offers strong exchange theoretical undertones (Cheal 1988). This second limitation is especially highlighted in subsequent

consumer studies' strong tendency to focus on gift giving exclusively as a process of balanced reciprocal exchange (see Belk and Coon 1993 for a detailed critique). While Sherry's model is clearly an important contribution in that it has inspired an entire stream of consumer research, its effectiveness is limited by an oversimplified, atomistic, economistic view on gift giving and its respective sociocultural dynamics.

I propose that it is no longer enough (if it ever was) to conceptualize consumer gift giving simply as an aggregate of dyadic gift transactions. Consumer researchers should grant consumer gift giving the same social-systemic status sociologists and anthropologists employed long ago when first studying the traditional gift systems like the Kula or the Potlatch. I suggest that gift systems can also evolve around consumption. These consumer gift systems may emerge from consumer networks of social solidarity, but they show the same fundamental systemic characteristics as those that were of interest to classic anthropologists. Like traditional gift systems, these consumer gift systems many serve as important sources of social solidarity that help constitute and maintain the society in which they are embedded. These and other important subjects evoke one central question: what is the nature of consumer gift systems and how do they extend our understanding of gift giving and consumer behavior as a whole?

METHOD

To present empirical evidence of a consumer gift system, this research uses five years of netnographic and ethnographic (e.g., Sherry and Kozinets 2001) studies of Napster's peer-to-peer music-file-sharing network and some of its technological successors (e.g., Hotline, Morpheus, Kazaa, and Lime Wire). Invented by the college student Shawn Fanning in 1999, Napster was the

first peer-to-peer music-file-sharing network on the Internet and offered a new form of music consumption. With the Napster software on Internet-connected computers, consumers were suddenly able to distribute music encoded in the MP3 format, which compresses recordings digitally into small and portable files without sacrificing much quality. Napster users could search each other's music files and share bootlegs, rare tracks and current releases by major artists stored in their "shared music" folder. Through Napster's built-in instant messaging system (IMS), they could also communicate textually. The music available at Napster ranged from old to new, the most popular to the hard-to-find. Music that has not been released by record companies and was rarely played on the radio was easy to find at Napster. The massive assortment of bands available in the network allowed consumers to experience music they would otherwise have had to buy. After almost three years of operation and accusations of copyright violation from the recording industry, a court order shut down Napster's file-sharing network in 2002.

Twenty online interviews were directly recorded through Napster's IMS, documenting the normative expectations of behavior and the ideology attending file sharing at Napster. Although some of these informants could have been interviewed on the phone, using Napster's IMS kept the data *in situ* as much as possible. Talking "through" Napster was a much more embedded yet equally unobtrusive netnographic interviewing procedure than just talking "about" it. The online interviews were of varying duration and ranged from several minutes to an hour. Informed consent was provided and confidentiality was assured beforehand to both online and offline respondents. A list of each informant's shared music files at the moment of the interview was archived with the text. Informants ranged in age from 16 to 63 years and were mostly male. Volunteers were solicited for the study through message-board postings and a research website, http://www.napsterresearch.com. Furthermore, observational data from 34 informant emails and several dozen threads of file-sharing-

related online message boards were collected and reviewed. An additional methodological component was historical information from news stories, magazine articles, press releases, and corporate websites.

The offline data used in this study stem from observations of Napster users and other file-sharing consumers (e.g., Hotline, Kazaa) using the file-sharing software in their natural physical surroundings from August 2000 until December 2003. Through this channel, I conducted 17 additional in-depth interviews with users among the students and staff of two North American universities. To solicit potential offline informants, I placed on campus several posters stating my research interest in the downloading of music and software. Interviews were conducted in computer labs, fraternity houses, student rooms, cafeterias and university offices. The interviews ranged from 12 minutes to about one and a half hours. About 70 percent of the offline informants were male. Informants ranged in age from 18 to 34.

FINDINGS

I will now discuss my empirical findings from Napster exploring the three traditional gift system markers as netnographic themes. At Napster, empirical evidence was found of all three traditional gift system indicators, as well as several other social-systemic characteristics of gift giving. The context of music consumption in which Napster's gift system is situated affects its nature and organization and entails its distinctiveness.

Social Distinctions

The most important characteristic of a gift system is its social distinctions. Gift giving as a system of social solidarity is characterized by a number of social discourses, practices and structures that are separable, because of their distinct characteristics, from those that form the subject matter of market exchange and other forms of gift giving. The fundamental social distinction of Napster as a consumer gift system is established through a specific ethos and structure of sharing that gives rise to, and subsequently reinforces, Napster users' self-identification and the confirmation of Napster's gift systemic boundaries. Consider, for instance, Arthur's statement:

> I guess the most important thing about Napster is that people are using it to make their own music collection available to each other, you know, that they share what they have with others instead of searching for CDs in stores and having to pay for them… (Arthur, offline interview)

As Arthur's statement reveals, the ethos of sharing music with others constitutes a gift system that is clearly distinguished from the form of music consumption based on market exchange. The contrast between sharing music and paying for it serves as a means of demarcating social systemic boundaries. Napster users derive important meanings of sharing through ideological comparisons to the economic system of music-market exchange. Whereas the marketplace is about exchanging music as a commodity with outsiders, Napster is about sharing music as a gift with insiders. In the words of Sam:

> Napster gives me that unlimited access to a universe of music. … I can see what other people have on their computers … and also ... I can offer my music to them so that everything that is shared is accessible by everyone else in the community. … (Sam, offline interview)

Sam employs the term "community" as an assertion of unity and closeness and to emphasize the ethos of sharing music at Napster. His statement also evokes the fundamental anthropological

distinction between ownership and access. Because Napster users "make their own music collection available to each other" and "everything that is shared is just accessible by everyone else" (Sam), Napster seems to reflect an ideological transition from music ownership (property) to music access (gift). At Napster, it is not important to own the copyright but to have unlimited access to a web of shared music. As Arthur further explains:

> It's also because Napster is this giant computer network…I can download the same song from different people at the same time. That's…I mean, wow! That really makes a huge difference because suddenly music is not only incredibly cheap but also instantly available… (Arthur, offline interview)

Unlike on markets or in the context of dyadic gift giving, Napster users can have access to and receive the same gift infinitely from multiple others at the same time because the same music file can usually be found on more than one computer. At Napster, gift giving is organized in a polyadic fashion. Accordingly, the process of gift giving at Napster is not dialectical but "root-like" or *rhizomatic*.

A cyber-geographical topology map of a rhizomatic gift transaction at Napster is presented in Figure 1. The gift recipient (represented by the red dot) received a gift from multiple donors (represented by empty circles at the end of the lines). The size of the circles represents the digital bandwidth available to the gifting partners, while the lines illustrate the flow of the cybernetic gift from the donors to the recipient. Rhizomatic connections among Napster users are built spontaneously to initiate a gift transaction, and they are terminated after the transaction. Napster's gifting structure therefore strongly contrasts Sherry's (1983) gift exchange spiral, in which a dyad of gifting partners proceeds through several rounds of ongoing moral obligation to give, receive and repay. Rhizomes, in turn, lead to the permanent "rewiring" of Napster's social matrix of gift

solidarity. While repetitive gift transactions between the same gifting partners are also possible at Napster, the overall stability of Napster's system of gifts lends itself more to a nomadic principle than an exclusively sedentary one. On the systemic level of analysis, Napster's rhizomatic "gift wiring" leads to a peculiar constellation. Jeff's statement is typical:

> All over the world, people are doing what we're doing here right now [clicks on the transfer button and points to the "outgoing transfers" section, which shows two outgoing downloads from his computer]. I mean, somehow, everyone is downloading music from everyone else…so we're part of this gigantic matrix of music... [gestures with his arms]…so it also becomes pretty difficult to distinguish who is giving and who is taking… (Jeff, offline interview)

Jeff's splendid statement portrays Napster as a total social fact that transcends the dyadic constellations and individual motivations and actions that were the focus of previous consumer research. What distinguishes Napster from music market exchange is that music is shared among users as a gift. For its users, Napster can only be grasped fully as a polyadic "matrix of music" in which "everyone is downloading from everyone else" (Jeff) and one can "download the same song from different people at the same time" (Barry) rather than a system of music-market exchange or a dyadic transaction. At Napster, to borrow and fracture Marcel Mauss's (1925) famous expression, the recipients of one moment become the givers of the same. These particular social discourses, practices and structures of sharing give rise to and subsequently reinforce users' self-identification of the difference between Napster and its music-marketplace environment.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Norm of Reciprocity

Gift systems are secondly marked by the norm of reciprocity, which is also evident at

Napster. Gouldner (1960), in his groundbreaking analysis, argues that the complex structure of give

and take is essential for providing stability of social systems. According to Komter (2005), the norm

of reciprocity is the basis upon which the solidarity between the participants of a gift system is set. At

Napster, the norm of reciprocity is manifest in consumers' discourse about the exchange rules that

structure proper music contribution. Consider, for instance, Julia's explanations:

> Napster really depends on everyone circulating music for the love of it…I mean seriously,
>
> it's the only way Napster can work for all of us…and [long pause]…I guess it's generally
>
> through circulation that music can work for us … (Julia, offline interview)

With the installation of the Napster software, every user implicitly subscribes to an internal

generalized reciprocity contract: every downloaded music file can be downloaded at another time

from the previous recipient. This internal "cyclic" form of generalized multiplicity leads to the quasi-

automatic accumulation of music files through downloading within Napster's gift system. It has been

commonly argued that gift giving is fundamentally related to a type of sacrifice (e.g., Bataille 1988).

In contrast to this, Napster's gift of music is a non-sacrificial gift in that it remains with the donor

after the transaction. This observation is also in line with previous cyber-consumption studies. In her

investigation of social exchange processes within innovative virtual communities, Hemetsberger

(2002) has demonstrated that "knowledge as the main resource of the community is multiplied by

giving it away freely to others" (p. 1). Likewise, Hayles (1999) has cogently argued that the

"disembodied information" of cyberspace is "not a conserved quantity" (p. 39) that is multiplied in a

"data matrix" (p. 38). However, internal multiplication is not an exclusive feature of cyberspace. For

instance, in a religious context, the gift of faith is multiplied through stories and myths passed from the preacher to the congregation, from one person to another or one generation to the next (e.g., Campbell 1970). Apart from the principle of internal multiplicity of downloading existing music material, there is also the principle of external multiplicity concerning the practice of uploading new music material. Gagan explains the relationship between both:

> This is my Napster folder [double-clicks on the Napster folder]. I guess I've uploaded more than 200 files or so that contribute to Napster's wealth. But I must also confess that I download way more than 200 files (laughs), but I think it's okay as long as I do keep these files online so that others can download them from me. (Gagan, offline interview)
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> As Gagan's statement reveals, reciprocity-related moral discourse at Napster includes both what has been given back in terms of bringing it in from the outside (external multiplication) and what has been given back in terms of leaving in the gift system what has been downloaded before (internal multiplication).

Another important file-sharing behavior is leeching. Leeching, according to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia.com, "refers to the practice of joining a group for the explicit purpose of gaining rewards without contributing anything to the efforts necessary to acquire those rewards." Leeching involves downloading music files and immediately withdrawing them from the system of gifts to prevent further multiplication. Consider, for instance, what Dawn had to say:

> What bugs me most about Napster is that there is a growing number of users that do not share what they've downloaded from others that download off me. If they're not into sharing, they should not be allowed to reap the benefits. Why should they be allowed to take and not share? Just think about why Napster is so popular. If no one shared, what's the point? (Dawn, board posting)

Dawn criticizes those Napster users as unsolidary who download and immediately withdraw the music from their list of shared files (leeching). At Napster, it is generally considered unsolidary to take without giving back in the form, at least, of leaving previously downloaded music available. In sum, Napster's system of musical gifts is based on the social solidarity of its users, a solidarity that is reflected in the norm of reciprocity in at least two ways. First, the rule of internal multiplicity (expected) organizes proper reciprocation through downloading within the system. Second, the rule of external multiplicity (desired) organizes proper reciprocation through uploading music files from outside of the system.

Rituals and Symbolisms

Napster is also characterized by the existence of rituals and symbolisms, the third central characteristic of a gift system. Rituals are meaningful social processes that, like distinctive symbolisms, help structure Napster users' file-sharing experiences and therefore present an important component of Napster's overall gift system. Symbolisms are defined as systems of symbols and symbolic representations that channel members' and non-members' thought and practices into particular ideological directions. Symbolisms can be found in many users' developed usernames and online personae. Daniel (alias "sgtpepper71"), for instance, is widely recognized as an expert source for Beatles songs, while Martin (alias "violator101") is a download authority for the music of Depeche Mode. These Napster users not only share music, they operate as esteemed file-sharing experts who, in the case of Martin, have homepages to complement their special music collections:

Researcher: Wow, what an awesome collection!

Martin: Yeah, I'm really proud of it!! The later stuff…pretty much everything after Violator

[title of the 11th album] really sucks, which is why I didn't go beyond that. …

Researcher: That's very impressive. …

Martin: Yeah, it took me quite a while to put this whole project together because some of the tracks are from my own records but most of them are from other Depeche fans and I've also this website where I've put all the scanned CD covers and some background information on who recorded the remix, and where it was released… (offline interview)

Martin talks about the process of preparing and providing his special Depeche Mode music collection to other Napster users. His quote illustrates that the music files as such are not as important as the combination in which they are presented and by which they symbolize their owners' expert identity and function to establish and maintain social relationships with other users. Martin uses his Depeche Mode collection mainly to get in touch with other fans in the system, consumers who cherish his collection as much as he does. While some Napster users pride themselves on the reputation that the quality of their music collections has generated, others employ the quantity of songs to indicate file-sharing greatness. Contributing the massive number of 639 files to Napster, Tom would be such a user:

Tom: I'm uploading my entire music collection step by step. I have about 400 CDs and 100 vinyl records. A bunch of other users and I are doing this. …

Researcher: …To provide music to the community?

Tom: Yep, it's for the community, but it's also fun because we're all into music and we often look at what the others have aggregated. In the beginning it was just normal artists but now it's also the rare stuff. …

Researcher: For example?

Tom: I have put up a recording from that '96 Rage gig in CA [a 1996 concert in California by

the band Rage Against the Machine]. I figured that people usually have a hard time finding

that stuff at the [record-trading] fairs, so I'm pretty proud that I have a copy to offer them…

(online interview)

When asked about this incredible number of music files (I talked him into having a

conversation to learn more about his gifting motivation after I had followed his request to make "at

least a few files" available to others), Tom revealed not only that he is "keepin' an eye on how much

people have on their hard drives when they download stuff from me" but also that he is competing

with other users to bring massive amounts of new music into Napster's system of gifts. Tom's and

Martin's statements both highlight the role of file sharing as a moral consumption activity. Some

Napster users are obviously driven by the idea of competing with and outperforming others in terms

of quantity (Tom) and also quality (Martin). They engage in a particular form of economic

competition that the anthropology literature has called "tournaments of value" (Appadurai 1986),

competitive events in which power is manifest and status contested. Economic rivalries at Napster

are also carried out according to specific exchange rules and conventions. For Tom, it is important

that the music he provides is original in both quantity and quality:

> …There are a few things to consider. 1) Try to bring up as much new stuff as possible! It
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> should be the new new stuff and not just some old new stuff from someone else in the
>
> community! 2) Keep your eyes open especially for the rare stuff! And 3) always use a decent
>
> sound quality and name the files so that other users can identify them!

Tom's passages reveal another important ideological disjuncture. Although this informant

likes to rationalize his accounts as altruistic, benevolent and heroic, his main interest is to stand out as

sharing vigilantes, to control the flow of wealth in the gift system and even to rebuke other Napster

users. With the accumulation of prestige in the system comes the perceived responsibility to enforce

law and order. As Tom explains:

> Did you know that only about one percent of all users really share files? Some of us have to take the initiative and look after things so that the system keeps running smoothly!

Tom points to the statistical imbalance between sharers and non-sharers to rationalize the necessity of his authoritative guiding. His behavior reinforces his personal prestige and status, but also humiliates or dominates others by putting them in a position of debt and dependence. It is through cybernetic argonauts like Tom and Martin that shared social rules are enforced and thus able to yield social stability of Napster's overall gift system. Accordingly, high social status is attached to these file-sharing heroes because they do more than add fresh new music material to Napster's gift organism.

DISCUSSION

This netnographic study has found striking evidence of a consumer gift system in peer-to-peer music-file-sharing practices at Napster. Napster's consumer gift system exemplifies all three classic gift system indicators, as well as several other social-systemic characteristics of consumer gift giving. Napster's rhizomatic structure of music sharing binds a complex consumer system of social solidarity, transcending the dyadic gift exchanges that were the focus of Sherry and his followers. By introducing the notion of consumer gift system in this study and finding empirical evidence for its existence at Napster, I have shed theoretical light on this formerly neglected aspect of consumer gift giving. I have shown that attempts to look at all gift-giving behavior in terms of purely dyadic, purely individualistic, or purely economic mechanisms miss much of what impels consumers to give gifts. In developing some of the previously neglected sociological and anthropological factors of consumer

gift giving, this study removes the conceptual straightjacket imposed by the reductionism implicit in the dyadic paradigm of consumer gift giving and reveals how consumers can construct a complex system of meaningful social interaction through gifts. Consumer gift systems should be understood as gift systems in their own right, systems of social solidarity that reveal the complex sociocultural construction of consumer gift giving as more than just an aggregate of dyadic interaction rituals.

Implications for Fundamental Theories of Gift Giving

This study contributes to the extant anthropological and sociological literature on gift giving. In this context, the prevailing theoretical view has long been that gift giving mattered only in tribal societies. Mauss (1925), following Durkheim, originated the problematic theoretical view that the nature of the gift could be investigated best in pre-industrial societies. According to this anthropological elementarism, only in indigenous societies does the gift as a total social fact appear in its purest form. Scholars have only recently begun to move away from this impoverished view and to acknowledge that gift giving is as important in contemporary society as it is and has been in pre-modern societies (e.g., Cheal 1988; Hyde 1983; Caplow 1982 and 1984). Yet, these scholars have been slow to move beyond the traditional Durkheimian "organs" of social solidarity such as the family, the neighborhood, or the church. Caplow's studies on Christmas gift giving in Middletown kin networks and Cheal's (1988) investigation of gift giving in the social context of Christmas and weddings are typical. These authors limit their attention to the role of gift giving in reinforcing traditional kin relationships.

Contrasting these studies, my findings locate solidarity in more separate, autonomous social segments of consumption connecting with other segments, no longer out of necessity and mutual

dependency but on the basis of individual choice. I have explored the role of consumer gift giving in providing the solidarity needed to establish and maintain the essential vitality, viability, and identity of the surrounding society. At the same time, however, Napster's consumer gift system is more global in nature and exhibits a more nomadic and non-committal type of gifting solidarity in comparison to the more "organic" gift systems previously studied. In the context of postmodern consumer culture, gift systems no longer seem to form the "organic whole" from which solidarity arises automatically, as is the case in the Kula system, where the combination of gifting partners is strictly defined and never changes, or in the Christmas system of gifts where gift roles are clearly defined between parents and children, children and grandparents and so forth. In contrast to that, consumer gift systems are geographically dispersed (often on a global scale), often technologically networked, and more independent social segments. Whereas "organic" gift systems are based on congruence between individuals, consumer gift systems are characterized more by diversity and plurality. As the rhizomatic gift dynamics of Napster's file sharing have shown, in the context of a consumer gift system, voluntariness and flexibility supersede necessity and commitment. In addition to focusing on the existence of "organic solidarity," sociologists and anthropologists should attend with particular vigilance to the ways in which consumer gift systems serve as central arenas for a more "segmented solidarity" in social life. In doing so, the interplay of gift giving, solidarity and consumption can be brought into clearer relief.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, netnographic research does not offer the same degree of generalizability positivist research does. Second, netnographic research does not

offer the same degree of generalizability ethnographic research does. For instance, the ability to own and operate expensive computer technology was necessary for participation in this study. Likewise, the fact that Napster is an online consumption context colors the data and opens the way for follow-up study.

It must also be acknowledged that, on an ideological continuum between gift and theft, this study has built its theoretical argument exclusively on the gift side. Future research is called for to investigate the distinct political role of Napster's "theft economy" in the music marketplace. The emergence of Napster constituted a "pressure point" (Thompson 2004) of conflicting ideological discourses between music industry executives constructing music as a product and file sharing as theft and music consumers constructing music as a gift. How, in the case of Napster, were these conflicting downloading interpretations constructed in the music marketplace and internalized in music producers' and consumers' ideological agendas? How were these agendas "played out" against each other in an attempt to alter the pattern of power relationships between consumers and industry? Ultimately, what are the political strategies these competing stakeholder groups formulated and executed in order to define the ideological status of music downloading in the music marketplace?

In closing, the consumption issues presented here offer an attractive theoretical platform for developing theoretical linkages between conceptualizations of consumption, gift giving, and social solidarity. It remains to be seen how the theoretical perspectives brought together in this study may complete and enrich each other, and how these combined insights may illuminate manifestations of contemporary gift giving. By developing the notion of consumer gift system and its most important theoretical dimensions, this study has provided an alternative consumer-centric, culturally grounded model of contemporary gift giving.

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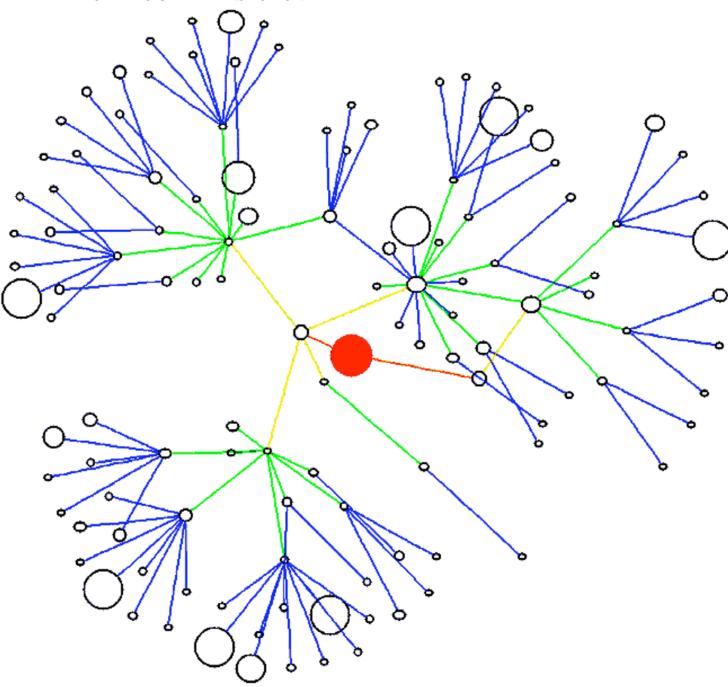Folkman Curasi, Carolyn, Linda L. Price, and Eric J. Arnould (2004), "How Individuals'

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FIGURE 1

RHIZOMATIC GIFT TRANSACTION

NOTE. — This cyber-geographical topology map shows a rhizomatic gift transaction at Napster recorded on Oct. 26, 2001. Filled circle indicates recipient. Empty circles at the end of lines indicate donors. Circle size indicates bandwidth. Other circles indicate intermediate nodes. Lines indicate the flow of the electronic gift (to the recipient). Line tones indicate the degree of connection with light=first degree, middle=second degree, dark=third degree. For more detailed color illustrations, please see: http://www.napsterresearch.com

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