



Swapping mothers on Facebook: The process of collaborative consumption of children's clothes

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Fueled by a variety of concerns including the impact of overconsumption on the environment and general well-being, clusters of individuals have begun to engage in a range of anti-consumerism activities. Some anti-consumers consciously resist throwing things away in their everyday lives, reduce their general level of consumption, or refuse to use brands from socially irresponsible businesses or products made from materials that are harmful to the environment. One possible means to reduce general levels of consumption and increase reuse of products is collaborative consumption. Belk (2014) defines collaborative consumption as “people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation.” Swapping apparel is a form of collaborative consumption as consumers pay for other apparel with apparel they no longer need or want. With the development of social networking sites such as Facebook has enabled swapping to occur in a broader scope; between strangers with no location boundaries. Numerous swap groups are formed by mothers on Facebook. According to Facebook, there are over 300 Facebook active swap groups that enable US mothers to swap children's clothes.

The purpose of this study was to explore consumers' collaborative consumption experiences within a Facebook swap group. Special attention was paid to provide detailed description of collaborative consumption experiences during three stages of the process (i.e., before, during, and after) and gain insights on how mothers swap children's clothes online. Collective action theory was used as a framework for this study. Collective action explains how self-organized groups are formed and continued in order to address the same collective good for the shared outcome (Marwell & Oliver, 1993).

**Methods.** Using phenomenological approach, data were collected through interviews. Purposive sampling methods were used to recruit participants. Prospective participants were approached by sending Facebook messages to the members of Facebook groups swapping children's clothes. Group members who agreed to participate were interviewed using Skype. The interview data were analyzed using components of phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2007).

**Participant characteristics.** A total of 20 mothers between the ages from 23 to 44 participated. Participants resided in various locations throughout the United States. All participants defined themselves as Caucasian and have been a member of a Facebook swap group from six months to two and a half years.

**Findings.** To facilitate successful swapping experience and to build trust, swapping groups on Facebook had strict policies/ rules that require their members to abide by. For example, a swap group with 281 members provides detailed house rule. For sellers, they need to use flat rate boxes from USPS to sell their items, create album with photos including detailed description, and ship the box after payment is received using PayPal. Sellers must delete their photos as soon as the item is received by the buyer and must ship their items within 48 hours of payment. In order

to be eligible to swap in the group, one must create an album. Album needs to include seller's Facebook name, information of whether it is from smoking or nonsmoking environment, have pets or not, and date of most recent update. In the photo description, sellers need to indicate size, condition, and brands of the items. House rule highlighted that members should not buy from the group with the intent to make a profit by reselling the items at other places and not hold items if they do not intend to buy. If any of the rules were broken by a member, the member was subjected to be removed from the group. Sellers who receive complaint because of sending items in poor conditions (e.g., excessive washwear, stains, holes, tears) may also be removed.

In the process of swapping goods, participants experienced both being a seller and a buyer. As a buyer, they selected a box on the group's Facebook page. As a seller, they prepared a box of clothing. Preparation entailed selecting clothing items to swap, taking pictures, posting pictures with descriptions, and responding to potential recipients' questions. If a box is selected, fixed box price is paid through Paypal and then the sellers ship it to the buyer. Even though the process appears simple, participants shared there are many steps that they go through in order to swap goods. For example, a mother of two children who has been sending out at least six boxes a month since 2011 shared, "Everything has already been washed when I begin sorting. I pull what my daughter is no longer using that I'm ready to get rid of. I then photograph items individually. I then upload it to the computer and post the pictures with information - If they have any wear or if they run smaller than other brands. I always inspect the clothing. If it's too worn it goes to donations." Once their box was selected by a buyer, most participants made sure the items were clean before they sent their box to the buyer. Most participants also shared that they added special notes (history, personal memories with the item) in the box to connect with the receiver and to show appreciation. As a buyer, participants performed an extensive information search before making their box selection. They looked at the seller's ratings/ reviews made by previous buyers, descriptions of the items, and looked at the pictures of items. Participants emphasized the importance of connecting with people on Facebook and knowing the seller before they swap. During the swapping process, participants stated that it could get very competitive. Some boxes contain popular sizes and brand names that people favored and contributed to their competing for the box. In order to get what they wanted, users needed to order the box as quickly as possible. Thus, participants visited the website regularly or used applications that notify new posts. After an exchange, users evaluated the swap and rated sellers or wrote reviews. Some participants made a list of whom to avoid transactions with. The findings of this study provide in-depth understanding of the collaborative consumption process in the context of mothers swapping children's clothes on Facebook. Mothers went through many steps in order to swap goods delivering some insights on how they build trust in the act of collaborative consumption.

#### References

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