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What makes people not throw goods away when they want to get rid of them? An application to books, clothes and mobile phones

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Abstract

Knowing what people do when an object is useless is mandatory, especially nowadays where firms communicate on sustainable development and public policies in developed countries on the need to reduce the amount of waste. This research funded by a French organization involved in this topic, ADEME, tries to evoke information on that point. After a first stage where we have conducted qualitative interviews to define what people do when they want to get rid of three types of objects - clothes, books and mobile phones - this research focuses on what motivates people to adopt a particular behavior rather than throwing them away. The perceived condition of the good and the usefulness dimension of the attitude impact on the adoption of a more responsible behavior. However, regarding the types of objects considered, specific determinants have been identified and have to be taken into account to motivate people not to throw objects away.

Keywords: socially responsible behavior, ecological behavior, second-hand product, waste

Track: Social Responsibility, Ethics and Consumer Protection

Developed countries deal with resources in a so-called “linear” way that is mainly based on the natural resources exhaustion and the accumulation of waste. 99% of the natural resources become a waste in less than 6 weeks¹. The growing world population sheds some light on the limits of this way to use resources and the necessity to adopt in a more circular way. It implies to reduce material flows rather than feed them, to create value rather than to discard, to save rather than to dispose of unused products, according to the rule of six “Rs”: Reduce, Recover, Re-use, Repair, Re-manufacture and Recycle productions. Consumers are increasingly aware of these problems as media communicates quite often on ecological disasters and on the need to be more responsible, not only on the consumer side but also on the political and economic sides, if we want to maintain our quality of life in the future.

So, global environmental issues challenge the ways some people live. From an individual point of view, when people want to get rid of goods, most of the time they throw them away. But, it is also possible to behave differently. Some authors researching on socially responsible consumers focused on disposal behaviors such as donation behaviors (Sargeant, 1999; Hibbert, Horne and Tagg, 2005; Bergadaà, 2006), resale behaviors (Williams and Paddock, 2003), or ecological behaviors like keeping the object or extending its life (Jacoby, Chesnut and Fisher, 1978). Most of these research inquiries focus on the determinants of these behaviors and/or have produced the portrait of the donor (Roux, 2004), “reseller”, and so on. So, we know why people choose to donate or to re-sell, that is, to behave in a socially responsible manner, but we have no idea why people choose to donate instead of throwing goods away. In this study, we will focus on this issue by shedding some light on what people do when they want to get rid of an object and why they behave in this way instead of throwing it away. Like Perugini and Conner (2000), we will consider that the behavior is the expression of a goal, to get rid of an object, and that various determinants explain why people choose one instrumental behavior instead of another. To do so, we will consider different kinds of products according to their economic and symbolic values: mobile phones, books and clothes, because they induce different behaviors that would probably have been explained by different determinants.

1. Conceptual framework

Scholars from different fields of research tend to understand what motivates ecological behaviors or how more sustainable behavior can be adopted (Antil, 1984; Kaiser, Wölfling and Fuhrer, 1999). In this perspective, several behavior models have been called up among which the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and the extended model of goal-directed behavior (EMGB) (Perugini and Conner, 2000). TPB focuses on three predictors of the intention to behave which predicts the behavior: (1) the attitude towards behavior which refers to the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior; (2) the subjective norms, which refers to the perceived social pressure to adopt the behavior; (3) the perceived behavioral control which refers to people’s perception of the ease or difficulty in realizing the behavior. This model explains behavior quite well but measurements have to be well specified (Ajzen, 1993), that is why ecological behaviors are not always well explained because of the use of general attitudes instead of particular ones. Moreover, this conceptual framework is limited to the scope of determinants considered. An enriched version of the TPB could be the EMGB. It focuses on the goal to reach instead of the intention to behave and considers different ways to achieve this goal through instrumental behaviors. It includes the same concepts as the TPB, and also previous behaviors, positive and

¹ Study by Kearney A.T. for ADN consulting, March 2010, <http://www.adnfrance.org/sites/default/files/images/Documents/etude-at-kearney-1.pdf>, Consulted the 7th of March 2012.

negative emotions, the desirability of the goal and the volition (Perugini and Conner, 2000). EMGB is more adapted to our aim as it is broader in its scope by considering the goal and its antecedents, and the consequences of the goal which is the volition concept as well as its determinants.

Considering these frameworks, a first qualitative phase has been carried out. 18 individual in-depth interviews have been conducted to determine the way people behave when they want to get rid of an object and what determines these behaviors (Authors, 2012). Seven behaviors have been evoked: sell on Internet, sell in a flea market, give to NGO, give to people you know, keep for another use, throw away, keep. Regarding the determinants, the TPB variables have been evoked as well as past behavior and emotions. Moreover, variables dealing with the object like its value in a broad meaning, its condition and polluting nature, the situation such as personal events or space issues at home, or the person like the knowledge of the different behaviors to get rid of an object, the environmental concern, the attachment to the object, the expected benefits to behave in a certain way, have been mentioned.

This first qualitative phase gave us a full picture regarding how people get rid of an object - especially clothes, books and mobile phones – and what motivates their behavior.

In order to explain why people behave in a certain way to get rid of an object instead of throwing it away, we will focus on the seven behaviors previously mentioned - sell on Internet, sell in a flea market, give to NGO, give to people you know, keep for another use, throw away, keep - and a few determinants according to the TPB and EMGB frameworks which are the attitudes regarding the behavior, the social norms, the perceived behavioral control and the past behavior. We will also consider a few variables evoked in the qualitative phase that relate to the person and the object. Regarding the individual variables, we will take into account:

- the environmental concern that deals with an attempt by the consumer to minimize his environmental costs - associated with the production, distribution, use and disposal of products - through his behavior (Grunert and Juhl, 1991) because as in the ecological behavior it could have an influence on the disposal behavior;
- the attachment to the object which is a consumer's intention to maintain an enduring relationship with the object (Gurviez, 1998) which could determine the way people get rid of an object according to our interviews;
- the expected benefits which is a well-known variable especially in a cost-benefit framework where people look to what a behavior can bring them or can cost them before adopting it. Through consumption practices - and by extension disposal practices – the individual gets functional, emotional, aesthetic profits and social benefits. So, it could influence their practices;
- the knowledge of the different solutions which is a well-known variable in a pedagogical context (Krauss *and al.*, 2008). Studies state that people who have multiple representations have flexible knowledge at their disposal and are able to solve unfamiliar problems such as, in our context, to get rid of an object through different channels. To be able to develop multiple representations, a connection between single representations and solutions has to exist. This knowledge has been evoked a few times in the interviews especially for mobile phones.

Regarding the object, we have taken into account two variables: the perceived condition of the object that makes the object valuable and seems to influence the way people decide to get rid of an object, and the perceived polluting nature of the object that seems to have an impact on the channel chosen to get rid of it, like the mobile phone, where people do not want to throw it out as it can pollute a lot.

2. Methodology

To test our framework, 597 questionnaires were collected through the Internet, split in 199 for each product - books, clothes and mobile phones. The sample was recruited on a quota basis to be representative of the French population on gender, age and occupation. The distributions of the gender and the occupation are not statistically different for the three products. However, regarding age, the three groups are not consistent: the 25-45 year olds are overrepresented for mobile phones (41,7%), and the 46-60 year olds for books (43%) compared to the French population.

The variables from the TPB and EMGB framework were measured according to Perugini and Connor (2000). The *environmental concern* was measured by the Ellen, Wiener and Cobb-Walgren's scale (1991). The *attachment to the object* was assessed by an adaptation of the attachment to the brand scale developed by Lacoëuilhe (2000). The *expected benefits* were measured according to items evoked in the qualitative phase. The *knowledge of the different solutions* to get rid of an object was a one item question on the perceived knowledge to adopt each behavior. Regarding the object, the *perceived condition of the object* was assessed by a one item measurement from good condition to bad condition, and a two item measurement was used for the *perceived polluting nature of the object*. All the measurements have been made on five-point scales.

To define why people behave in a certain way to get rid of their objects instead of throwing them away, we have conducted a logistic regression on the variables after having checked the validity and reliability of the scales used. This analysis is more suitable than a discriminant analysis because the explicative variables do not need to have a multi-normal distribution, and the relationship between explicative variables and the variable to explain is not expected to be linear. In this context, we defined throwing away as the reference behavior. Moreover, all the quantitative explicative variables have been factorized – except for the perceived condition of the object and its perceived polluting nature - and we have used the factorial scores of the different variables to run the regression. Perceived behavioral control has been removed from the analysis because it was associated too strongly with social norms.

3. Results

The logistic regressions fit quite well with the set of data for the three products (R^2_{books} : 0,81 ; R^2_{clothes} : 0,84 ; $R^2_{\text{mobile phones}}$: 0,89). Globally, there is no common explicative variable to all behaviors and products studied as presented in the appendix 1 which exhibits the regression coefficients for each product and each behavior studied. However, the good condition of the object and the usefulness dimension of the attitude both impact most of the time on the likelihood of adopting another behavior rather than throwing it away. As in the TPB, attitude is an important factor in explaining the behavior. Conversely, the attachment to the object and the perceived knowledge to conduct the different behaviors do not explain the likelihood for a more responsible behavior. This last variable did not influence the way people act probably because people would act according to what they know. Regarding the attachment to the object, it has been evoked mostly for symbolic goods like clothes and books where respondents could not imagine throwing away a piece of knowledge or throwing away a garment that is part of “their history”. Further research could allow to understand why it did not influence the way people behave when they decide to get rid of a symbolic object, whereas it was quite obvious in our qualitative phase that it could be the case.

Three other variables did not influence significantly the way people behave instead of throwing goods away: the environmental concern, the social norms and the fact that in the past people have kept goods instead of throwing them away. This result is very important in a

communication context where the environmental sensitivity will not change the way people behave as well as the social norms.

Regarding the results behavior by behavior, we can notice that:

- People who are used to selling on the Internet and consider this way to be useful and efficient would have more probability to behave this way instead of throwing goods away, especially when the object is in good condition. In addition to these determinants, for mobile phones, the monetary benefits play a role as well as the smart dimension of the attitudes. For clothes, the perceived polluting nature of the product and the past behavior of throwing goods away negatively influence the probability to sell on the Internet. For books, the wish to please someone else has an impact.
The usefulness dimension of the behavior is the main lever to make people sell their goods on the Internet instead of throwing them away, as well as the fact that people have already sold goods on the Internet.
- People are more likely to sell goods in a flea market instead of throwing them away when they consider this way to be useful and efficient, and when they expected monetary and experiential benefits. In addition to these determinants, for mobile phones and clothes, the good condition of the object is important. Moreover, for clothes, the fact that people have already sold in a flea market plays a role and, for books, the wish to please someone else influence negatively the probability to sell in a flea market.
The expected monetary and experiential benefits are the main lever to make people more likely to sell goods in a flea market. The fact that people have already sold goods in a flea market plays a role for clothes (odd ratio=717) and books (o.r.=5,3), and the usefulness dimension of the behavior for books (o.r.=5,8) and mobile phones (o.r.=239,4).
- People would prefer to give goods to people they know instead of throwing them away when the object is in good condition, when they want to please someone they know and they consider this way to be useful and efficient. In addition to these determinants, the fact that people have already sold second-hand clothes and the responsible dimension of the attitude make this giving behavior more likely to occur, whereas the past behavior of throwing things away makes it less likely.
The usefulness dimension of the behavior is the main lever to make people more likely to give their mobile phones (o.r.= 52,8) and clothes (o.r.=156) to people they know, and the wish to please someone they know for mobile phones (o.r.=29,3) and books (o.r.=11).
- People are more likely to give goods to NGO instead of throwing them away when the object is in good condition and they consider this way to be useful and efficient. In addition to these determinants, the responsible dimension of the attitude makes the giving behavior of clothes to NGO more likely to occur and the fact that people have already given books, to NGO or people they know, make this behavior more likely to occur.
The usefulness dimension of the behavior is the main lever to make people more likely to give their mobile phones (o.r.=83,5) and clothes (o.r.=208) to NGO, and the fact that people have already given books make them more likely to do it again (o.r.=24,6).
- The good condition of the object makes the people keep the object even if it is useless. Moreover, for mobile phones, people would rather keep them than throw them away because they are used to keeping them, are environmentally concerned, and/or consider this behavior efficient and useful.
- There is no common determinant to the three objects studied that explain why people are more likely to keep goods for another function. For mobile phones, the usefulness dimension of the attitude, the good condition of the object and the wish to please someone else play a role. For clothes, social norms negatively influence the probability to keep clothes for another function as well as the habit of keeping clothes.

4. Conclusions and future perspectives

This research contributes to a better understanding of the disposal behavior by considering a set of behaviors associated with one goal that is the willingness to get rid of goods and more particularly clothes, books and mobile phones which vary in their symbolic and economic values. Contrary to most of the research on this topic which focuses on a single responsible behavior, the aim of this research was to understand the choice of people to adopt a responsible behavior rather than throwing goods away. The good condition of the object and the usefulness dimension of the attitude are the two main determinants that make the individual more likely to adopt a more responsible behavior – whatever the behavior considered. Depending on the behavior adopted and the products considered, past behavior, monetary and experiential benefits, the wish to please someone else play a significant role to make people more likely to behave in a responsible way.

From a managerial point of view, if firms want to engage in a more responsible way when producing their goods and if they want that consumer to not throw goods away, firms, NGO and public policies have to promote the utility of the alternative behaviors such as giving, selling, or keeping for another function. Moreover, if all the stakeholders decide to engage in this circular way, firms have to produce good quality products as their good condition is an important factor for not throwing them away.

Regarding the way these actors could communicate, it is still mandatory to explain what people can do with their useless goods, but it will be more beneficial to communicate on the efficiency of the behavior adopted than on the environmental advantages. Moreover, communication techniques based on word of mouth could not be efficient as social norms did not play any role in the adoption of a more responsible behavior.

This study was a first step to understand the choice of the individual for a more responsible behavior when people want to get rid of goods. More research needs to be conducted regarding a larger variety of products and conducting experimentation introducing the levers identified.

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Appendix 1: Sum up of the results of logistic regressions for the three products: presentation of the regression coefficients.

We did not take into account in the analysis clothes to keep behavior and books to keep for another use, because there were less than 5 persons who behave that way for this good.

Variables	Keep			Keep for another use			Sell on Internet			Sell in a flea market			Give to people you know			Give to NGO		
	B	C	M	B	C	M	B	C	M	B	C	M	B	C	M	B	C	M
Constant			8,50				41,33	11,22		39,33	13,00	7,76	41,97	11,35		8,82	40,64	9,39
Attitude : exciting, enjoyable, give value, responsible, smart					3,22			2,72			1,87		4,90				4,95	
Attitude : Useful and efficiency			2,41			3,05	2,01	4,97	4,75	1,76	4,89	5,48	1,68	5,05	3,97	1,82	5,34	4,43
Social norms					-0,68													
Past behavior : Sell on Internet or in a flea market							2,06	4,82	3,14	1,67	6,58			3,44			2,13	
Past behavior : Throw away or keep for another function					-2,04			-4,33						-3,12			-2,30	
Past behavior : Give to NGO and people you know													1,92	2,64		3,20	2,36	
Past behavior : Keep			1,84															
Environmental concern			-1,23												-1,04	0,91		-0,99
Attachment to the object																		
Perceived knowledge of the different behaviors																		
Expected benefits : Money and new experience								2,59	2,16	2,00	5,34	3,33						
Expected benefits : Please						2,94	-2,49			-2,52		-3,82	2,40	3,51	3,38			1,81
Polluting nature of the object								-1,81										
Perceived condition of the object	-2,33		-2,46			-2,33	-2,96	-9,17	-4,48		-9,09	-6,81	-1,54	-7,63	-4,09	-2,03	-7,53	-3,62

The regressions coefficients presented in the table are significant to 5%, and those in grey to 10%.