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Gifts, sustainable consumption and giving up green anxieties at Christmas

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Keywords

anxieties, christmas, gifts, sustainable, consumption, giving, up, green, ERA2015

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Abstract

This paper explores the proposition that gifting is a little recognised yet important practice bound up in the quest for sustainable consumption, which has largely been studied with reference to market rather than gift economies. It draws on gift theories in economic anthropology which explain gifts as engendering social relations of reciprocity and beyond, and shaping social life differently to commodities. Understanding how and why commodities become gifts (and vice versa), we contend, provides a new way of understanding some of the complex ways in which social relations are implicated in sustainable consumption. We use a study of Christmas gifting practices within a group of environmentally engaged households to begin to empirically explore if and how environmental considerations are expressed in the gift economy. We conclude that the fashioning of a particular social identity, namely, the ‘green consumer’ can operate very differently in the context of gift-exchange than in the context of non-gifting consumption.

Keywords: Gifts, sustainable consumption, social relations, Christmas, Australia

1. Introduction

The role of gift-giving has been little explored in research into sustainable consumption. In the quest to understand the possibilities and limitations of sustainable consumption as a tool for political and environmental change, what insights can be gleaned from analyses of gifts and gift economies? Far from being trivial, practices of gift giving have long constituted some of the most important modes of

social exchange in human societies, pre-dating commercial markets and continuing to operate alongside and in interaction with them. As Yan (2005, p. 246) explains, ‘the give-and-take of gifts in everyday life creates, maintains and strengthens various social bonds – be they cooperative, competitive or antagonistic.’ In this paper we explore the proposition that gifting is a little recognised yet important practice bound up in the quest for sustainable consumption, which has largely been studied with reference to market rather than gift economies (cf Miller 1998; Miller 2001). Specifically, we draw on theories of gifting that insist that gifts always engender social relations of reciprocity and beyond – they are always more than ‘disguised payments’ of economic exchange, and hence must be understood as shaping social life differently to commodities (Osteen, 2010; Callari, 2002). As gifts are given and received, identities are both cemented and augmented, and social and kinship relations are affirmed and extended. The things we call ‘gifts’ are a product of meaning accumulated over time, and the meanings attached to gifts are subject to change as they circulate (or not) among different people or groups (Osteen, 2002). Understanding how and why commodities become gifts (and vice versa), we contend, provides a fresh means of understanding some of the complex ways in which social relations are bound up in the quest for sustainable consumption. We use a study of Christmas gifting practices within a group of environmentally engaged households to begin to empirically explore if and how environmental considerations are expressed in the gift economy.

We proceed as follows. First, we explore theories of gifts, examining in particular how apprehending gift economies may be able to expand our understanding of sustainable consumption as a complex, incomplete project bound up in social relations. Then, we turn to gift-giving at Christmas, and consider the environmental anxieties associated with this practice. We draw on a study of environmentally engaged households that we conducted in Wollongong, Australia to examine empirically how environmental concerns and gifting practices are negotiated at Christmas. We conclude that the fashioning of a particular social identity, namely, the ‘green consumer’ can operate very differently in the context of gift-exchange than in the context of non-gifting consumption.

2. Gifts and sustainable consumption

The utility function of *Homo economicus* has been understood overwhelmingly in terms of consumption in an ordinary sense. Allowing the purchase of a gift for another to count as consumption has been a concession from which nothing has followed. If one emphasized the pleasure *Homo economicus* takes in the pleasure of gift recipients, the inconsistency of not allowing him or her to take pleasure in any other enjoyment by others would be too striking to be tolerable. The concession to this enjoyment of generosity is made so that purchase of gifts for others need not be subtracted from utility function. It is not taken as a significant feature of *Homo economicus* (Daly and Cobb Jr, 1994, p. 88).

Daly and Cobb Jr describe, but do not pursue, the failure of neoclassical economics to adequately account for the ways in which gifting practices differ from and yet interact with consumption as ordinarily understood. This description, it seems to us, is highly suggestive of the need for an expanded account of social exchange in understanding sustainable consumption. If sustainable consumption is the act of consuming differently for the purposes of reduced social and environmental impact, it is an unfinished, and widely critiqued, project (Evans, 2011; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Seyfang, 2005). Yet while the current environmental benefits of sustainable consumption may be uncertain, its possibilities as a political project are not exhausted (Seyfang, 2006). It is increasingly clear that consumption is closely linked to the construction and maintenance of green identities as well as being shaped by the structural contexts in which everyday life unfolds (Soron, 2010; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Horton, 2003). While sustainable consumption research has begun to pay attention to the effects on identity of the commodities and commercial markets that seem to dominate late modernity, there has been little focus on the readily observable co-existence of consumption as generally understood (non-gifting consumption for self or household), and generous ritualized gifting (for example, in birthday and Christmas celebrations). As the goal of sustainability becomes increasingly important for some consumers, the ways in which professed environmental concerns might be changing gift practices have received little scholarly attention (although see Kasser and

Sheldon, 2002). The issue of whether those who identify as ‘green consumers’ are also concerned with being ‘green givers’ has not, to our knowledge, been explored.

This is not a trivial issue, we contend, as it opens up sustainable consumption research to the fruitful perspectives of the feminist economic geography project to recognise wider sets of practices that constitute economic activity (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2006). To assist in this task, we turn to economic anthropology, which views the capitalist market as a dominant but not a singular economic system, and the world as possessing multiple, intertwined systems of social exchange. Gift economies operate simultaneously with, not separately from, the market economy and in complex interaction with it. Gift exchanges are different to barter or market exchanges in that there is no explicit agreement for reward for valuables exchanged. Rather, rewards are shaped by social expectations and customs, particularly an expectation of reciprocation, and are generally not immediate (Mauss, 2002). Marcel Mauss published his seminal theory of gifting in 1925, at a time when industrialisation had taken place and mass-consumption was rapidly being established as the basis of a booming Western, if not yet global, economy. Mauss drew on studies of social exchange in non-western societies to argue that gifting practices involve obligations to give, receive and reciprocate. Crucially, the issue of reciprocation underscores that the interests of others, as well as self-interest, are furthered in gift exchange. The wish of the parties to express and foster a social tie generally takes precedence over any market value of items exchanged. Gift exchanges express the personal bonds between givers and recipients, while in market exchanges personal bonds are secondary to market value. Reciprocity involves a commitment to exchanging gifts over time, an ongoing affirmation of a social relationship through the periodic offering and receiving of goods. A ‘lean Christmas’ or the ‘year my mum forgot my birthday’ are not rendered cheerless because of the lack of an exchange in goods *per se*, but because the ability to give, or the worthiness to receive, seems to be denied, and valued social relations are thus in doubt. Gifting is associated with affirming and extending social relations, and so gifts need to be understood as shaping social life differently to commodities (Osteen, 2010; Callari, 2002). Indeed, as gifts are given and received, identities are both cemented and augmented, and social and kinship relations are affirmed and extended (Mauss, 2002;

Osteen, 2002). Mauss argued that there may also be element of coercion in gift practice, and hence receivers may also perceive obligations to reciprocate as a social burden. Indeed, when objects are given they never become completely detached from the giver (Mauss, 2002). If gifts are exchanged, then, consumption is never a simple matter of commodities bought and sold at market value. Mauss was clear that the more-than-market value of gifts was important in understanding social life: 'fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorized in terms of buying and selling. Things still have sentimental as well as venal value' (Mauss, 2002, p. 83).

To understand interactions between capitalism and gift economies, it is helpful to briefly situate historically the shift from hand-made gifts to those sourced from mass-produced commodity markets. Following the industrial revolution, when mass-produced items could become purchased as gifts for the first time, there was a new context for social relationships in urban settings. Gifts became likely to possess both market and social value as urban workers had less time, and eventually less skill, than their earlier rural counterparts possessed in early winter to make things for gifting purposes, particularly Christmas gifts. In the case of handmade gifts, time spent in crafting was indicative of the value of the giver's bond with the receiver (Waits, 1993). Importantly, the expression of social relationships in commercially-bought gifts was not uncontested, even while it was taken up in enthusiastic numbers. Time and skill spent making personalized, unique gifts was replaced by shopping for mass-produced items as well as by various practices, such as gift-wrapping, that were directed at removing a perceived market 'taint' attached to the goods, practices which continue today (Carrier 1993; Waits 1993; Cheal 1987). Paradoxically perhaps, givers are assisted in removing perceived market taint by manufacturers and shop-owners. Strategies such as advertising, and special labelling and packaging, are used to help customers accept the notion that mass-produced commodities may be successfully transformed into personalized gifts and embody a valued relation between giver and receiver.

Gift-giving practices in contemporary industrial societies can thus be understood as attempts to nurture meaningful social relationships within the dominant market of transient, mass-produced consumer goods. Whether such attempts are doomed to failure is a question for empirical as well as

theoretical research. It may be difficult to construct a meaningful self-identity through individualistic consumption practices, because consumer goods are characterized by transience and the market by impersonal relations (Soron, 2010). But gifts define consumption relating to gifting as, necessarily, a social rather than individual consumption practice. With this view, goods are never pure gifts nor pure commodities, but shift with time along a continuum between the two (Mauss, 2002). Anxieties commonly associated with market consumption, such as extreme individualism or financial burden, may be tempered by a stronger need to acknowledge and nurture the social relation embodied in a gift. On the other hand, anxieties about environmental impact are generally thought to act as prompts towards sustainable consumption practices, but if consumption is linked to gift-giving, we need to understand the ways in which social relations are implicated in nurturing or tempering the expression of professed environmental concerns. A Maussian perspective might posit that green gift giving is likely for those who hold environmental concerns: a way to ‘widen the circle of [a] desired society through the circulation of ... ethical commodities’ (Orlando 2012, 142). On the other hand, it is possible that green values do not translate from ordinary individual or household consumption to celebratory gifting practices. Studies of ethical consumption have highlighted the importance of understanding the wide range and combination of values – such as asceticism and hedonism, prestige and nationalism - that can underlie ethical consumption choices (Dombos 2012; Isenhour 2012). Issues of status and solidarity, therefore, may conflict or harmonize with professed environmental concern. If self-identified ‘green consumers’ are not ‘green givers’, there are important implications for our understanding of sustainable consumption. It is important to explore empirically the question of whether there are barriers encountered by those who attempt to minimize their environmental impact in gifting practices within social contexts dominated by commodified goods. Equally, it is important to explore how gifting practices may reveal limitations of professed environmental concern.

3. Christmas gifts and environmental anxieties

Christmas, we contend, is a useful festival for an empirical scoping study of gifts and sustainable consumption because of its importance in both social and market relations, even if Christmas gift-giving practices are unique to the season: ‘Christmas is a cultural event of immense economic

significance – or an economic event of immense cultural significance’ (Thrift and Olds, 1996, p. 311). Christmas gift-giving is a social practice central to Christmas celebrations, a time for negotiating one’s place in the contemporary world through rituals associated with gift-giving (Levi-Strauss, 1993). Prominent is the desire to affirm family. Ritual exchanges of Christmas presents provide a ‘material basis for kindred interaction and identification’ (Cheal, 1987, p. 151). The ritual of gift-giving is a key feature of the economic significance of Christmas consumption, directly accounting for much of the increase in Christmas season retail sales, as it is characterised by the exchange of mass-produced items (Lemmergard and Muhr, 2011; Carrier, 1993). Indeed, the modern form of Christmas in America emerged at the same time as industrial capitalism, the time when material items became mass-produced and consumed for the first time (Carrier, 1993; Wait 1993). Mansvelt (2008) argues that households receive mixed messages about their role in the Christmas economy; they are enjoined to spend more to support retailers, and hence the national economy, but not to finance their expenditure through excessive debt (see also Cheal, 1988). Nevertheless, even in a time of global recession, Christmas spending accounts for about one third of annual retail turnover in Western economies (Hancock and Rehn, 2011). In an inherently unstable economic system, Bryant (2010) argues that capitalism is increasingly dependent on consumption throughout the Christmas season. While unwanted gifts have become a lamented feature of Christmas, to the extent that materialism commonly associated with excessive gift-giving has become a global Christmas cliché, newly purchased commercial goods and sometimes services are most likely to be deemed suitable gifts (Ger and Belk, 1999; Carrier, 1993). Second hand purchases are frequently viewed as ‘unsuitable and offensive’ Christmas presents (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009, p. 248). Home-made gifts are likewise often unsatisfactory (Carrier, 1993).

Christmas gift-giving is thus an important context for understanding better the ways in which the nurturing of social relations within the dominant market of transient, mass-produced consumer goods can be achieved (Soron, 2010). Attempts to personalise and thus transform commodities into gifts at Christmas is largely practiced through perpetuation of the myth of Santa Claus, shopping and

wrapping. The explosion in popularity of Santa Claus in shops at Christmas during the 1920s was, and remains, key to the task of removing perceived market taint during the festive season:

Santa was effective because, according to his myth, he did not use money and was not engaged in making profit. In his North pole [work]shop, he and his elves handmade all of the items that he distributed around the world. He made no trip to the toy store to buy the toys, nor even a trip to purchase raw materials. Santa's motivation for his monumental undertaking was free of market considerations. His gargantuan giveaway was antithetical to pecuniary self-interest, and its only reward was the satisfaction of making recipients happy. No wonder Santa was a valuable decontaminator of manufactured items (Waits, 1993, p. 25).

Carrier argues that shopping is a part of the means of affirming social relations embodied in a market-sourced gift:

Christmas shopping is an annual ritual through which we convert commodities into gifts. Performing this ritual demonstrates that we can celebrate and recreate personal relations with the anonymous objects available to us [Westerners] see family and friendship as surrounded by the impersonal world 'out there', the world of work and alienated commodities. It is the Christmas shopping that proves to them that they can create a sphere of familial love in the face of a world of money ... it begins to make sense that people complain about the hard work of shopping. The sense of hard work, together with complaints about growing commercialization, help affirm that the impersonality of the commercial world does contradict family relations, and that people are, at this heightened time of the year, really able to wrest family values from recalcitrant raw materials. It is work, it has to be work, but they can do it (Carrier, 1993, p. 63).

Relatedly, gift wrapping brings about a 'transformation of meaning' between the personal and the commercial, but, due to the impermanent nature of wrapping, this transformation is partial:

Gift wrapping is an act of some importance in an industrial capitalist society since it transforms commodities into gifts. However, once a gift is unwrapped it is revealed as a

commodity which must now take its place among all the other commodities in the recipient's possession. The disguise provided by a gift wrapping is only a temporary, and partial, solution to the problem of communicating relational significance by means of anonymous, mass-produced objects (Cheal 1987, p.159).

Gift-giving at Christmas is frequently lamented by environmental organisations as a practice with significant environmental impact, yet the ways in which this Christmas 'tradition' shapes environmental outcomes has received only a little research attention (Hancock and Rehn 2011; Stichnothe et al., 2008; Haq et al. 2007; ACF, nd). Bryant (2010) refers to Christmas as the world's greatest annual environmental disaster, with Christmas not only symbolic of hyper-capitalism, but constitutive of it. Christmas is the most intensive trading period of the year for sustainable consumption providers such as (UK) *Traidcraft* (Barnett et al., 2005; Sanchez, 2005). As a period of intensified consumption, Christmas may not simply mirror but indeed compound environmental issues. For example, one study concluded that in the United Kingdom, Christmas accounts for 5.5 per cent of annual household carbon dioxide emissions, from a time period less than 1 per cent of the year (Haq et al., 2007). Further, some £4 billion was spent on unwanted gifts each year. If unwanted gifts were not bought in the first place, the carbon footprint of Christmas shopping would be reduced by 80 kg CO₂-e per person (Haq et al., 2007). While the environmental impact of Christmas is beginning to be studied, and it is certainly widely feared, this part of the debate is not our concern in this paper. Rather, we explore what role, if any, do professed environmental considerations play in Christmas gifting practices? How do householders resolve any environmental dilemmas that they associate with Christmas gift-giving? And are Christmas gifts bound up in social relations which deny or confirm opportunities to identify as green? While gift-giving associated with Christmas is distinctive and not necessarily indicative of other contexts in which gift-giving and environmental concern might be related, we posit that Christmas gift-giving is worthy of consideration in this scoping-style study as a special case, precisely because of the economic magnitude, social significance and potential environmental impact of Christmas consumption.

4. Methods

This section explains our research methods, chosen to advance understanding of those who affirm a green self-identity and attempt to further their professed environmental concerns in individual and household consumption practices: do these ‘green consumers’ also engage in what they perceive to be green gifting at Christmas? We conducted a qualitative study of environmentally engaged households, defined as households whose members express concern with environmental issues and appear to attempt to incorporate such concern into some of their daily practices, including but not limited to consumption. Environmentally engaged households adhere, but not necessarily strongly, to moral codes and practices commonly understood as delineating commitment to environmental concern (Horton, 2003). In practice, this adherence translates into participation in, at a minimum, perceived ‘green’ practices that are relatively easily achievable within the structures of everyday life in the industrialised world: household recycling, water conservation, reduced plastic bag use and so on. Some, however, may be involved in activities perceived to be more deeply green such as growing community gardens and environmental activism. We are not concerned in this paper with making an assessment of the contribution to sustainability of any of these activities. Rather, we seek to understand green identities in terms of performances of the self and the social. The categories and conventions with which being a green consumer is associated become a repertoire which shapes the imaginings and practices of those who draw on it. There may be dominant performativities of green identity, for example, household recycling, but it is important to remember that they are always subject to challenge (Horton, 2003; Butler, 1993).

We conducted longitudinal interview and observational research with a group of households in Wollongong, a city of around 270,000 people, some 80 km south of Sydney on the east coast of Australia. The city is characterised by a lower income population relative to Australia as a whole and a (declining) reliance on heavy industry – coal mining and steel production. Green subjectivities are negotiated within the context of a strong sense of worker’s solidarity, although for many in the region now employed in tourism, health and higher education, such an identity is far less important than it was for their parents or grandparents. The fieldwork forms part of a broader study concerned with

household sustainability perceptions and practices, beyond those associated with Christmas gifting. Interviews and observations were conducted in the homes of 16 households every 3-4 months between January 2010 and November 2011, with two households leaving the study part-way through leaving a total of 14. Discussions covered a range of everyday practices such as shopping and laundry. For the purposes of this paper, we draw on conversations with five of the sixteen households specifically about Christmas, but situate these in the context of other conversations about sustainability with the same households over the course of the study. Households volunteered to participate in the longitudinal research following a postal survey on household sustainability undertaken as part of a larger, umbrella project named 'Making Less Space for Carbon: Cultural Research for Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation'. The recruitment process meant that participating households are likely to be engaged, at least lightly, with environmental issues and to be participating in recycling, water conservation and other mainstream environmental practices. The selection process was not concerned with recruiting environmental activists, although some, but certainly not all, households had members who would consider themselves as such. All professed concern about some aspects of environmental degradation, while some were engaged in local environmental initiatives such as community gardens, anti-development organisations, and the Greens political party. On another hand, all except two of the households owned at least one car. Refusal of car ownership is a widely accepted moral code for strong environmentalism, although we characterised two of our households with cars as very high in terms of green identity (cf Horton 2003). The car-less households in this study valued the absence in part for environmental reasons, but the most important reason was that they could not afford one. Our household participants represented a range of occupations, incomes, educational attainments, sexual and ethnic identifications and household compositions. A number of households had members who were, or had been, employed in the government sector, in occupations such as teaching, nursing and community development. Because the households in this study self-selected from a random sample of the population of the city of Wollongong (which was sent the initial survey), we were confident that environmentally engaged households in this city are not limited to an educated middle-class: three of the households were entirely comprised of members with very limited education, wealth and/or income. The 16 households

were dominated by families of Western European descent rather than representing the fairly wide mixture of cultural groups that comprise the population of the city. Two households were comprised of members with non-Western European descent (one Australian indigenous and one Latin American).

Participants were asked, in semi-structured interviews, about their Christmas practices. Background questions were asked on who is present, what generally occurs, and food that is eaten, followed by more discussion about the role of gifts. Interviews were undertaken in the month leading up to Christmas 2010, then transcribed and thematically coded. Drawing on other interviews conducted during the course of the study, the households were characterised according to year-round reported commitment to a green identity (low, moderate, high, very high), based on a qualitative overall assessment of that households' professed concerns about environmental issues and the practical exercise of this concern in consumption, community and/or activist activities believed by participants to broadly help reduce environmental problems. The households discussed in this paper have been selected in order to illustrate trends in these relative characterisations (see Table 1). Gifting practices at Christmas were then characterised as green, or not, and compared to the strength of everyday professed green identity. When discussing Christmas, direct questions about perceptions of the environmental impact of Christmas gifts were not asked in interviews. This was a deliberate strategy to avoid an undesirable effect, whereby participants would claim a greater concern with the environmental impact of Christmas gifts than they might actually feel or practise, in order to (probably not consciously) preserve a certain moral status. A recurring topic of interviews, perhaps not surprisingly, was a concern with commercialism and materialism that pervades Christmas. It is not certain that such a topic is an indication of environmental anxiety, and there may be a range of cultural reasons explaining such concerns. However, given our in-depth interviews about environmental concerns with the householders over a period of time, as well as observation conducted in their homes at each interview, we consider such a topic as a possible, perhaps even likely, sign of environmental concern within this group. During the study, environmental anxieties were found to be embedded in, and not easily separable from, broader cultural anxieties such as concerns about

commercialism and materialism. Participants are identified either by name or pseudonym in this paper depending on their personal preference.

5. Christmas gifts and green identities in Wollongong

Lauren, a married mother of four embraced the celebration of Christmas with her extended family wholeheartedly. Environmental anxieties did not arise as a result of their gifting practices. Lauren loved entertaining at Christmas, and enjoyed Christmas shopping, although she disapproved of Christmas goods on display in the shops as early as October. For Lauren, attempts to curtail gift exchanges among members of her extended family were ‘really mean’. Gifts had been bought for everybody in the past, but this practice was changing. Her brothers felt that as the family was getting bigger, it was becoming more expensive to buy gifts, and there was a perception that family members did not ‘need’ anything. Grandparents and children under eighteen still received gifts under this new family rule, but everybody else received nothing. Lauren thought this was ‘really mean ... even if it’s a novelty item or just one funny thing that you can buy somebody or just even a pair of earrings that you think somebody would like. I think it’s just a nice idea to be able to go out and buy something for your family.’ Lauren does not find problematic the nurturing of family relationships through exchange of Christmas gifts sourced from the dominant market of transient, mass-produced consumer goods. Furthermore, she sees an absence of Christmas gifts as a signifier of at least a little trouble in relations within her extended family. However, Lauren’s household was one of the lowest in terms of acknowledging a green identity, and so while the gifting practices of this household confirm that social relations embed in gifts, they do not reveal much about the performance of green identities.

Marie, a married mother of two in her forties with a moderate green identity, had a strong dislike of Christmas based on what she saw as an excess of celebratory ‘stuff’, which included, but was not limited to, gifts. Importantly, Marie was quite an active shopper the rest of the year, albeit one who professed to strive for responsible consumption with a view to minimising the environmental, social and economic costs of her purchases. Her green identity was, in fact, related most closely to her shopping practices. She made frequent references to her detailed research into ways to shop for

quality, financial value, and minimal social and environmental impact. For example, she stated in an early interview:

Everything we've done for the heating and cooling of the house, it has been because of [climate change]. ... everything we've done to keeping the house cool and warm it has been because of our awareness of climate change. I know we went gas and the reason why we went gas because we thought it had the less impact on the environment. That was the principal thing. And now, I know probably in the last 2 years, just about every gadget that we've bought, every electrical appliance that we've had to replace, that's been the main thing. And even disposing of items, I'm aware that you just can't take stuff to the dump. I prefer to look for the recycle options, so that's what I've done with all our phones, our computer. And now I think, well that probably in the next year or so we'll have to replace the big tellie in the lounge room and then I thought, yeah, I don't mind paying the \$60.00 and taking it somewhere it can be recycled.

Marie relied heavily on the Australian consumer rights magazine 'Choice' for her information. Her dislike of Christmas-related consumption was linked most closely to waste; food that is not eaten, gifts that are not needed, and unnecessary packaging. Marie stated:

I hate the fact that [Christmas is] so over the top. I hate all the wasting, wasting food and packaging, everything and ... now that my children are older, I'm looking for presents that are not necessarily something that you gift wrap. I look for vouchers and things like that ... I've learnt my lesson with food because I just think people go so over the top with food and there's so much wastage ... And I just don't get it. Like you see people doing all their mad shopping, just leading up to the Christmas and you think, you know, the shops are only shut, they open up at 10.00 on Boxing Day ... it's not as if it's the end of the world and [yet] you see them with these trolleys full of food ... I just think it's crazy.'

Marie may have been affirming her moderate green identity at Christmas by expressing her desire to shop for gift vouchers and things that did not need wrapping. By choosing vouchers as gifts for her

family, Marie may have felt she was able to significantly reduce her contribution to excessive goods and packaging at Christmas. In doing so, she found a way to participate fully in gift-giving, but left the choice of gift to the recipient. Implicitly, Marie transferred some of the responsibility for more sustainable consumption to the receiver, although the vouchers were not necessarily for what Marie perceived to be 'green' products or stores. Further than gifts, Marie may have found an opportunity to confirm her green identity in her anxiety about general Christmas waste, such as wasted food.

Marie attempted to minimize what she saw as excess and waste at Christmas, although gift-giving, particularly to her own children, remained important in celebrations. However, there came a point at which too many gifts failed to add further value to social bonds, such as mother and son. Additionally, for Marie, some relationships were not considered to be important enough to embody in a gift, such as those between cousins. There were, therefore, thresholds at which anxieties about excessive stuff became intolerable and began to override the importance of affirming a social relation in gift-giving. All of these practices could indicate a social concern with extravagance or an economic concern with financial excess or both: environmental anxieties do not necessarily shape Marie's Christmas consumption significantly, since she did not explicitly mention them. On the other hand, Marie's concerns about waste and packaging may have been a sign that her professed environmental anxieties were an obvious influence on her Christmas practices. As such they may not have appeared to need to be explicitly explained to an interviewer with whom she had held previous conversations about her environmental concerns.

For Jean, a married woman with two children living at home, Christmas was celebrated on a tight budget but was nevertheless fun and family-focussed, with items like home-made ginger bread and beer central to the celebration. Jean's household strongly identified as green, seemingly shaped by a complicated mixture of financial considerations, an expressed deep love of gardening as a sustainability practice, and a nostalgia for things home-made:

I think I've always been born in the wrong era or maybe this is the era I needed to be born into, I don't know... . I just I suppose I like all the home crafts and I don't buy biscuits, we

bake them all. I'll have 'ready made' [home made] stuff. We call it home made takeaway in the fridge and that's the meat pies and that but I prefer to make it. I prefer to grow it. Yeah, and the stuff that I like to do is all sort of home. I did like sewing before but material's too expensive. I do cross stitch instead now. But yeah, I used to make the kids' clothes when they were little and Mum did but now the material's more expensive than buying clothes so we gave that up... . So yeah, I suppose would you say traditional or just old fashioned would pretty much sum it up there. I'm not near as old fashioned as my parents and I'm sure they were born 100 years too late. But I still don't feel that I'm modern. I've mastered a computer and I know how to work that but within I don't feel that I'm truly a part of modern society as such. I don't want to be part of the rat race and I'd rather just take a step back.

Jean practised her professed environmental concern by tending an organic fruit and vegetable garden and raising chickens, both at home and at the primary school where she worked as a teacher:

It's outdoor learning basically. It's being able to, it's teaching them sustainability. It's teaching them where things come from. It's teaching them where we are in the scheme of things, that you don't just go to [the supermarket] and get it, like it's got to come, you know, [the supermarket] have got to get it somewhere. It's just holistic learning. There's so much.

Her family of four shared bath water each night, water that was then reused for toilet flushing, and only bicarbonate of soda and vinegar were used to clean everything in the home. Yet Jean's apparently deep sense of environmental care did not appear prominently in her Christmas, which was a fairly straightforward negotiation of balancing financial concerns with a celebration of family life. Commercially acquired items were an important feature of their Christmas stocking traditions:

Christmas Day is our gift time. The kids, even though Darryl's the youngest, he's 16, Vanessa's 24, they still put the stockings out ... and I still go and get all stationery and stocking fillers at the [discount store] and always have some sort of junk ... so there'll be pads and rubbers and pens and all sorts of things in their stockings ... I've said to them, it's at that stage now that you've got everything that you could possibly need, you really do. I said,

there's a limit now, it's not just free for all...It was quite a generous limit originally, we used to just go all out. But with things the way they have been economically with the last couple of years, just our family, with Graham out of work, the limit's been coming down ... And the [adult children] are given the choice whether they want that in vouchers or whether they want that in gifts ...[yet] I try and put as many things wrapped as possible. So if they've got three pairs of undies I'll wrap the undies all separate so that it just sort of pads out the tree and makes it look ...because if you just open one with three pairs, oh, but I don't know, it's opening the presents. And they still love it.

Lacking money to buy extravagant gifts was an issue, but it was a blow that was softened by numerous small, inexpensive and yet useful household items, like stationery and underwear, bought from the store and lovingly individually wrapped. Jean was unwilling to extend her professed environmental concerns to Christmas. She saw her everyday water-saving and cleaning practices as difficulties to be borne, albeit cheerfully, following the family's move out of a fancy home upon her husband's retrenchment. Such frugalities were not to be carried over into Christmas. Inexpensive goods - 'junk' and wrapping paper – did not detract from, but in fact contributed significantly to, the festivities. The household's greenness was not transferred from everyday consumption to family gifting practices at Christmas. Indeed, Jean's Christmas practices express a conflicting social concern with maintaining a particular level of financial and material abundance at Christmas, even in the face of financial hardship. Jean's professed environmental anxieties may have been a means of deflecting social attention away from her family's reduced finance means.

Benn and Tennille were a self-professed environmentally-minded couple, in their early thirties with a two-year old daughter. Benn summed up his household's approach to major environmental issues as constituted by consumer behaviour and wider political actions:

I think that households need to get more political and that's probably where the real difference is going to be made on [issues such as] climate change. I think that all those small things like being energy efficient in the house and using less water and re-using your water

and all those things are good because they give you confidence in your own lifestyle but those big changes have to happen on that political level to rein in industry and all that sort of stuff.

For Benn and Tennille, active involvement in a local community garden was an important social and political activity that furthered their ideals about sustainability. They stated very explicitly, unlike Jean, that Christmas was about maintaining a separation between the family celebration and the ‘consumer side of things’. They were wary, but also accepting, of consumerism forming part of their Christmas:

Benn: as much as there’s the consumer side of things it will be exciting as [our daughter] Eden grows up to see her excitement in Christmas and Santa Claus and all that sort of stuff ... because it’s so ingrained in our culture it’s probably one of those last real cultural things that we have where almost everyone shuts down for the day and does that family stuff.

Tennille added: ‘it would be a real shame if we lost that, I think’, while Benn stated: ‘it’s a tricky thing because I think, like so you don’t want to denounce the whole day ... [as a] consumerists’ plot to buy more stuff but it’s just more telling of how we celebrate as cultures, I suppose, and people go, righto, to show your love of your family then you have to buy them heaps of stuff.’

Benn and Tennille were both critical of, and yet participants in, the act of nurturing social relations with mass-produced gifts. Though Tennille is an ‘op-shop [charity shop] queen’, her Christmas shopping involved only new items: books and vouchers for her brothers and sisters, decorative items from fair-trade stores, new toys for Eden. New, commercially acquired items, wrapped and exchanged among family members, such as siblings and grandparents, were the manifestation of the emphasis they placed on affirming family. They identified their anxiety about the number and quality of gifts given. They tried not to ‘go crazy, gift wise’ with presents for Eden: ‘I think we only got her, like, three little gifts last year ... and this year we won’t go crazy either. Like, I think we might get her a doll’s house and that’s probably enough.’ For this family with their strong concerns about environmental care, Christmas was something of a struggle between rejecting large quantities of gifts while at the same time carefully incorporating gifts as thoughtful signifiers of family love. Yet they

also felt that they had successfully negotiated the tension by reclaiming the gifts acquired through commercial consumption that they purchased for their daughter at Christmas as “family-focussed” and “non-excessive”.

For Benn and Tennille there were also barriers encountered in their attempts to minimize their environmental impact in gifting practices, because they had extended family who were not so environmentally minded. Tennille could have been happier if she had fewer presents to buy: ‘[Benn’s] dad’s side of the family we do a Secret Santa, which makes it easier. And I’d be happy to do that with my family as well but my mum won’t budge.’ Tennille’s mum was described, quite approvingly by Benn, as a ‘gift-giver’: it was the way she expressed care for her loved ones. Benn stated ‘she’s a really generous person and you can see the enjoyment she gets out of giving people things’. Tennille was more critical, describing the amount of gifts her mother gives as ‘ridiculous’. Benn and Tennille talked about the issue with her. Benn said: ‘she’s getting better ... we’ve sort of talked about that a bit too, as in we ask people for vouchers from the nursery or, you know, I think vouchers are a good thing so you don’t end up with so much stuff.’ Tennille adds: ‘Stuff that you’re never going to use or isn’t your taste.’ Clearly, Benn and Tennille desired to both achieve a positive environmental outcome and refrain from threatening valued family bonds with diplomatic discussion about nursery vouchers, which fulfilled their idea of a green gift. They were also keen to avoid hurting people’s feelings if the gift was not to their liking:

that was a big problem with Mum buying things as well, like she’d often buy stuff and I’d be like, oh, this is ‘nice’, and then you feel bad because it’s a waste of her money because you’re not going to wear it, it’s not your taste but you don’t want to hurt her and say, I don’t like that, or, I’m not going to wear it. So you’re in a really bad situation.

Tennille held onto unwanted gifts ‘for a year, then I don’t feel as guilty’. She then gave them away or took them to a charity shop, so the items were not ‘wasted’. Only when a substantial amount of time had passed would Christmas gifts from her mother shed some of their social importance as a sign of maternal love, and become sufficiently ordinary to be treated as any other unwanted or unneeded item

around the house. Benn added: 'Tennille likes the excuse to drop stuff in there so she can have a look around. It's good.' Tennille is thus, eventually, able to perceive a transformation of her mother's gift back into a commodity and 'exchange' it for something she might like, her consumption of choice being items from the charity shop – for her a more 'green' option than buying something new.

Brad and Carmel, a strongly green-identifying couple practiced largely through refraining from shopping as much as possible, had four children, two of whom were teenagers still living at home. They did not 'really relish Christmas', as it was a time when family tension was brought to the surface. Carmel made earnest attempts to broaden gift-giving to recipients beyond family, but using non-commercial gifts. For example, she encouraged their daughters to save money to donate to a charity at Christmas, and to play Christmas Carols on their musical instruments in a nursing home in the lead up to Christmas. Yet Brad was adamant that he 'didn't want a goat for Christmas'. Here, Brad was making reference to charity gifting programmes in which the giver makes a donation to a developing community, and the gift-recipient receives notification that a donation has been made on their behalf, valued at, for example, the price of a goat or a yearly school fee. These were 'green gifts' for Brad and Carmel. While Carmel thought such a gift was satisfactory, for Brad it was not, embodying a virtual rather than an actual gift. For Brad, the bond between the giver and recipient of such a virtual gift was not affirmed. Rather, it was threatened by another bond, one created between giver and the charity recipient. However, Brad was comfortable with the idea of his daughters giving to charity – a separate social bond, seemingly non-threatening to his valued family relationships.

6. Discussion

Are Christmas gifts bound up in social relations which deny or confirm opportunities to identify as green? Among the households in this study, there were frequent mentions of attempts to create boundaries around 'too much stuff' at Christmas, with householders sometimes instituting rules, usually in negotiations with extended families. These rules were both quantitative, about how much can be spent and the number of gifts that are appropriate, and qualitative (for instance 'not going crazy with gifts'). Indeed, gifting choices were frequently informed by financial considerations, which

may have overridden anxieties about social relations engendered in Christmas gifting. Nevertheless, while observing much anxiety about the financial cost and amount and type of stuff that enters people's lives and homes through gift-giving at Christmas, gift-giving was maintained as the core way in which the value of family was affirmed. Gifts were persistently given, even when stipulations were made by some family members that they should be cut back in number, or reduced in financial value. Nobody wanted to reduce Christmas gift-giving to nothing at all. Indeed, it was commonly thought that everyone present at a Christmas celebration must have at least one gift to unwrap. Furthermore, even if households were relatively mindful of sustainable consumption, members of their extended family were not necessarily so committed, and when it came to a choice between family harmony and environment, family harmony would be likely to win. Thus, things given at Christmas were piling up, filling up space in homes, and often unwanted as things. Yet they were also often very welcome as signifiers of valued social relations. Households invested much work in preserving the status of Christmas gifts as objects of love. Explicitly or non-diplomatically linking their desire for fewer or different gifts with perceived better environmental outcomes was perceived as a threat to the social relations embodied in Christmas gifts. Gifts were, through elaborate rituals of shopping, wrapping and exchange, imbued with particular social qualities that rendered them less encumbered by environmental concerns than they might have been if acquired through ordinary consumption. In this way, although green identities were not necessarily relinquished, neither were they forefront, and indeed they took on a role subordinate to other concerns, such as family harmony, at Christmas. Green anxieties were not typically expressed strongly in gift-giving practices. Social bonds, particularly from a 'more green' giver to a 'less green' recipient, seemed to preclude rather than advance such expression. On the other hand, those who self-identified as green did not feel that their green identity was particularly threatened by giving and receiving mass-produced goods as gifts. Furthermore, the nurturing of social bonds seemed to be more important than concern about environmental impact associated with a gift, as long as thresholds indicating excess were not breached.

7. Concluding remarks

This study has suggested a new dimension to sustainable consumption, namely, that concern about environmental impact in gift-giving practices may be different than for individual or household consumption. Our empirical study confirms difference, and indeed that for a particular group of self-identified green consumers in Wollongong, Australia, green gifting is not foregrounded at Christmas. We have shown that environmental considerations can detract from the ability of gifts to embody a valued social relation, and thus 'green consumers' are not necessarily 'green givers'. For families already attempting to negotiate tension between the impersonal market and the social relation embodied in a gift, adding environmental concerns into the mix may be too great a burden. To understand why, we turned to gift theory, in which gifts affirm social relations and are more than commodities exchanged in impersonal commercial transactions. According to Mauss' (2002) gift theory, as developed by Osteen (2002; 2010), givers are active in affirming and extending their social relations. Gift theory suggests to us that Christmas gifting is not necessarily prolific because of wanton individualistic consumerism, but because through gift-giving, people bring social relations to the fore in a period of respite from a world dominated by individualism. While for some, the fact that commodities are an integral part of gifting in the contemporary world may be a source of environmental anxiety, others are able to (fairly) successfully deploy the work involved in shopping and gift wrapping, as well as a narrative of family love and festivity, to perceive a successful transformation from commodities into gifts, reassuring themselves that they can indeed elevate social bonds above individualistic concerns, at least during times of ritual gift exchange. While self-consumption of ethical commodities may be a way for some to raise social prestige (Isenhour 2012), in our study it seemed that green gifting had the effect of devaluing social relations, and thus possibly lowering prestige, even among those who profess environmental concern. Thus, environmental concerns may not be important at Christmas because recipients resent environmentally conscious gifts, a reduction in quantity of gifts, or refusal to give at all as unacceptable push into environmental politics, or a valuing of environment over family bonds: receivers of green gifts may indeed perceive the obligation to reciprocate 'greenly' as a burden, or as a subtle form of coercion. Green gifting at

Christmas, it seems, is likely to remain a weak way in which the circulation of green goods might be increased or the circulation of mass-produced goods might be decreased.

Sustainability concerns and gift practices, then, need to be understood as bound up in tensions between market and society, in the ongoing negotiation of social relations in a commercial world. Social concerns can outweigh anxieties with environmental impact of gifting practices. It should be noted that Christmas, however, is a special case, and not necessarily indicative of other contexts in which gift-giving and environmental concern might be related. Future research would benefit from a broader concern with household provisioning. Miller argues that household provisioning can be considered in terms of gifting that is nevertheless fraught with contradictions, such as a moral concern with household frugality which can conflict with a desire to purchase ethical, including green, goods (Miller 1998; 2001). We look forward to future work in this direction.

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Household representative	Age	Household composition	Green identity	Green Christmas gift-giving practices
Patrick	70-80	Single	High	Moderate
May	80-90	Single	Moderate	Moderate
Jill	60-70	Single	Moderate	Low
Terry	70-80	Couple	Moderate	Low
Jan	50-60	Couple	High	Moderate
Lauren	40-50	Couple with children	Low	Low
Marie	40-50	Couple with children	Moderate	Moderate
Peter	30-40	Couple with children	Moderate	Moderate
Christine	40-50	Couple with children	Moderate	Moderate
Nella	40-50	Couple with children	Moderate	Moderate
Kariene	40-50	Share house	Moderate	Moderate
Brad	40-50	Couple with children	High	High
Jean	40-50	Couple with children	Very high	Low
Benn	30-40	Couple with children	Very high	Moderate

Table 1: Household summary - green identity and green gifting