

# Share and share alike: How the modern world affects our tendency to share

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From giving directions to a stranger to cooking a meal for loved ones, sharing is an essential part of the human experience. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* unravels the complexities of sharing and examines how changes in our culture affect sharing.

"Sharing is a fundamental consumer behavior that we have either tended to overlook or to confuse with commodity exchange and gift giving," writes author Russell Belk (York University, Toronto). In his study, Belk explores differences between sharing, gift giving, and exchanging marketplace commodities.

"Rather than absolute distinctions, I see these as categories that share fuzzy boundaries," writes Belk. "Although both sharing and gift-giving have some elements that often (but not always) make them more communal, loving, and caring than marketplace exchange, sharing differs from gift-giving in that it is non-reciprocal. The infant who receives his or her mother's nurturing care and sustenance does not incur a debt. Nor does the child who receives food, shelter, and love from parents receive an itemized bill upon leaving the nuclear family home."

Societal changes can affect the nature of sharing, notes Belk. Examples of threats to sharing may be the individualization of family phones and meals, the decline of free public education, and the shrinking of public broadcasting.

On the other hand, the Internet provides many healthy models for

increased sharing. Belk notes that forums, bulletin boards, blogs, [social networking sites](#), wikis, open-source software development projects, and websites where people share expertise, advice, and opinions all contribute to a sharing community.

Belk provides some suggestions for promoting sharing in today's world. "I suggest that two keys to promoting contemporary sharing are an expanded sense of self that embraces other people more than other things and a greater sense of 'sharing in,' where possessions are seen as ours rather than mine and yours," Belk concludes.

More information: Russell Belk. "Sharing." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): February 2010 (published online August 20, 2009).

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