



‘A Small Way to Give Back’: Role of Buy Nothing Groups During COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Covid-19 pandemic brought about many challenges within the global economic arena, especially in terms of disrupting supply chains for products, both essential and non-essential (Panwar et al., 2022). In addition, with many people isolated in their homes, items such as toys, electronics, and clothing were in high demand. This, coupled with supply chain disruptions resulting from labor strains, travel and quarantine restrictions, and, shipping delays, led to empty stores (Panwar et al., 2022). In addition, cost of products increased making it difficult for people to afford them. Therefore, consumers resorted to procuring products from other sources, and not just retail stores, such as from friends, community, and such.

One such platform that really rose to the occasion was the Buy Nothing Project, particularly the Buy Nothing groups (BNG) on social media platform, Facebook. When a consumer deems a product as useless, Jacoby et al. (1977) proposes that the individual is left with three options: keeping the good with the possibility of using it in the future, permanently discard it, or temporarily loan it to a peer for it to be returned at a later date. The Buy Nothing Project encourages the latter two options when consumers have no use for goods through a virtual gifting platform that promotes sustainability, resiliency, and community through online recycling (*Buy Nothing Project*, n.d.). Group members can post items that they do not need any more, and choose a recipient based on their expressed need for the same. In addition, members are also able to wish or ask for items that they need, and group members are able to fulfil those needs. However, the underlying idea is that everyone gives out of their own abundance and excess, without having to buy anything and receivers are not obligated to return a favor. In spite of over 6 million people being a part of the global Buy Nothing community (*Buy Nothing Project*, n.d.), there is little research on how these local BNG contributed to easing the disruptions of the supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing an alternate method of procuring items, particularly those related to clothing.

Research on virtual gifting communities indicate that consumers join them to dispose of clutter, as well as keeping items out of landfills, while at the same time easily detaching themselves from the items knowing that the item will be well taken care of (Nelson et al., 2007; Aptekar, 2016). Furthermore, it has been found that encountering recipients of these goods, who are often strangers, is more rewarding than donating anonymously to a charity (Guillard & Del Bucchia, 2012; Aptekar, 2016). In this light, Buy Nothing groups are unique in the sense these groups are hyper-local and all gifts tend to stay within a small geographical area, such as a small town, thereby benefitting the local community. Given the COVID-19 pandemic brought about

severe disruptions to the clothing and textiles supply chain, this study aims to explore if and how the Buy Nothing groups influenced how individuals sourced their products locally through BNG and if an alternate supply chain helped them navigate the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic.

For the purpose of this study, an online survey involving multiple choice and open-ended questions was distributed on the social media platform Facebook. It was posted on the two researchers' accounts with ability to be shared by peers if they so wished. Participants had to be adult members of a Buy Nothing group on Facebook. Usable responses were analyzed from thirty-seven (n= 37, age range: 23 to 69 years) participants. Majority (n=26) of these participants have been members of a BNG on Facebook for two or more years. All but one of the respondents were from NE Ohio region, where the researchers are geographically located.

Upon analysis and interpretation of the data, it was found that participants used Buy Nothing Facebook groups most to give away unwanted items (34.02%), as well as to reduce clutter (24.74%), fulfill others' wishes (22.68%), and to ask for needed items (18.56%). Analyses of the open-ended questions revealed that BNG members helped mitigate product shortages by offering what they already had. This in turn developed a sense of security through a feeling of community which eventually helped members' emotional and physical wellbeing. The findings are elaborated as follows: To *mitigate product shortages* during the Covid-19 pandemic, majority of respondents reported giving away as well as asking for clothing, shoes, accessories and related items such as PPE (cloth masks, gloves, etc.). Other items being given or asked for were furniture, toys, home appliances, books/toys, baby items and food. Particularly, participants reported asking for items that they anticipated using for a relatively short period of time such as baby/children's clothing. Outerwear including coats and boots for children were asked for quite often, as well as children's costumes, since children were at home most of the times. In spite of the worries and uncertainty surrounding the spread of the SARS-CoV-2, respondents seemed to have felt comfortable asking for clothing-related items from their BNG as one participant (P16) noted asking for children's clothes "that could be washed". At a time when social activities were limited, participants asked for items such as fabric for crafting and making cloth face masks to keep themselves occupied and for their mental and physical well-being, while others asked specifically for "small comfy masks" (P6) to keep their children safe.

The generosity of BNG members provided a sense of security as "[they] were always willing to help" (P10) through sharing anything extra that they had. Members purchased items specifically to give through their Buy Nothing Facebook group, including PPE, baby formula, and other items. Participants were able to receive food that they could not access due to the pandemic, with members even preparing meals specifically to give away. Respondents indicated that Buy Nothing Facebook groups helped their emotional and physical well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, respondents indicated that it gave them a heightened sense of community and allowed them to connect with neighbors during a time of isolation, even if it was mostly through a computer or "through a door and a face mask" [when they picked up items] (P35). Many others reported that fulfilling other's needs during this time helped them

emotionally as it gave them a chance to feel connected to the community during a time of isolation and social distancing. Second, the act of gifting to others during a time of need was emotionally rewarding for respondents. They felt that others having a purpose for goods that were of no use to the owner was indeed emotionally rewarding and that it was “a nice way to give back” (P27). Some found this as a way to give back to the community without spending extra money, which to some was a scarce resource during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, during such stressful times, the Buy Nothing Facebook group gave participants “the ability to alleviate a small bit of that stress” (P35).

The results show that BNG have increased the lifecycles of goods, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. These groups promote not only communication and community amongst members, but also sustainability and circularity within the supply chain, as goods old and new are being re-used and re-purposed. This bears implications for local governments as they make various efforts to encourage reducing, reusing and recycling clothing products within the local communities. The findings also bear significance for sustainable clothing companies who not only need to plan for how their products now have multiple users but also leverage these groups to ensure that their products continue to have an extended life, thereby reducing waste.

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