

Care to share: Research on the social-ecological impact of the Weggeefwinkel



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Abstract

This thesis explores the social-ecological impact of the Weggeefwinkel, a free shop in Utrecht. The research investigates the motivations of volunteers and customers, the facilitation of interpersonal connections, and the role of sharing in producing social relations. Through qualitative interviews with stakeholders, the study reveals that the Weggeefwinkel serves not only as a hub for exchanging goods but also as an important space for social interaction and support. The findings demonstrate that the Weggeefwinkel fosters inclusivity, empathy, and social cohesion, offering a micro-scale solution to broader socio-economic and environmental challenges. This research contributes to the discourse on sustainable consumption and social innovation, highlighting the potential of community-driven initiatives in addressing global sustainability issues.

Keywords: Free shops, Collaborative Economy, Sustainable Consumption, Motivations, Social Connections

Introduction

Problem statement

In today's society, it is common to walk into a shop, buy a cheap shirt, wear it a few times and then throw it away. This phenomenon, known as 'fast fashion' is driven by capitalism's relentless pursuit of profit maximization and heightened efficiency (Gabriel, 2021). The "buy-and-throw-away philosophy" fuels overconsumption of textiles, raw materials, water, and energy (Yan et al., 2021). The consequences are disastrous: rivers are polluted, vast amounts of clothing waste are generated, and CO2 emissions exceed those from air and sea transport combined (VPRO Tegenlicht, 2024). The industry's unsustainable production practices degrade the environment and perpetuate social inequalities by exploiting low-wage workers and contributing to resource depletion (Alexander, 2014; Koch, 2021; Buchs, 2021). Although these issues are increasingly recognized, sustainable development policies by national governments and international institutions have long appeared to do little more than "sustain the unsustainable" (Fournier, 2008). While consumers enjoy the benefits of cheap clothing, the real cost is borne by the environment and marginalized workers. Consumers don't feel the need to wear items more than an average of seven times before discarding them (VPRO Tegenlicht, 2024). Lots of items are donated to countries like Chile or Ghana, where, due to the abundance of cheap, poor-quality clothing, they often end up in huge piles of waste (VPRO Tegenlicht, 2024).

In addition to driving fast fashion and the negative consequences associated with it, capitalism fosters individualism by promoting self-responsibility, competitive advantage, and personal success over collective well-being and solidarity (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). Europe is experiencing the converging impact of ideological and politico-economic forces that undermine solidarity. However, solidarity is a vital principle for addressing global challenges, as it encompasses the human ideals of cohesion, equality, and camaraderie (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). These socio-economic and environmental challenges demand radical solutions, including a fundamental shift in our economic approaches and the exploration of innovative models for economic functioning (Poszewiecki & Czerepko, 2022). An example of such an alternative consumption model is free shops, which are community-oriented spaces that operate on the principles of sharing, collaboration, and resourcefulness (Pinq, 2019). The growing popularity of free shops underscores a broader societal shift towards reevaluating traditional notions of consumption and ownership, emphasizing sustainability and social responsibility (Aptekar, 2016).

The Weggeefwinkel (the giveaway shop) is a free shop in Utrecht where people can bring items they no longer need and shop for free. This initiative started from the squatters' movement 20 years ago, by a group of people who wanted not only to convert vacant property into living space but also to use it for a social purpose. The Weggeefwinkel has now been located on the Tweede Daalsedijk for more than eight years. The outside walls of the building are painted with colorful faces, the shops' cargo bicycle and the words 'reduce, reuse, recycle' in big letters. The Weggeefwinkel actively aims to address overconsumption, by reducing the necessity for production and minimize excessive waste (Weggeefwinkel Utrecht, 2024). Next to the entrance, people can drop off goods during opening hours. Walking inside, on the left there are boxes with children's clothes, a toy corner and shoe cupboards. On the right, there are cupboards with crockery and racks with adult clothes. It is a bit messy inside: the shop is full of stickers, paintings, cheerful flags and signs with random texts like 'only enter in swimwear'. At the back of the shop, there are shelves with lots of books and a table where visitors can sit down for a chat and have a cup of coffee or tea. Next to offering a place where people can exchange goods, the Weggeefwinkel is a meeting spot where everyone is welcome to get a free warm drink and be among others. De Weggeefwinkel strives for a society that is not about accumulating more and more stuff and money, but where there is enough for everyone through collaboration and sharing (Weggeefwinkel Utrecht, 2024). Additionally, every Saturday, the Weggeefwinkel hands out free food that has been donated or rescued from waste bins. Outside of the shop there is a solidarity fridge and clinic cabinet, where people can give and take food and hygiene products.

The Weggeefwinkel provides a micro scale solution to significant social challenges like excessive production and loneliness. Individuals engage with free shops, like the Weggeefwinkel in Utrecht, for a variety of personal motivations, reflecting broader societal values and personal circumstances. This research aims to provide insights into the social dynamics and personal motivations for being involved in the Weggeefwinkel. Understanding the motivations and social interactions within the Weggeefwinkel can offer valuable lessons for similar initiatives, emphasizing the importance of community-driven solutions for addressing global sustainability challenges. This study contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable consumption and social innovation, providing empirical evidence of how grassroots initiatives can foster environmental responsibility and social cohesion. The scientific relevance of this study lies in its potential to fill gaps in the current understanding of free shops and their impact. Specifically, it responds to calls from previous research for a deeper examination of permanent sharing facilities and their community effects. Albinsson and Perera (2012) emphasize the need for future research to investigate permanent facilities and programs that promote sharing and their effects on communities. Additionally, Griffiths and colleagues (2022) note the scarcity of research on Sharing Economy initiatives aimed at reducing loneliness and social isolation.

The importance of the Weggeefwinkel for people involved, is explored by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the main motivations of volunteers and customers to be involved in the Weggeefwinkel?
2. In what way does the Weggeefwinkel facilitate the establishment and nurturing of interpersonal connections?
3. How does the act of sharing play a role in producing social relations in the context of the Weggeefwinkel?

Theoretical background

Interdisciplinarity

An interdisciplinary research approach is essential for comprehensively understanding the complex social dynamics and motivations underlying volunteer and customer participation, the establishment and nurturing of interpersonal connections and the role of sharing in producing social relations within the Weggeefwinkel. The Weggeefwinkel can help address various social challenges,

which cannot be fully understood through a single discipline (Menken & Keestra, 2016). Sociology provides insights into the systemic and societal structures, which are important to understand the social issues the *Weggeefwinkel* addresses (Aptekar, 2016; Fournier, 2008; Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). Anthropology offers a lens to understand the cultural and community dynamics within the *Weggeefwinkel*, which is important for comprehending social relationships within the *Weggeefwinkel* (Muriel, 2009). Social psychology contributes insights into individuals' motivations for being involved in the *Weggeefwinkel*, and the role that sharing can play in alleviating social isolation (Yan et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2022). Economic sciences provide understanding on consumer culture and consumer trends, like collaborative consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2007; Hamilton, 2009; Poszowiecki & Czerepko, 2022). Sustainability sciences are important for understanding the environmental impact of the fashion and how sustainable practices, such as recycling, can play a role in alleviating these effects (Alexander, 2014; Koch, 2022; Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). Insights from the fields of sociology, anthropology, social psychology, economics, and sustainability sciences are integrated to result in a meaningful integration of theories and methods.

Literature overview

Free shops exist in various forms around the world. In the Netherlands, there are around 50 *Weggeefwinkels*, in Berlin there are *Umsonstladen* (free shops), in Poland there is a *Podzielnia* (sharing facility) and in the United States there are *Really Really Free Markets* (Pinq, 2019; Sabaté Muriel, 2009; Poszowiecki & Czerepko, 2022; Albinsson & Perera, 2012). Free shops are part of a broader societal shift towards reevaluating traditional notions of consumption and ownership (Aptekar, 2016). The transformation movement advocating shared ownership and reuse of goods, was originally called the 'sharing economy'. Later also came to be known as 'collaborative consumption', as the result of a book by Botsman and Rogers (2010) (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015). Sharing is an important element of collaborative consumption, which Belk (2007) defines as: "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use". The *Weggeefwinkel* strives for a society where there's enough for everyone through collaboration and sharing and operates from the idea 'the earth has enough for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed'. Research suggests that sharing goods through collaborative consumption can create new modes of social relations and solidarity in communities (Aptekar, 2016; Griffiths et al, 2022).

Motivations for participating in a collaborative economy are diverse, and differently categorized throughout literature. Angelovska and colleagues (2021) categorize motivations for participating in economic and non-economic motivations. According to their research, economic

motivations are cost-saving and convenience, and non-economic motivations include social interaction, enjoyment of sharing, and intentions to help others and/or protect the environment. Their research shows how motivations for participating in collaborative consumption can vary by role: providers often emphasize idealistic motives, while consumers, particularly those with lower incomes, are primarily driven by economic incentives (Angelovska et al., 2021). Schor and Fitzmaurice (2015) categorized the main motivations for participating in collaborative consumption in four categories: economic, ecological, social and ideological. In their definition, economic motivations as related to saving money, ecological motivations relate to reducing ecological impact, social motivations include increasing social connection and building social networks, and ideological motivations are commitment to the concepts of sharing and collaborating.

For this research, the motivations to participate in the Weggeefwinkel will be categorized into three main types: economic, social, and ideological motivations. Economic motivations are either related to cost-savings or convenience, in line with Angelovska et al (2021). Social motivations include increasing social connection and building social networks. Free shops facilitate social interaction, which is a key part of community building that increases both tolerance and trust in others (Albinsson & Perera, 2012). The last category of motivation is ideological factors. Ideologies are defined as structured collections of normatively infused concepts and ideas, which include specific depictions of power dynamics, which help people navigate the complexity of their political universe and carry claims to social truth (Steger and James, 2013). Ideological motivations include ecological motivations of reducing environmental impact and commitment to sharing but also anti-capitalistic ideas. Free shops are deeply intertwined with broader anti-capitalist and anarchist ideologies, challenging the notion of ownership and embracing collective responsibility (Albinsson & Perera, 2012). Unlike traditional capitalist models, free shops like the Weggeefwinkel operate without monetary exchange, fostering a culture of abundance through shared resources (Weggeefwinkel Utrecht, 2024; Lai & Ho, 2022).

The hypotheses derived from the literature review are as follows:

1. Volunteers and customers participate in the Weggeefwinkel due to economic, social and ideological reasons. Volunteers are expected to be more driven by ideological motivations and customers are expected to be more driven by material motivations.
2. The Weggeefwinkel serves as a hub for fostering meaningful connections among individuals.
3. The act of sharing within the Weggeefwinkel significantly contributes to the formation of social relationships.

Methods

Study design

To answer the research questions, qualitative research was carried out to provide an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences (Hennink et al., 2011). Individual interviews were conducted to gain better insight into the target group's world. In a qualitative interview, as Evers (2015) describes, the interviewer can give the respondent space to discuss their experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attach to the research topic, as well as its potential effects on their lives. This research design provides the tools to explore the complex, interconnected motivations and experiences of individuals, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and the integration of sharing and social cohesion within the Weggeefwinkel.

Study sample

For this research, stakeholders of the Weggeefwinkel (volunteers and customers) were interviewed. For selecting participants, a convenience sample has been conducted, meaning that respondents were selected because they were available (Bijleveld, 2009). The selection process focused on individuals who were accessible and willing to participate in the research (Plochg & Van Zwieten, 2007). To connect with the people involved in the Weggeefwinkel, I sent an email expressing my interest in the shop and asking whether they would be open to be interviewed for my thesis research. I received an enthusiastic response and got invited to a monthly volunteer meeting, in which I met a lot of the volunteers. I got the opportunity to explain my research and hand out information letters. I brought a form in which people who wanted to participate could fill in their availability. Two of the volunteers agreed on making an appointment, but others expressed they preferred more spontaneous interviews. To gain enough participants, I walked by the shop regularly to see who was available.

The only inclusion criteria for participation was involvement in de Weggeefwinkel. In total, interviews have been conducted with nine stakeholders of the Weggeefwinkel, consisting of five volunteers and four regular clients. The characteristics of the respondents can be found in Table 1. All the respondents visit the Weggeefwinkel on a weekly basis and have been involved for periods ranging from two to 20 years. The interviews were conducted over a period of two weeks. I visited the shop more often to get to know the place and the people and help sometimes.

Table 1: Interview log

Respondent	Gender	Alias	Date	Role
1	Female	Vianne	10/04	volunteer

2	Female	Maran	10/04	volunteer
3	Female	Selenay	10/04	volunteer
4	Male	Falco	12/04	volunteer
5	Male	Spencer	17/04	customer
6	Male	Fabio	17/04	volunteer
7	Female	Kamile	17/04	customer
8	Female	Nanine	20/04	customer
9	Female	Judi	20/04	customer

Data and measurements

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, for which a topic list including a set of main and sub-questions were developed in advance (see Attachment 1). The respondents were first asked about how they got involved in the Weggeefwinkel and openly asked about their motivations by asking “What is your main reason for going to the Weggeefwinkel?”. Follow-up questions were posed to evoke detailed insights into the participants' real-life experiences. Inspired by the goals of the Weggeefwinkel and literature on collaborative economy, the other main topics the respondents were asked about were sharing, sustainability and social network. The motivations to participate were later in the process categorized in economic, social and ideological factors.

The topic list provides a framework during the interview while allowing the opportunity to create depth through follow-up questions and map the social reality in an inductive way (Decorte & Zaitch, 2009). Both customers and volunteers were asked the same open questions, but the tool was flexible enough to accommodate differences in their positions. During the first interviews I looked at the guide list more often, but after a few I was able to memorize the questions, which gave the possibility to let the conversation flow more freely while still touching all the important themes. The initial plan was to conduct the interviews in the neighbourhood house next to the Weggeefwinkel, as it is more quiet than the shop and freely accessible. In the end the participants were asked for their preferred location, which resulted in some interviews being conducted outside next to the shop, some in the neighbourhood house and some inside of the Weggeefwinkel.

Data management and analysis

The data has been managed, shared and analysed on data storage devices provided by Utrecht University, in accordance with the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences research data storage (archiving) protocol. The interviews were recorded using a personal device and stored on YoDa, after

which they were deleted from the personal device. The audio files were transcribed using the transcribing tool of Word and checking everything manually after. Subsequently, various coding techniques were used to make the data searchable and findable in the analysis software Nvivo (Evers, 2015). The qualitative research process is iterative, involving a cyclical process that integrated both inductive and deductive methods (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). First, the main concepts from the topic list, which are based on the literature, were converted into thematic codes. These are deductive codes, as they were generated before the analysis based on literature research and pertain to themes that were asked about during the interview. Then, open codes were generated to capture concepts not fully covered by the thematic codes. The codes are much more concrete, and the code names are closer to the text. This inductive coding technique allows capturing the social reality and meaning world of the respondents that were not foreseen in advance (Bouabid, 2020). The open coding was done as layered as possible and already grouped into the main themes during the process. Once the coding was finished, the main codes were manually put in a code tree to find patterns between the themes (see Attachment 2). All the quotes connected to the main themes were compiled to be able to make a story about the experiences of the respondents. The quotes were translated to English, and all the respondents were given alias names so they could not be linked directly to the quotes. Memos were created to record ideas that arose during coding and that could potentially contribute to theory development, this way the entire process could be followed accurately.

Critical reflection on research process and positionality

During the first meeting I attended at the Weggeefwinkel, I realized some distance from the target group. After this meeting I was asked “if I wasn’t shocked by the chaos, as there are quite some paradise birds within the volunteer circle and not everyone is used to meetings”. The group of people involved in the Weggeefwinkel is very diverse: some are fully tattooed and pierced and others wear a hijab. Given the different backgrounds of the volunteer group, I attempted to compose my information letter using accessible and straightforward language. During the meeting I realised my information letters were still too complicated for some of the volunteers to understand, so I also explained them in person. The subjects explored in qualitative research can be sensitive, so data and participation information were handled carefully (Boeije, 2009). To ensure that respondents are aware of the context and scope of this research, all respondents were asked for informed consent (Bekker & Tobi, 2012). Information about the purpose has been provided at the start and the anonymization of the names of the participants was communicated and consent was granted. Respondents were asked to give permission for their data to be used and explained they can stop their participation at any point during the research (Crow et al., 2006). Some of the volunteers made clear they did not want to sign

anything, however they did express they wanted to tell their story. Hence, instead of a sign I asked for a spoken permission for participating. During the research period I frequently visited the shop to get to know the people involved and help in the shop sometimes. This allowed me to build connections with the volunteers and clients, which I think contributed to increasing their trust and willingness to be a part of the research.

Results

The Weggeefwinkel is a space where everyone is welcome. A diverse group of people is attracted, each with their own unique reasons for being involved. In this paragraph I will first outline the different reasons for people to get involved in the shop, highlight the importance of sharing. Then I will explain how the Weggeefwinkel became an important part of the social lives of all respondents.

Rye bread and pretty dresses

Every Saturday, the Weggeefwinkel hands out food that has been donated or rescued from waste bins. Participants that are mostly driven by material reasons, come to the Weggeefwinkel to save money on groceries or clothing. Selenay is a volunteer at de Weggeefwinkel, living on welfare benefits, which are not enough to support her three children. Apart from volunteering, she takes food from the Weggeefwinkel and fills up a bag of clothes when her daughters are in need. Some people were in such an economic trough when they started visiting the Weggeefwinkel, that they do not know how they would have survived without it. Kamile and Nanine expressed, if it was not for the Weggeefwinkel, they would not have made it. Kamile is a customer of the Weggeefwinkel who had lost access to her bank account. When she ate all the food in her cupboards, a friend told her that she could get rye bread (that she loves) at the Weggeefwinkel. She did not find rye bread, but from that moment she went to de Weggeefwinkel every Saturday. For Nanine, the Weggeefwinkel was also very important when she was at her lowest: "When you have real money concerns, you have a lot of stress. The giveaway shop really saved my financial situation. And that scarcity feeling, which I just had all the time. That also passed because of this". The Weggeefwinkel saved Nanine, when talking about this, she got so emotional that she shed a tear.

While for some the food is an important reason to come to the Weggeefwinkel, the focus of the shop is on goods. Spencer, a regular visitor, loves beauty of form and gets little sparks of happiness from the stuff he finds at the Weggeefwinkel. He really loves seeing beauty in things that others don't like at all. Apart from food and clothes, volunteers also have some other benefits like learning the

Dutch language or using the internet or electricity to charge their electronics. Falco said: “besides coming here to help reuse items, I also come here to make my own life a bit easier.”

Fighting the system

While some people mainly go to the Weggeefwinkel for practicalities, others have more ideological reasons: to take part in a movement towards sustainability, to promote recycling and ultimately to fight the capitalistic system that exploits people and the planet. Fabio, one of the volunteers, has personally experienced the negative effects that excessive production has on the climate and people up close in his country of origin which is rich in natural resources. He puts a lot of time and effort into saving goods from dumpsters and bringing it to people in need:

"I have been with the communities that are fighting for the resources... They stole the mountains, the rivers, the resources. They fucked it up there. To produce this shit that here nobody gives value to. I know what the price of the bicycle is, steel and Iron... The copper, the technology, like there's a big, big price. It's very expensive. And for me, it's clear that there's people dying behind this. There's people really dying. And I cannot go back to my country because of this shit, because I fight there to try to stop the destruction of the areas. Then I come here, and I see what you do with the fucking resources that you took from our lands, it is insane, insane... This madness is sick, is violent. So this just allowed me to not feel so pissed off about the situation. Finally, I'm just going to be alive in the country where people don't give a shit about the resources that we have to put our lives into defending the mountains. And here you just don't give a fuck about it. Like it's such nonsense. So for me it's very personal." (Fabio)

For Fabio, volunteering in the Weggeefwinkel and other solitary initiatives alleviates the guilt associated with participating in a system that prioritizes profit over the well-being of people and the planet. While many respondents name sustainability as a big motivation for being involved, two respondents did not know what this word meant. However, even though volunteer Falco said he had never heard of the term ‘sustainability’, he said “I just like things to be reused. I think it's a shame when people just throw everything on the street like that”. According to Kamille, the big problem is “just the whole mentality of the western world. Always new, always more, more, more...”. She considers it ‘crazy’ that in this western society we need to have a free shop: “While we live in such a rich country, there are still people who can't do without it, because they just don't have enough income”.

Vianne is one of the volunteers that has been with the Weggeefwinkel since the beginning. She explains that initially she got involved mostly because of how much she values recycling: “It’s such a shame that so much is thrown away and bought and dragged around the world. For myself that was - and still is - the main reason to contribute, much more than helping poor people or whatever”. The Weggeefwinkel was created by the squatters’ movement, from anti-capitalist ideas, as a form of resistance to the status quo. Besides contributing to giving a lot of goods a second life, respondents also hope to occasionally make people think about consumption and money. When people come for the first time, Vianne explains, they are very confused about the fact that everything is free. Sometimes they even refuse to take things because it makes them uncomfortable. Vianne wonders why everything should cost money. She questions why it is always about making as much profit as possible, instead of just making enough, and loves to bring up these questions in others.

Sharing is caring

Another motivation for people to be involved in the Weggeefwinkel, is simply wanting to help others. Selenay liked it, she said: “I’m always helping people. Not only here, but also outside I help where I can. I don’t have money to spend but if I have more groceries at home, I will bring them here”. Selenay is Islamic and she emphasizes sharing is a very important part of her religion, which was passed to her from a young age. Vianne explains how the Weggeefwinkel facilitates helping each other, without owing an obligation to thank someone. According to her, people really want to help each other, but do not go as quickly to their neighbours to ask whether they want to have some shoes. She wonders: “Why is it always one thing for another? If you need a jumper, and I have it here, you take it. You don’t need to give anything back.” Sharing can lead to beautiful connections, like Kamile explained:

“The food was very important to me. And because of that, I also got more and more in touch with the volunteers, and the other people who come here. I felt very positive because of that. They think of me, and when I come here, it’s just very nice, not anonymous anymore or anything. And that’s very pleasant.” (Kamile)

This quote clearly shows how receiving food was not just about meeting a basic need, but also about building relationships with volunteers and other community members. This sense of connection alleviates feelings of anonymity and fosters a pleasant, supportive environment. The act of sharing creates a network of mutual care and support. Spencer also explains that “the people get to know each other, and they start watching out for each other, or taking things for each other”.

Exchanging goods and conversations

The giveaway shop was set up mostly for combatting overconsumption but developed into much more over the years. Vianne explains that the Weggeefwinkel started out with a group of activists. In the beginning there was a lot of organizing and planning to do, but after that was done the work became just hanging up clothes. Many of the initial organizers left to do other things, and in the meantime, more customers and neighbours wanted to come help, so slowly the dynamics changed.

“And now we really have a super diverse group. I hadn't thought about that beforehand and I find that incredibly fun and educational, you just completely step out of your own bubble. And it's also very difficult at times. But it's really cool.” (Vianne)

A similar shift is visible in motivations for the volunteers and clients to come to the Weggeefwinkel. While all the respondents had different ways of getting involved in the shop, and different reasons for going to the Weggeefwinkel, all the nine respondents mentioned that the social interactions they had in the Weggeefwinkel was a reason to return. Many participants expressed that once they went, they came back every week because they really enjoyed it.

“You know, every week there is a new moment again. And it makes some people very happy because it is not forced. They happen to meet you every time, or they know they'll see you every week. They come primarily for the items, but yeah, the side effect is that you... can give something to your fellow human beings, that you make a chat there. And well, discover that... you can actually talk to people that are different. Nowadays this society is very individualistic... People are only focused on themselves and don't even see anymore what they, what the power is to give.” (Spencer)

A place to connect

While the Weggeefwinkel is just a small place, for many people it is very important. Loneliness is a big problem, Vienna explains, and because of the Weggeefwinkel, people are not alone. Fabio explains that it does not matter who you are or what your past is, to be cared for here: “Everybody has their problems, here we're all feeling that there's a place where we can all fit in". People get attached to each other, Spencer explains, “It becomes a bit like a family”. The shop is open four days a week, and usually Spencer steps by all these four days. For Spencer and Falco, going to the Weggeefwinkel is a fun break in their day. Both say that if they would not go there, they would just be

sitting at home alone. And they are not the only ones. There is one story about a regular client that really touched Vianne. This woman came in every time and sat in the chair the whole day, she would say to her daughter what she wanted and needed her to pick up. Vianne thought it was a bit much at first, but at one point the daughter came to her with the news that her mother passed away. The daughter explained that she was so grateful for the shop because her mom had lung cancer and she really couldn't do anything anymore. The only thing she could do was walk to the Weggeefwinkel, that was the only outing she had left. As thanks, the daughter wanted to come volunteer.

“I loved that story so much, that was very eye opening for me. I just thought that woman was sitting there, and I did not understand at all how important it was to her. And for a lot of clients, I don't know what their story is at all, and I also like that you don't have to say that you come here because you're lonely, you don't have to say anything. But I do notice it in some of them. That they really just come for social contact. A quick look and a cup of coffee, a chat...”
(Vienna)

Breaking barriers

Because everyone has their own, different reasons for being involved, a lot of different people come to the Weggeefwinkel. Everyone who enters the space has something unique to contribute, and volunteers and customers meet people that they would never meet otherwise. The participants express that meeting people outside of one's usual social bubble opened their eyes to different perspectives. As Vianne typically spends time with like-minded people, she emphasizes that that she gains significant insights from the diverse perspectives and worldviews of others. Both the customers and the volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, which can be challenging at times, but also eye opening.

“In fact, someone like David doesn't fit with me at all. The iron and the tattoos... and not that I have a problem with that, you shouldn't think that. But that's not my thing at all. I really like going to such occasions, because you meet all kinds of people there that I normally, in the proper street where I live, don't meet.” (Judi)

Spencer mentioned that initially, he had some difficulties with certain individuals, but after seeing them every week he got used to them. There are not a lot of rules at the Weggeefwinkel, but one that is very important is, no kind of discrimination is tolerated. Fabio expresses that this is very necessary for the vulnerable communities and the diversity of the city. This place strives to be one where

everyone, regardless of their background, can come together and feel valued. This inclusive atmosphere not only enriches the community but also reinforces why it's so important for this place to exist.

Discussion

Main findings

The data has shown that the Weggeefwinkel, in many ways, is a very important place for the people involved in it. This research examined how the economic and social dimensions of sharing intersect in practice at the micro level within the framework of the Weggeefwinkel.

RQ1) What are the main motivations of volunteers and customers to be involved in the Weggeefwinkel?

The main motivations of volunteers and customers to be involved in the Weggeefwinkel are divided into three categories: economic, ideological and social. It is interesting that all the participants got involved either for economic or ideological reasons, but the social connections were an important motivation for all of them to come back. Economic motivations were mostly driven by financial strains that were alleviated by the goods and clothing that is freely accessible at the Weggeefwinkel. The Weggeefwinkel plays a significant role in addressing immediate needs and thereby improving the well-being of customers. Other benefits that motivated volunteers to be involved are access to facilities like the internet and the opportunity to practice the Dutch language. The motivations are different for the roles that the respondents have within the Weggeefwinkel. Where customers mainly cite economic reasons as their main motivations, for volunteers, ideologic reasons seem to prevail. All four customers interviewed visited the store first to get goods for free. Three of the respondents were in difficult financial situations and came for economic reasons, one had a more ideological reasons as she mostly got clothes for a women's shelter. For the five volunteers I interviewed, the main reasons to participate were non-economic. Two volunteers with an activist background stated stronger ideologic reasons for participating: they aim to contribute to the sustainability movement and challenge the capitalistic system. Concerns about the environmental and social impacts of excessive production motivated them to invest considerable time and effort into saving goods and distributing them to those in need. They highlight the importance of the shop's role not only in facilitating recycling but also in sparking discussions about consumption and money, ultimately challenging prevailing ideologies and encouraging reflection on alternative ways of living and interacting with resources.

Another volunteer named helping others as the key motivation to participate. For two volunteers, taking part in meaningful daily activities is the most important reason for participating.

These results confirm the hypothesis derived from literature: volunteers are mostly driven by non-economic motivations while customers, especially those with lower incomes, are mostly driven by material motivations (Angelovska et al, 2021). However, the separation between motivations is not strict and motivations overlap. Some of the volunteers also expressed economic motivations for participating: they get goods from the shop to save money or other conveniences like the use of the internet. The motivations of people to participate in the Weggeefwinkel are diverse and change over time.

RQ2) In what way does the Weggeefwinkel facilitate the establishment and nurturing of interpersonal connections?

The data shows that besides being a place to give and take goods, the Weggeefwinkel provides a crucial opportunity for interaction and engagement with others. While participants got involved either for economic or ideological reasons, the social connections was an important motivation for all respondents to come back, especially the opportunity to make valuable connections and to meet people outside of one's social bubble. For some, the Weggeefwinkel is the sole outing of their day, making the Weggeefwinkel an enjoyable respite from their daily routines. Instead of spending their time isolated at home, they can engage in meaningful activities. The results confirm the hypothesis derived from literature stating that while the primary goal of free shops is to prevent excessive consumption and the resultant waste, they also facilitate the exchange of goods and foster conversations and social interactions (Poszewiecki & Czerepko, 2022). Respondents know that the shop offers a new opportunity every week to meet each other informally, which they find very gratifying.

The respondents stress the importance of the inclusive atmosphere of the Weggeefwinkel. Everyone, regardless of their background, can come and feel valued, which is a necessity for the vulnerable communities and the diversity of the city. Moreover, the interaction with a diverse group of people contributes to a broader acceptance and understanding of different backgrounds and perspectives within the community. This inclusive environment promotes empathy, tolerance, and the establishment of interpersonal connections based on shared experiences and mutual respect. The quotes show how important the role of the Weggeefwinkel is for the participants in reducing loneliness and social isolation.

RQ3) How does the act of sharing play a role in producing social relations in the context of the Weggeefwinkel?

As hypothesized, the data shows the act of sharing not only meets practical needs but also leads to the formation of meaningful relationships by fostering a sense of connection, community, and mutual care among participants. These results are in line with those of Aptekar (2016) and Griffiths and colleagues (2022), stating that sharing goods through collaborative consumption can create new modes of social relations and solidarity in communities. Volunteers and customers engage in acts of giving without expectation of reward, creating a culture of mutual support and solidarity. Through the exchange of goods and resources, individuals form emotional connections and a sense of belonging within the community. Respondents noted that people who meet at the Weggeefwinkel begin to look for and bring items they know others would like. This sense of connection alleviates feelings of anonymity and fosters a supportive environment where individuals feel valued and appreciated. Moreover, the exchange of goods and conversations within the Weggeefwinkel creates opportunities for social interaction and bonding in a society often characterized by individualism. Overall, the act of sharing within the Weggeefwinkel serves as a catalyst for building relationships, fostering a sense of community, and promoting empathy and understanding among participants.

Limitations

The topic list was mainly developed based on the goals of the Weggeefwinkel. Literature was also consulted, but due to time constraints, a complete literature review had not been conducted before conducting the interviews. After collecting the data, I delved back into the literature, which led me to slightly change my approach. If this would have been done beforehand, different questions might have been asked. Systematically coding the interviews and grouping them in code trees ensured that all the important mechanisms were derived from the data. While coding, I realized that I hadn't operationalized the terms ideology and motivation properly, so this was done during the process. External reliability of a study looks at the extent to which the study is repeatable with similar results (Evers, 2015). While complete reliability is challenging due to the depth of the research and the limited number of nine respondents, repeatability of the process from the data to the final report was strived for by maintaining transparency in the research process. To give as much insight as possible into the steps made during the process, I created an audit trail where all steps in the process were documented (Evers, 2015). Although I acknowledge some limitations in the memo-keeping process, my approach was designed to capture significant insights and that ensure traceability throughout the study.

Implications

This research clearly highlights the critical role of initiatives like the Weggeefwinkel in promoting social cohesion, sustainability, and community well-being. As one respondent noted: "Every neighbourhood should have a giveaway shop". Government agencies are recommended to actively support the establishment of more free shops or similar initiatives and provide financial backing for existing ones. This research provides deeper insights into permanent facilities and programs that promote sharing, demonstrating their positive effects on communities, as suggested by Albinsson and Perera (2012). The interviews clearly show the important role the Weggeefwinkel plays in reducing loneliness and social isolation for the people involved, which fills a gap in research noted by Griffiths and colleagues (2022). More research on the potential role of governmental organizations in these kinds of initiatives could provide valuable insights to guide policymakers in crafting more supportive frameworks and allocating resources more effectively as governments have resources, infrastructure, and policy-making capabilities that can significantly impact the success of community-focused initiatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the significance of the Weggeefwinkel as a vital community space where economic and social dimensions intersect at the micro level, highlighting its importance for the community. The use of qualitative research is particularly effective in this context, as the impact is expressed through stories rather than numbers. By including respondents' quotes, participants' feelings and experiences are vividly illustrated. The analysis of the data confirms all three hypotheses derived from the literature. The main findings reveal that volunteers and customers are driven by a variety of motivations, including economical, ideological, and social factors. This research confirms volunteers at the Weggeefwinkel are primarily motivated by non-economic factors, while customers are mostly driven by material motivations (Angelovska et al., 2021). However, also a new take is provided: the data shows these motivations are not strictly separate and often overlap. Overall, motivations for participation in the Weggeefwinkel are diverse and evolve over time. Furthermore, the Weggeefwinkel facilitates the establishment and nurturing of interpersonal connections, offering a vital space for individuals to come together, share experiences, and foster empathy and understanding. Through the act of sharing, participants not only fulfil practical needs but also cultivate meaningful relationships, fostering a sense of community and mutual care within the Weggeefwinkel.

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Attachment 1: Topic list

Onderzoek naar de sociaal-ecologische impact van de weggeefwinkel onder betrokkenen.

Welkom

- Dank medewerking
- Voorstellen (indien nodig)
- Doel onderzoek
- Opname gesprek → toestemming
- Bevestigen vertrouwelijk behandelen van gegevens
- Als u vragen niet wilt beantwoorden, dan mag u dat altijd aangeven. Dan slaan we die over.

Persoonskenmerken

- Kunt je wat over jezelf vertellen?
 - leeftijd, woonplaats
- Hoe ben jij betrokken bij de weggeefwinkel?
 - Hoe ben je er terechtgekomen?
- Evt: info over achtergrond weggeef winkel
 - rol overheid?

Wat betekent de weggeefwinkel voor jou?

- a. Wat is voor jou de voornaamste reden om naar de weggeefwinkel te gaan?
 - i. Spullen brengen/ halen
 1. Wat is jouw motivatie om deel te nemen aan de gifteconomie ten opzichte van nieuw kopen?
 - ii. Vrijwilligen
 1. Wat is de reden voor jou om je in te zetten voor de weggeefwinkel

Delen

- a. *De weggeefwinkel strijdt tegen zinloos geld; het draait om geven en nemen*
 - i. Wat betekent dat voor jou?
 - ii. Wat is voor jou het belang van delen?
 - iii. nemen / nodig ?

Duurzaamheid

- a. *De weggeefwinkel heeft als doel het strijden tegen overconsumptie,*
 - i. Wat voor rol speelt duurzaamheid in jouw leven/ Is duurzaamheid belangrijk voor jou?
 1. Hoe hou je je daar mee bezig? Wat doe je verder?
 - ii. Hoe draagt volgens jou de weggeefwinkel bij aan een meer duurzame samenleving?
 1. Speelt de weggeefwinkel een rol bij het vergroten van bewustzijn over o.a. duurzaamheid en overconsumptie?

Sociaal netwerk

- a. *Daarnaast biedt het ook een plek om samen te komen*
 - i. Hoe ziet jouw sociale leven er uit?
 1. veel sociale contacten?
 - ii. Wat betekent de gemeenschap binnen de weggeefwinkel voor jou?
 - iii. (Waarom) denk je dat de gemeenschap van de weggeefwinkel belangrijk is voor andere betrokkenen?

Afsluiten - toekomstvisie;

- A. Hoe zou jij de toekomst het liefst voor je zien? Met betrekking tot de weggeefwinkel en de samenleving als geheel
- B. Wat is er volgens jou nodig om meer ruimte te creëren voor initiatieven als dit?
 - a. rol overheid?

Dankwoord/Afronding

- Is er nog iets dat je zou willen delen mbt dit onderzoek?
- Heeft u nog vragen?
- Danken voor gesprek

