

Sharing and the Marketplace - What is Shared in the Sharing Economy?

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What is commonly labeled the “sharing economy” or “collaborative consumption” has recently faced serious criticism for being about anything but what sharing is actually thought to be about. Numerous examples have been given in consumer research for “sharing businesses” whose business has little to do with the romantic ideal of sharing in the sense of “joint (psychological) ownership, pro-social intentions and the absence of expectations of reciprocity” (the definition of sharing according to Belk 2010). The carsharing company ZipCar has found to display negative reciprocities and a big-brother governance instead of feelings of community (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), and the taxi service Uber is accused for exploiting participating drivers and dumping wages in the taxi business (Giesler 2014).

Much of the criticism centers on the “economic” side of the sharing economy and how participants perpetuate a traditional capitalist mindset by maximizing their utilities under the disguise of a socially romantic label—a practice sometimes called “sharewashing.” Much of that research focuses on the redistribution of idle capacity and thus on a purely economically efficient behavior within a system labeled sharing. However, if a socially romantic aspect within sharing systems is to be found, it is not advisable to focus on economically efficient behaviors, but on the opposite: on economically inefficient behaviors, namely participants’ spending time with each other although the redistribution of resources would not require it. One popular case is the accommodation rental AirBnB in which individuals rent out rooms in their apartments and remain present. While many AirBnB hosts rent full apartments without their presence, there are

many who more personally accommodate guests by sharing not only space, but also time and at least some conversation, interaction, and moments with each guest.

Being interested in the social ideology of sharing, we looked at these “inefficient” behaviors within market-based versus non-market based sharing systems in order to understand how the notion of sociality is produced and shaped through the respective prevailing (market or non-market based) sharing ideology. Concretely, the present research project explores and compares the nature of social moments among AirBnB (a sharing business with monetary exchange) and CouchSurfing (a sharing business without monetary exchange) guest-host dyads.

Over a three year period, 14 in-depth interviews have been conducted with AirBnB hosts renting out rooms while being present (4), with CouchSurfing hosts (5), and with individuals who host on both platforms (5) in Europe and the Americas. These data were complemented by participant observation and the analysis of online contents such as member profiles, blog entries, forum discussions, and news articles.

Our findings describe how shared experiences are mutually created and consumed in moments of social togetherness. We see the production of such shared experiences as being driven by principles of reciprocity that follow the logics of gift-giving (Mauss 1990/1924), but we suggest that their actual consumption can be defined as sharing according to Belk's (2010) definition in both cases. Similar to a conversation where one individual expect the other to react to a statement made, any social interaction is most likely not free of reciprocal expectations.

However, with regard to the product of such mutually created social experiences and its value to the involved parties - it is almost impossible to determine who contributed what to the experience as a whole. Given that the value of each action depends on the respective reactions that develop the shared experience further, its overall value can be seen to reside in the dynamics

of the social exchange. As such, this value is not concretely assignable to one of the involved parties which implies that its consumption is based on shared ownership and cannot be reciprocal. While the basic structure of this finding holds for both, AirBnB and CouchSurfing, differences occur with regard to how the ideologies represented by the different contexts shape the practices of social togetherness among participants.

In AirBnB, the market logic emphasizes the materiality of the hospitality experience (e.g. the exchange of money for a beautiful room and a nice location) while the shared experiences are perceived as an added value that is appreciated, yet not expected. In contrast, the absence of money and an active denial of materialities that build the normative frame of CouchSurfing shift the focus to the social aspects of the consumption act. As such, the social interaction is a central part of the consumption act in CouchSurfing, where it is perceived as a taboo not to spend time with each other. The actual accommodation in contrast has been found to be at most marginally relevant. As a result, there is quantitatively more time shared in CouchSurfing. However, our data also show that that being the central object of the consumption act seems to change social interaction: Many respondents that actively hosted on both platforms acknowledged to at times perceive shared experiences in CouchSurfing as enforced and indicated to prefer hosting on AirBnB where participation or denial of social interaction appeared to be more of a free choice. This finding holds for informants that were guests on both platforms as well.

While research on consumption practices in the so-called sharing economy mostly looks at how existing resources are redistributed among individuals, the present project looks at how shared experiences are created by moments of social togetherness and shaped through the respective prevailing context. This perspective sheds new light on the discussion on sharing that is developing in consumer research (Arnould and Rose forthcoming).

References

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