Sharing Is Caring – Is This True Or What Else Explains the Tremendous Growth of the Sharing Economy?

Kristine Fritz, University of Basel, Switzerland
Manfred Bruhn, University of Basel, Switzerland
Verena Schoenmueller, University of Basel, Switzerland

Although the 'sharing economy' is growing at an enormous pace, research regarding the individual needs that drive this trend is still scarce. Therefore, our study aims at a comprehensive identification of the different needs pursued with sharing. We identify sixteen needs and, moreover, demonstrate differences between different sharing platforms.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1016728/la/v3_pdf/LA-03

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Sharing is Caring – is this True or what else
Explains the Tremendous Growth of the Sharing Economy?
Verena Schoenmueller, University of Basel, Switzerland
Kristine Fritz, University of Basel, Switzerland
Manfred Bruhn, University of Basel, Switzerland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The ‘sharing economy’ has become a widely discussed social trend in recent years. Various sharing offers continue to grow at an amazing pace: Airbnb has served a total of 9 million guests since its foundation, and worldwide memberships in car-sharing programs are expected to grow from 2.3 million in 2013 to more than 12 mil-lion by 2020. However, in the context of consumer behavior research, the motivations for sharing have so far not been investigated and the needs that are met by these sharing arrangements are scarcely understood at an individual level. A better understanding of these needs would help improve sharing offers and sustain the impressive growth that has taken place over the past years. In order to fill this research gap, the present study aims to identify and compile a comprehensive catalogue of the needs pursued with sharing.

As sharing offers differ substantially regarding various aspects such as the object shared or the level of interaction between the members, we first aim to identify the characteristics of sharing proposals in order to systematically categorize different forms of sharing. One major characteristic that distinguishes sharing proposals is the type of object that is shared. We therefore adopt “type of object” as our first criterion, and distinguish between the variants: tangibles (e.g., office-sharing) and intangibles (e.g., information sharing) (Belk 2013). In addition to the object that is shared, Belk differentiates two forms of sharing: “sharing-in” and “sharing-out”. Belk’s differentiation demonstrates that the degree of intimacy can vary considerably between different sharing proposals. Therefore, we introduce a second criterion to further distinguish between different forms of sharing: the level of social interaction; i.e., the intimacy between the participants of a sharing platform. Whereas car-sharing or rating services are mostly characterized by a very low level of intimacy between the parties involved; the level of intimacy between parties is very high for office-sharing and some flat-sharing platforms. Building on this categorization, the present study aims to identify a comprehensive set of needs and compare these within and between the four identified sharing categories.

We build on an intensive literature review and focus particularly on several psychological theories in order to identify the basic needs that might explain the reasons why individuals participate in online sharing proposals. More specifically we review literature regarding Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 2000), Epstein’s cognitive-experiential self-theory (1985), Maslow’s Theory of Personality (1954) and the Core Social Motive Theory (Fiske, 2010) to identify a comprehensive need catalogue regarding the different sharing offers. Additionally, we complement the review of major theories with research regarding human needs and motivations (e.g., Sheldon et al., 2001). In sum, we identify 14 potential needs in the context of an individual’s sharing behavior: autonomy, competence, relatedness, affiliation, achievement, power, self-esteem, pleasure (vs. pain), self-concept consistency, need for financial security, need for non-financial security, independence, social congruence, and control.

To verify our needs catalogue, developed within the literature review, and to identify further needs, we use a psychological means-end chain approach. Therefore, we conducted a semi-structured, in-depth interview, called the laddering technique. In accordance with various investigations (e.g., Botschen and Hemetsberger 1998), we use a modified paper-and-pencil version of the laddering technique, in which the respondents first specify three important perceived attributes of the corresponding sharing-platform and then state why these are important to them, whereby they can name up to three reasons.

We generate 85 data sets (47% females, 53% males, average age: 24.01). Two in-dependent judges analyze the content of the responses. The results demonstrate congruence between the identified need structures of the laddering interviews and the findings of the literature review, with one exception, namely, self-concept consistency. Although discussed in literature, this need is not mentioned by the respondents. Moreover, several other needs can be detected: altruism (i.e., seeking another person’s well-being as an objective) and reciprocity (i.e., seeking behavior on a mutual basis), which are identified as needs pursued on sharing-platforms characterized by the criteria of a low level of intimacy and intangible objects (e.g., rating services, open source initiatives), as well as collectivism in the sense of sustainability, quoted as a need in the context of sharing-platforms characterized by a high level of intimacy and tangible objects. Concerning the need pleasure (vs. pain), the analysis shows two different interpretations of minimizing pain and maximizing pleasure: on the one hand, pleasure (vs. pain) is determined by the need for entertainment and fun; on the other hand, the variable expresses a means to an end connection concerning the saving of money or time for other matters. The data demonstrate the importance of financial aspects (i.e., financial security, pleasure (vs. pain) [a means to an end]) for tangible sharing objects. As can be seen, for intangibles, the satisfaction of the needs competence, control, achievement and power seem to be more relevant. Interestingly, collectivism seems to be of greater importance as driver of sharing behavior for sharing tangible objects with a high level of social interaction. Finally, the social-oriented needs relatedness and affiliation are considerable for sharing-platforms characterized by a high level of intimacy.

Our results show, that consumer sharing behavior is determined by various needs discussed in social psychology as basic human needs (Pittman and Zeigler 2007). The further identified needs altruism, reciprocity, and collectivism are discussed in literature as one explanation for pro-social behavior (Batson et al. 2007). Various sharing-offerings imply other-oriented behavior. Therefore, the consideration of these needs seems to be a reasonable extension of our needs catalogue. Moreover, the variety of identified needs pursued via the different types of sharing confirms the relevance of establishing a typology of sharing-platforms. Our use of distinctions between different degrees of intimacy is confirmed by our data to be meaningful. Moreover, our results verify the distinction between tangible and intangible sharing platforms. To verify our results, a quantitative analysis of the needs that are pursued through sharing behavior is needed.
REFERENCES


