Share Your Life and Get More of Yourself. Experience Sharing in Couchsurfing

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By means of a multi-sited multi-method ethnography of CouchSurfing.org, this study explores what motivates consumers to share their homes with strangers. Our findings suggest that participation is best understood by focusing on experience sharing and identify four types of experiential capital as sources of self-enhancement.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sharing is the new talk of the town. Its advocates (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Gansky 2010; Sacks 2011) but also popular media like the Time magazine (Walsh 2011) or The Economist (“The Rise of the Sharing Economy” 2013) hold sharing to be a game changer for the world’s consumption patterns – or at least for those in the industrialized nations that such coverage usually centers on. Summarized under different labels like “collaborative consumption”, “sharing economy”, “the mesh” or “peer-to-peer economy”, we see a variety of “sharing businesses” that are rapidly gaining importance in the international marketplace. Commonly mentioned examples include bike- and car-sharing systems (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Lambertson and Rose 2012), toy-sharing (Ozanne and Ballantine 2010), land-sharing and Community Supported Agriculture (Schnell 2007). One of the most prominent hallmarks of the “sharing economy” (Sacks 2011) is the hospitality platform CouchSurfing where members offer shelter and oftentimes food and entertainment to strangers. With almost six million people in over 97,000 cities worldwide (“Couchsurfing Statistics 2014” 2014) sharing their space with people they have never met before, the CouchSurfing project exemplifies that non-commercial sharing among strangers is more than a niche phenomenon. While the benefits for the “surfers” who use the offer of free accommodation are somewhat straightforward, the motivations of the hosts providing their space appear more bewildering. Given that there is a considerable range of market-based alternatives such as AirBnB, we wondered why people choose to share shelter, time and oftentimes even food and drinks with strangers whom they have never met before and will possibly never meet again, while consciously renouncing monetary gain or other tangible remuneration. The question guiding our research is hence why CouchSurfing hosts offer their hospitality to strangers.

We address this question by means of a multi-method multi-sited ethnography of the hospitality platform CouchSurfing over a three year period. Methods include qualitative in-depth interviews, participant observation and the analysis of online contents such as member profiles, blog entries, forum discussions and news articles. In-depth interviews were conducted with 37 CouchSurfing hosts aged 22-36 from Europe and the Americas, 15 of them being female. We interpreted our data by means of a hermeneutic approach (Thompson and Haytko 1997) and used our field notes and comparisons with web-content (i.e., participants’ online profiles and contributions on discussion boards) as sources of triangulation to validate the attitudes and behaviors reported in the interviews (Mays and Pope 1995).

Our results are structured into three main parts:

Experience Sharing. Our findings suggest that the jointly produced and consumed experiences are at the core of sharing in CouchSurfing. The actual time that the two (or more) CouchSurfing partners spend together constitutes the most important part of the CouchSurfing experience. The “couch” as shared material object in contrast has been found to merely serve as a catalyst and an enabler for sharing experiences in the context of CouchSurfing.

Experiential Capital. Although no money is involved and free accommodation and gifts as manifestations of material value merely play a subordinate role in the social exchanges of CouchSurfing, we still observe an emergence of lasting benefits for the involved parties.

We characterize these benefits as “experiential capital”, in the sense that they represent an assembly of identity-relevant meanings, skills and cultural learning that can be collected and are of lasting value to the individual. Four types of such experiential capital have emerged as outcome of experience sharing from our data: Ego boost, learning, an inner glow from helping others and self-authentication. In line with literature on experiential consumption we suggest that the consumption of such “experiential capital” can in fact contribute to self-enhancement (Keinan and Kivetz 2011).

Reciprocity and intermingled self-centered and other-related goals. We also discuss the role of reciprocity in the light of the particular win-win situation that we see occurring in CouchSurfing and revisit notions of reciprocity in hitherto existing theories on sharing. Existing literature on sharing assumes that true sharing comes about without the involvement of reciprocity. And although we see the interactions taking place on CouchSurfing as a form of sharing, we also found many indicators that point to the existence of reciprocal claims. However, the reciprocity that is implied here is neither an expression of direct, or tit-for-tat reciprocity (Sahlins 1972) nor of indirect or even generalized reciprocity that assumes a circular understanding of giving and taking. Rather, we find that self-centered and other-related goals are almost inseparably intermingled in the context of CouchSurfing. We see such intermingledness of pro-social and egoistic behaviors rooted in the close connection between pro-social enactments and their returns for the individual (Ariely, Bracha, and Meier 2009; Soossi-Nathan, Negri, and Delle Fave 2013), a finding that is in fact likely to also occur in other sharing contexts. Such intermingledness of egoistic and altruistic motives for pro-social action, which has similarly been put forward by Mauss (1925/1967) in his theory of gift giving, is however not addressed by Belk’s (2007, 2010) seminal sharing theory.

Our analysis of CouchSurfing contributes to the recent discussion on sharing in that it introduces the idea of experience sharing, which provides a complementary perspective to the focus on sharing material resources. Additionally, we introduce the concept of experiential capital and point out how such experiential capital can lead to self-enhancement as concrete outcome of sharing. Finally, we discuss the issue of reciprocity in shared experiences that we see as being rooted in an intermingling of self- and other-directed goals, a perspective that refines Belk’s (2007, 2010) definition of sharing.

REFERENCES


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