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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **“Thank Me For Hosting:” the Role of Reciprocity in Sharing**

Alina Geiger, University of Bayreuth

Claas Christian Germelmann, University of Bayreuth

This paper contributes to the discussion of sharing and reciprocity. Following a mixed method approach, we examine the role of reciprocity within the context of Couchsurfing, a free online hospitality exchange platform. Results indicate that giving and receiving play different roles when it comes to the hosts' balance perceptions.

### **[to cite]:**

Alina Geiger and Claas Christian Germelmann (2015) ,““Thank Me For Hosting:” the Role of Reciprocity in Sharing”, in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 43, eds. Kristin Diehl and Carolyn Yoon, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 534-535.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019382/volumes/v43/NA-43>

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# “Thank Me for Hosting:” The Role of Reciprocity in Sharing

Alina Geiger, University of Bayreuth, Germany

Claas Christian Germelmann, University of Bayreuth, Germany

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

According to the sharing literature (Belk 2010; Price 1975), sharing does not include reciprocity in the classical sense, as occurs in gift giving or commodity exchange. On the other hand, reciprocity seems to be ubiquitous in the sharing economy, where we find plenty of business models comprising sharing, swapping, bartering, commercial renting, leasing as well as buying (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Gansky 2010). We decided to investigate this contradiction in the context of Couchsurfing, a prime example of real sharing (Belk 2014). Couchsurfing is a platform on which members offer free accommodation to other members. Since Couchsurfing (2015) prohibits to charge for hosting, the type and amount of compensation is regulated implicitly. Except for small gifts, reciprocal acts usually involve intangible, interpersonal compensation (Belk 2014; Bialski 2011; Chen 2011; Hellwig et al. 2014).

The role of reciprocity has so far been only sparsely observed in sharing theory and we know little about the reciprocity perceptions of consumers who engage actively in sharing programs. Though prior studies have pointed out that reciprocity is involved in Couchsurfing (Bialski 2011; Chen 2011; Hellwig et al. 2014; Lauterbach et al. 2009), it remains unclear how different types of reciprocity are perceived and how they can affect the sharing experience. In order to close this gap, our research is guided by the question of how important reciprocity is for sharing and whether differences in balance of reciprocity perception may lead to different outcomes.

We address this question with a mixed method approach of the quan-QUAL type. To obtain some initial insights into the interrelation between giving, receiving, and the perceived balance between these two in a sharing context, we conducted an empirical pilot study. In this pilot study with 298 Couchsurfing hosts (48% female, aged 18-70,  $M = 31$ ), we investigated perceptions of how much the hosts give to and receive from their surfers, as well as the perceived balance in their exchanges. The perceived level of what the host gives and what he takes (receives) from his surfers was measured with a slider from zero to 100. Four items from Pervan, Bove, and Johnson (2009) were used to measure the perceived balance of reciprocity (seven-point rating scale with 1 = totally disagree, and 7 = totally agree; Cronbach's alpha = .91). The results of the pilot study indicate that the perceived reciprocity balance depends on how much hosts receive ( $\beta = .36, p < .05$  and not how much they give:  $\beta = -.03, p = .65$ ) and therefore, it is not the result of an economic trade-off between giving and receiving.

In order to generate a better understanding of these complex interrelations between receiving and the perceived balance of reciprocity in sharing, we conducted 21 semi-structured interviews (48% female, aged 18-47,  $M = 28$ ) and asked Couchsurfing hosts to keep an event-based diary ( $N = 35$ , 34% female, aged 19-58,  $M = 32$ ). We analyzed both interviews and diaries using an interpretive, exploratory approach (Spiggle 1994).

The findings of both studies show that hosts generally welcome and accept reciprocal behavior, but that there is a different understanding of what kind and how much reciprocity is appropriate. What is considered to be a sufficient, appropriate, and valuable compensation further depends on the nature of the relationship between host and surfer.

At first, and during short-term stays with little opportunity for social interaction, the relationship is distant and superficial. The

host is indeed sharing his home with the surfer, but more in terms of *sharing out*, which is, according to Belk “dividing a resource among discrete economic interests” (2010, 726). Here, the host either gladly accepts any kind of compensation offered by the surfer, or even expects the surfer to reciprocate directly in order to achieve a balanced reciprocity (Sahlins 1972). It is common to bring a small gift (Belk 2014a; Bialski 2011) or invite hosts for coffee or drinks. Both material and monetary compensations often serve as icebreakers and endorsements for immaterial compensation (Bialski 2011; Chen 2011; Hellwig et al. 2014) like cooking a traditional meal, knowledge transfer or an art or musical performance. This type of reciprocity contributes to the joint experience (Hellwig et al. 2014) and is often regarded as more valuable and special than material or monetary compensation.

A balance of exchanges can also be accomplished indirectly through the community. It is considered a general principle that one should alternate between surfing and hosting (Bialski 2011; Lauterbach et al. 2009), which functions as stabilization (Gouldner 1960; Pervan et al. 2009) within the Couchsurfing community.

According to Sahlins (1972), balanced reciprocity between friends can develop into more generalized reciprocity over time. In Couchsurfing, friendship, intimacy, and trust often evolve quickly, despite the short time frame (Bialski 2011). A close relationship is usually what Couchsurfers seek (Bialski 2011), but it does not evolve during every stay. Outcomes of such a close relationship may occur in terms of experiential capital (Hellwig et al. 2014), personal growth, and mutual inspiration. Arriving at this stage, which is characterized by generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972), trying to reciprocate with material or monetary compensation is not considered necessary and could even jeopardize the relationship between host and surfer. In return for accommodation and invested efforts, hosts rather wish to spend time with their guest—getting to know the surfer, hear the stories, and learn more about his/her life, way of thinking, profession, or culture (Bialski 2011; Hellwig et al. 2014). When surfers do not meet the hosts' expectations, hosts feel disappointed or even exploited, which is an example for negative reciprocity (Sahlins 1972).

Our research contributes to the discussion on the relationship between sharing and reciprocity (Belk 2010; Hellwig et al. 2014; Price 1975), by generating a better understanding of the interplay between giving, receiving, and reciprocity for sharing behavior. By linking different forms of reciprocity (Sahlins 1972) to the sharing concept, we further provide a clearer distinction of why and where sharing ends and other forms of exchange begin.

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