Sharing My Way Or Your Way? Institutional Alignment of Ideological Tensions and Justice Narratives Within a Sharing Community

Johanna F. Gollnhofer, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
Katharina Hellwig, HEC Lausanne, Switzerland
Felicitas Morhart, HEC Lausanne, Switzerland

Sharing is driven by different and partly contradicting ideologies such as ecological, social and capitalist point of views. By the means of an ethnographic approach we investigate how institutional structures align those ideologies within a sharing community and advance understanding of ideology and justice in the field of consumer behavior.

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Narratives Within a Sharing Community

Johanna F. Gollnhofer, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland
Katharina Hellwig, HEC Lausanne, Switzerland
Felicitas Morhart, HEC Lausanne, Switzerland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Gift-exchanges, sharing and alternative markets as they can be observed within the “new sharing economy” (Botsman and Rogers 2011) flourish all over the world. Recent research has pointed out nuances of sharing and proposed a differentiation between concepts such as sharing, gift-giving and pseudosharing (Belk 2010). However, such distinction is oftentimes blurry as different ideological tensions exist within multi-stakeholder sharing systems. In popular media but also in academic accounts, “sharing” is displayed as a panacea in a hyper consumerist world: It is not only seen as pro-social (Belk 2010), but moreover associated with an environmentally friendly lifestyle (Botsman and Rogers 2011) that fosters an efficient use of existing resources. From this perspective on sharing, the ideals of pro-sociality and sustainability go hand in hand. In addition to ideals of sustainability and pro-sociality, sharing also accommodates capitalist ideals. Indeed, the “new sharing economy” has brought forward numerous new business models (e.g., car-sharing, peer-to-peer rental) that outperform traditional businesses through their efficiency and profit margins.

Ideologies have been found to underlie and underpin most structures, exchanges, interactions, institutions and consumer behavior (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Üstüner and Holt 2007). Recent research has focused on how ideological struggles are enacted on the marketplace (Giesler 2008; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010), and how they might hinder the pursuit of an identity project (McAlexander, Dufault, Martin, and Schouten 2014) or firms to adapt innovative strategic orientations (Press, Arnould, Murray, and Strand 2014). However, only a few studies suggested how these ideologies might be aligned or form a hybrid structure (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Kozinets 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

Against this background, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

What different ideological tensions and different perceptions of ideology exist within a non-monetary sharing system? How are those tensions negotiated and aligned?

By means of an analysis of ethnographic data collected in the German sharing community foodsharing.de, we analyze justice narratives regarding the redistribution of surplus food items and uncover underlying ideological struggles, tensions and their final alignment through the adoption of an institutional structure.

Foodsharing.de is a German online platform aimed at reducing food waste. The organization connects retailers who have surplus food to give away with individuals (named foodsavers) volunteering to collect and distribute the food for further use. The role of the retailers in foodsharing.de is particularly noteworthy as they give away food for free although this could potentially cannibalize their source of revenue. No monetary flows are involved at any moment in time and the foodsharing platform positions itself as “ethical sharing”.

Our results show how the negotiation of ideologies and underlying principles of justice in the foodsharing community follows the classic dramaturgical structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Marx 1956). Threatened by conflicting ideologies of fair sharing, the original ecological ideology of foodsharing is being re-negotiated through different narratives: The retailers’ capitalist ideology challenged the ecological foodsaver ideology (thesis) through suspicion of personal gain from free food (antithesis). In response, food savers created the “service provider” narrative (synthesis) to embrace the capitalist economy principle (tit-for-tat). Then, the pro-social camp within the community challenged an overly capitalistic framing of foodsharing as service provider through a heroic Robin Hood narrative promoting the needs principle of justice (thesis). This narrative, in turn, was at odds and endangered the ecological ideology of food sharing (antithesis), namely the reduction of food waste. In response, proponents of the original idea created an equally heroic counter-narrative of the “Knights of the Round Table” (synthesis). An institutional structure sustains and emphasizes this heroic counter-narrative while still leaving space for other ideological orientations.

This way we yield several theoretical contributions. First, prior research came up with blurry classifications of sharing in opposition to other forms of exchange such as gift-giving or traditional market exchange (Belk 2010). We show that sharing communities are a nexus of pro-social, environmental and capitalist ideologies that are similar to communities of purpose (Schouten and Martin, 2011) and that the actions happening therein are hence difficult to classify. Second, in contrast to recent research claiming that divergent ideologies always strive for dominance (Giesler 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), we show that ideologies might as well co-exist in a peaceful manner through the balancing of fluent narratives. Furthermore, we add to research on legitimation and social structure (Giesler 2012; Thompson 2004) by emphasizing how institutionalization helps in aligning partly opposing and divergent ideologies.

REFERENCES
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