“People Like Us:” Negotiating Social Boundaries in House Swapping

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This study explores how consumers temporarily swap their homes with strangers. Through micro social practices, such as cleaning, consumers assert house swapping as altruistically-driven exchange that exists outside market logics of commercial lodging services. Nevertheless, subtle practices lead to exclusion of trading partners who are dissimilar.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1021386/volumes/v44/NA-44

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The concept of consumer sharing is attracting the attention of both researchers and practitioners given the growth of the sharing economy (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Gansky 2010). Sharing was originally defined as compassionate, socially inclusive, unselfish, communal behavior, reflecting our altruistic motives to help and connect with other people, with no expectations of reciprocity (Belk 2010; Benkler 2004). However, recent scholars question the adequacy of existing definitions and are noting a darker side of sharing (Arnould and Rose 2015; Appau, Ozanne, and Klein 2015; Botsman 2014). This special session asks the question: how are different meanings of sharing socially constructed and when does sharing turn dark? By integrating a macro view of sharing in the context of the sharing economy with a micro view of sharing between individual consumers, and utilizing variety of methodological approaches, this session introduces new forms of sharing, expanding our knowledge about this important consumption phenomenon.

First, Belk explores selfish sharing, which addresses the darker side of sharing that moves away from its original definition of being a caring and inclusionary act. Belk posits that both providers and consumers exhibit utilitarian and selfish motives within many sharing economy services. He focuses on gated communities as a prototype of selfish sharing, showing that members of these communities use sharing within their communities to exclude others from enjoying the shared services.

Second, Yang, Ozanne, and Paladino explore the community of house swapping where strangers allow one another to live temporarily in their homes, arguably one of the most sacred possessions. Through their micro practices of cleaning and hospitality, consumers assert house swapping as altruistically driven exchange that exists outside market logics of commercial lodging services. Nevertheless, subtle practices exclude people who are not like us.

Third, Rose builds on work by Arnould and Rose (2015), Belk (2010; 2016), and Giesler (2008) in an effort to further disambiguate the breadth and depth of the sharing economy and its participants. By focusing on differences in actors (i.e. firms, consumers, workers) and modes of exchange of various contexts, the utility of the mutuality concept in both academic analysis of and business success in the sharing economy is demonstrated.

FINALLY, Ruvio, Mandel, and Gentina investigate the reciprocal altruistic motives of consumers when they consider with whom they share. In four experiments they demonstrate that sharing is a strategic social decision that leads people to share more with individuals perceived as superior (vs. inferior) to them in a specific domain of social comparison. This behavior is motivated by future expectations for gains, and similar to Belk’s paper, questions the perception of sharing as an unselfish, nonreciprocal act.

Each of these papers highlights a different shade of sharing as a consumption phenomenon. Together they expand our understanding of consumer sharing and help push the boundaries of this emerging concept. This session offers potentially fruitful avenues for future research, and will appeal to ACR attendees interested in sharing, sharing economy, altruistic behavior, possessions and self-identity, among others.

Selfish Sharing

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the ideal form of “sharing in,” inclusionary acts of allowing others to use our possessions as if they were their own are typically generous, caring, and even altruistic acts of kindness intended to help these other people. This is the sort of sharing that is found most often among family members, close kin, and sometimes among friends and neighbors (Belk 2010). At the opposite extreme lies egoistic sharing. While egoistic sharing is not necessarily intended to harm others, it is narrowly or grudgingly inclusionary and is often more concerned with getting “my share” and with excluding others who are not legally entitled to partake of the shared resources. One example is an antagonistic divorce in which each partner is intent on getting as much as they can and with having no further contact with the other party (McAlexander, Schouten, and Roberts 1993; McAlexander and Schouten 1996). This is one extreme of “sharing out.”

Egoistic sharing also includes pseudo-sharing (Belk 2014) that involves mercenary short term rental. Such selfish pseudo-sharing uses “sharewashing” rhetoric to cloak the practice of rental in the more socially desirable, but unjustified, mantle of sharing (Belk 2014, forthcoming; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2015). The only differences between car rental companies like Avis and many “car sharing” companies like ZipCar is the length of rental, the places and process of gaining access, and the need for a membership. Both are selling temporary access and not the act of voluntarily sharing possessions with others in a caring and generous manner. Quite the opposite is true. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found that ZipCar participants feel no sense of community with other members and fail to make an effort to return possessions prior drivers may have left behind in a vehicle. They instead want to penalize members who return a car later than promised or leave personal items inside.

It is not simply the act of charging a fee that differentiates altruistic sharing from more selfish pseudo-sharing. A small-scale neighborhood car sharing organization like Majorna in Göteborg, Sweden, operates without employees as its 300 members service the organization’s 29 cars, run IT, and take care of day-to-day operations (Jonsson 2007). Members want to keep the organization small for fear that they would lose their ability to know all the other members. Similarly, it is not only the no-fee accommodation sharing service of CouchSurfing that provides social benefits to participants, but even...
the fee-based service of AirBnB is found to often include sociability as well as a place to stay (Hellwig, Belk, and Morhart forthcoming). Nor, as the millions of participants in both CouchSurfing and AirBnB attest, is it the size of an organization that decouples caring from sharing. Rather, it appears to be the dominance of a utilitarian, egoistic, and selfish orientation among both providers and consumers of sharing services that makes the difference.

In this presentation I focus on a context where selfish sharing is the norm: gated communities. Although they are premised on sharing common resources like roads, swimming pools, landscaping, and guardhouses with fellow residents, gated community members focus more on uncaring exclusionary practices. This is true not only in the sense of excluding neighbors from outside the community like trick-or-treaters and Christmas carolers (National Report 2015), but they may even ban children living within the gated community from these neighborly caring practices (Ramirez 2013). The fears that attract people to buy into gated communities do not seem to abate once inside. Members feel little sense of community, install burglar alarms, and fail to participate in the homeowner associations to which they must belong (Choon-Piew 2007; Dinzey-Flores 2013; Low 2004).

Not only do residents of gated communities tend to engage in only selfish sharing, but developers and municipalities do as well. Because local governments can still collect property taxes without having to provide many services, gated communities are welcomed as cash cows (McKenzie 2006).

Using gated communities as an example, we can see how the growing global divide between rich and poor tends to promote selfish privatization in the name of sharing. Here too the retreat to egoistic “sharing” precludes caring and community. The promise of sharing is found to be inverted from being inclusionary to being another exclusionary neo-liberal practice.

Mutually Assured Explanation: Advancing a Framework for the Sharing Economy

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As the name of this session, implies, the “sharing economy” has firmly positioned itself within academic discourse. Similarly, a perusal of the New York Times will reveal the extent to which the concept has reached a similar vantage point in the mainstream press. Despite this ubiquity, a great deal of the discussion seems to revolve around points of confusion with respect to the phenomenon. The argument presented here is that the theoretical framework of mutuality and possessive individualism introduced to consumer research by Giesler (2008) and elaborated in Arnould and Rose (2015) offers a comprehensive, accessible means of grasping, both analytically (e.g., for academics) and strategically (e.g., for managers), the sharing economy.

Before demonstrating the efficacy of the framework, it bears delving into four issues that seem to be consistently lost in the shuffle when discussions of the sharing economy occur. The first matter is to define what exactly is it that is being discussed, a definition of the subject matter as it were. That is, an economy—a system of resource circulation amongst a collection of actors. This rather elementary point is important because it fixes for us the often-elusive subject of our discussion: a group of people engaged in the activity of exchange. Second, what is being circulated? Money? Access? Obligation? Labor? Services?

The third issue, which follows from the first two, is an explicit recognition of the actors involved in the analysis. Again, this point seems more than a touch elementary, but many of the disputes one encounters in the literature seem to find their source in an ambiguity about the actors involved in the specific analysis. Are we considering the role of exchange between consumers? Between brands and consumers? Between firms and workers? Between some combination of these?

Fourth, we must recall that economies do not occur in a vacuum. That is, none of these systems of resource circulation take place independently of a cultural context. Delineating the nature of that context sheds additional light on the issue. For instance, exchange of money between citizens of a country in the form of taxes might be viewed as a tyrannical imposition in one context, or in a benevolent cast as fair social redistribution in another.

The framework posits mutuality as a substitute for the nebulous sharing construct and juxtaposes it against another dominant trope, possessive individualism (Giesler 2008). Mutuality, otherwise identified as generalized exchange (Willer et al. 2011), is action that entails the assumption that another party would act toward the first in mutual fashion were their roles reversed. This assumption of mutuality rests on the actors’ understanding that they share a common sociality. Thus, mutuality is exchange action that rests on normative sociality, with the expectations attached thereto.

Opposite mutuality, the concept of possessive individualism is the normative underpinning of market exchange. Here, action entails the assumption that the actor maximize his/her own personal benefit. The obligation to receive dominates exchange and actions rest on an ethic of maximization. Possessive individualism lends itself to actions that disregard the shared social context, as its normative imperative is for the individual to control, own, and of course, maximize; it has given rise to conservative and capitalist agendas for these very reasons (Giesler 2008).

In her essay for The Great Transition Initiative, Schor beautifully articulates the potential of the theoretical framework, though not in explicit terms: “The key to making sharing economies just is to emphasize an explicit politics of sharing, as well as nurturing collective, public forms of sharing” (2014, p.11). In other words, sharing economies will succeed in their socially promising premise insofar as they are built on and foster mutuality, rather than possessive individualism. To illustrate, consider the following examples.

Lamberton and Rose examine commercial sharing programs, which they define as “marketer-managed systems that provide customers with the opportunity to enjoy product benefits without ownership” (2012, p.109). They find that consumers take a largely utilitarian view of services like Zipcar. Consider the actors: this is a consumer sharing system mediated by a firm. The resources circulating are filtered through an impersonal, private entity. That the possessive individualist norms dominate should thus come as little surprise, as the entire exchange is contextualized as a market transaction without any of the inscribed sociality one would expect from mutuality. Thus, social-like trust and cooperation had limited efficacy. Furthermore, the authors find that increasing familiarity with the sharing concept increases consumers’ propensity to participate. One might hazard to guess that this familiarity makes salient the sociality inherent in mutuality and thus shifts perceptions of the exchange.

On the other hand, my own field work in the craft beer industry reveals a network precisely the same: consumers, firms, and consumers. The difference, however, is that these craft brewers provide the social context for relationships develop; their market-mediated exchanges facilitate the grounds for sociality inherent in mutuality. As a result, I found solidarity amongst the consumers and favorable attributions about the brand by consumers, both to one another, to the brand, and to potential consumers. Each of these outcomes is theoretically consistent with the theory of the gift and accounted for by the fostering of mutuality by the firm.
In this manner, I explicate in depth these examples and several others in order to highlight the extent to which the mutuality and possessive individualism framework can help disambiguate the causes and consequences of the variance we see in different contexts of the sharing economy. Clearly identifying the actors and excavating the normative undertones of the exchange allows researchers to use the mutuality and individualism framework analytically as well as strategically.

“People Like Us:” Negotiating Social Boundaries in House Swapping

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent studies find commercial sharing groups do not always produce in-group identity and solidarity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). When the shared good is perceived as scarce, competitive relationships may arise in commercial sharing groups (Lamberton and Rose 2012). We examine the meaning of sharing among individuals who exchange their homes with strangers. Although a sense of solidarity emerges among members who swap homes as a travel lifestyle, subtle exclusionary forces are also at play. We focus on how micro social practices help people negotiate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Home swapping is a well-established online lodging service, which enables members to temporarily stay in each other’s home for free. The majority of home swappers are educated couples who are keen travelers seeking authentic cultural experiences (Forno and Garibaldi 2013). This study involved the analysis of online archival data, interviews with 23 home swappers (varying in their level of experience), and home swapping materials (e.g., web profiles and house instructions). We also probed examples of extreme cases, such as best and worst home swaps, to establish the boundaries of our findings (Dion, Sabri, and Guillard 2014).

Many swappers were seeking out people who were like themselves. Jennifer captures this sentiment: “I’m into all sorts of sharing things, but I think it’s one of those things where it works best when it’s what I describe as PLU, ‘people like us.’ People with the same standards, same expectations, quite often same education level, not necessarily, but it helps.” Early in the home sharing negotiations, swappers even use a dating metaphor as they include and exclude potential swap partners. Sometimes this match making is practical (e.g., families who share similar school holiday dates or retirees who travel for longer period). But significant time is invested in researching potential partners and looking for subtle tells for compatibility (e.g., shared interests, furnishings that reflect similar tastes, or delayed replies suggesting lack of a commitment). Swappers who pass this vetting process often become friends and stay in touch: “It doesn’t feel like a business transaction… you feel like a friendship was developed (Ross).”

We find that mundane practices of cleaning are employed by home swappers to substantiate the swap transaction as a form of altruistic sharing. Through the micro-social negotiation of ‘clean enough,” home swappers achieve a sense of ‘we-ness’ and differentiate themselves from commercial lodging services. The meaning of cleanliness is expressed and reproduced in everyday cleaning practices (Shove 2003). Cleaning practices symbolize and reproduce social boundaries and a sense of order in our everyday life (Douglas 1984). Through domestic cleaning, people come to realize and negotiate the difference between clean and dirty, inside and outside, and “create a sense of home out of the material house” (Douglas 1984, p. 69).

‘Over clean’ imposes stress and fear of contamination to swappers and hampers the pleasure of ‘being on holiday.’ As Michelle described: “They basically spent the whole day cleaning. We got to their house and it’s absolutely spotless. And I thought, ‘No, this is terrible.’” Excessive cleaning makes swappers more conscious about being in another’s home and reinforces the boundary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ which in turn positions the swap more like an exchange between strangers. When homes are ‘over cleaned,’ it violates the shared expectation that swappers are a different group who are relaxed and adaptable. Homes that are too clean highlight the mismatch of expectations between swappers and symbolize characteristics of commodified hotel rooms (Dion et al. 2014).

Among experienced swappers, “clean enough” is the common expectation that marks a person as part of the community. Rather than making their homes “spotless” or “pristine and clean,” swappers do basic cleaning of bathrooms and kitchens and provide clean linens, but most leave the home as they normally live. They clear out space in closets but leave the clutter of daily life, which is part of the appeal of living in another person’s home. Certain dirt, like bread crumbs and dirty towels in the hamper, are considered normal and tolerated by swappers (Dion et al. 2014). Thus, ‘enough clean’ helps swappers navigate potential symbolic pollution and highlights the unpaid nature of home swapping as a form of sharing (Belk 2010).

Finally, the ‘under-cleaned’ house revealed a sense of local dis-order and mismatch of standards. Although some cultural differences are tolerated, swappers who ‘under clean’ are often considered as an outsider or newbie. Experienced home swappers such as Lucy, attributes the problem of under-cleaning to “the type of people.”

There is a downside to home exchange and that can include inconsiderate people who commit to home exchanges and then back out with idiotic explanations (e.g., “I changed my mind”). There are also the slobs and people who do not maintain their homes, leaving you with a myriad of unpleasant problems during the exchange. Although unusual, another informant left a home horrified at a flat that was “dirty” and “sticky” with bed linens that “looked grubby,” she equated it to living in council flats of the poor and a chaotic life.

These findings extend our knowledge on how and why some symbolic pollution is tolerated while others are not. It also shows that the meaning of cleanliness can be fluid and circumstantial (Dion et al. 2014). In home swapping, the alternative norm of ‘clean enough” enables a sense of solidarity and affirms the spirit of altruistic sharing. However, the tolerance of dirt and ‘clean enough” is conditional among people like us. This demonstrates that similar to cleaning practices, sharing as a cultural construct is built around distinctions of age, gender, and class (Douglas, 1984).

To summarize, our study shows that the micro social negotiation of exchange and cleanliness can be used by consumers to substantiate the altruistic face of sharing. Underneath its altruistic appearance, sharing implies an in-group practice. More importantly, this study demonstrates how meanings of sharing are actively constructed and reproduced by consumers in everyday practices. This important finding should help us better understand the contemporary sharing economy and consumers’ role within it.

Reciprocal Altruism as a Motivation for Sharing: Sharing Up verses Sharing Down

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The consumer literature on sharing views it as a social phenomenon, and focuses on sharing with close others such as family and friends, portraying it as an altruistic, pro-social behavior with no...
expectations of reciprocity (Belk’s presentation). However, little is known about what drives people to share important possessions with acquaintances and strangers.

Our research explores the role of social comparison and reciprocity expectations in sharing. Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) posits that people compare themselves to others who are either superior to them (upward comparison) or inferior to them (downward comparison) on dimensions such as intelligence, appearance, or status. Upward (vs. downward) comparison is often motivated by assimilation needs (Mussweiler 2003).

The extant literature suggests that when considering with whom to share, individuals may have conflicting motivations. On the one hand, individuals may prefer to share up due to reciprocity expectations. While sharing up and sharing down are both strategies that will result in reciprocal altruism, sharing up should be seen as more beneficial, because it has the potential to result in a larger amount of reciprocity. On the other hand, individuals may prefer to share down due to feeling better off, feeling empathy toward the target, or wanting their resources to go a longer way. Under normal conditions (such as when the comparison target is the same as the sharing target), we expect reciprocity concerns to be stronger than altruistic concerns, making people more likely to share up than to share down. However, under conditions in which reciprocity is less likely, we expect altruistic concerns to be stronger than reciprocity concerns, making people more likely to share down than to share up. In four studies, we demonstrate that due to expected reciprocity, individuals are generally more likely to share up than to share down. However, when expected reciprocity is removed from the equation, pure altruism takes over, and individuals become more likely to share down than to share up.

Study 1a investigated the effect of social comparison on the willingness to share, utilizing a 3 (comparison target: upward, downward, neutral) between-subject design with 501 business students. The participants read a scenario about Michael/Michelle, who was a very successful (upward comparison), very unsuccessful (downward comparison) or average (neutral) business student in the same class as the participant (Mussweiler et al. 2004). The gender of the target and the participants were matched to control for the effects of mating motives. Next, the participants read another scenario about the same person approaching them and asking them to share a possession relevant to the academic domain (class notes or a computer) with him or her. Participants indicated their willingness to share the items with Michael/Michelle and their reciprocity expectations (i.e., what they expected to gain) from the act of sharing. Participants were more willing to share-up versus down (M_{upward}=5.01 vs. M_{downward}=3.25), with neutral in the middle (M_{neutral}=4.25; F(2,497) = 48.86, p=.00). In addition, they had greater reciprocity expectations from sharing with an upward target than from the other targets (M_{upward}=4.57 vs. M_{neutral}=3.90 vs. M_{downward}=3.43; F(2,497) = 32.27, p=.00). Furthermore, their reciprocity expectations mediated the relationship between social comparison (b=2.0, p=.00) and sharing (b=.77, p=.00). Study 1b replicated these results with a different social comparison scenario (a hypothetical workplace situation) among a sample of mTurk workers. Study 2 replicated these results with another academic scenario, across a variety of different possessions that were either relevant to the domain of comparison (computer and class notes) or non-relevant to the domain of comparison (sandwich and apartment). Participants were again more likely to share up than to share down across these different scenarios and product categories.

In study 3, we varied whether the sharing target (e.g., Jordan) was the same as or different from the comparison target (e.g., Michael). By doing so, we rendered the sharing decision irrelevant to the comparison act. In other words, Michael’s class performance is irrelevant to the decision of whether or not to share with Jordan. We used a 2 (social comparison: upward vs. downward) x 2 (sharing target: same as comparison target vs. different than comparison target) between-subject design with 329 students and the same procedure of the previous experiments. The results showed a main effect of social comparison, with greater intentions to share-up (M_{upward}=4.80 vs. M_{downward}=4.13; F(1,325) = 13.21, p=.00), as well as a significant social comparison X sharing target interaction (F(1,325) = 37.99, p=.00). Specifically, when the sharing target was the same as the comparison target, the participants were more likely to share up than down (M_{upward}=5.40 vs. M_{downward}=3.64), replicating our previous findings. However, when the sharing target was different from the comparison target, they were more likely to share down than to share up (M_{upward}=4.18 vs. M_{downward}=4.63; F(1,325) = 3.13, p=.08).

Finally, Study 4 investigated the moderating effect of the comparison target relevancy, as reflected in the degree of which the comparison target was related to the participants’ academic major. We reasoned that a comparison target who has the same college major would be much more likely and capable of reciprocating in the future. We used 2 (social comparison: upward vs. downward) x 3 (comparison target relevancy: high- business major; moderate- biology major taking one business course; low- biology major taking no classes in common with the sharer) between-subjects design with 656 business students. The results revealed a main effect of social comparison, with greater intentions to share up (M_{upward}=5.00 vs. M_{downward}=3.83; F(1,653) = 79.74, p=.00). However, this main effect was qualified by a significant social comparison X relevancy interaction (F(2,650) = 8.84, p=.00). In the high and moderate relevancy conditions, participants were more likely to share up vs. down (M_{high relevancy upward}=5.39, SD=1.42 vs. M_{high relevancy downward}=3.60; M_{moderate relevancy upward}=4.89 vs. M_{moderate relevancy downward}=3.59), replicating our previous findings. However, in the low relevancy condition, there were no significant differences between the social comparison conditions (M_{upward}=4.72 vs. M_{downward}=4.29).

Taken together these studies suggest that expected reciprocity motivates people to share up versus down. However, in the absence of such motivations, people’s sharing decisions become more altruistic.

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Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 44) / 41


