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## **How the Norm of Reciprocity Influences Sharing in Direct and Generalized Exchanges**

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We provide experimental evidence of how the norm of reciprocity influences sharing. Results show that the expected balance of reciprocity mediates the relationship between future giving and sharing intentions. When a norm is explicitly stated, sharing intensity decreases in generalized exchange, and sharing intentions are lower compared to balanced exchange.

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# How the Norm of Reciprocity Influences Sharing in Direct and Generalized Exchanges

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Even though sharing is universal and by no means a new concept, it was neglected in consumer research until Belk's seminal work in 2010. Research on sharing has been growing rapidly since then. One stream of this research follows an ethnographic approach and offers valuable insights into particular phenomena within the sharing economy (Gollnhofer, Hellwig, and Morhart 2016; Scaraboto 2015). Others expand knowledge with survey data (Habibi, Kim, and Laroche 2016; Hellwig et al. 2015). Despite the growing interest in this phenomenon, there is surprisingly little experimental research (Lamberton and Rose 2012) on the mechanisms behind the sharing of physical objects. Therefore, the aim of our research is to shed more light on the underlying processes, by looking at the interplay between sharing and reciprocity norms.

Prior research has found that reciprocity is involved in peer-to-peer sharing (Albinsson and Perera 2012; Corciolani and Dalli 2014; Habibi et al. 2016; Hellwig et al. 2015), but that it lacks clear reciprocity rules (Gollnhofer et al. 2016). Therefore, we want to investigate how an explicitly stated reciprocity norm influences sharing, compared to the absence of such an explicit norm. In addition, we consider exchange structure, since reciprocity differs in direct exchanges compared to generalized exchanges (Ekeh 1974). In direct exchange, an individual B will reciprocate directly to individual A in exchange for that what A has given to B (Willer, Flynn, and Zak 2012). In generalized exchange (Ekeh 1974) with "collective reciprocity" (Corciolani and Dalli 2014, 769), recipients are not obliged to reciprocate directly to their giver, but only indirectly through someone else.

Social exchange theory states that individuals provide each other with resources, because they expect to receive something in return (Blau 1964; Homans 1958). In social exchanges, the norm of reciprocity can function as a "starting mechanism" and as a "stabilizing mechanism" (Gouldner 1960, 176), because receiving implies an obligation to reciprocate (Blau 1964). Furthermore, according to Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), norms can induce norm-congruent behavior only when they are salient. Consequently, we expect an explicitly stated norm to affect the appeal of sharing platforms. We also propose that in the absence of an explicit norm, the expectation of balance of reciprocity affects sharing intentions.

The objective of our first study was to examine the appeal of different platform designs prior to the decision to join the platform. Therefore, we asked our participants to evaluate the front page of a new sharing website for booksharing. We used a 3 x 2 between-subject design, crossing reciprocity principle (explicit norm vs. two control conditions: gratitude or absence of an explicit norm) and exchange structure (direct vs. generalized), and randomly assigned 232 participants to one of the conditions.

As expected, without a clearly stated norm, potential giving did not influence the intention to participate directly, but was mediated by an expected balance of reciprocity. In the case of an explicit norm, intentions to participate were higher, but not significant in the direct exchange condition, and lower but not significant in the generalized condition. However, moderation analysis revealed a significant interaction between explicit norm and exchange structure. In the case of an explicit norm, intentions to participate were significantly lower in generalized exchange, compared to balanced exchange. Activating

gratitude, and mentioning no norm at all, did not yield significant effects.

The norm of reciprocity implies both rights and duties (Gouldner 1960). In this vein, receiving does imply an obligation to reciprocate, but giving also justifies receiving. Furthermore, while giving is important for reaching a critical mass (Botsman and Rogers 2010), peer-to-peer sharing depends on both the giving and taking of resources (Schade, Nitschke, and Sattler 2005). Without anyone taking, there is no circulation of resources. For this reason, we do not focus solely on giving, but giving *and* taking as an indicator of sharing intensity in our second study. Building on our results from study 1, we expect an explicit norm to decrease sharing intensity in generalized exchange. In this context, one might give more cautiously, because generalized exchange requires more trust (Ekeh 1974) that one will indeed receive appropriate reciprocation (Takahashi 2000). Additionally, taking might be more reserved, because the explicit norm underlines the obligation to reciprocate and it is not specified to whom one should give in the future, in order to comply sufficiently with the explicit norm.

In study 2, we randomly assigned 162 participants to a 2 (explicit norm vs. no norm mentioned) x 2 (direct vs. generalized exchange) between-subject design. This time, additionally to the front page, they saw how it would look when logging in on the website as a registered member. All participants saw an unbalanced status quo where prior giving exceeded prior receiving.

The results confirm Gouldner's (1960) assertion that prior giving justifies subsequent taking. As expected, significantly more participants chose to look at other's books first, after they had seen the stimulus material. Their decision was independent of the experimental condition. Furthermore, sharing intensity was lower in generalized exchange in cases of an explicit norm. Moderation analysis revealed a significant negative effect in the generalized condition; while there was no effect in the direct exchange condition.

Our findings extend Gouldner's (1960) view on the norm of reciprocity as an initiator and stabilization of social exchange, since we could also show that explicit norms can restrain sharing within generalized exchange in our context (i.e., sharing of physical objects without strong connection between members). However, in order to fully understand the influence of explicit norms in direct and generalized exchange, future research should take into account trust (Ekeh 1974), identification and levels of benefit (Willer et al. 2012).

In conclusion, our findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on the role of reciprocity in sharing (Arnould and Rose 2016; Belk 2010, 2016). Furthermore, we provide additional evidence that generalized exchange is not *per se* more effective than direct exchange, in contrast to what is argued by Lévi-Strauss (1949/1969) and Ekeh (1974). This evidence has implications for sharing platforms regarding platform design and communication.

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