



# You are what you can access: Sharing and collaborative consumption online



Russell Belk \*

York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3 Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Accepted 1 September 2013

Available online 16 October 2013

### Keywords:

Collaborative consumption

Ownership

Access

Sharing

Sharing economy

Community

## ABSTRACT

Sharing is a phenomenon as old as humankind, while collaborative consumption and the “sharing economy” are phenomena born of the Internet age. This paper compares sharing and collaborative consumption and finds that both are growing in popularity today. Examples are given and an assessment is made of the reasons for the current growth in these practices and their implications for businesses still using traditional models of sales and ownership. The old wisdom that we are what we own, may need modifying to consider forms of possession and uses that do not involve ownership.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Belk (1988) argues and theorizes that you are what you own. However with the Internet we have many ways to express our identity without ownership (Belk, 2013, in press). Consumer research bears witness to a flurry of recent attention to a group of related business and consumption practices describable as sharing (Belk, 2010), “collaborative consumption” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), “the mesh” (Gansky, 2010), “commercial sharing systems” (Lamberton & Rose, 2012), “co-production” (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), “co-creation” (Lanier & Schau, 2007; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), “prosumption” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1980), “product-service systems” (Mont, 2002), “access-based consumption,” (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), “consumer participation” (Fitzsimmons, 1985), and “online volunteering” (Postigo, 2003). This attention corresponds to the rise of numerous for-profit and non-profit businesses that are flourishing thanks to the rise of the “sharing economy” (e.g., Lessig, 2008; A. Sacks, 2011). Examples of businesses that fall within one or more of these rubrics are Airbnb, Zipcar, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Freecycle, and Twitter. In a broad sense, the Internet itself is a giant pool of shared content that can be accessed by anyone with an Internet connection, a browser, and a government that allows access to most or all web content.

There are two commonalities in these sharing and collaborative consumption practices: 1) their use of temporary access non-ownership models of utilizing consumer goods and services and 2) their reliance on the Internet, and especially Web 2.0, to bring this about. Web 2.0

“...refers collectively to websites that allow users to contribute content and connect with each other” (Carroll & Romano, 2011, p. 190). This is in contrast to Web 1.0 which primarily involved one-directional provision of information to consumers who did not interact or respond to the web site or to one another.

In this paper I seek to assess the similarities and differences between sharing and collaborative consumption, examine the extent to which various parts of the “sharing economy” truly involve sharing, and explain why these developments have stirred so much attention at this particular time. I further consider the degree to which they challenge traditional business models and the dangers and opportunities they may provide for business. For consumers, I consider how emerging ways of accessing possessions without ownership may influence our sense of self.

## 2. Materials and methods

This review is conceptual and based on an analysis of both scholarly research on sharing and collaborative consumption and media accounts of the latest developments in these contexts. I also draw on my own prior conceptual (Belk, 2007, 2010) and empirical (Belk & Llamas, 2012) work in studying sharing. I focus primarily on contemporary sharing activity, although the analysis is grounded in an historical and cultural appreciation of the basic practice of sharing.

## 3. Theory

Rather than a precise definition of sharing, Belk (2010) suggests contrasting the prototypes of sharing (mothering and the pooling and allocation of household resources) with the prototypes of gift giving

\* Tel.: +1 905 596 0079.

E-mail address: rbelk@schulich.yorku.ca.

(the exchange by Della and Jim in the O'Henry story "The Gift of the Magi") and of marketplace exchange (buying bread at a store for money). Belk (2007, p. 126) suggests that sharing involves "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use." A more succinct definition is provided by Benkler (2004) who sees sharing as "nonreciprocal pro-social behavior."

We share for both functional reasons like survival (Fine, 1980) and as an altruistic act intended as a convenience, courtesy, or kindness to others. We would be churlish indeed to deny someone the time of day, directions to a nearby location, or, if we are among fellow smokers, a light for their cigarette. These patterns of expected behavior have become cultural norms. Nevertheless, sharing is more likely to take place within family, close kin, and friends than among strangers. When sharing is an inclusive act that is likely to make the recipient a part of a pseudo-family and our aggregate extended self (Belk, 1988, 2013), it can be described as "sharing in" (Belk, 2010; Ingold, 1986).

On the other hand, when sharing involves dividing something between relative strangers or when it is intended as a one-time act such as providing someone with spare change, directions, or the time of day, it is described as "sharing out." Thus the degree of intimacy involved in sharing can vary considerably. But across this continuum, there remains a distinction between non-ownership-based sharing and the transfer of ownership and reciprocal exchange that are involved in both gift giving and marketplace exchange. Furthermore, no debt incurs when partaking of sharing as would be the case with gifts and market transactions.

Borrowing and lending are borderline cases of sharing that generate an expectation that the object or some equivalent will be returned. Sometimes "borrowing" is only a euphemism for requested sharing. If one student asks another, "May I borrow a sheet of paper?" no one expects that the borrower will ever return the sheet of paper. But this act of sharing may forge a small bond between the students so that favors may more readily be exchanged back and forth in the future. On the other hand if someone asks if they can borrow our mobile phone to make a call, we certainly expect them to return it as soon as the call is completed. Lending a mobile phone is a case of sharing out, as is the practice of sharing a ride with someone who is hitchhiking. Although hitchhiking has largely succumbed to fears of "stranger danger," as we will see it is being revived in several different forms with the help of the Internet.

Although Belk (2010) stipulates that we can share intangibles like ideas, values, and time, he excludes simple coincidences like "sharing" a common language, place of birth, or set of experiences, because these are not volitional choices. Two types of sharing that frequently occur are "demand sharing" and "open sharing." Demand sharing is evident when our children ask to be fed, but also when someone asks us for the time of day. Neither can rightly be refused, although the former involves sharing in while the latter involves sharing out. Open sharing is implied when we tell a house guest, "My house is your house." This implies that they can take our food, sit on our furniture, and use our bathroom, all without asking. With family members, such privileges are taken for granted, while for those whom we have invited to temporarily share our home, they need to be established unless there is a long history of such open sharing between the host and guest. Open sharing generally involves sharing in and would be quite uncommon with strangers.

#### 4. Findings: New sharing and pseudo-sharing practices

Having established some of the theoretical premises of sharing, distinctions from gift-giving and marketplace exchange, as well as different types of sharing practices and their relationship effects, I now turn to recent variations on the sharing theme as well as practices that appear to be related, but do not involve true sharing. It is important to make some distinctions, because there are a vast variety of activities

that now invoke the term sharing to describe what they involve (Wittel, 2011). After presenting and deconstructing these practices, I will consider implications for businesses, consumers, and the environment.

##### 4.1. Internet-facilitated sharing

The Internet and especially Web 2.0 has brought about many new ways of sharing as well as facilitating older forms of sharing on a larger scale. Grassmuck (in press) calls this "the sharing turn." Starting with Napster, free sharing of digital music and films began to flow between strangers who would download and often upload material via peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing (Giesler, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Henning, & Sattler, 2007). This caused the music and film industries to lose substantial sales of CDs and DVDs and provoked them to engage in a series of actions attempting to enforce their intellectual property rights (IPR) through such means as lawsuits, incorporating digital rights management (DRM) software into their products to curb duplication, and putting up fake corrupt files online to fowl download attempts (Giesler, 2008). The resulting "war on sharing" (Aigrain, 2012) has proved largely futile. Even though Napster was shut down (and later reinstated in legal form as a digital music store), many alternative sites sprung up in its place, including BitTorrent protocol sites like The Pirate Bay, Grokster, Gnutella, and Freenet.

Although iTunes, Rhapsody, Pandora, and Spotify have all succeeded in offering legal downloads or streaming music, and in some cases also films and television programs, a substantial proportion of downloads of films and music as well as software, e-books, and games are illegal, especially among young people. Estimates vary widely and differ from country to country, but there is no doubt that the practice is widespread. In Sweden sentiments in favor of Internet sharing are so strong that The Pirate Bay sharing site has successfully gained seats in Parliament. According to a survey by CBS (2009), 69% of Americans ages 18 to 29 believe that it is okay to share music online always or at least sometimes.

Although most of the non-market sharing sites involve true sharing, BitTorrent trackers require that users balance their uploads and downloads (Aigrain, 2012), making use more like a barter system that can be regarded as a special form of market exchange (Belk, 2010). Slater (2000) found that those exchanging pornographic photos online also kept track of others' balances between uploading and downloading, even though they had initially obtained the photos online for free. Here too we see intrusions of the marketplace exchange ethos into what is in other respects an act of online sharing.

While illegal music and film downloading has received the greatest amount of media attention and the most opposition by the music and film industries, there are a number of other sorts of sharing that have been initiated or facilitated by the Internet. YouTube asks us "What do you have to share?" and expects users to freely upload videos that they have made or mashups that they have created from other video content (John, 2013). Although those who put up popular videos can receive some compensation, the vast majority of content provision is uncompensated. This non-compensation is more fully the case with photo sharing sites like Flickr and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter as well as interest-sharing sites like Pinterest, ratings services like Tripadvisor and Angie's List, among bloggers, and in ratings given to books and movies on digital commerce sites like Amazon.com. It is not that these sites themselves are non-profit. The sites gain revenues through online selling and advertising, as do search engines like Google that facilitate accessing the vast archive of shared online information. But the overwhelming majority of users of these sites and those who put up much of the information that is able to be accessed online are freely sharing information, ratings, photos, and videos without compensation. Other examples include open source software like the Linux kernel that are collectively developed with volunteer labor and made freely available to whoever wants to use them as long as they credit the source (e.g., Hemetsberger, in press). Wikipedia is another example of a useful source of information (in this case, encyclopedic information)

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1017616>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1017616>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)