



# Exploring the effect of Airbnb hosts' attachment and psychological ownership in the sharing economy

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research on the sharing economy has not typically focused on organizational structure and its management in spite of the fact that the essence of recent peer-to-peer business practices is the collaboration of online platforms and sharable assets owned by market peers. This paper critically examines a theoretical model to explore how these market partners engage in this platform organization and how their perceptions of attachment and ownership are established within the new organizational structure. The results of structural equation modeling applied to 224 Airbnb hosts indicate that attachment to a platform firm plays a vital role in achieving a sense of psychological ownership that ultimately influences citizenship behaviors toward the organization as well as toward peer hosts. The results suggest that the newly formed structure should acknowledge an establishing mechanism of attachment and psychological ownership in partnering with individual service providers in its operational management.

## 1. Introduction

Online platform networks have transformed traditional consumption models (i.e., business-to-consumer transactions) into innovative consumption models based on emerging auxiliary goods and services by connecting supply and demand through peer-to-peer (P2P) transactions (Perry, 2015). In this transition, online platform organizations have recognized the inevitability of incorporating individual market partners (i.e., peers). These firm-market hybrid models of the sharing economy have resulted in a new organizational structure that does not necessarily focus on owning main products or hiring service providers (i.e., employees) (Sundararajan, 2014). To facilitate new organizational arrangements that include market peers who perform services with their owned assets, P2P firms require an extended investigation of how this new arrangement can be formed and what factors drive market partners (i.e., peer service providers) to participate in this new organizational structure.

Earlier organizational management studies have examined factors that influence the organizational behaviors of employees (e.g., Luthans, 2002; Pan & Qin, 2009; Pierce, Gardner, & Dunham, 2001a). Luthans (2002) emphasized that positive psychology emotionally connects employees with the organization and suggested that a sense of psychological ownership (henceforth PO) provides an important human resource advantage for the organization. In a subsequent empirical

study, Pan and Qin (2009) found that employees with a sense of PO show six behavioral outcomes: dedication, accountability, enthusiasm, innovation, helping others, and interpersonal congruence with the target organization. Further studies indicated a positive correlation between PO and organizational citizenship behavior (henceforth OCB), with PO as an important trigger (Lv & Gu, 2007; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). With an emphasis on the importance of PO, a feeling of attachment is an essential element that can develop emotional possession (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003). In a study by Ren et al. (2012), individual attachment was measured with two dimensions: being attached to a group and being attached to individuals. The group and its members may have a different level of attachment that eventually determines the presence of PO.

Although current research on the sharing economy provides insights into users' perspectives and their sources of motivation as well as their trust behaviors (e.g., Belk, 2013; Guttentag, 2013; Slee, 2013), little attention has been given to the comprehensive investigation of individual service providers (i.e., peer providers or sharing service partners). Differing from prior studies on the sharing economy, the present study interests in the managerial relationship between the firm and these service providers in response to the organizational structure changes in the sharing economy environment. To address the viewpoint of individual service providers and organization-partner relationships, this study regards Airbnb hosts as delegates of a sharing service partner

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and considers the Airbnb platform firm as a newly invented P2P organization.

The purpose of this study is therefore to provide an understanding of Airbnb hosts' perspectives on how they attach to both the Airbnb platform firm and peer hosts and how these different levels of attachment influence hosts' consequent behaviors by suggesting and testing a model of attachment antecedents, PO, and OCB of Airbnb hosts within the new P2P organizational structure. This paper extends the current sharing economy literature by proposing an integrated model that explains the importance of hosts' attachment in engendering citizenship behaviors toward the firm and peer hosts. In addition, it examines the effect of PO on hosts' citizenship behavior as they are attached to the organization and the peer host of Airbnb.

Finally, this paper suggests that the newly formed structure provides an important understanding of the mechanism of attachment and PO in its partnering with individual service providers in its operational management. Because the sharing economy businesses are based on the concept of the collaborative consumption of individuals, P2P firms should realize that the innovative formation of the organization requires a strategically customized way of management to work well with individual product and service owners.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The second section presents the theoretical background and the third section suggests the research model and hypotheses derived from prior literature and discussion. The fourth section elaborates the method, and the results of the study follow in the next section. The last section concludes with discussions, implications, limitations, and future research recommendations.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Attachment

According to Bowlby (1969), individuals naturally engage in the attachment process when they are born. The relationship between infant and mother is the foremost instance of attachment (Bowlby, 1969). These primary interactions permit an individual to create a growing set of expectations regarding other individuals, specifically regarding how individuals behave and respond in relationships (Weimer, Kerns, & Oldenburg, 2004). Bowlby (1969) also argued that time and proximity are required for an individual to develop feelings of attachment to other objects. Following Bowlby (1969), recent literature in social psychology has extended the scope of attachment from the individual to the organizational level and has suggested new measures for assessing a sense of attachment toward an organization (Ren et al., 2012). Attachment thus explains how psychological proximity determines the differences in behavior among individual members of a certain group. As behavioral outcomes resulting from attachment, individuals with a stronger sense of attachment to an organization generally stay longer, engage more actively, and take additional responsibilities within the organization, which in turn leads to better job performance (Hogg, 1992). The work of Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky (2002) showed that lower job turnover rates and fewer intentions to leave are seen in groups of people who are more committed to their organization.

Other scholars have developed similar accounts. For example, O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) argued that an individual's psychological attachment to an organization is directed toward both the organization itself and other members of the organization. It was also argued that one critical mechanism of becoming attached is an individual's acceptance of a specific set of visions, goals, or values (Kagan, 1958). In the process of becoming attached to a group (e.g., an organization), attachment is built when people feel a sense of connection to the characteristics or purpose of a group (Hogg & Turner, 1985). At the same time, this sense is rooted when individuals develop interpersonal relationships with other members of the group (Festinger, Back, & Schachter, 1950). Furthermore, Ren et al. (2012) proposed various

possible antecedents that can strengthen an individual's sense of attachment to an organization, such as group categorization, information, homogeneity, and familiarity, along with a sense of attachment to other members of the group, which includes personal information, transparency, similarity, and interpersonal communication. Following these arguments, the present study considers two different types of attachment—attachment to the organization (the Airbnb company) and attachment to other members of the organization (peer hosts of Airbnb)—as key factors that promote both PO and OCB, with a focus on individual service providers (Airbnb hosts) in the context of P2P platforms of the sharing economy. In addition to consequences (PO and two types of OCB), the antecedents of each type of attachment are identified and investigated in this study to understand the comprehensive mechanism of the two different types of attachment from the perspective of individual service providers.

### 2.2. Psychological ownership

The concept of possessive feelings or psychological ownership (PO) has been defined as the identification of a particular object as “mine” or “ours” (Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). A wide range of research concludes that PO has a significant relationship with an individual's attitude, motivation, and behavior. In particular, a great deal of earlier management literature has shown that PO plays a vital role within employee-organization relationships (Dirks, Cummings, & Pierce, 1996; Pendleton, Wilson, & Wright, 1998; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001b). Pierce et al. (2003) argued that a sense of ownership is an attitudinal consequence induced by affective judgments based on both cognitive and affective information. A number of scholars have supported their ideas with affective events theory (AET), explaining that an individual's evaluation of his/her organization is based upon emotional experiences in the workplace (Breckler & Wiggins, 1989; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). The present study extends these arguments to propose that PO can be derived from a sense of emotional attachment to other individuals in the firm as well as to the firm, applying the arguments to an examination of the sharing economy firm. In addition, it investigates whether these possessive feelings of individual service providers in the sharing economy context contribute to enhancing two different types of OCB, OCB toward the organization (i.e., Airbnb company) and OCB toward other members of the organization (i.e., peer hosts of Airbnb), as they do in traditional employee-firm relationships. According to Pierce et al. (2003), behavioral consequences of an employee's PO, such as extensive motivation, sense of responsibility, and self-generated OCB, are suggested.

### 2.3. Organizational citizenship behavior in collaborative relations

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) encompasses all actions that positively influence work-related parties (i.e., co-workers and the organization) for the sake of long-term business accomplishment (Organ, 1988; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). Research on this topic has distinguished three traits of an employee's OCB—discretionary, self-generated, and contributing positively to the target organization (Kim, Shin, Chang, & Kong, 2009; Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2005). OCB has been defined as employee behavior that is not essential in completing job tasks but supports organizational operation, such as helping coworkers and participating in roles that are not formally required (Lee & Allen, 2002). Earlier research has measured OCB toward other individuals (coworkers) and the organization (Organ, 1988; Smith et al., 1983). Organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals (OCBI) refers to surpassing engagement actions that help coworkers, such as switching work schedules and staying extra hours, whereas organizational citizenship behavior toward the organization (OCBO) refers to actions that support the target organization, such as defending the firm from criticism and expressing loyalty (Lee & Allen, 2002). On the other hand, there has been relatively little OCB research

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