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What's mine is yours (for a nominal fee) – Exploring the spectrum of utilitarian to altruistic motives for Internet-mediated sharing

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, we scrutinize the diverse motives for internet-mediated sharing as well as their role in shaping attitudes towards sharing one's possessions in commercialized as well as non-commercialized settings. On the basis of qualitative and quantitative research, we *first* develop a scale of sharing motives, showing that the reasons for participating in online sharing platforms are more nuanced than previously thought. *Second*, employing a motivational model of sharing, rooted in the theory of planned behavior, we show that sharing attitudes are driven by moral, social-hedonic and monetary motivations. Furthermore, we identify materialism, sociability and volunteering as predictors of sharing motives in different sharing contexts. Against this background, we explore the possible role of monetary incentives as a necessary but not sufficient condition for sharing one's possessions with others.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a new culture of sharing as people increasingly choose to make their possessions, such as their apartments, cars, bikes, tools and other items of everyday life, accessible to others on various online platforms (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Gansky, 2010). Through a growing number of these digital intermediaries, the ability to find sharing partners around the globe has become not only possible but also widespread (Benkler, 2004; Gansky, 2010).

This collective advent of online sharing models stems from both a recent leap in social technologies and continuous shifts in societal attitudes. In particular, consumer preferences are evolving from a primary focus on ownership toward a focus on experience and access, which may explain the scale and growth of the current sharing phenomenon (e.g., Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2013; John, 2013a). Furthermore, due to the emergence of digital intermediaries, communities and social ties in general are no longer restricted to the offline realm, and relationships as well as reputation-based trust as prerequisites for sharing can be formed and maintained online as well as offline (e.g., Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Finally, as individuals become increasingly accustomed to conducting everyday activities, such as shopping, banking or even dating, through Internet platforms, the threshold for sharing possessions through online platforms is lowered considerably.

Although the shift in social technologies and attitudes may certainly serve to explain the motives on the demand side of the sharing phenomenon (why do individuals seek access to various goods?) (e.g., Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Botsman & Rogers, 2010), individual motives on the distribution side (why do individuals grant access to their possessions?) remain somewhat uncharted territory.

Sharing one's possessions with others is generally considered an inherently pro-social or even altruistic act, marked by feelings of solidarity and bonding (Belk, 2010; Benkler, 2004; Wittel, 2011). In addition to altruistic motives, there are several utilitarian aspects tied to sharing ones possessions. Individuals share in their community because it is economically advantageous or because it helps them either save resources or improve resource efficiency (Gurven, 2006). Sharing may create synergies (Belk, 2007) and increase security by sowing seeds of reciprocal obligations (Belk, 2010). Furthermore, sharing enhances the status of those who share within the community (Gurven, 2006). Finally, sharing resources is considered sustainable and beneficial to the environment (Belk, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

Despite these benefits, on an individual level, sharing is also tied to several material and personal risks because it exposes one's

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possessions to the hazards of loss, damage and decreased utility. Because "knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves" (Belk, 1988, p. 139), we may equate possible damage to our possessions not only with material loss but also with a loss or lessening of the self (Belk, 1988). This phenomenon explains a generally assumed reluctance to grant others access to valued possessions, particularly if the sharing occurs outside the boundaries of trusted circles such as family and friends (Belk, 2010; Kleine & Allen 1995).

Although various authors and media discuss the sharing phenomenon from a macro-perspective and critically assess the roles of sharing intermediaries as well as the ethical and economic implications of non-regulated commercial niches in the sharing economy (e.g., Scholz, 2014), surprisingly little is known about the individuals who are at the heart of this phenomenon. What motivates them to share their cars, apartments, gardens and bikes with strangers?

Against this background, this contribution strives for a better understanding of the motives and salient beliefs that shape individuals' attitudes toward and intention to share goods with others through Internet-mediated platforms. Specifically, we seek to add to the ongoing discussion on non-ownership modes of access by offering a nuanced look at individual motivations for the Internet-mediated sharing of scarce or rival physical goods. In the following, we will (1) provide an overview of the sharing phenomenon and related constructs and (2) propose a motivational model of sharing, rooted in the theory of planned behavior and the social cognitive theory. Furthermore, we will (3) compare the motives for and attitudes towards sharing among individuals who participate in either commercial or non-commercial sharing settings, using multiple group analysis (MGA). Finally, (4) in our discussion of the results, we will provide implications for further research, reconciling our findings with the current debate on Internet-mediated sharing and related non-ownership modes of access.

2. Literature

Although sharing and related modes of access emerge as key concepts in several disciplines (John, 2013a; Lamberton & Rose, 2012), research on the sharing phenomenon is still in its formative stages as various authors contribute to disentangling and classifying various manifestations of the term (Belk, 1985, 2010, 2014; John, 2013a, 2013b; Lamberton & Rose, 2012; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Wittel, 2011). One of the most frequently cited definitions of sharing stems from Belk (2007), who proposes that sharing is the "act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act or process of receiving or taking something from others for our use." Several authors differentiate between the sharing of tangible or physical goods, such as cars, bicycles and apartments, and intangible goods, such as knowledge, emotions and ideas (e.g., Belk, 2007, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Gansky, 2010; Giesler, 2006; John, 2013a). Sharing has been explored in various contexts, including car sharing (Belk, 2014), apartment sharing, toy sharing (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010), and commercial physical product sharing systems (Lamberton & Rose, 2012) (see Table 1). Sharing is further defined as a non-ownership alternative to obtaining product benefits (e.g., Belk, 1985, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; John, 2013a; Lamberton & Rose, 2012). As such, sharing is often depicted as more sustainable, ecological and ultimately more profitable than ownership (Belk, 2007; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Lamberton & Rose, 2012).

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) note that boundaries between sharing and other forms of access are blurred. Accordingly, sharing has been discussed in the context of access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), collaborative consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2010) and anti-consumption (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010). Belk (2010) differentiates sharing (e.g., non-reciprocal usage with de facto shared ownership) from gift-giving (e.g., non-reciprocal transfer of ownership) on the one hand and from commodity exchange (e.g., reciprocal transfer of ownership) on the other hand. This differentiation as well as Belk's (2010) characterization of sharing as a nonreciprocal, prosocial distribution of resources given without expectation of reciprocity have recently been challenged by Arnould and Rose (2015) who put forth the concept of mutuality as an alternative to sharing. Furthermore, Belk (2014) separates prosocial sharing from pseudo-sharing by stating that "sharing includes voluntary lending, pooling and allocation of resources, and authorized use of public property (sharing), but not contractual renting, leasing, or unauthorized use of property by theft or trespass (pseudo-sharing)."

Although most authors agree on the basic nature of sharing as an act of joint usage of a good that is owned or quasi-owned by at least one of the sharing parties, several defining elements of sharing are debated in the literature. *First*, there is no unanimous view on whether the motives leading to sharing behavior should be incorporated into the definition of sharing itself. More to the point, although several authors posit that sharing, in its essence, is marked by altruistic and prosocial motives (Belk, 2014; Benkler, 2004), others, such as this contribution, favor a more objective definition of sharing practices independent of individual motives (Aigrain, 2012; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; John, 2013b). *Second*, it is not clear to what extent direct reciprocity—for example, in the form of a fee—can be reconciled with the idea of sharing (Belk, 2010; 2014). *Third*, it is not yet resolved whether joint ownership, or at least "a sense of communal ownership" (Belk, 2014), is a constituent element of sharing (Epp & Price, 2008) or whether the ownership or quasi-ownership of one sharing party is sufficient (Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

In the current contribution, we build on Belk's (2007) original definition of sharing. Specifically, we explore the distribution-side of sharing by focusing on the motives for *distributing what is ours to others for their use* (Belk, 2007). According to Belk, there is a clear distinction between the altruistically motivated distribution of possessions (sharing) and the utilitarian or economically motivated distribution of possessions (pseudo-sharing). In this contribution, we challenge this dichotomy somewhat by noting the great variety and complexity of potential sharing motivations. The current debate on sharing motivations is largely shaped by either social considerations, such as altruism, prosocial behavior and social belonging (e.g., *I share because I want to help and connect with others)*, or utilitarian considerations, such as direct or indirect reciprocity or the saving of resources (e.g., *I share because it is economically wise*).

However, other considerations pertaining, for example, to hedonic, social or moral motivations have rarely been addressed in the literature. Lamberton and Rose (2012) assume that a shared object may convey utility not only in the form of perceived economic value but also other forms of utility, such as social utility, referring to the gained approval by reference groups, as well as moral utility, referring to the perceived contribution to a good or worthy cause. Similarly, Benkler (2004, p. 295) suspects that there may be various motivations for sharing behavior – some altruistic, some reciprocity seeking, and some even agonistic (i.e., "giving intended to show that the person giving is greater than or more important than others, who gave less").

3. Method

3.1. Qualitative inquiry and initial scale development

In our research, we are interested in why people share their