Are digital sharing platforms driving users to over-consume? A home swapping platform study

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Abstract

The collaborative consumption, specifically through digital sharing platforms, are on the rise globally these years. Several studies point to a large potential of sharing practices and digital sharing platforms (e.g. Airbnb or BlablaCar). Recent studies focus on examining why users join and how they adopt this new sharing phenomena, but we know next to nothing about how digital sharing platforms (DSP) guide users' behaviour. This research explores the acceleration mechanisms used by digital sharing platforms and aims to explain how DSP encourage users to consume more. We conducted a qualitative survey using the netnography method. Our data were collected from members of French branch of HomeExchange.com platform.

Keywords: sharing economy, digital platforms, acceleration, over-consumption, HomeExchange.

Introduction

Today, the sharing of products or service, specifically through digital sharing platforms has changed the paradigm of consumption from purchasing to sharing resources (Barnes and Mattsson, 2016; Leismann et al., 2013). The wide range of business initiatives adopting sharing practices: sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, or swapping…(Botsman and Rogers, 2010) has become one of major business segments (Schwanholz and Leipold, 2020 ; Kathan et al., 2016), "the consumption model of the future", one of the "10 ideas that will change the world" (Walsh, 2011). Sharing practices provide economic opportunities and costs saving (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Finley, 2013; Guttentag, 2015; Lamberton and Rose, 2012; Molz, 2013), authentic experiences (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016; Gutiérrez et al., 2017) and meaningful social encounter (Cheng, 2016). Nica and Potcovaru (2015) noted that the value and involvement of users in the sharing economy "make their lives easier." It's considered as a new sustainable form of consumption and a new field of innovation, a pathway to "a decentralized, equitable, and sustainable economy" (Martin, 2016). Sharing helps to reduce the environmental impact of consumption (Tussyadiah, 2016) and save resources (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015). In the actual context of digitalization, the development of ICT devices (Information and Communication Technology) and online platforms has contributed to new ways of sharing. Sablik (2014) shown that the digital sharing economy increases consumer welfare and opens new options and markets.

On the other hand, digital sharing platforms show their dark side: they are in "unfair" competition situation against existing professionals and impact the labor market (Malardé and Pénard, 2019). Schor (2017) argues that collaborative consumption platforms would reinforce income inequality in favor of people already in a good financial situation. Digital sharing platforms use marketing and technological tools to speed up user's transaction, push users in a competitive situation and distort the user's social relationship (Juge et al., 2021).

We would like to explore this dark side from digital sharing platforms (DSP), and try to understand how digital sharing platforms put their users to consume more. Our study focuses on digital home swapping platforms, i.e. peer-to-peer accommodation websites. First, we study the literature on the sharing economy and digital sharing platforms, and then develop our conceptual framework. The second section of this article focuses on our methodology choice. Data were collected from the French branch of HomeExchange.com, one of the leading home swapping networks. This paper reveals that HomeExchange, like most digital platforms, implements functions to speed up user transactions. This acceleration mechanism does not create a competitive relationship and seems not to impact the social link between users. However, it encourages users to consume more and more. Our study helps to better understand the risk of over-consumption, which is not really studied in the sharing economy literature. We try to explain this phenomenon, adopting the social theory of acceleration by Rosa (2012).

1. Literature review

1.1. Defining the digital sharing economy (DSE)

If sharing practices have existed for years, the terms of "sharing economy" and "collaborative consumption" emerged within the past decades, especially since Lessig (2008) mentioned them in his work. There has been a proliferation of literature proposing definitions or explanations of this phenomenon in marketing (Bardhi and Dalli, 2014; Belk, 2014), in management and economics (Schor, 2014; Schor et al., 2016). The concept is commonly considered as a part of the circular economy (Schwanholz and Leipold, 2020) and it is connected to the temporary and collaborative use of products and services (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Following Botsman and Rogers (2010), consumers today seem to be turning to alternative consumption models that emphasize usefulness over ownership, community over selfishness, and sustainability over wastefulness. They chose sharing consumption for

different reasons: saving money, space, and time, making friends and building offline communities and peer-to-peer trust (Botsman and Rogers, 2010).

For a long time now, sharing has been used to allocate resources within small communities (Pouri and Hilty, 2021). With the development of ICT device, in particular the Internet and social media technology, new forms of sharing have emerged: digital sharing economy. Following Pouri and Hilty (2021), the digital sharing economy (DSE) refers to "a sustainable form of online business exchange that is built around sharing assets and resources rather than transferring their ownership". The digitalization has been the facilitator of sharing activities: it reduces the proximity constraints and offers more flexibility, makes sharing more convenient, efficient, and effective (Pouri and Hilty, 2021). In fact, compared to the traditional form, digital sharing platforms increase the number of possible 'matches' (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018) and thus enhances the efficacy of sharing. Thanks to digital platforms, people can now share, not only in local scale, inside "intimate social groups" (Price, 1975), but also with strangers, with very few constraints of time, place, and communication mode. Because of their very low entry barriers, and thanks to the increasing interest in the "shared-use" instead of the "ownership mode of consumption (Matzler et al., 2015), the DSE is now open to large communities of users. There are thousands of the sharing economy platforms and their value is projected to grow to close to 335 billion U.S. dollars by 2025[1].

The study of digital sharing platforms is only just emerging. Existing literature largely focuses on user's perception and behaviour, essentially in the accommodation and mobility sectors, like Airbnb and Uber (Hobson and Lynch, 2016; Quattrone et al., 2016; Schneider, 2017; Xie et al., 2020). We know next to nothing about the interaction between users and platforms. Yet, this is an important issue. Denegri-Knott (2011) and Benavent (2016) think that digital sharing platforms affect users by using technical functions and marketing mechanisms in order to accelerate user's transactions, without their being aware of it (Keucheyan, 2019). Here is the paradox. The ideological dimension of sharing has been highlighted in the literature (Nerbusson, 2014): by adopting the sharing economy and joining digital sharing platforms, users reject the conventional market system and the capitalist ideologies (Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010; Albinsson and Perera, 2012; Lamberton and Rose, 2012). Users hope to find in sharing platforms a liberal model out of any control. Is this still the case? We think that it's important to explore the acceleration mechanisms in the context of digital sharing platforms and to understand how they shape user's behaviour.

1.2. Social acceleration theory in the digital sharing context

On his work on sharing platforms, Hutchby (2001) highlighted the "complex relationships between technologies and the social and interactional circumstances in which they exist and through which they attain their meaning » and suggested studying the impact of platforms' affordances on users' behaviour. Following this author, thanks to their affordances, i.e. the architecture of the website and a number of technical functions that "make certain actions possible and forbid others" (Akrich and Latour, 1992; Norman, 1988), digital platforms can shape user's exchange and their behaviour (Peugeot et al., 2015), control users by using the rating and tracking systems (Möhlmann and Zalmanson, 2017) and make trading easier (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009). Denegri-Knott (2011) emphasizes that digital sharing platforms accentuate the user's cycle of desire, by introducing and promoting, persistently and continuously, new products and services. By this way, digital sharing platforms encourage user's speed-based competition. Following Juge et al. (2021), here is a big paradox: on the one hand, digital sharing platforms seem to be an alternative model to the capitalist market economy. In other hand, they encourage users to trade more and consume

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[1] PwC, "The sharing economy: Consumer intelligence series," *PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP*, 2015.

more, and generate competition between users. The social relationship disappears, and progressively turns into a classic competitive situation (Juge et al., 2021). Juge et al (2021) suggest not to consider digital sharing platforms as an alternative of the conventionnel market, but rather its extension, and to use the social theory of acceleration (Rosa, 2012) in order to explore this phenomenon. In fact, Rosa (2012, 2017) identified three categories of change in the tempo of modern social life: technological acceleration, social acceleration, and acceleration in the pace of life. The idea is that in the context of so-called "late modernity", human is forced to be ever faster in order to maintain his social position. Juge et al. (2021) confirmed this acceleration mechanism when studying the second-hand clothing digital platform Vinted. Several technical functions and tempo markers have been set up by Vinted in order to encourage users to become more reactive, more up to date and more informed. Users come into a speed-based competition, which was not necessarily their initial objective when they completed their registration form.

We would like to continue this line of reflexion by studying the acceleration mechanism in the context of sharing accommodation platforms. We are especially interested in home swapping platforms. Researchers have studied Airbnb (Quattrone et al., 2016; Cansoy and Schor, 2016; Schor, 2017), but we know next to nothing about home swapping business model. This peer-to-peer hosting platform is based on reciprocity and mutual collaboration. It consists of a "direct exchange of home between the homeowners - the swappers, and without intermediaries" (Forno and Garibaldi, 2013). Home swapping may be said to be "the modern tourist equivalent of bartering", a "mutual exchange of homes over varying periods of time for the purpose of holiday-making, work, or study" (Forno and Garibaldi, 2005). Several home swapping sites have been created to promote this kind of alternative holiday: Homelink International, Intervac, Green Theme International, HomeExchange. We focus on HomeExchange, the world's number one home swapping platform (450,000 listings in 130 countries, 100,000 users, 70% market share). We would like to know whether this platform tries to accelerate user's transactions and how HomeExchange shapes relationships between users.

2. Methodology

To answer the research question, we conducted a qualitative survey using the netnography method. This qualitative survey method uses Internet as a data source and focuses on online consumer communities (Bernard, 2004). There are some explanations for our choice. Firstly, we are interested in user' behaviour in the context of digital sharing platforms. By using netnography, we can observe and explore user' experiences, in their natural environment, with low financial and time costs, thanks to the absence of spatial or temporal barriers. It should be noted that it still difficult to collect data directly from sharing economy platform: they are not always ready to share data with researchers.

For data collection, we targeted members of French branch of Homeexchange.com. They meet the criteria recommended by Bernard (2004): (1) it's a big online community, (2) led by a core group of members and (3) users are active. Data were collected from February 2020 to February 2022: we created a user account and browsed the platform, explored its interfaces (website structure, registration procedures, buttons and icons, user profiles, messaging and notification systems, terms and conditions of use), analyzed user's testimonials and discussions on social network, i.e. Facebook. In total, we passed more than 250 hours browsing HomeExchange and produced more than 100 data pages, including observations, memos, verbatim collected from HomeExchanges users. We analyzed our data using a « walkthrough method » (Light et al., 2018): we started our first "floating reading" of the data in order to construct our initial coding grid. Then, we compared it with the literature and refined our analysis, by using Nvivo software.

3. Results

First of all, HomeExchange differs from other digital sharing platforms, i.e. Airbnb: there is no money and no commercial relationship in this home swapping platform. HomeExchange may be said to be the "pure formula" of the sharing economy where "trust will be the new currency" (Bostman, 2004): no place for money but only trust and direct exchange between users. For this reason, HomeExchange's affordances are not designed to put users in competition, but rather to accelerate their desire to exchange. HomeExchange website highlights new swapping opportunities: "There is a home for all your desires: A selection of houses based on your favorite criteria, to live an unforgettable experience", "Homes near you: travel locally and reduce the carbon footprint of your holidays", "Homes with swimming pool: Beautiful pools to cool off and feel like a vacation every day", "Pet friendly homes: Travel with your pets", "Kid friendly homes: Travel with peace of mind with your family", "Discover our members' favorite destinations this season: Thousands of members are available to organize an exchange in these destinations. Which one will make you fall in love?", "You'll find below homes that match your preferred destinations", "Here are the homes of members who have chosen a favorite destination in your area", "You'll find below the homes you have added to your favorites.", "They love my home: You'll find below the homes of people who have added your home to their favorites.".

Users receive every day emails informing them about new listings and updating calendars ("This is an automatic email to inform you that Eva has added your house to her favorites. Here are her houses, perhaps you'd like to take a look and are interested to swap with Eva"). This finding corroborates the results from previous studies: digital platforms, including sharing platforms, try to frequently create new consumer's desire cycle. Users are regularly informed about new choices and new products. They are encouraged to easily update their "immediate pleasures" (Denegri-Knott, 2011) and satisfy their desire. In some cases, this "accelerating desires mechanism" leads to an addiction to the system ("We're now addicts and we travel now only via HomeExchange") and an impulsive consumption ("The problem with HomeExchange is that you become more than addicted! We didn't plan it, but we have finalized a swap with Nantes this weekend! #homeexchange addict"). These findings add to the marketing literature about the dark side of consumer attachment: brand attachment can lead to compulsive buying, which in turn influences trash talking (Japutra et al., 2022). Based on attachment theory, Japutra et al. (2022) show that people who are highly passionate about a brand are more likely to conduct obsessive–compulsive buying and creating strong attachment toward a brand can turn the consumer into a vulnerable consumer. Excessive "love" could turn into something bad.

HomeExchange tries also to encourage its users to be more responsive: this website highlights tips and tricks on how to write user's listing and share it on social networks. Time markers provide information about user's activity (for example, at what time each message was sent) and user responsiveness (last connection, average response time). HomeExchange encourages users to multiply their contacts ("Tip: on average, a member sends around fifteen requests to obtain an exchange") and offers affordances to encourage communication via automatic messages (type "Thank you very much for your request. Unfortunately, this does not fit in with our current plans. Good luck with your search"). This technical acceleration mechanism has been studied in the literature. Following Juge et al. (2021), it aims to facilitate user's transactions and speed up their exchanges. But these technical functions are less present than on other digital sharing platforms. In the case of Airbnb platform for example, users can record automatic reply models, schedule messages to be sent. Users, especially hosts, can be punished for being late in replying. This system enables Airbnb to control users behaviour and encourage them to react quickly, hence creating a speed-based competition between users (Duong, 2023). Vinted enforces time limits for each transaction confirmation,

in order to force users to finalize their exchanges as quickly as possible (Juge et al., 2021).This timing pressure is less visible, less strong in the case of HomeExchange and in many cases, it is rejected by users ("I can't accept the automatic response any more, it only takes a few seconds to write and send a personnel message") or boycotted ("Maybe HomeExchange could create a *courtesy index*: automatic reply *versus* personalized reply. Having a personal relationship and taking time to discuss with others, here is the core values of home swapping"). In fact, users associate automatic reply with impersonal and commercial world (*versus* human approach of home swapping).

Digital sharing platforms are considered as an alternative consumption model, enabling to reduce the negative impact of user's consumption act and to reinforce social links. On its home page, HomeExchange emphasized that its first objective is "to establish home exchange as a way for everyone to go on vacation in a responsible and human way by enhancing what already exists and by blocking mass tourism" and the second one is "to drastically reduce its environmental impact by 2030, mainly through reducing the digital pollution linked to the website's operations and by reducing the impact of our members' trips". Here is the paradox, because HomeExchange'affordances are close to conventional digital platforms and aim to strengthen user's desire to consume. Here, it is interesting to study the development of HomeExchange: from a small and homogeneous community at its creation in the early 2000, HomeExchange become today a worldwide website with the arrival of new users and professionals. This is exactly what happened with other digital sharing platforms, i.e. Airbnb. Here is the final question: Is the sharing consumption model sustainable? Do digital sharing platforms still be considered as an alternative to the market economy, or rather its extension, as Juge et al. (2021) have suggested?

Conclusion

In this work, we tried to explore how a home swapping platform, i.e. HomeExchange, accelerates users' transactions and shapes their relationships. This study completes the literature on digital sharing platforms and helps users to better understand the social mechanisms in which they are involved by subscribing to sharing platforms (Juge et al., 2021). Users will therefore be able to rectify their online behaviour. We introduce also another question: does the sharing consumption model really contribute "to the well-being of society in the short, medium or long term" (Parguel et al., 2018)? Does it really help to produce less, consume less and waste less (Peugeot et al., 2015)?

Our study highlighted the diversity of social links encouraged by digital sharing platforms, through their affordances. The literature suggests that this acceleration system can lead to a competitive relationship between users (Airbnb, Vinted). But in some cases (Uber, HomeExchange), digital sharing platforms are still a warm and social place where users can share tips and help each other. This difference can be explained firstly by the user's profile: HomeExchange users have a double status (host and guest), they are in a reciprocal relationship. It is not always the case for Airbnb or Vinted members. The role of money in sharing systems can also explain this difference and suggests us future research directions.

The research findings are subject to several methodological limitations. Netnography is not an exhaustive method (Bernard, 2004). It is not possible to generalize our findings. This investigation suggests several possible areas for future research: using other qualitative methods (interviews or life stories) or a quantitative approach. It would also be interesting to extend the study to other digital sharing platforms.

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