How deep is your love? Explore user attachment to digital sharing platforms

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Abstract

While sharing platforms have shown their continued rise and growing importance in recent years, they now operate in competitive market conditions and a changing environment: scam issues (Vinted platform), legal evolution (Airbnb issue). Today, it is becoming essential for digital sharing platforms to develop strong and durable relationships with users. In this context, platform attachment is the key to success (Li et al., 2022). This study explores a concept widely used in marketing literature, brand attachment, within the context of sharing platforms. A qualitative study was conducted among users of the HomeExchange platform to identify and better understand the platform attachment construct. Our exploratory study reveals five user profiles and suggests that while user experiences impact satisfaction, which leads to platform attachment, user compatibility remains the key factor. This study contributes to the marketing literature by investigating the role of user attachment to sharing platforms and provides a holistic understanding of how platform attachment develops.

Keywords: digital sharing platforms; collaborative consumption; attachment; user; typology.

Introduction

Digital sharing platforms, which involve both consumers and business partners in the value cocreation process, have experienced extensive growth in many industries (Wirtz et al., 2019; Schwanholz and Leipold, 2020; Kathan et al., 2016) and have changed consumers' behavior (Barnes and Mattsson, 2016; Leismann et al., 2013). These peer-to-peer platforms offer attractive alternatives with economic benefits (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Finley, 2013; Guttentag, 2015; Lamberton and Rose, 2012; Molz, 2013), authentic consumer experiences (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2016; Gutiérrez et al., 2017), and warm social relationships (Cheng, 2016). Digital sharing platforms "make life easier" for users (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015) and increase their "well-being" (Sablik, 2014). They mediate the flow of goods and services (Shi et al., 2019), help to reduce the environmental impact of consumption (Tussyadiah, 2015), optimize the use of resources (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015), and contribute to the development of a "decentralized, equitable and sustainable economy" (Martin, 2016). Digital sharing platforms have been considered a real economic and social innovation (Walsh, 2011). Although user experience in the context of digital sharing platforms has garnered close scholarly attention, the study of user behavior, particularly from a marketing perspective, is only just emerging, and the question of how to maintain and strengthen user platform attachment remains unclear (Li et al., 2022). Wirtz et al. (2019) explained that branding in the sharing economy, with its triadic relationship involving service providers, customers, and platform providers, is more complex than those adopted in traditional business models. In this study, we explore if and how the brand attachment construct can be transposed to the sharing platform context, and whether it is expressed in the same way. Then, we identify different user profiles based on their platform attachment. Our study focuses on digital home swapping platforms, specifically peer-to-peer accommodation websites. The results of our exploratory qualitative study of HomeExchange users lead us to identify five user profiles: Evangelistic user, Neo-fan, Uncertain user, Nostalgic user, and Rational user.

1. Literature review

While sharing practices have existed for years, the terms "sharing economy" and "collaborative consumption" emerged only in recent decades, particularly after Lessig (2008) highlighted them in his work. Since then, there has been a proliferation of literature offering definitions and explanations of this phenomenon, particularly in marketing (Bardhi and Dalli, 2014; Belk, 2014), as well as in management and economics (Schor, 2014; Schor et al., 2016). Sharing platforms, generally regarded as part of the circular economy (Schwanholz and Leipold, 2020), facilitate the collaborative use of products and services, including "sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, or swapping" (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). In the context of digitalization, the advancement of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) devices and online platforms has enabled the emergence of new forms of sharing (Belk, 2014). Digitalization has promoted sharing practices by reducing geographical constraints and providing greater flexibility (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018), making sharing more convenient, effective, and efficient (Pouri and Hilty, 2021). Due to their very low entry barriers and the growing preference for the "shared-use" model over the traditional "ownership" model of consumption (Matzler et al., 2015), digital sharing platforms have become accessible to large communities of users. Today, there are thousands of sharing economy platforms, and their collective value is projected to grow to nearly 335 billion U.S. dollars by 2025[1]. However, the study of user behavior in this new context remains unclear. Existing literature primarily focuses on understanding users' perceptions and motivations, particularly in the case of Airbnb (Quattrone et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2020), to explore how and why people engage with this new sharing phenomenon (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Finley, 2013; Guttentag, 2015; Lamberton

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

and Rose, 2012; Molz, 2013). Huang et al. (2020) proposed using Rogers' theory of innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003) to examine five stages of the user decision-making process: knowledge, persuasion, decision-making, implementation, and confirmation. The authors highlighted that existing literature addresses only limited and fragmented aspects of user behavior, with a predominant focus on the pre-adoption phase (Ram and Sheth, 1989). No study provides a comprehensive overview of the confirmation stage, during which users decide to continue using the platform (continuance) or discontinue its use (discontinuance) (Huang et al., 2020). The question of how to maintain and strengthen users' attachment to platforms remains unresolved, leaving a significant knowledge gap.

We aim to build our research on brand attachment theory (Thomson et al., 2005; Li et al., 2020). Attachment is defined as the enduring psychological connectedness between a person and an object (Bowlby, 1969). According to attachment theory, individuals with a strong attachment are more likely to establish a stable relationship with the object (Li et al., 2022). In the marketing domain, brand attachment has become a central construct in the consumer–brand relationship literature (Thomson et al., 2005; Li et al., 2020). Brand attachment refers to a consumer's strong emotional connection with brands and their intention to maintain a relationship with the brand (Park et al., 2010). It encompasses passion, affection, and a sense of connection toward brands (Thomson et al., 2005). Brand attachment influences several key outcomes, including brand commitment (Charton-Vachet and Lombart, 2018), positive word-of-mouth (Brocato et al., 2015), brand advocacy (Magnoni et al., 2021), and willingness to pay (Li et al., 2019). Consequently, brand attachment positively impacts profitability and brand equity (Heinberg et al., 2020). Conversely, the loss of attachment can have detrimental effects on a company's investments, revenues, and profitability, particularly over the long term (Grayson and Ambler, 1999). However, brand attachment can also reveal its darker side, leading to impulsive or compulsive purchasing behavior in some cases (Japutra et al., 2022; Okazaki et al., 2019). While the importance of the relationship between consumers and brands has resulted in a substantial body of research on the brand attachment construct (Lacoeuilhe, 2000; Cristau, 2001; Heibrunn, 2001; Thomson et al., 2005), it has yet to be thoroughly studied in the context of sharing platforms. This gap can be attributed to the fundamental differences between the sharing economy and traditional markets. Traditional business models rely on standardized services and products, whereas sharing platforms offer diverse alternatives and options, facilitate various interactions and transactions, and complicate the branding process (Wirtz et al., 2019). In the sharing platform business model, users not only participate in transactions and consumption but also co-create experiences. They engage in multiple types of online and offline interactions with other stakeholders (Li et al., 2023). User experiences are dynamic and subjective, varying across different contexts (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). This triadic business model fundamentally differentiates the branding process from that of traditional business models. Nevertheless, user attachment can play a critical role in the relationship between platforms and users. Cognitive factors alone cannot fully explain user behavior; affective factors, such as attachment, are essential for understanding how to maintain user loyalty and engagement. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the platform attachment construct and its dimensions. In this paper, we aim to investigate whether user attachment is truly significant in the context of digital sharing platforms and to understand how platform attachment manifests. Our central research question is as follows: **How relevant is user attachment in the context of digital sharing platforms?**

2. Methodology

To address our research questions, we conducted a netnographic study, analyzing data from the internet (websites, blogs, and social networks). This approach allowed us to explore users' experiences in their natural environments with minimal financial and temporal costs, benefiting from the absence of spatial or temporal barriers (Bernard, 2004). For data collection,

we focused on members of the French branch of HomeExchange.com, a home-swapping platform where users can "organize made-to-measure tours without seeking the services of travel mediators and with the only cost of making their own home available" (Forno and Garibaldi, 2013). We created a user account, browsed the HomeExchange platform, and analyzed user discussions on social networks from February 2018 to February 2023. In total, we spent over 200 hours observing and exploring user exchanges, producing more than 100 pages of data, including observation notes, memos, and verbatims from HomeExchange users. Our analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we examined how users express their attachment to the platform through their verbatims. Second, we conducted a typological analysis to categorize different user groups based on their platform attachment. To describe each group's profile, we explored users' characteristics, usage experiences (e.g., membership history, number of exchanges, response rate, and response time).

3. Results

First, we examined whether the notion of attachment platform held meaning for HomeExchange users, and tried to enrich our knowledge of this construct. Our netnographic study revealed the existence of user attachment to the HomeExchange platform, even though users do not always explicitly use the term "attachment". Discovering the HomeExchange platform "*changed the way I travel, and also my life*", "*I'm grateful for my HomeExchange experiences*", "*Thanks to HomeExchange, we have enjoyed great family moments*", "*It is such a win-win situation for us*", "*We swapped our house through HomeExchange and it was our most incredible experience, it's pretty addictive*", "*I've had so many wonderful experiences since I signed up in 2018. It's my new lifestyle* "). The coding process enabled us to identify three dimensions of the platform attachment construct: 1. Affective dimension, which refers to users' passion, love, and emotional connection to the platform. Participants shared statements like: *Our life with HomeExchange is emotionally overwhelmed*", "*Thank you for being @HomeExchange*", "*My life as a HomeExchange member has been an exciting, connecting and heartwarming adventure. Thanks to my experiences with HomeExchange, I've learned to open my doors, respect others, share my home and enjoy*", "*HomeExchange holds a special place in my heart*", "*I'm so grateful to every one of you for making this platform what it is, with its values: trust, respect and sharing*", "*How lucky we are to have taken the step for being HomeExchange user. I just wanted to express how proud, happy and lucky I am to be part of this community!* "), 2. Cognitive and Conative dimensions, which refer to the importance users attach to the platform, and their commitment to it: "*We've been proud to be part of this wonderful world of home swapping for thirteen years and we'll continue*", "*I'm a teacher and have long holidays, but I can't afford hotels all the time. HomeExchange is the perfect win-win solution for me*", "*Home Exchange is definitely for us. We've had wonderful experiences, and we hope to continue for many more years*", "*We've been members for over 10 years, with more than 50 exchanges. Now we're HomeExchange Ambassadors*".

Then, we try to identify different user groups based on their attachment to HomeExchange. Our exploratory study revealed five user profiles: Evangelist, Neo-fan, Uncertain user, Nostalgic user and Rational user.

Evangelists: The term *Evangelists* refers to the most active users within HomeExchange community. Typically aged between 35 and 50, *Evangelists* often travel with their families, representing the new generation of home swappers. They navigate the HomeExchange platform with ease and communicate effectively on social networks. Their profiles reflect an average membership duration of over five years, with a near-perfect response rate (close to 100%) and a quick response time (within 24 hours). Having used the HomeExchange platform extensively, they are familiar with its business model and adept at using it. These users have moved beyond the initial discovery phase and are well-versed in the platform's "codes of conduct." They know how to find exchange partners, communicate effectively, and execute successful transactions.

It should be highlighted that the HomeExchange' sharing model transcends the traditional "buyer-seller" relationship. Within the HomeExchange context, members are not merely passive users but active, engaged, and participatory members. *Evangelists* take pride in contributing to the platform's development by helping to improve its functionality and leading discussions on social networks. Many even serve as HomeExchange ambassadors. In some cases, *Evangelists* users have expressed an almost addictive relationship with the platform, with comments such as: "*We are now addicts and only plan our holidays via HomeExchange*". Signs of impulsive behavior have been observed. This finding aligns with previous studies that highlight the connection between brand attachment and risky consumption behaviors, such as impulse buying (Japutra et al., 2019) and compulsive buying (Ridgway et al., 2008). While their deep attachment to the platform brings significant benefits, excessive love can have negative consequences.

Neo fans: these new members still in the learning phase. They express a desire to continue using HomeExchange, but often report challenges in their initial user experiences. These members are accustomed to booking accommodations via rental platforms and HomeExchange's particularities are not always understood. Some users shared their frustrations: "*I don't have the perseverance to spend entire evenings reading profiles and listings, then sending personalized messages and wating for replies. It's quicker and simpler to use rental platforms*", "*We really love the home swapping concept, but it's not always easy. I received many negative responses to my request. Or no response at all. Why?*". Despite these difficulties, newcomers can adapt over time. Through the learning process, they become better at managing issues, understanding HomeExchange's codes, and communicating with potential partners. They also learn to adjust their expectations and adopt HomeExchange practices. Some *Neo fans* even develop a strong attachment to the platform and eventually transition into the *Evangelists* group.

Rational users: it refers to individuals or professionals who use HomeExchange primarily for financial reasons. These members often participate in multiple hosting platforms, viewing HomeExchange as an additional channel to promote their property and maximize financial benefits. While some may demonstrate loyalty to HomeExchange, they do not express strong emotional attachment to the platform. As one user put it: "*Because it works*", "*HomeExchange allows us to optimize our rental*". For *Rational users*, the cognitive and conative dimensions of attachment—such as the platform's practical utility and their commitment to using it—are present. However, the affective dimension, which reflects emotional connection or passion, is notably absent.

Nostalgic users: consist of members who migrated from other home-swapping platforms. HomeExchange's acquisition of platforms such as Guesttoguest (France), Trampolinn (Canada), HomeforHome (Spain), and the original HomeExchange (USA) has significantly impacted its strategy, business model, and user base. This integration of different platforms - and their corresponding user practices - has been a source of conflict. Some users have expressed their dissatisfaction: "*We want to stop using HomeExchange. We're disappointed*", "*Since Trocmaison was taken over by HomeExchange, I've tried to hold on. I'm trying again this year, but I'm beginning to lose confidence in this new system*". It's worth noting that earlier versions of home-swapping platforms had a very different dynamic. In the past, users (often teachers) exchanged homes through paper brochures and communicated over several months via post, telephone, or email. These exchanges were reciprocal, and the process was more personal. Today, many *Nostalgic users* are seniors or retirees who struggle to adapt to HomeExchange's modern platform, technical features, and new home-swapping options. They feel out of place within the current HomeExchange community. Frustrated by the platform's strategic evolution - described by some as "the marketing of human relationships" - many *Nostalgic Users* plan to leave. Although they remain deeply attached to the concept of

home swapping, they often switch to platforms that better align with their values and expectations. This trend raises questions about the development strategies of digital sharing platforms. A strategy focused solely on user growth may not always succeed; in some cases, it can lead to the abandonment of the platform's original core business model and result in user discontinuance.

Uncertain users also question their commitment to the platform, asking themselves, "Do I stay? Or should I leave?" However, their hesitations stem from different reasons. These users are reluctant to confirm their commitment to HomeExchange due to disappointing or unsatisfactory experiences. Two major sources of dissatisfaction were identified: 1. Dissatisfaction with partner behavior (e.g. communication issues, lack of respect) and how HomeExchange handles conflicts, and 2. Incompatibility issues. Interestingly, while *Uncertain users* express dissatisfaction, not all of them proceed to the break-up phase. Instead, some take a temporary break to reflect on their experiences. As one user shared: "*I was discouraged: when guests left my house, it was really dirty, with some items missing. So, I needed time to review my home swapping experiences. Finally, the positive outweighed this bad experience, and I started again*". In contrast, incompatibility often leads to discontinuance: *"We haven't really stopped home swapping. But at this moment, we cannot continue with HomeExchange because my son has moved back home with us"*. This finding aligns with previous research that links brand attachment to self-concept. The loss of attachment is more often explained by a loss of connection to the self than by a loss of overall satisfaction (Heilbrunn, 2007). In these cases, users cease to integrate the concept of home swapping and the HomeExchange brand into their "personal space" due to socio-demographic or personal expectation changes, leading them to quit the platform.

Our exploratory analysis highlights a key conclusion: while user attachment does exist in the context of home swapping, it is not necessarily linked to the HomeExchange platform itself. Instead, it is more closely tied to the concept of home swapping. In most cases, users express emotions, commitment, and loyalty to the concept, even when mentioning the platform's name. This observation has significant implications: digital platforms are not the core of the sharing economy; rather, the central idea is *sharing, not owning*. Users may leave a platform even if they remain engaged in sharing practices. Platforms that fail to meet user needs are simply replaced by competitors. This poses a critical challenge for sharing platforms: their life cycle tends to be short, and they are easily replaced if they lose relevance or fail to satisfy users.

Conclusion

As sharing platforms continue to grow and evolve, researchers and managers are increasingly interested in understanding the mechanisms that drive user behavior. This study contributes to marketing literature by examining user attachment to digital sharing platforms. Based on this initial exploratory study, platform attachment appears to hold significant relevance for users. However, the platform attachment construct differs notably from the traditional brand-attachment construct and warrants further investigation. This research provides valuable insights for managers, helping them optimize user relationship management, maintain strong long-term relationships, and reduce the risk of user discontinuance. Additionally, the typology developed in this study offers a framework for targeting users, personalizing their experiences, and refining communication strategies. Our findings also highlight the need for future research on the attachment process, its antecedents, and its consequences. The attachment construct should be explored further using diverse research methods. While this netnographic study provides valuable exploratory insights, its findings are not exhaustive and cannot be generalized (Bernard, 2004). Future studies could employ qualitative methods such as interviews or life stories, or adopt a quantitative approach to validate and extend these findings.

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