

When Attachment Turns Risky: The Dark Side of User Relationships with Sharing Platform

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Abstract

Sharing platforms have experienced rapid growth and are now competing in increasingly saturated markets. To succeed, they seek to cultivate strong and lasting relationships with users, making attachment a key driver of loyalty and engagement (Li et al., 2020). While most studies emphasize the positive outcomes of user attachment, little is known about its potential harmful consequences in the context of sharing platforms. This study addresses this gap by extending brand attachment theory to digital sharing platforms and examining its potential negative dimensions. Drawing on qualitative data collected through a five-year netnography of French users of HomeExchange, our findings reveal that platform attachment can foster harmful outcomes, especially impulsive and compulsive usage behaviours. The study contributes to marketing literature by showing how user - platform relationships, while fostering loyalty and community, can also generate vulnerability and dependence. From a managerial perspective, our results suggest that engagement strategies should be designed with caution: excessive stimulation of attachment risks undermining user well-being.

Keywords: sharing economy, digital platforms, attachment, dark side, impulsive behaviour.

Introduction

The practice of sharing has existed for years, but the terms “sharing economy” and “collaborative consumption” have emerged in recent decades, particularly since Lessig's work (2008). The sharing economy involves the temporary and collaborative use of products and services through Peer-to-Peer (P2P) coordination (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), while traditional business models are largely based on ownership. For a long time, sharing has been a way to allocate resources within small communities (Pouri and Hilty, 2021). However, with the development of digital information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet and social media, a new form of sharing has emerged - namely, the digital sharing economy. Sharing platforms reduce constraints and offer more flexibility (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018), making sharing more convenient, effective, and efficient (Pouri and Hilty, 2021). Due to their very low entry barriers, digital sharing platforms have become accessible to large communities of users.

However, little attention has been given to user behaviour in the context of sharing platforms. In this article, we use a key concept from marketing literature: brand attachment, with a focus on its negative aspects, namely impulsive and compulsive behaviour. First, we will examine the theoretical framework about the concept of user attachment. The second section details our methodological choice to use netnography. The data were collected from the French branch of HomeExchange.com, one of the leading home exchange networks. This article reveals that strong platform attachment can make users vulnerable and lead to platform addiction. Our findings also demonstrate the link between impulsive user behaviour and the marketing practices of sharing platforms.

1. Literature review

Digital sharing platforms, which involve both consumers and business partners in the value co-creation process, have seen significant growth in many industries (Wirtz et al., 2019; Schwanholz and Leipold, 2020; Kathan et al., 2016) and have changed consumer behaviour (Barnes and Mattsson, 2016; Leismann et al., 2013). Sharing platforms are generally considered part of the circular economy (Schwanholz and Leipold, 2020), in contrast to the traditional commercial economy, where access is largely determined by ownership and monetary exchange. These peer-to-peer platforms offer economic benefits (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 warm social relationships (Cheng, 2016). They mediate the flow of goods and services (Choi et al., 2019), reduce the environmental impact of consumption (Tussyadiah, 2015), optimize resource use (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015), and contribute to the development of a “decentralized, equitable, and sustainable economy” (Martin, 2016). Sharing platforms have been considered as a real economic and social innovation (Walsh, 2011) and have resulted in a large body of knowledge in marketing (Bardhi and Dalli, 2014; Belk, 2014), in management and economic fields (Schor, 2014; Schor et al., 2016). Digital sharing platforms “make life easier” for users (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015) and improve their “well-being” (Sablik, 2014).

Despite these advantages, research has only partially captured the complexity of user behaviour on sharing platforms. Existing studies have mainly focused on user perceptions, motivations, and adoption processes (Quattrone et al., 2016; Xie et al., 2020). Scholars have noted the need for deeper theoretical and empirical inquiry, particularly beyond the pre-adoption phase (Barnes & Mattsson, 2016; Hamari et al., 2015; Hallem et al., 2020). While Rogers’ diffusion model (2003) has been used to explain adoption decisions, the confirmation phase—where users either remain engaged or discontinue—remains underexplored (Huang et al., 2020). As a result, research has paid little attention to why users abandon platforms (Sthapit, 2018) or how their long-term attachment evolves.

Most importantly, while prior studies have largely examined motivations and adoption, little is known about the dark side of post-adoption user–platform relationships. Existing findings show that users often “tend not to be loyal” (Varma et al., 2016), and that discontinuance is frequent (Huang et al., 2020). Yet few studies have investigated whether strong attachment to a platform might itself generate harmful behaviours.

In the marketing literature, brand attachment has been shown to act like a double-edged sword (Japutra et al., 2022). While it can reinforce loyalty and advocacy, it can also trigger impulsive or compulsive buying (Japutra et al., 2019), destructive community dynamics (Liao et al., 2019), and negative customer perceptions (Merk & Michel, 2019). This “dark side” has been observed in brand communities (Okazaki et al., 2019; Riquelme et al., 2019), but remains largely absent from research on digital sharing platforms. This stream of research provides a useful lens to investigate how platform attachment may simultaneously drive loyalty and generate harmful patterns.

Our study addresses this gap by applying attachment theory (Thomson et al., 2005; Park et al., 2010; Li et al., 2020) to the context of sharing platforms. Specifically, we explore how platform attachment may foster not only positive engagement but also harmful behaviours such as impulsivity, compulsivity, and even platform addiction. In the marketing field, brand attachment is a central construct in consumer-brand relationship literature (Thomson et al., 2005; Li et al., 2020). Brand attachment refers to a consumer’s strong emotional connection with a brand and intention to remain loyal to it (Park et al., 2010), encompassing passion, affection, and connection (Thomson et al., 2005). Brand attachment can influence 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). It positively impacts profitability and brand equity (Heinberg et al., 2021), while a loss of attachment can lead to negative consequences for the company’s investments, revenues, and long-term profitability (Grayson and Ambler, 1999).

While the dark side of attachment has been documented in brand communities (Japutra et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2019), little is known about how such mechanisms unfold in peer-to-peer sharing platforms. This gap motivates our study. In this article, we aim to explore how platform attachment can stimulate harmful behaviours and provide insights into the dark side of user attachment. Additionally, we will examine the connection between impulsive behaviour and the marketing practices employed by sharing platforms.

2. Methodology

To answer our research questions, we examined the case of HomeExchange, a leading platform for home swapping. Home swapping is an alternative tourism model that relies on peer-to-peer arrangements between homeowners, “without the intermediation of conventional operators” (Forno and Garibaldi, 2015). 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). HomeExchange was selected because it is one of the world’s leading home-swapping platforms, with a large and active community. Its strong market presence, extensive user-generated content, and accessibility of data make it a particularly relevant and information-rich case for studying user attachment and its potential dark sides.

Data were collected from February 2018 to February 2023 from members of the French branch of the HomeExchange.com platform using the netnography method. This qualitative method uses the Internet as a data source, making it possible to observe naturally occurring user interactions within digital communities (Kozinets, 2010). It also offers advantages such as low financial and time-related costs, since it removes spatial and temporal barriers (Bernard, 2004). We created a user account and systematically analysed user testimonials and discussions on HomeExchange and related social media platforms. In total,

we spent over 250 hours reviewing the platform and other websites, producing more than a hundred pages of notes, including observational notes, memos, and verbatim user quotes

First, we examined whether the concept of platform attachment was meaningful to HomeExchange users and tried to enrich our knowledge of this construct. Then, we aimed to identify different user groups based on their attachment to HomeExchange. Finally, we identified various types of harmful behaviour and the user profiles most prone to these risks, thereby exploring the darker side of user attachment. The coding process was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated systematic data management and thematic analysis. We adopted an inductive, grounded approach, allowing categories and themes to emerge progressively from users' verbatims and online interactions.

3. Results

Our netnographic study reveals the existence of user attachment to the HomeExchange platform, even though members rarely use this term explicitly. Many describe HomeExchange as life-changing: "It changed the way I travel, and also my life," or "I'm grateful for my HomeExchange experiences." Others emphasize the social benefits: "Thanks to HomeExchange, we've enjoyed great family moments," or simply, "It's such a win-win situation for us." Users often portray their participation as both extraordinary and addictive. One member recalls: "We swapped our house through HomeExchange, and it was our most incredible experience—it's pretty addictive." Another explains: "Since I signed up in 2018, I've had so many wonderful experiences. It has become my lifestyle."

The coding process highlights three key dimensions of the platform attachment construct. (1) The affective dimension captures users' passion, love, and emotions: "Our life with HomeExchange is emotionally overwhelming," or "My life as a HomeExchange member has been an exciting, connecting, and heart-warming adventure." Many underline that the platform has taught them to "open my doors, respect others, share my home, and enjoy." HomeExchange is described as holding "a special place in their heart" and embodying values of trust, respect, and sharing. (2) The cognitive and conative dimensions reflect the importance attached to the platform and the depth of user commitment, illustrated by declarations such as: "We've been proud to be part of this world of home swapping for thirteen years and will continue," or "HomeExchange is the perfect win-win solution for me, as I have long holidays but can't always afford hotels." Long-term involvement is also frequently mentioned: "We've been members for over 10 years, with more than 50 exchanges. Now we're HomeExchange Ambassadors."

Building on this analysis, we identify user profiles. These typologies should be understood as illustrative tendencies rather than statistically validated categories; they highlight recurring patterns observed among HomeExchange users rather than generalizable classification. Our study reveals five profiles: Evangelists, Neo Fans, Undecided users, Nostalgic users, and Pragmatic users. Pragmatic users engage with HomeExchange primarily for economic reasons. They are active across multiple hosting platforms and adopt a rational, financially driven approach, using HomeExchange as a promotional channel for their property. Nostalgic and Undecided users, by contrast, display hesitation or reluctance. Undecided users are held back by disappointing experiences, while Nostalgic users—often long-time members accustomed to the traditional reciprocal model—express discomfort with recent strategic changes that they feel no longer align with their values. Despite their attachment to the concept of home exchange, many in this group consider migrating to alternative platforms. Neo Fans, meanwhile, show enthusiasm for continuing but struggle with learning the "codes" of the community. Over time, some manage to overcome these barriers and transition into the Evangelist group. Our findings echo the typology proposed by Hallem et al. (2020), who identified four consumer profiles in collaborative consumption: the committed, the pragmatist, the intermittent, and the skeptical. The parallels reinforce the idea

that platform attachment evolves along different trajectories, with some users embracing deep commitment and others remaining cautious or critical.

In our case, we are particularly interested in the behaviour of the Evangelist group. Typically between 35 and 50 years old and often travelling with their families, Evangelists represent the new generation of home swappers. They use the HomeExchange platform with ease, are highly active on social networks, and stand out as the most engaged members of the community. Their profiles reveal long-standing involvement - on average more than five years - along with nearly perfect response rates and rapid replies. Having moved beyond the discovery phase, they fully understand the platform's business model and "codes of conduct," enabling them to navigate exchanges smoothly, find partners, and complete transactions successfully. More than users, they see themselves as active members of a participatory community: many help improve the platform, animate discussions, and even act as ambassadors.

This profile closely resembles the committed collaborative consumers identified by Hallem et al. (2020): highly engaged, motivated by values rather than convenience, and seeking to challenge mainstream consumer models (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). These users find in the sharing platforms "what they feel is currently missing from the traditional system" (Hallem et al., 2020), viewing it as the best way to reduce consumption. Sharing is part of their lifestyle and relationships between community members are close, with a strong attachment to the platform.

Yet, this deep engagement also exposes them to risks of dependency. Evangelists frequently describe themselves as "addicts," checking notifications compulsively, finalizing unplanned swaps at the last minute, or reporting feelings of emptiness when not active on the platform. Their attachment therefore manifests not only in loyalty and advocacy but also in impulsive decision-making and compulsive use. As some members put it: "We're now addicts and only plan our vacations via HomeExchange," or "The problem with HomeExchange is that you become more than addicted! We didn't plan it, but we've finalized a swap with Nantes this weekend! #homeexchangeaddict." Others describe post-exchange "baby blues" or even feelings of depression when notifications stop: "If the notification for HomeExchange messages stops appearing on my phone, I feel like I'm missing something."

These findings enrich marketing literature on the dark side of consumer attachment. Prior research shows that strong attachment can lead to impulsive buying - spontaneous and unplanned decisions (Rook & Fisher, 1995; Kacen & Lee, 2002; Japutra et al., 2019) - and compulsive buying, marked by repeated, uncontrollable behaviours (Ridgway et al., 2008). Our results demonstrate that similar mechanisms operate in the context of collaborative consumption, despite its reputation for promoting responsible practices. As one user rationalized, "I feel a real addiction to HomeExchange, but since it's much less dangerous than cigarettes, there's no problem." Such testimonies illustrate how excessive attachment, initially driven by passion, can slide into dependence and addiction (Japutra et al., 2022).

Marketing literature has emphasized the importance for managers to develop consumer attachment. However, the negative consequences of impulsive and compulsive behaviours (Maraz et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2019) have also been highlighted: financial problems (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2018), depressive symptoms (Joireman et al., 2010; Mueller et al., 2011; Japutra & Song, 2020), guilt and post-purchase regret (Gallagher et al., 2017), and family conflicts (Müller et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This research aims to explore the negative aspects of user attachment in the context of sharing platforms. From a managerial perspective, our findings highlight the need for caution in designing user engagement strategies. While attachment can foster loyalty and advocacy, excessive stimulation risks pushing users toward dependence and compulsive use. The

observation of HomeExchange shows that the platform's design actively stimulates user engagement through constant highlighting of new offers, automated notifications, and metrics that reward rapid responsiveness. These affordances accelerate user activity, multiply interactions, and continually renew desire—mechanisms already identified in the literature as ways digital platforms shape and sometimes control behaviour (Juge et al., 2021; Benavent, 2016; Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017). Such practices may reinforce attachment but also increase the risk of addiction or compulsive use. Managers should move beyond maximizing engagement at all costs and instead design platforms that balance user attachment with well-being.

From a broader socio-political standpoint, digital sharing platforms are often presented as alternative consumption models that mitigate the negative impacts of overconsumption while fostering stronger social connections. Yet, their affordances increasingly mirror those of conventional digital platforms, both seeking to stimulate and reinforce the user's desire to consume. Our findings suggest that sharing platforms risk functioning less as genuine alternatives and more as extensions of the market economy, as suggested by Juge et al. (2021). This calls into question the sustainability of the sharing model and its founding principles—usefulness over ownership, community over individualism, and sustainability over waste (Forno & Garibaldi, 2013). Botsman and Rogers (2010) optimistically argued that sharing practices could reduce consumption and enhance social well-being. Yet, as Parguel et al. (2018) remind us, it remains uncertain whether these promises hold true in the short, medium, and long term. Ultimately, our findings highlight the paradox of platform attachment: while it can build loyalty and community, it also risks reinforcing market logics and harmful behaviours, challenging the very promise of the sharing economy.

This study has several limitations that open avenues for further investigation. First, it focused solely on the HomeExchange platform; future work should examine whether similar dynamics arise on other sharing platforms (e.g., Airbnb, BlaBlaCar, Leboncoin). Second, our research relied on a qualitative netnography, which captures users' expressed behaviours (through testimonials and online interactions) rather than their actual transactional behaviours. Moreover, netnography tends to capture the voices of self-selected, vocal users, raising questions of representativeness. Future studies could adopt mixed-method designs, combining netnographic insights with quantitative data such as transaction logs or surveys, to validate and deepen our findings. Finally, our dataset was limited to French users, and cross-cultural comparisons could reveal important variations in how attachment manifests and whether its dark side is universal or context-dependent.

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