

Sharing my way or your way? Institutional alignment of ideological tensions and justice narratives within a sharing community

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Abstract

Sharing is driven by different and partly contradicting ideologies such as ecological, social and capitalist point of views. By the means of an ethnographic approach we investigate how institutional structures align those ideologies within a sharing community and advance understanding of ideology and justice in the field of consumer behavior.

Extended Abstract

Gift-exchanges, sharing and alternative markets as they can be observed within the “new sharing economy” (Botsman & Rogers, 2011) flourish all over the world. Recent research has pointed out the nuances of sharing and proposed classification and distinctions of sharing (Russell Belk, 2010). However, the distinction between sharing, gift-giving and pseudosharing (Russell Belk, 2014) is oftentimes blurry as sharing communities tend to act as a nexus of different ideological orientations. In popular media but also in academic accounts, sharing is displayed as a panaceum in a hyper consumerist world: It is not only seen as pro-social (Belk, 2010), but moreover associated with an environmentally friendly lifestyle (Botsman & Rogers, 2011) that fosters an efficient use of existing resources. From this perspective on sharing, the ideals of pro-sociality and sustainability go hand in hand. In addition to ideals of sustainability and pro-sociality, sharing also accommodates capitalist ideals. Indeed, the “new sharing economy” has brought forward numerous new business models (e.g., car-sharing, peer-to-peer rental) that outperform traditional businesses through their efficiency and profit margins.

Ideologies have been found to underlie and underpin most structures, exchanges, interactions, institutions and consumer behavior (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Üstüner & Holt, 2007). Recent research has focused on how ideological struggles are enacted on the marketplace (Giesler, 2008; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010), and how they might hinder the pursuit of an identity project (McAlexander, Dufault, Martin, & Schouten, 2014) or firms to adapt innovative strategic orientations (Press, Arnould, Murray, & Strand, 2014). However, only a few studies suggested how these ideologies might be aligned or form a hybrid structure (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Kozinets, 2008; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

We analyze justice narratives regarding the redistribution of items in the context of the German foodsharing community and uncover underlying ideological struggles, tensions and their final alignment through the adoption of an institutional structure. Hereby we rely on ethnographic data collected in the context of Foodsharing.de, a German online platform with the goal to save surplus food from being thrown away and to share it with others still using it. The platform connects retailers who have surplus food to give away with individuals (named foodsavers) volunteering to collect and distribute the food for further use. The role of the retailers in foodsharing.de is particularly noteworthy as they give away food for free although

this could potentially cannibalize their source of revenue. No monetary flows are involved at any moment in time and the foodsharing platform positions itself as ‘ethical sharing’. Explicitly, the research at hand aims at answering the following research questions: What different ideological tensions and different perceptions of ideology exist within a sharing community? How are those tensions negotiated and aligned?

Conflicting or sometimes overlapping worldviews such as ecological, pro-social and capitalist ideologies strive for synthesis, i.e., resolution (Marx, 1956). We show how the negotiation of ideologies and underlying principles of justice in the foodsharing community follows the classic dramaturgical structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis structure: Threatened by conflicting ideologies of fair sharing, the original ecological ideology of foodsharing is being re-negotiated through different narratives: The retailers’ capitalist ideology challenged the ecological food saver ideology (thesis) through suspicion of personal gain from free food (antithesis). In response, food savers created the “service provider” narrative (synthesis) to embrace the capitalist equity principle (tit-for-tat). Then, the pro-social camp within the community challenged an overly capitalistic framing of foodsharing as service provider through a heroic Robin Hood narrative promoting the needs principle of justice (thesis). This narrative in turn was at odds and endangered the ecological ideology of foodsharing (antithesis), namely the reduction of food waste. In response, proponents of the original idea created an equally heroic counter-narrative of the “Knights of the Round Table” (synthesis). An institutional structure sustains and emphasizes this heroic counter-narrative while still leaving space for other ideological orientations.

This way we yield several theoretical contributions. First, prior research came up with blurry classifications of sharing in opposition to other forms of exchange such as gift-giving or traditional market exchange (Russell Belk, 2010). We show that sharing communities are a nexus of pro-social, environmental and capitalist ideologies that are similar to communities of purpose (Schouten & Martin, 2011) and therefore difficult to classify. Second, in contrast to recent research claiming that divergent ideologies always strive for dominance (Giesler, 2008; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), we show that ideologies might as well co-exist in a peaceful manner through the balancing of fluent narratives. Furthermore, we add to research on legitimation and social structure (Giesler 2012; Thompson 2004) by emphasizing how institutionalization helps in aligning partly opposing and divergent ideologies.

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1. Need for study

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We analyze justice narratives regarding the distribution of items in the context of the German foodsharing community and uncover underlying ideological struggles, tensions and their final alignment through the adoption of an institutional structure.

Explicitly, the research at hand aims at answering the following research questions: What different ideological tensions and different perceptions of ideology exist within a sharing community? How are those tensions negotiated and aligned?

Based on an ethnography including participant observation, in-depth interviews and the analysis of online data of a foodsharing community in Western Europe, we investigate how groups of individuals dynamically form, communicate, negotiate, and embrace tensions that emerge from divergent ideologies and respective understandings of justice.

2. Conceptual Background: Ideologies in the context of sharing

We start by reviewing the larger cultural context in which the foodsharing community as our research context is embedded. Seen from such “context-in context” perspective

(Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), the interests of different actors that strive for negotiation, dominance and resolution in a community are object to the influences of broader socio-cultural currents that prevail in the respective environment. In our cultural analysis of sharing in Western industrialized nations, we review three concrete ideologies (pro-social, ecological and capitalist) that have been found to guide perceptions of sharing in this particular context and outline how each of them is connected to certain principles of justice.

2.1 Pro-social Ideology

The idea of the modern social welfare state that guides the distribution of resources in many developed nations can be seen as an institutionalization of the pro-social ideal of Robin Hood's "taking from the rich and giving to the poor". At the heart of this ideology is the *need principle of justice* according to which individuals who are in greatest need should be provided with the resources required to meet those needs, independently of their actual input (Forsyth, 2006). Such pro-social ideas of justice are reflected by economic welfare state systems, but also by institutions such as food banks, charities, soup kitchens, homeless shelters or policy initiatives aimed at diminishing the experienced poverty trap (Sachs, 2006).

According to Belk (2010), the prototype of sharing is sharing within the family in which the parents and hence the economically and physically better equipped parties within this social group share their resources with their children as individuals in need without expectations of concrete reciprocal expectations.

2.2 Ecology Ideology

Said to foster an efficient use of resources and hence to help providing a livable environment for future generations, sharing also has the image of being an environmentally friendly consumption behavior (Belk, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2011; Gansky, 2010). Such common perceptions of sharing among scholars and the public link it to preserving the environment and efficiently governing common resources (Ostrom, 1990), a political dimension that goes beyond its theoretical conceptualization as alternative mode of good circulation. Sharing for a sustainable future operates on the underlying *justice principle of equality*. Hereby, no dominance or preference is granted to a certain group, but the aim of redistribution is the preservation of resources for everyone.

Sustainable consumption ideals are reflected, for instance, in community-supported agriculture movements (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), recycling efforts (Biswas et al., 2000), or second-hand stores (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005).

2.3 Capitalist Ideology

Despite influences such as pro-social and ecological considerations, sharing is not devoid of capitalist ideology. The main actors in the "new sharing economy" have still been brought up in a capitalist society and are coined by its value system and contractual exchange principles. The capitalist ideology operates on an *equity justice principle* striving for a balanced input-output ratio or tit-for-tat reciprocities.

With regard to sharing systems, this ideology manifests itself in so-called "pseudo-sharing" models (Belk, 2014). "Pseudo-sharing" refers to commercial exchange systems (Lamberton & Rose, 2012) or access-based consumption models (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) which primarily aim at efficiently coordinating joint use of idle capacity that would otherwise go unused. As these systems' ultimate goal is to maximize usage efficiency and utility of involved parties, they need to be distinguished from pro-social sharing systems (Belk, 2014).

3. Research Context

Foodsharing.de is an online platform with the goal to save surplus food from being thrown away and to share it with others still using it. It was initiated in Germany in 2012 as a reaction to growing awareness of living in a "throwaway society" in which large shares of produced foods end unused in trashcans. Since the website's launch in December 2012, 427,171 kg of food have been saved by 7,156 participating individuals, with over 63,000

people following foodsharing on Facebook and 9,000 cooperative arrangements with retailers established. The platform connects retailers who have surplus food to give away with individuals (named foodsavers) volunteering to collect and distribute the food for further use. The role of the retailers in foodsharing.de is particularly noteworthy as they give away food for free although this could potentially cannibalize their source of revenue. No monetary flows are involved at any moment in time and the foodsharing platform positions itself as ‘ethical sharing’ (www.foodsharing.de).

4. Methodology and Data Analysis

Data collection started in January 2013 and includes participant observation, in-depth interviews as well as netnographic methods. Our total sample comprises in-depth interviews with 13 foodsharing members, 47 pages of field notes as well as comprehensive online data from media coverage, social media sites, WhatsApp messaging groups, personal blogs, and online discussion forums. Data interpretation followed a hermeneutic approach (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and field notes and comparisons with web-content (i.e., participants’ online profiles and entries on discussion boards) served as sources of triangulation to validate information reported in the interviews (Mays & Pope, 1995).

5. Findings

Following prior studies in consumer research (Kozinets, 2008), we will illustrate the interplay of ideologies and understandings of justice by means of three different narratives that prevail in the foodsharing community. The presentation of our findings follows Figure 1, displaying how different ideologies are dynamically enacted, negotiated and synthesized through evolving narratives. Furthermore we show how an institutional structure manages to align the different ideologies.

The initial idea of foodsharing.de was based on an idea of two German food activists who launched the fight against food waste in developed countries. Their idea was to (re-)use and distribute food items that had been declared as waste by the official market: Consistent with the ecological ideology, their major aim was to provide and preserve a livable present and future for everyone. The emphasis on “everyone” reveals the justice principle of *equality*, according to which each individual has the same rights to benefit from a common good instead of redistributing or allocating goods in favor of a certain group of individuals.

Insert Figure 1 here

Narrative 1: The service provider

Foodsharing is dependent on the cooperation between consumers and retailers, as foodsavers rely on retailers to provide them with food waste that is going to be redistributed among private individuals. The initial ecological ideology, however, turned out not to be a convincing argument for retailers in light of the capitalist ideology those are embedded in. Retailers were even reluctant to openly display their cooperation with foodsharing for potential equity concerns: indeed, some retailers suspected personal gain by foodsharers putting at a disadvantage those consumers who pay the full price for the food.

As a reaction, foodsavers shifted to a service-oriented line of argumentation to frame their originally ecological message in a more contextually appropriate (i.e., capitalist) way. By shifting the ecological ideology towards a capitalist one, foodsharing.de embraced the equity justice principle in its narrative.

“A green consciousness and better sleep often does not count as an argument. But we can tighten it to money. You save expenses for waste disposal, because we sort your waste and filter out what is still eatable. We sort the waste! That means that your employees only put the waste somewhere and we do what your employee would usually have to do. What we can also offer you: A sticker which you can visibly

display for your consumers saying that you don't waste food". (Monica, foodsharing ambassador)

Narrative 2: Robin-Hood-Story

The capitalist ideology as promoted by the "service provider" narrative, however, encountered resistance from within the foodsharing community. Proponents of a pro-social ideology pitched in the principle of need justice to counter what they perceived to be an over-capitalist and elitist framing of the food sharing community's mission. They advocated the allocation of surplus food to the needy - a narrative that is similar to the story of Robin Hood as an unrecognized knight who fights for the rights of the poorest.

"Who considers himself too good for distributing food to homeless people, who only wants to take and not to give (sharing!!!), should (...) not act as an altruistic helper". (Tania, former foodsharing ambassador)

Narrative 3: The Knights of the Round Table

While the Robin Hood narrative was perceived noble by some, it also challenged the foodsharing organizers' initial mission to reduce food waste. In fact, the Robin Hood narrative implicitly requires retailers to keep supplying surplus food. The goal of the foodsharing.de founders, however, is to achieve a decrease in surplus food on the part of retailers. It hence reflects the ideals of an ecology ideology that is driven by justice principles of equality and hence goes beyond individual interests for the sake of a greater common good.

The defenders of the original idea thus countered the powerful Robin Hood narrative through an equally heroic narrative similar to a "Knights of the Round Table" story. According to this narrative, foodsavers are similar to knights fighting for a better world through personal example and sacrifice. They set example by sacrificing parts of their valuable time and convenient lifestyle by "saving" and eating surplus "waste" food and educating society about the perils of an over-consumerist lifestyle.

Alignment of ideologies through institutional organization

Though the organizers welcome the rapid growth of the community, they see their initial mission threatened by those parties that do not live the advocated "Knights of the Roundtable" ideology. Well aware that foodsharing also relies and needs to rely on people that embody a different ideology, they resort to top-down measures that support them in prioritizing their initial ideology. As one of the organizers puts it:

"... we have grown so fast and we just have also so many people that do not really share that idealism. But we want people to have a certain basic knowledge. Not only with regard to when foodsharing was created or what is our goal with foodsharing, but also how we deal with each other. It's really bad, but it's necessary. That's, that's the thing. We currently do not act, we react [...] and it is just like that we said we must force people to deal with the topic, with the ideology, sounds stupid, but with foodsharing... The quiz is a reaction to all those conflicts, to all those issues we had." (Monica, foodsharing ambassador and head of a major regional foodsharing chapter).

In order to enforce the ideology of the "Knights of the Roundtable", the organizers created a charter, a special wiki, a quiz, and regular info letters that particularly newcomers are expected to work through. Furthermore, a hierarchical three-tier system (foodsharer-foodsaver-ambassador), personal introduction sessions by the regional head herself, video trainings, and documents and standard templates were put in place to codify and institutionalize appropriate, that is "on-strategy", behavior by foodsavers among each other and towards other stakeholders. As such, the organizers gradually introduced bureaucratic procedures and structures to anchor their idea of foodsharing in the organization. Though at first sight hierarchical and bureaucratic structures seem at odds with the alternative image of

foodsharing.de, participants do not oppose them as long as they see real merit in these procedures and structures.

“Yes, I think it is hierarchical, but on the other hand, uhm, I just find it also good, because I would not know how it should work otherwise. So for me...because, uhm, for example there is a rule, nobody is allowed to just talk to a business and you must attend such a speaking training before [...] Uhm, that’s also a crazily hierarchical rule, but after having had attended myself the training in the beginning, I also realized why. Because I just learned there with which kind of arguments I might, in case of doubt, convince a company to cooperate with me. Because all companies say ‘no’ in the beginning. (Monica, foodsharing ambassador and head of a major regional foodsharing chapter)

At times however, members of the community take a more critical stance towards the legitimacy of the top-down power exerted by the organizers. In one of the regional chapters, the chapter head seems to claim so much regulatory power that some members speak of a “Moniacracy” to describe the dominant organizational principle in their chapter as a mixture of dictatorship (exerted by Monica) and democracy. In this case Monica, the regional head justifies her position through her expert power:

“Leo [...] has once brought up the notion of ‘Moniacracy’. In [city] we don’t have a democracy, but a Moniacracy, right?! (laughs) Uhm, that’s of course not completely right. But I think people know what they have in me. So not only that I do a lot or have done a lot, but also that I have lots and lots of background knowledge and lots and lots of experience.”

From her experiences in the beginning with some individuals that opposed her top-down approach, for example with Tania who personally attacked her and accused her for arbitrary and nepotistic behavior, the regional head has learned her lessons. Apart from her expert knowledge that she refers to in order to legitimize her power position, she also uses bureaucracy to legitimize actions. Through rules and structures, she can detach the enforcement of ideology from her personality and create a system of transparency and fairness that she has to abide with, too, and thus fosters broader acceptance in the community. At the same time, the increasing bureaucracy helps to institutionalize the mission, functions and processes within the organization. Ironically, though most of the rules and regulations were born out of conflicts with opposing stakeholders, these conflicts gave birth to bureaucratic innovations creating and stabilizing the foodsharing organization. It is noteworthy that the other ideologies still co-exist, however are aligned to the initial mission through bureaucratic structures.

6. Discussion

Conflicting or sometimes overlapping worldviews such as ecological, pro-social and capitalist ideologies strive for synthesis, i.e., resolution (Marx, 1956). By means of an ethnography in the context of a German foodsharing community, we show how the negotiation of ideologies and underlying principles of justice follows the classic dramaturgical structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis: Threatened by conflicting ideologies of fair sharing, the original ecological ideology of foodsharing is being re-negotiated through different narratives. While our analysis follows a chronological structure, it should be kept in mind that those negotiations form an on-going dynamic discourse.

The retailers’ capitalist ideology challenged the ecological food saver ideology (thesis) through suspicion of personal gain from free food (antithesis). In response, food savers created the “service provider” narrative (synthesis) to embrace the capitalist equity principle (tit-for-tat). Then, the pro-social camp within the community challenged an overly capitalistic framing of foodsharing as service provider through a heroic Robin Hood narrative promoting the needs principle of justice (thesis). This narrative in turn was at odds and endangered the

ecological ideology of foodsharing (antithesis), namely the reduction of food waste. In response, proponents of the original idea created an equally heroic counter-narrative of the “Knights of the Round Table” (synthesis). An institutional structure sustains and emphasizes this heroic counter-narrative while still leaving space for other ideological orientations.

Insert table 1 here

Sharing communities as a nexus of ideologies

Our findings show that a sharing community is not necessarily a homogenous group but can embody pro-social, ecological and capitalist perspectives that all strive for expression. In contrast to prior research that positioned sharing at odds with gift-giving, pseudo-sharing or other alternative markets (Belk, 2010), we argue that sharing communities often are a nexus of different ideologies and thus are difficult to classify. This is in line with earlier voices that have criticized the conceptualization of sharing in consumer research as a conceptual universalism that exists within a cultural vacuum (Arnould & Rose, 2014; Siebert, 2013). Our analysis of how justice principles are formed and enacted sheds light on how each ideological camp tries to find and fight for its respective place in the sharing community. Despite those internal struggles, the processes of institutionalization establish a basic integrity of the foodsharing community. In this regard the foodsharing community might be seen as a community of purpose in terms of, “a social interaction system organized among people with shared or overlapping goals in order to pursue privileged outcomes” (Schouten & Martin, 2011) that is capable of aligning the interests of different stakeholders.

Co-constitutive Ideologies and Stable Structures

According to Giesler (2008) and Thompson & Coskuner-Balli (2008), conflicting and co-existing ideologies as those found within the foodsharing community are expressed through practices and narratives and will compete in order to gain dominance over each other. However, our analysis highlights how the interplay of different ideologies can be dynamically balanced through a fluent narrative of the main actor that accommodates different social interests in a multifaceted ideological field. The bridging function of consumer narratives that are at the same time influenced by ideology and shaping it emphasizes the fluid connection between the material (i.e., practices) and the immaterial world (i.e., socio-cultural values and ideals). In contrast to prior research (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Kozinets, 2008), our findings indicate that a synthesis between different ideological tensions can be reached, resulting in a (temporarily) stable market system where the ideologies of different actors can co-exist and are not fused.

Formation of social structure through points of ideological instability

Further, our findings add to the literature on social discourse and its role in the construction and legitimization of social structure (Giesler 2012; Thompson 2004). What we describe is a “dynamic ideological model” (Kozinets, 2008, p. 878), an evolving process of ideology contestations among opposing groups of stakeholders and its influence on the creation and establishment of organizational purpose and structure. Within the field of justice ideology, the founders of foodsharing.de adapted their narrative in response to opposing narratives that might endanger the original purpose of the organization with the goal to restore harmony and regain dominance. In the course of this process, the whole organization got transformed through a mechanism of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter, 2001). Fights over the organization’s purpose and functioning and rejection by important stakeholders marked “points of ideological instability” (Thompson 2004, p. 171) that triggered institutional innovation within the organization in the form of structures, roles, hierarchies, rules, and sanctions that increased the organization’s professionalism while reducing pervasive favoritism. As such, the ideological contradictions function as a legitimization process through which the organization gained in stability and capacity to act. At the same time, the

ideological discourse helped to sharpen the organization’s purpose and institutionalize the normative identity of the organization and its members.

7. Conclusion

Our study looks at different and at times conflicting ideological orientations that co-exist within a sharing community. We show how contradicting ideologies are negotiated by the different actors through evolving narratives and shed light on the central role of institutionalization for aligning ideological tensions within the community.. This way we contribute to the understanding of sharing in consumer research, and advance knowledge regarding the interplay between ideology and consumption as well as the role of institutionalization in this process.

Figures and Tables

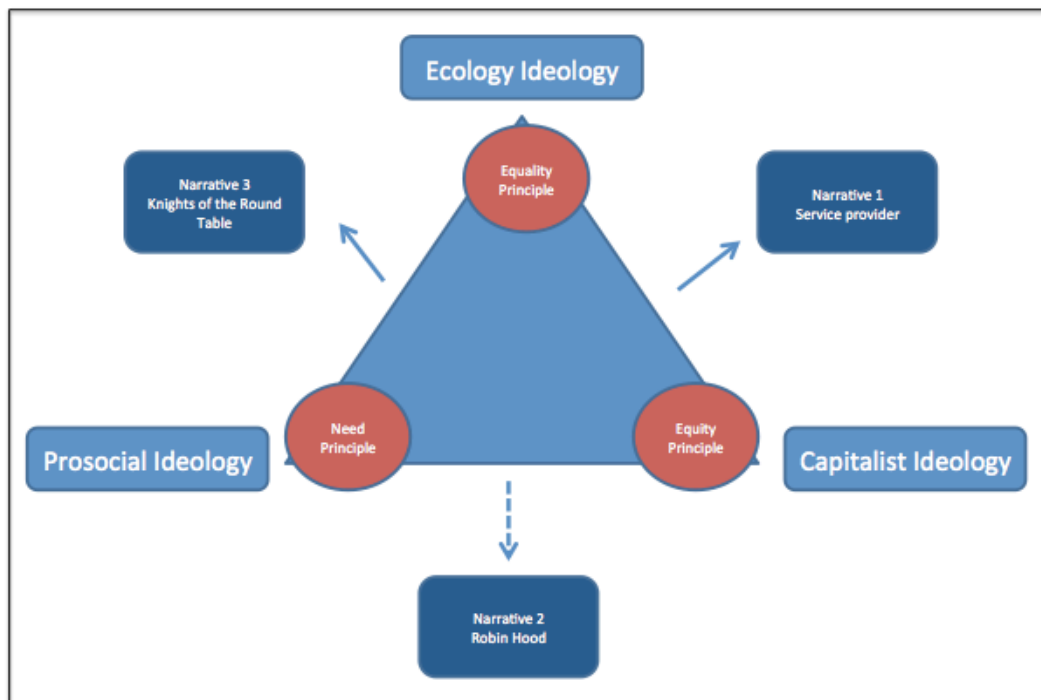


Figure 1. Ideologies and Narratives.

Themes	Key findings	Contribution to theory
Narrative 1: The Service Provider	Foodsharing delivers economic value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing as a nexus of ideologies • Co-constitutive ideologies and stable structures • Formation of social structure through points of ideological instability
Narrative 2: Robin-Hood-Story	Foodsharing should prioritize people in need	
Narrative 3: The Knights of the Round Table	Foodsharing strives for protection of the environment	
Alignment of ideologies through institutional	Foodsharing strives for legitimization through	

organization	institutional organization	
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Table 1: Summary of main findings

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