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Positioning Airbnb and Fairbnb in the Sharing-Exchange Continuum

Many organizations are positioning themselves as part of the sharing economy due to positive connotations associated with the sharing concept. Recognizing that many of these organizations represent the sharing economy to varying degrees, this study selected two organizations – Airbnb and Fairbnb, to analyze the extent to which they serve as examples of the sharing economy. A content analysis was undertaken to identify the position of each organization on a continuum, ranging from *pure sharing* to *pure exchange* characteristics. The analysis reveals that overall Fairbnb may be a stronger example of the sharing economy than Airbnb.

Keywords: sharing economy, Airbnb, Fairbnb, characteristics, content analysis

1. Introduction

The sharing economy is a concept that encompasses many platforms that connect users in a variety of areas, including accommodation, transportation, food and leisure (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinkse, 2017). In fact, it is so common that organizations, such as Airbnb and Fairbnb, want to be recognized as part of the sharing economy due to the positive symbolic value of sharing practices (Altinay & Taheri, 2018; Frenken & Schor, 2017).

Among the various for-profit and non-profit sharing economy organizations, Airbnb appears as the most known innovation in the tourist accommodation sector (Dolnicar, 2017). Since its foundation in 2008, Airbnb has experienced continued and substantive growth, from 140,000 guest arrivals in 2010 to more than 500 million guest arrivals until the middle of 2019 (Airbnb, 2019; Molla, 2017), which has resulted in both positive and negative economic, social, and environmental impacts. In partial response to these impacts, related to Airbnb, a new sharing economy organization, Fairbnb, has recently emerged in the tourist accommodation sector. Fairbnb purports to be a more socially aware and socially conscious company, with an alternative

business model that prioritizes people over profit, and reinvestment in local community projects (Fairbnb, n.d.).

Recognizing that both Airbnb and Fairbnb comprise components of the sharing economy, albeit, with different characteristic and objectives, the purpose of this study is: (1) to analyse how Airbnb and Fairbnb promote themselves in terms of the sharing economy characteristics and (2) identify where each company falls within the Sharing-Exchange Continuum proposed by Habibi, Kim and Laroche (2016), and Habibi, Davidson and Laroche (2017). Habibi et al. (2016) developed the continuum to help distinguish the degree of sharing represented by various sharing economy organizations. It is anchored on the left side by the characteristics associated with pure sharing (social bonds, sense of joint ownership, dependent, similarity to real sharing, social reproduction, and singularity), while on the right it is anchored by the characteristics associated with pure exchange (reciprocation, money relevance, money importance, and calculation). Importantly, the continuum reflects past characteristics-focused research in the tourism accommodation sector, particularly as it relates to small, family owned tourism businesses (see Hall and Rusher's, 2005, 2013 research on the motivations of bed and breakfast operators on the North Island of New Zealand). This study builds upon past research, presenting unique insights related to the theoretical aspects of the sharing economy, as well as illustrating the inconsistencies within organizations claiming to be part of the sharing economy and their actual business practices.

2. Methods

This research employed the Sharing-Exchange Continuum proposed by Habibi et al. (2016) and Habibi et al. (2017). While Habibi et al. (2016) designed and tested the continuum based upon respondents' considerations, we utilize the continuum to analyze key documents of both

companies. An exploratory method of netnography, or ethnography conducted through the internet (Kozinets, 2002), gathered data related to the sharing and exchange characteristics of Airbnb and Fairbnb. The data was gathered from 33 newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, press releases, webpages and reports. Hyperlinks and references within the first selected documents were also analyzed.

Content analysis, a qualitative technique of analyzing written messages (Cole, 1988), through a deductive approach, was used to provide a text-driven review of the documents. Specifically, the categories for analysis were construed from previous research and defined before the coding phase (Mayring, 2014). The categories that directed the research were developed from the characteristics adopted in the Sharing-Exchange Continuum proposed by Habibi et al. (2016). NVivo 12, a qualitative research software, was used to help in the classifying process.

3. Results and discussion

The analysis identified that nine of the ten sharing-exchange characteristics are present in both Airbnb and Fairbnb communication. The sense of joint ownership characteristic was not identified in the companies' communication; thus, it is not included in our analysis.

The analysis reveals that Airbnb and Fairbnb possess characteristics of both the sharing and exchange economy. For example, Airbnb exhibits the sharing and exchange characteristics of the dependent and singularity. As it relates to the exchange characteristics, Airbnb represents a money relevance characteristic and involves calculation as it relates to how much hosts should charge. The analysis also reveals that Airbnb exhibits the characteristic of money importance and participants expecting to receive some type of reciprocity in return for the shared resource. Airbnb evidences the presence of the social bond characteristic, where participants reproduce relationships

amongst themselves (social reproduction). Airbnb also exhibits the characteristics of similarity to real sharing in its communication. Therefore, the analysis suggests that Airbnb presents more exchange than sharing characteristics. Consequently, it appears appropriate to position Airbnb closer to the exchange side of the continuum than the sharing side (Figure 1).

For Fairbnb, the analysis suggests it possesses the characteristics of similarity to real sharing, social bond among participants, which result in social reproduction. The money importance characteristic is oppositely expressed in Fairbnb communication. Thus, it should be (re)codified as money (non)importance, representing a sharing characteristic. Fairbnb also exhibits the sharing and exchange aspects of the dependent and singularity characteristics. However, it also exhibits characteristics of the exchange economy, albeit to a lesser extent than Airbnb. For example, Fairbnb demonstrates the characteristics of reciprocation, calculation of charges and money relevance. Given these findings we draw the conclusion that Fairbnb appears to present more characteristics of sharing and therefore we position it closer to the sharing side of the continuum than the exchange side (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 approximately here]

4. Contributions and future research agenda

While it appears that this research may be the first time the Sharing-Exchange Continuum has been applied beyond its original application, some interesting findings are observed. First, all but one of the characteristics evidenced in Habibi et al.'s (2016) (sense of joint ownership) was present in this research. In other words, our research did not find any evidence that neither Airbnb nor Fairbnb promote a sense of joint ownership. Second, our findings suggest that Fairbnb may be a stronger

example of the sharing economy than Airbnb because it possesses dominance of pure sharing characteristics over pure exchange. Specifically, it presents more characteristics associated with the pure sharing economy, including the goal to minimize the negative impacts associated with other organizations, such as Airbnb.

Undeniably, these initial findings require further exploration. As such, future research will delve more deeply into the characteristics of the sharing economy. This is an important next step because, from a theoretical perspective, it may assist in further developing the existing continuum and assist in better characterizing the sharing economy. In this regard, as a next step, we plan to analyze the perceptions of other stakeholders, such as hosts and guests, related to the sharing economy characteristics. From a practical perspective, this research may be of interest to governance and community leaders as a means for addressing the negative social impacts associated with some sharing economy businesses. Indeed, the up and coming generation of consumers appears to be signaling the need for more socially and environmentally benign business models.

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