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## **Interpersonal Relationships As “Self-Otherhood”: a Conceptualization and Demonstration in the Context of the P2p Sharing Economy**

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Scholarly inquiry into the host-guest self-presentations and re-presentations on technology-mediated platforms is limited. Our paper addresses this topic by conceptualising and demonstrating “self-otherhood” in the context of the P2P sharing economy. The study uses apriori logic to categorize the “relational self-other” and the “subdued self” in host-guest relationships

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# Interpersonal Relationships as “Self-otherhood”: A Conceptualization and Demonstration in the Context of the P2P Sharing Economy

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Encounters with others may produce meaningful relationships or may create disparities in the meanings derived by the individuals involved. Our focus is on the relationships formed on peer-to-peer accommodation platforms, such as those for Couchsurfing and Airbnb. Potential hosts and guests pursue self-presentations on these platforms. The motivation for self-presentation involves a desire to please through a version of the presenter’s ideal self (Baumeister 1982), social self, or anticipatory self (Hearn 2017).

Peer-to-peer accommodations present opportunities for self-fulfilment, enjoyment, monetary benefits, accommodation, amenities and the need for socialization (Tussyadiah 2016). These benefits are intricately intermeshed. But initially the host and guest meet on an internet website. Here their self-presentations take the form of personal profiles – conveying information about jobs, demographics, hobbies, and heroes. They often include visuals: photos of self, family, pets, and homes. Host and guest design their self-presentations independently. Studies have explored the topic of self-marketing on personal web pages and various social media platforms (e.g., Kim and Tussyadiah 2013; Hearn 2017; Kim and Lee 2011; Schau and Gilly 2003). While these studies are beneficial in understanding self-branding, dating and hook-up apps, and web pages, they may be less useful for understanding host-guest interactions on P2P accommodation-sharing sites.

Drawing on the Ronald Laing’s *Knots* (1970) and Goffman’s presentation of self (1956), this research challenges the view of shared cognition and feelings of consistency/inconsistency between individuals. It is likely that hosts and guests create their own individual imagined relationships construed as friends, commercial partners, or even adversaries.

## Relational Self-Otherhood

We study Couchsurfing self-presentations online as a “dance” between camaraderie, marketplace exchange, and conflict. In order to understand this dance, we develop the concept of relational self-otherhood. This involves *the bundle of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations regarding the relationship*. Both the host and guest have such construals of their relationship and they are necessarily at least somewhat incongruent. Often, they are predicated on an imagination of the other’s relational self-otherhood. This is perhaps best illustrated an excerpt from Laing’s (1970, 48) *Knots*:

*She wants him to want her*

*He wants her to want him To get him to want her*

*She pretends she wants him To get her to want him*

*He pretends he wants her*

## First Impressions and Prejudices

Camaraderie, whether sincere or insincere, is the preferred mode of relationship on Couchsurfing. Online profiles provide a basis for first impressions and the dance begins in subsequent online exchanges. In technology-mediated relations of peer-to-peer accommodations, the construals of the relational self-other image are interdependent, but strongly guided by first impressions. These impressions may be influenced by personality, occupation, nationality, age, ethnicity, gender, attractiveness, and apparent income and

social class. There is ample opportunity for racism, sexism, ageism and other forms of bias and prejudice to enter into these first impressions. But the host’s and guest’s imagined self-otherhood is more likely to proceed beyond this first impression if there is anticipated comradery.

## Masks and Selves

We are comprised of all the “masks” we wear on different occasion (Brissett and Edgley 2005; Goffman 1956). Peer-to-peer accommodation platforms function to help each party design self-presentations or “masks.” The mask helps us to project our best self in a given situation like interacting on the Couchsurfing platform. For potential hosts, having formulated an attractive profile self-presentation, we continue to put our best face forward in sending messages in response to potential guest inquiries. Mutual self-disclosures can help to build pre-visit comradery or may raise flags of conflict. Aesthetic, political, ethical or other differences may either be ignored, challenged, or sabotage the relationship and bring it to an end.

When host’s and guest’s self-otherhoods are dissimilar, but the difference is ignored this involves what we call a subdued self. Subdued self an alternative self to avoid conflict. It is achieved by hiding or subduing aspects of self that are likely to provoke or expose a conflict situation. Either or both members of the dyad may do this. The relationship between host and guest is likely to be more passive, professional and pro-forma in nature than it might otherwise be if the participants were truly the friends they are pretending to be. If, for example, they perceive a likely ideological difference, they try to avoid conversations that would surface the conflict. Some might even appear to go along with beliefs that they would normally oppose.

## Face-to-Face Interactions and their Aftermath

Experiences during the stay continue the dance and influence both actors. Host and guest post-visit activity takes the form of posting comments, pictures, likes and dislikes as part of a mutual reputation rating system. With the greater distance they may be more forthright, especially if the experience was positive. They may however continue to portray a negative experience as positive, with a subdued self and a lack of candor about differences with the other. In this case they jointly co-create a surface-level, often fictional, image of a co-constructed shared self-otherhood. We often do this in person as well through through polite fictions, civil inattention, and studied non-observance (Goffman 1967).

Peer-to-peer social media platforms for Airbnb or Couchsurfing often act as repositories for selfie culture (Goss 2019; Gorichanaz 2019) as a way to communicate self-otherhood among platform members, specifically when they portray the host and guest in a recent stay. When the imagined self-otherhoods are similar between host and guest, this results in co-created relational self-otherhood. Similar perceptions should heighten the

perceived warmth of the relationship and the feeling of camaraderie. On the other hand, dissimilar self-other experiences will lead to felt conflict, frustration and perhaps a subdued self for either one or both of the agents in order not to provoke a confrontation in person or later online.

We find that these relationships are most likely to be implicitly negotiated between members of the pair. We explore this topography through a series of encounters involving both disputes and harmony. In this exploration we consider self-presentations (before) and self-representations (after) host-guest contact using ethnographic and netnographic research.

### Ronald Laing’s Knots

As noted above, Ronald Laing’s *Knots* outlines how two persons develop their relationship in a potentially conflicting situation. The idea that people tend to assume what other people are thinking about them may be the root to misunderstanding in a relationship. This is most likely to be the case when two strangers meet and try to develop a relationship with each other. In order to pursue a relationship one or both parties may recognize initial insincerity but still persevere to realize co-orientation. Their initial interaction takes place within the larger rubric of a game:

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me.

*I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.* (Laing 1970, 1) Misunderstandings, by one or both agents, may interrupt bonding in a relationship. The relational self between guest and host is disrupted if either one or both misunderstand that the relationship is a fictive pretence. The premise is that people may knowingly or unknowingly participate in building relationships based on falsehoods. Laing focuses on the knots people tie themselves into through preconceptions and misunderstandings. He calls them “*knots, tangles, fankles, impasses, disjunctions, whirligogs, binds*” (Laing 1970, i). The relationships he deals with are those of parent and child, lovers, or peers. The bonds can be of love, dependency, uncertainty or jealousy. These sort of knots in relationships are also likely when two strangers meet online to determine whether they will pursue a further relationship. Even when insincerity or falsehood in a relationship is known to both parties, they may decide to play their role knowing that the relationship will end when the contractual stay is over. Such is the logic of “knots.”

By expressly theorising self-otherhood in cases of dissimilarity, we allow for deeper reflection on the nature of peer-to-peer homestays. We use separate interviews with both participants in Couchsurfing to focus on the subdued self.

### A Priori and Logical Extension of Self Otherhood

The GUEST self-other and HOST self-other in relational self-otherhood are imagined separately. For example, both guest and host like drinking wine but one likes red wine and the other likes white wine. One may feign indifference in order to defer to the other’s preference. In this simple case, one would perceive congruent preferences and the other incongruent preferences. Therefore, we focus on *imagined* rather than actual similarity/dissimilarity. Sometimes it is like mutually saluting a flag or two people both saying “I love you” to each other. These are things that should be taken at face value and not questioned. Otherwise the partners may discover that they mean quite different things to them and that they have different levels of sincerity in their relational self-otherhood. If the parties assume mutual sincerity, ‘me’ and ‘you’ transforms as ‘we’ and ‘us.’ This magical transmogrification results in an imagined ‘self-otherhood’ that two people in a relationship exemplify a shared self-otherhood. Peer-to-peer accommodations present a special case because the face-to-face encounter is for a fixed period of time. Departure does not entail a breakup or divorce.

### Conclusion

In this on-going project, we propose that platform-mediated interactions create a ‘relational’ self-otherhood. A good positive experience for both host and guest entails harmony in the relationship providing the self-other of host and the self-other of guest with corresponding sentiments, emotions, thoughts and feelings. Like a ballroom dance, where male and female are in synchrony and lost within the moment, this can be an exalted flow state. This is an ideal outcome, but it does not occur most of the time; there are times when dissimilarity dominates expectations and experiences in either the host or guest domain. The relational self-other manifests in both host’s and guest’s minds. It is not just predicated on the shared experience of a visit, but also depends on their perceptions and imaginations of each other’s performance and thoughts.

The relational self-otherhood concept differs from the simpler formulation of co-orientation. Laing’s (1970) *Knots* insights highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the temporary or lasting merging of selves that takes place when strangers come together. We began our study online because of the digital affordances available on general and specialized social media. The behavioural phase currently underway examines actual Couchsurfing pairs and interviews them separately. Unlike other platforms like Airbnb, Couchsurfing has the advantage of being less mediated. Airbnb employs professional photographers, coaches, and local host coordinators, whereas Couchsurfing is largely free of such management. Furthermore, whereas Airbnb often involves couples and families as both hosts and guests, Couchsurfing most often involves two individuals. And the fact that no money changes hand in Couchsurfing takes away the possible ulterior motives of profit-seeking and bargain-hunting. This does not rule out other ulterior motives like learning, sex, or putting a guest to work on the host’s home projects. But the absence of monetary considerations removes some obvious alternate explanations of cordial-seeming behaviors. This makes for a clearer opportunity for testing our a priori model.

Our study focuses on the intimacy of sharing a home or couch, but the model potentially applies to a variety of interpersonal encounters, including those between merchants and customers, business colleagues, friendship networks, and family members. The construct of self-otherhood offers a way to account for B2B, B2C and P2P relationships and hopes to broaden the field of relationship marketing. The concept of the subdued self is potentially relevant in all fields of consumer behavior studies.

What our perspective introduces to theoretical and methodological conversations is the issue of sincerity of performance. It recognizes that we are both performers and audience in our interactions with others. We also play the role of critic in that we evaluate the success and sincerity of the other’s performance. We hope that we are opening a theoretical and methodological door for consumer researchers that will result in new insights and understandings.

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