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Introduction to Volume II – Sharing

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The articles in this volume speak to contemporary debates on the significance and increasing turn to practices such as sharing.  We start with work on notions of sharing, especially Belk (2010), before addressing recent work on the shift to collaborative consumption.  Consumer Culture Theory has foregrounded notions of community and we explore the links to this concept in section three, which also embraces the shift to Web 2.0 and its participatory and sharing imperatives. Sharing also brings in its wake tensions and contradictions and we attend to these in the final sections. We believe that the papers in this volume demonstrate the value of exploring sharing as a possible avenue to advance consumer research.

**Theoretical & Anthropological Roots of Sharing**

Belk (2010) sees sharing as an overlooked but critical concept for the understanding of consumer behaviour. Through a review of anthropological and sociocultural work on familial sharing and sharing within the extended family Belk demonstrates how sharing is a fundamental aspect of consumer behaviour: "Sharing is a more subtle, and likely more pervasive, mode of consumer behaviour [like gift giving or economic exchange] that has gone largely unrecognized or misrecognized." (2010, p. 730).  Such academic inattention also

expresses itself within the family unit, where Belk reveals that sharing is once again taken-for-granted given its routine character, but also the suggestion that it does not mark itself out like gift giving through formalized rituals. But, as Belk suggests, "Sharing a family meal is an important bonding ritual." (2010, p. 724); an act through which caring and nurturing is expressed. For Belk, such neglect is troubling, especially as sharing dovetails with notions of social justice, consumer welfare, environmentalism and sustainable contexts, but also with the shift towards online sharing through support groups.

Widlock (2004) provides an anthropological account of sharing which does not rely upon notions of human selfishness or generosity. Like Belk, Widlock seeks to distance the act from what Sahlins' (1988) notion of sharing as a special type of reciprocity. For Widlock, sharing is a form of virtuous practice, as distinct from accumulation and exchange: "…sharing is morally and logically an act for its own sake." (2004, p.61). In this manner, "Sharing creates a shared base, triggering the emergence of social groups and shared identities. The act of sharing itself creates this sharing in, a group of people who share not only some resources but a moral base of mutual engagement more generally…Sharing can be initiated both the by the giver and by the receiver: demand sharing is a common and an accepted practice." (2004, pp.61-62). Thus, talk of sharing "entails allowing others access, and to do this for its own sake, i.e. for the sake of jointly enjoying these resources." (2004, p.63). For Widlock, sharing is thus best understood as an example of everyday practical reasoning to better express the idea that human actions and social relations are founded on moral dimensions. Such work can thus be related to emerging notions of collaborative consumption, as we explore next.

**Collaborative Consumption**

In recent years, countless examples from clothes swaps to car sharing, time banks to crowdfunding demonstrate that collaborative consumption has been embraced by consumers across the world and is regarded as having important cultural, social, economic and political consequences. Rachel Botsman has developed a reputation as a leading authority and consultant on collaborative consumption. In the first piece of this section, we present a chapter from Botsman and Rogers' (2010), *What's mine is yours: How collaborative consumption is changing the way we live*. In this chapter, they identify three forms of collaborative consumption systems: (1) product service systems are based on consumers paying to access the benefits of a product without desiring to own it outright (2) redistribution markets refer to examples such as Ebay or Freecycle when consumers reuse or resell items they no longer want and (3) collaborative lifestyles involves the sharing and exchange of less tangible assets. They then present four key principles of collaborative consumption which are illustrated with a range of contemporary examples of collaborative consumption in action. First, critical mass refers to the need for enough choice to satisfy consumers. Second, idling capacity refers to the redistribution of the unused potential of both physical products and less tangible assets, often facilitated by modern technologies. Third, belief in the commons puts emphasis on the collaborative part of the concept as "by providing value to the community, we enable our own social value to expand in return" (p. 90). Fourth, trust between strangers refers to well-designed peer-to-peer platforms that remove the need for middlemen by systems that build reputational capital for users.

The next articles are academic studies on various forms of collaborative consumption. We have selected these two papers because although both largely coincide with what Botsman and Rogers (2010) term as product service systems, they offer alternative perspectives on the role

of the market. The paper by Ozanne and Ozanne is based on the context of toy libraries and considered in light of policy concerns about children's access to play opportunities without the encroachment of commercial forces. The papers present findings from a qualitative study in New Zealand based on in-depth interviews with parents and children alongside participant observation at a toy library. Families appear to construct various meanings of the toy library which "range from being a good way to save money and have fun to being a political act of conscience and a way to build community" (p. 269). Toy libraries, in comparison to more commercial spaces of intergenerational appeal such as that presented by Borghini and colleagues (2009) in Volume IV: Space, are regarded as collective spaces that offer "safe havens" (p. 273) from marketers and marketing practices. In socialising their children into the context of toy libraries, parents are presented as exerting their control to mediate market influence on their children and encouraging various forms of citizenship.

The second paper by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) is much more commercial and focuses on the case of car sharing as an example of access-based consumption which they define as "transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place" (p. 881). The authors demonstrate how access differs from ownership and sharing by discussing the following six dimensions of access consumptionscapes: temporality, anonymity, market mediation, consumer involvement, type of accessed object and political consumerism. They then consider the outcomes of these dimensions with findings revealing that consumers do not feel a sense of identification with the shared objects but are more instrumental as regards their relationship to the cars. The cars are valued for their use value, however, sign value has a role to play in terms of the practice of access as a "more economically savvy and more flexible form of consumption than ownership" (p. 890). In contrast to the anti-commercial nature of the toy library discussed above, car sharers wanted market mediation in the form of a "big-brother

governance model to regulate the system" (p. 892). Also unlike the toy library context, consumers of car sharing have little interest in community-building.

**Sharing, Community and Web 2.0**

Articles in this section highlight the importance of understanding consumption and consumers through notions of communality. In his seminal article, Cova (1997) draws our attention to the 'linking value' of consumption in the conditions of post or late modernity. Cova's discussion corresponds to two major approaches to the study of consumption: First, he critiques the dominant conceptualisation of the consumer as an individual unit of analysis in the literature of postmodernity. This stream's overemphasis on individuation and the fragmentation of self (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), according to Cova, divorces the individual from the broader social context in which the consumer interacts with other members of society. Second, the author argues that since the critics of consumption (e.g., Bauman, 2000, 2001) overlook the social aspect of consumption, they render consumption as a devastating act that nurtures individualism and destroys social ties. Cova's analytical lens depicts consumption as a social behaviour in emerging communities of consumption – new tribes in Maffesoli's (1996) terms – where consumers share their sense of sociality and communality through engagement in consumption spaces (e.g., shopping malls) and activities (e.g., symbolic consumption of brands). Cova's notion of 'linking value' of consumption finds support in many studies (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Hamilton and Hewer, 2010; Jafari et al., 2013) in which people share a diversity of values and meanings in their everyday life situations.

Cova and Dalli (2009) use the term 'working consumers' to denote the fact that consumers are engaged in the co-creation of value in the market. The authors build upon Lusch and Vargo's (2006a, 2006b) concept of service dominant logic to argue that consumers' participation in consumption practices and their involvement in transactions and interactions with the firm eventually contribute to the value of market offerings such as brands, products, and services. For example, as consumers share their, knowledge, interests, experiences and meanings through brand communities, they voluntarily utilise their own resources towards benefiting other consumers and the companies. The authors call these consumers 'working' because they are not economically rewarded. The authors also acknowledge the fact that working consumers may be seen as unpaid labour exploited by the firm.

For Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau (2008), the concept of sharing is not explicitly deployed, rather the focus is upon collective creativity and innovation in network contexts. Like Cova and Dalli (2009), Kozinets et al draw our attention to contemporary marketing thought and its service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) to explore emergent forms of innovation. As they suggest: "Anthropology tells us that contemporary and traditional societies thrive or perish based largely on innovation. Innovation has also become one of the most important topics in the contemporary lexicon of management behaviors." (2008, p. 340). Based on research from a range of consumption communities, the authors propose four ideal types of creative online consumer community: *crowds, hives, mobs and swarms*. In this manner, they compare the emergent collaborativeness of *crowds* based around particular projects to *hives* as centres of skills and excellence. In contrast, *mobs* express "a high concentration of innovative contribution, but these contributions are oriented to a commune-ludic spirit of communal play and lifestyle exchange." (2008, p.348); whereas within *swarms* "the value-added of most individual contributions may be quite low, but the aggregate value of the high collective

quantity and quality of contributions will be very high." (2008, p.350). Through such a typology, the authors better express the forms of community-making which are now typical of and performed within participative cultures. Herein, as they suggest, the notion of the *consumer* appears increasingly outdated givens its semantics of passivity and isolation (see also Introduction to Practices Volume); rather the focus of consumer behaviour is shifted to what Kozinets et al (2008, p.353) term 'new architectures of participation' (see also Hamilton and Hewer, 2010).

The work of John (2012) reveals how notions of 'sharing' are not part and parcel of the constitutive activity of Web 2.0. Through an analysis of the largest and most visited Social Network sites, John is able to demonstrate that whereas 'sharing' was initially concerned with specifics objects, such as file-sharing (see also Cluley 2013; Giesler 2006) it has increasingly become more fuzzy, vague and inclusive, to refer to the imperative to 'share your world' and 'share your life'. Sharing has thus become versatile and increasingly 'dense', associated with positive connotations of giving, equality and selflessness it is as though sharing as become a modern form of caring. Moreover, given the rhetorical power of sharing as 'communication *and* distribution' hints at its commercial logic or as John suggests: "…sharing on SNSs is also, and importantly, about communication, particularly through the practice of updating one's status on Facebook or Twitter. Here, sharing is telling. Part of what we are encourage to share on SNSs is our feelings, and so there is an overlap between common spoken use of the term and the Web 2.0 meaning. However, letting people know your opinion of current events, your location or any of the minutiae of your everyday life is, in Web 2.0, also called sharing." (2012, pp.175-176). In this manner, the social logic of sharing (as practice to foster human relations) converges with commercial interests for whom the logic is one of monetizing participation and users' activities, or as John suggests: "…every time we share something online, we create

traces of data, which constitute the hard currency of commercial organizations in Web 2.0."
(2012, p.178).

**Sharing, Inclusion and Exclusion**

Similar to the articles on communities of consumption, the two articles relevant to this theme also consider how we connect with other people. However, the focus is on inclusion and exclusion to demonstrate how sharing can be both altruistic and self-interested.

As noted above, Belk (2010) highlight the relevance of exploring the expression of sharing within the family unit. One paper which addresses this issue is Kochuyt's (2004) sociological study of sharing resources within the family. Kochuyt focuses specifically on families experiencing poverty, a context where sharing arguably takes on increased significance. This qualitative study conducted in Belgium conveys the difficulties of dealing with material deprivation within consumer culture. In response, parents prioritise the needs and desire of their children above their own physical well-being. This self-sacrifice means that exclusion within the marketplace is countered by the inclusive effects of the family unit. As Kochuyt (2004: 145) suggests, "*By imposing an 'artificial lack' of resources upon themselves, the parents create an 'artificial affluence' for their kids.*" As a result, the ways in which resources are distributed within the family can create affluence amidst poverty.

In the next paper, Sobh et al. (2013) report on an ethnographic study on Arab hospitality conducted in Qatar and United Arab Emirates. Within this context, hospitality rituals are performed in both private and commercial spaces and the "ritual performance is used to erect and strengthen boundaries between people and groups, while still touting a discourse of

generosity and openness" (p. 444). This reveals the potential tensions at play in the enactment of the hospitality ritual in that it is regarded as a "ritual of exclusion masquerading as a ritual of inclusion" (p. 453). The findings suggest that on some occasions where threat or hostility are perceived to be low, hospitality rituals do involve "meaningful sharing" (p 468) that is characterised by openness and enduring relationships. However, on other occasions, it is a much more formal and fleeting experience.

**From Illegal Downloading to Deviance and the negative aspects of sharing**

Articles in this section reveal the negative aspects of sharing. First, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2007) shed light on a different dimension of sharing as a negative behaviour amongst the consumers engaged in illegal downloading and sharing of motion pictures. The authors' empirical examination of consumers' illegal file sharing of movies in Germany supports the movie industry's claim that consumer file sharing destroys a significant amount of its revenues. Their research also confirms that such consumers' engagement in file sharing reduces their theatre visits, legal DVD rentals, and legal DVD purchases. This study highlights the key determinants of consumers' intention of illegal file sharing with reference to 'utility' theory. That is, consumers engage in file sharing because it reduces their transaction cost, enhances their mobility, reduces their physical storage space, empowers them to take revenge from the movie industry's unfair pricing, enables them to establish social ties with other consumers, and helps them to collect larger amounts of movies. This study is important in the sense that it draws attention to the benefits consumers gain from an act which is seen as consumers' misbehaviour and has negative consequences for the industry.

The work of Cluley (2013) employs symbolic interactionism to challenge such an assumption. Making use of Becker's (1963) work on *outsiders* and *deviance*, Cluley suggests: "whether an act is considered deviant can be seen as the result of groups labelling an act as wrong and enforcing a punishment on anyone who commits it. Labelling theorists argue that all punishments are designed to push the deviant to the margins of society." (2013, p.267). In this manner, as Cluley suggests, to label downloading as 'illegal' rests the profit motive and the economic imperative. But proponents of such downloading contest and twist such simple acts of labelling: "claiming that they are taking the commodification of music to its ultimate conclusion. They are becoming perfect consumers who get the most music while paying as little as possible… to [further] justify their position as outsiders." (2013, p.272).

The negative aspects of sharing become evident in the next article by Cherrier and Gurrier (2013). The authors' analysis of drinking culture in Australia reveals that such a culture is deeply rooted in the normative constructs and behaviours that shape people's engagement in drinking. Such norms are related to the nature of sharing, reciprocity and conformity collectively practised amongst alcohol consumers. Consumers of alcohol see drinking as a social activity and a symbolic practice to take part in moments, experiences, celebrations and events in their day-to-day life. As such, they feel obliged to reciprocate one another's generosity of buying or offering alcohol as gift-giving. This kind of reciprocity is seen as caring for friends and others in the social group. Therefore, individuals find refraining from drinking hard as they feel social pressure on them. As a result, they feel that they should conform to the norms of their collective group. The authors conclude that, as change agents, non-profit

organisations can play an important role in changing people's attitude towards such norms and reduce the harms of drinking culture.

**Suggestions for future research**

We feel that the papers in this volume demonstrate that the turn to sharing is now well and truly underway. Academics have sought to understand the forms and character of sharing. We consider the shift to sharing as an outcome of a global interconnected world where risks and fears are increasingly common currency; the inflation of talk around sharing thus signals shifting social, cultural and technological contexts and how they are lived and made meaningful. We also see it as an outcome of the commercial and economic imperatives at work where the language of sharing and participation have become increasingly foregrounded, coupled with the technological affordances which make sharing increasingly inevitable. We are thinking here of Twitter and Facebook, but also Dropbox and Flickr where 'Sharing' has become a way of life: less a choice than routinized and inevitable. In this regard, the term oversharing (Agger, 2013) where the emphasis is on the 'trading or telling [of] secrets' (2013, p.60), demonstrates the convergence of the social and commercial logics at work.

Sharing in this manner has become, much like practices and spaces, a keyword in academic debates. Sharing much like other social science concepts demands to be made meaningful and researched given its essentially contested and negotiated character. Future research on sharing is thus required to explore its contemporary forms. This may take the form of work on participatory cultures and Web 2.0, but also perhaps how sharing expresses itself at a macro-level and in terms of the politics and contradictions involved. Sharing at the family level as per Belk's work (2010), or in terms of communities and neighbourhoods, or even at the national

and global level necessitates further work to understand its contemporary significance and value as a critical constituent of global consumer culture.

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