

Chapter 2

Flattening Relations in the Sharing Economy: A Framework to Analyze Users, Digital Platforms, and Providers

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ABSTRACT

The sharing economy (SE) includes economic, social, and technological arrangements to promote collaborative relations between users and providers willing to share assets through digital platforms (DP). Even evolving fast, there is an opportunity to discuss how DP establishes connections between users and providers and uses a digital agency to mediate and flatten consumption relations in SE. Therefore, the authors propose a framework and future research directions that explore characteristics of the actants (roles, agency, behavioral attitudes) in the process of flattening consumption relations through DP in SE (connections, mediation, induction). To structure this framework, the authors consolidated the various definitions of its main elements and adopted the actor-network theory concept of translation as the theoretical-methodological approach to analyze the associations that determined how flattening consumption relations occur in SE.

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INTRODUCTION

“We are living in a world of hybrids in which relationships between subjects and objects remains contentious.” Domen Bajde (2013)

With the emergence of information and communication technology (ICT), there has been a significant change in the behavior of consumers and providers that enhances new collaborative relations to share assets—products and services—through digital platforms (DP) (Acquier et al., 2017, Belk, 2014a; Eckhardt et al., 2019). In this context, the sharing economy (SE) relates to economic and technological arrangements that result from these collaborative relations. It promotes new business models in a digital movement disseminated by collaborative communities and platforms, such as Airbnb, Uber, and WeWork, changing the way people travel, use transport, and do office work (Sundararajan, 2017; De Vaujany et al., 2020; Ertz and Boily, 2019). Therefore, the combination and diffusion of informational systems, devices, and DP have formed a context with new consumption habits, involving new values, practices, and relations and that promote socio-technological development (Hamari et al., 2016; Bradley and Pargman, 2017; Ertz and Boily, 2019). These new habits represent managerial challenges that enlarge the discussion by centering the focus of analysis on the actions of consumers (users) and service providers (Razeghian and Weber, 2019) and the role of DP in mediating consumption and service relations (Laurell and Sandström, 2017; Ertz et al., 2018; Cotrim et al., 2020), thereby reshaping these relations (Sigala, 2019; Basili and Rossi, 2020).

Although this economic and social environment is evolving fast (Hamari et al., 2016; Ertz and Boily, 2019; Basili and Rossi, 2020), there is an opportunity to discuss the role and agency of DP in consumption and service relations by promoting connections, interactions, mediations, and inductions among users through their features: tools, and algorithms (De Reuver et al., 2018; Kinder et al., 2019). Currently, DP is defined as visible and invisible solutions that include websites, blogs, virtual messaging networks, mobile applications, and social networks of texts, content, images, and videos that allow the quick sharing of information, products, and services (Eckhardt et al., 2019). In the context of the SE, a broad definition of DP seems appropriate. This definition includes a community-based economy (Acquier et al., 2017; Ertz and Boily, 2019) and multisided platforms that give users temporary access to tangible and intangible resources to use some services (Sundararajan, 2017; Ertz and Leblanc-Proulx, 2018). Literature gives us examples of studies investigating (a) DP agency while mediating communication, reputation, trust, engagement, sharing practices, and service quality (De Rivera et al., 2017; Basili and Rossi, 2020); (b) key factors such as access to the SE through technology (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014b); (c) how DP carry out and coordinate engagement (Breidbach and Brodie, 2017); (d) the realization, moderation, and mediation of consumption sharing by DP (Basili and Rossi, 2020); and (e) the diffusion and promotion of innovative businesses (Ertz and Boily, 2019). However, these studies tend to ignore the sociotechnical process and details about agency in this triad of users, DP, and providers. This process assembles subjects and objects through the flattening of relations between users and providers with the mediation of technological artifacts to spur consumption (Bajde, 2013, 2014; Schouten et al., 2015). Furthermore, this process shows symmetry between human agents (users and providers) and nonhuman ones (DP) (Bajde, 2013). Digital technologies are not inanimate because they act, inspire meanings, and influence the relations and dynamics of consumption (Bajde, 2014; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2016, Garud et al., 2020).

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