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Theorizing Relational Work in the Collaborative Economy: An Application to Peer-To-Peer Renting

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Why, to whom and how do people rent out their possessions? Previous research explains why people prefer renting rather than owning (Durgee and O'Connor 1995; Moeller and Wittkowski 2010) and how peer-to-peer rental systems organize balanced short-term exchanges between strangers (Ikkala and Lampinen 2015; Philip, Ozanne, and Ballantine 2015; von Richthofen and Fischer 2019). Considered as 'pseudo-sharing' (Belk 2014), renting illustrates a growing tendency toward commodification whereby individuals marketize personal assets, including private goods/spaces (Belk 2020; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2016; Harvey 2007). Previous literature highlights the crucial role of platforms in "hybridizing" conflicting institutional logics between commerce and hospitality (Scaraboto 2015; von Richthofen and Fischer 2019)) and fostering 'market empathization' (Giesler, Veresiu, and Siebert 2015). In addition, extant literature on liquid relationships to possessions (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012) argues that access-based modes of consumption fuel a new culture of circulation (Aronczyk and Craig 2012; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), which helps both renters to avoid unnecessary purchases and owners to make extra money from the temporary disposition of their personal possessions (Horton and Zeckhauser 2016). However, previous studies on renting present three gaps that our research intends to fill. First, they mostly concentrate on users and thus fail to examine how owners become renters, when and why (Belk, Bardhi, and Eckhardt 2019; Philip et al. 2015). Second, they pay little attention to what is rented, and in particular to the relationships owners have with their possessions before, during and after rental. Third, because they concentrate on short-term rental with Airbnb as a favorite focus of study (Ikkala and Lampinen 2015; von Richthofen and Fischer 2019), they also limit our understanding of rental activity as a whole. In short, examining "networked hospitality businesses" only (Oskam and Boswijk 2016) prevents us from understanding other contexts such as managing long term rentals or providing neighbors with everyday items.

Our approach to renting draws on Zelizer's (2010, 2012) contribution on relationality, i.e., the way social relationships shape economic lives (Zelizer 1985, 1995, 2005). Rather than considering sociality as an extra touch of soul brought into economic activities, we contend that distinctive social ties with renters result in specific economic transactions, meanings and media of exchange, what Zelizer (2012) terms "relational packages." We theorize renting as a set of "relational packages." In addition, we extend Zelizer's (2012) approach to objects. In particular, we consider the attachment and social bonds owners have with their possessions as the cornerstone of "relational packages." Through 'relational work', including the emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) that owners undertake both with relinquishing their items and with renters, we examine how various forms of economic exchange are articulated with specific moral valuation, meanings, communication channels and currencies that typify particular object-person and person-person-relationships (Zelizer 2012). With renting as a relevant but overlooked practice in the field of collaborative consumption (Albinsson and Perera 2018), we raise three research questions: How do possession-owner relationships result in assessing

the rent-ability of private objects/spaces? Once a possession is deemed rent-able, what conditions make objects/spaces enter into an economic relation with others? And what are the appropriate means of exchange, associated meanings and social ties that owners develop with people whom they distinctively term tenants, guests or simply neighbors?

To answer these questions, we conducted a 3-year qualitative study with 43 French informants who rent dwelling, cars and other objects. Informants were sequentially recruited through social networks using a “snowballing” technique. The interviews were mostly conducted in homes where pictures and videos were taken with their owner’s consent. Although no claim of representativeness is made, informants were almost equally distributed by gender (22 F and 21 M), ranging in age from 22 to 79 (average 35), and represented a mix of different types of occupation, levels of income and rented goods, namely dwellings (19), various equipment, tools and kitchen appliances (16), cars (9), washing machines (3) and a bicycle (1).

Our findings first focus on how possessions enter the realm of ‘sharing out’ (Belk 2010). We show how informants assess the ‘rent-ability’ of what they make available to others. This relational work with one’s private goods consists of both shaping the boundaries of what is ‘rent-able’ and of sometimes excluding others from using parts of these things. While Philip et al. (2015, 8) argue that rented goods are preferably “unbreakable, fairly durable and not precious,” our findings show that “rent-ability” is a feature attached to the closeness and secrecy of exchanges individuals have with their possessions (Simmel 1906). Hence rented goods never belong to informants’ territory of intimacy (Goffman 1971), although this varies according to people’s biographical sensitivity.

Next, we examine the circumstances under which possessions actually come to be rented and what relational work is performed both with objects and tenants/guests/neighbors as informants variously term them. We highlight three different circumstances whereby private goods/spaces come to be rented. For some informants, expensive goods such as dwellings, cars and luxurious objects (e.g., wedding dresses) are acquired from the beginning for a regular, long-term rental activity. These semi-professionals owners develop a quite intensive secondary occupation that competes with marketplace offering by providing other consumers with better prices and services. In such cases, relational work with objects/spaces appears to be demanding. It consists of selecting “interesting” goods in terms of investment such as well-situated houses, comfortable cars or highly demanded goods. Once goods are dedicated and adapted to renting, relational work with tenants requires finding the “proper renter” (i.e., liable, solvable and respectful) through various exchange media such as social networks, C2C websites and word-of-mouth. The second category of owners comes to rent goods usually after prior experiences as users of online short-term rental platforms. We call this ‘generalized reciprocal sharing out’ because it occurs outside the family circle (Belk 2010), but within a system of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972) or mutuality (Arnould and Rose 2016) whereby owners welcome guests as they expect to be welcomed when they are themselves travelling. While shared meanings entangle commercial/hospitality logics that are shaped by platforms (von Richthofen and Fischer 2019), our findings demonstrate high variability in how hospitality is understood and performed. Likewise, we show that relational work with objects/places results in various approaches, from leaving everything in place to restricting access to some areas and sometimes excluding oneself from one’s own place of living. Finally, the third category of informants comes to rent goods because others – mostly

neighbors or friends – request some things that they possess. What we call “local trade” includes lending a vacant garage, garden or DIY tools, or kitchen equipment whose request may be free before it turns into regular and paid rental. As the object is offered “as is,” relational work with possessions is limited. Preference for paid rental gradually appears within existing relationships and is intended to tell renters that objects must be returned. Fees also serve to maintain distanced relationships that distinguish such exchanges from sharing ‘in’ (Belk 2010) and to enable owners to avoid renters’ indebtedness.

We first contribute by extending the approach of P2P activities beyond single-field approaches thus showing that rental is a multifaceted activity. Second, we emphasize that relational work with possessions is required prior to making them available to others. In so doing, we extend Zelizer’s (2012) work on relationality to objects. Third, we detect three different types of relational packages whereby different social ties, economic transactions, exchange media and negotiated meanings are articulated. Though limited to rental and an idiosyncratic cultural context, our study extends current research on the collaborative economy (Belk et al. 2019; John 2016; Widlock 2017) by offering a broader and theorized approach to an overlooked access-based mode of consumption (Albinsson and Perera 2018). It shows that using a unique action verb—here renting out but elsewhere sharing or accessing—may be problematic to embrace heterogeneous realities. Rather, we assume that renting, sharing and other collaborative activities can better understood by examining the various relationships owners have with their possessions and how these define the process whereby private goods/spaces are rented, shared, mutualized or sold (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), with whom and how. Finally, our research sketches fruitful ways of understanding how marketplace dynamics affect and is affected by particular institutionalizing processes of entanglement of economic and relational exchanges (Findlay 2018; Giesler et al. 2015).

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