
ЧЕЛОВЕК, ЭКОНОМИКА, ОБЩЕСТВО

The Sharing Economy and its Paradoxes: A Sociological Study of Sharing Communities in Russia

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Over the past decade there has been an enormous rise in alternative forms of economic organization, such as the sharing economy – an under-theorized and contradictory empirical phenomenon. The paper studies the variety of interaction practices and motivations for participation and identifies common and specific features of self-organization by comparing three platforms: Darudar (sharing goods), Bank Vremeni [Time Bank] (sharing time and services) and Couchsurfing (sharing accommodation and leisure).

The data, which was triangulated, includes: (i) 25 in-depth interviews conducted with experts and active users of the platforms, (ii) ethnography from participant observation of users' offline meetings, (iii) systematic online observation. This study employs a blended ethnography/netnography approach – studying the sharing economy communities both online and face-to-face to provide 'thick' description of community-building.

We theorize that sharing in the sharing economy is a separate principle of resource allocation, which is characterized by the priority of goods over the structure of relations between parties. In contrast to the reciprocity principle, the recipient in sharing is selected with respect to a fixed amount of resources which the donor possesses. Sharing is moving far beyond the boundaries of kindred, friend, partner or other personal relationships, as far as the counterparty is selected among the participants of an extended network of social contacts. The circle of people who can enjoy the benefits of a joint resource expands to the many thousands of users of the virtual sharing platform. What motivates the well-resourced users of the sharing economy platforms, who possess economic and cultural capital, to become practitioners of sharing? Aspiration for community-building, deriving from the extrapolation of the self to the aggregate level: the 'extended self'. Sharing contributes to a sense of an imaginary community, making ourselves an integral part. Practically, sharing transforms into a ritual chain: from the preparation of resources for exchange to the choice of counteragent, communication before the act of sharing, during and

after, all of which create a full part of social life. When offering to share material and immaterial objects, participants of the platforms offer a part of themselves – talents and opportunities, communication and empathy, belonging to cultural tradition. In return, they receive a means of reducing loneliness and overcoming social alienation.

Key words: sharing, collaborative consumption, sharing economy in Russia, sharing vs. gift exchange, netnography, case study, *Couchsurfing*, *Time Bank*, *Darudar*

Introduction

The economic crisis of 2008 stirred scholarly interest in alternative forms of economic exchange. Scholars began to rethink market capitalism by addressing alternative forms of economic organization, such as the sharing economy [Walsh 2011]. The sharing economy emphasizes access to products and services over exclusive private property and ownership; it values cooperative, rather than competitive market behavior, it appreciates and values the community emerging from collaborative consumption.

The idea of sharing is the most universal form of economic action, distinct from the notion of reciprocity [Price 1975; Widlok 2017], and refers to “allowing others to take what is valued” [Widlok 2013]. Granting access to what is valued in some sense is a path dependent practice in the Russian institutional context, with its long history of deficit and deprivations in consumption. Numerous studies are dedicated to the household economy of the Russian household, such as Ledeneva’s contribution on *blat* or “economies of favor” [Ledeneva 1998], Barsukova’s and Steinberg’s research on the “moral economy” of Russian households [Barsukova 2003; Steinberg 2002]. However, sharing stands apart from these reciprocal strategies. We speak of sharing as a paradigm separate from the logic of reciprocity. The displays of network exchanges, mentioned above, are united by the priority of the relationship over the gift: resources are typically distributed with respect to the structure of relations between counterparties. Sharing plays by the opposite rule: “sharer” holds a fixed amount of resources and select a counterparty with respect to the amount possessed.

The proximity of social distance moves sharing away from the “moral economy”. The reduction of such social practices to small-scale groups (including, but not limited to kinship-based ones) do not belong to the modern forms of the sharing economy. Digitalization takes sharing to a higher level. The internet becomes a connecting platform where potential exchange partners express a demand for a certain good, or place an offer to use their resource. Internet platforms act as mediators between anonymous users and develop individual exchange to extended networks which connect masses of people, thereby creating a network where no one knows each other individually, but each has the right to invest resources and exploit others’ resources. Schor calls it “stranger sharing”: going beyond the borders of a personal network of social contacts, interconnected with high risk. But what lies behind this tendency? A potential answer is in the combination of technology, the market and the “the wisdom of crowds”, which make it possible to bring strangers together [Schor 2014, p. 7]. Consequently, within the global web, platforms which unite thousands of users create new types of community-building.

The research questions we ask in that context are the following: why, given all the risks tied to the de-commercialization of market relations in the sharing economy, is the number of followers steadily increasing? What motivates well-resourced users, who possess not only high level of economic, but also cultural capital [Schor, Fitzmaurice 2015], to become participants in the sharing economy?

The conceptual and semantic ambiguity of sharing

Belief in economic determinism is a modern idea; until the 19th century markets did not dominate society, and the economic system was embedded in social relations and did not subordinate individual status to one's capital [Polanyi 1999, p. 510]. The subordinate role of the market was displaced by other economic principles. An economy, accordant to the substantive meaning of the economic, is thus an "institutionalized process", exemplified by Karl Polanyi by three forms of integration, each requiring a certain institutional mechanism: reciprocity, redistribution, and market. Redistribution is characterized by the centralization of resources in the hands of one authority, which is followed by the distribution of resources according to established societal norms. Market is described as displacement under the principle of equivalence of the exchanged. Reciprocity implies moving among corresponding points in symmetric groups [Polanyi 1957 (1968)].

What is novel about sharing? Reciprocity requires a certain proximity of the participants. Sharing does not. Subjects for reciprocal interactions are selected on the basis of non-economic preferences among the personal network, with respect to its needs. Sharers, on the contrary, are selected among the anonymous agents of the extended network.

Reciprocity revolves around the agents of exchange, while in sharing the emphasis is placed on the objects exchanged. An agent holds resources and selects an exchange partner with respect to the amount possessed. Reciprocity plays by the opposite rule – resources are distributed with respect to the structure of relations between counterparties.

Gifting is accompanied by the expectation of a return gift, and the principle of "deferred reciprocity" does not imply equivalence. Often, the return gift may exceed the original gift in terms of cost, prompted by a desire to show nobility and to indicate generosity [Kolm 2006, p. 18]. Widlok argues that the social practice of sharing is devoid of displays of generosity and power [Widlok 2017]. The "obliged" part of the exchange is also irrelevant for sharing – informal debt cannot emerge with the absence of transfer of ownership [Huurne, Ronteltap, Corten, Buskens 2017]. Moreover, we do not consider deferred return gifting as sharing. Transactions are unilateral: while the agent possess a resource, sharing it with an extended network of social contacts, which is structured around this resource.

Pais and Provasi assume that sharing in the sharing economy should be an umbrella notion, relating to at least two of Polanyi's integrations [Pais, Provasi 2015]. Agent collaboration concerning exchange, intermediate reciprocity and market, and the disposal of a common pool of resources, intermediate reciprocity and redistribution. Reciprocity is achieved by the P2P-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services" [Hamari, Sjöklint, Ukkonen 2015, p. 2050]. We do not describe symmetrical P2P exchange as a synonym

to reciprocity. If a P2P network is a structure, reciprocity should characterize linkages within it. However, symmetry in such networks is not defined by horizontally located friend or kin households, alternately being each others' donors and recipients. Symmetry and equality of relations are emphasized only by the fact that resources are transferred between "peers". Accordingly, we presume it incorrect to determine the characteristic of ties in P2P networks as reciprocal (*Table 1*).

Table 1. **Modes of exchange**

Market	Sharing	Reciprocity	Sharing
Strict equivalence of exchanged (monetary nature), bilateral transaction	Imbalancedness of transfers, unilateral transactions	Return gifts are stretched in time, expectation of reciprocation	No return gifts, unilateral agreement
Anonymity	Personal autonomy	Non-anonymity	Personal autonomy
Mutual profit	Profit is non-monetized	Stability of contacts – the subject of exchange is chosen on the basis of non-economic preferences among the network of the closest contacts	The amount of resources is fixed, the object of sharing is selected based on the volume of possessed among the extended network of social contacts
Competitive pricing	No pricing in the absence of distribution of property rights	Priority of the relationship built around the exchange, but not of the gift itself	Priority of the exchanged resource, but not of the structure of relations between parties

While some argue that the sharing economy addresses anti-capitalist rhetoric and strives for inventing a novel means of resource allocation, others assume that it is not about sharing at all [*Eckhardt, Bardhi* 2015], "that label [the sharing economy] is either strategically or unwittingly employed to expand the market rather than sharing in the sense of providing access to goods" [*Widlok* 2017, p. 193]. Thus, the sharing economy is quite contradictory in its fundamental reasoning.

Why does sharing become a space for maneuvering for both academic audiences (who confuse sharing with reciprocity) and practitioners (who promote market mediated practices through the lens of social rules such as reciprocity)? To a certain extent, the answer is self-explanatory. The sharing rhetoric has a strong positive connotation as a vital humanistic and moral value, and thus, the exploitation of the "sharing economy" label seems to be a profitable strategy for companies, providing short-term rental of accommodation and vehicles, taxi companies, and professional services providers. Kalamar suggests to use the term "sharewashing" meaning the practice of labelling regular commercial services with "sharing", using it as a marketing tool [*Kalamar* 2013].

In the "popular" sharing economy literature, the phenomenon is conceptualized as a form of market where underused assets (such as an empty room in an apartment or

a place in a car) are capitalized through the use of extensive networks in which each asset owner opens access to it to others [Botsman, Rogers 2011; Gansky 2010], concluded in the socio-cultural context of the value of “sharing with the near” [Schor, Fitzmaurice 2015]. Examples of the pioneers of the movement economy – AirBnb, Uber and other initiatives – are becoming a guiding star of such conclusions.

Car-sharing exploits the logic of “use” but not “own”, use-rights are purchased by registered customers from a car-rental company that owns the pool of vehicles and decides the fees for use. The same is true of taxi apps like Uber or Lyft, which connect drivers using their own cars and passengers. App businesses occupy a niche in the taxi market, the so-called “distributors of the app” do not own taxis, but their profit is more valuable: not only do they get commissions, but they aggregate huge amounts of data that are vital to predicting patterns of customer behavior [Shmidt 2017]. Similarly, online short-term rental markets, like AirBnB, offer accommodation (rooms, a whole apartment or a house). It is common to see professional realtors using the platform to increase the visibility and flexibility of their offers [Pais, Provasi 2015].

Thus, we observe regular competitive exchange of a monetary nature, from which the participants derive mutual benefit, but not the social practice of sharing. This conclusion is supported by PwC reports [Shared Benefits 2016] which estimate the profitability of the five sectors of the sharing economy (namely, P2P accommodation and transportation, on-demand household services and professional services, and collaborative finance) at 3,600 million euros in 2015. Therefore, we do not use the concept of the sharing to describe the form of the market that exploits the P2P business model, and thereby, promotes its product under the brand of sharing.

Belk makes it clear that commercial platforms are included in the sharing economy erroneously, and suggests separating labeled business relations (“pseudo-sharing”) from “true” sharing which provides temporary access to the resource through an internet platform on a free-of-charge basis [Belk 2014]. The literature maps the following examples of sharing economy initiatives, based on self-regulation: natural not equivalent exchange [Schor, Fitzmaurice 2015], bookcrossing [Widlok 2017], Time Banks [Dubois, Schor, Carfagna 2014; Del Moral, Pais 2015], local currencies [North 2010].

Finally, it is necessary to identify the organizational form of the sharing principle. We have discussed, how different organizations exploit the “sharing economy” label. The focus of the presented paper, however, is on non-commercial sharing communities, and we define a sharing economy platform on the following parameters. The first parameter is the presence of the platform, which we position as part of the sharing economy, on the internet, uniting a large number of anonymous participants. The second parameter is the (non-)commercial orientation of activities. Commercial internet platforms are considered by us as a business model, and therefore are automatically excluded from the sociological understanding of sharing.

We categorize the community as part of the sharing economy if it is focused on the non-monetary provision of goods and services, and the style of its management tends to self-organize. Finally, the degree of self-organization, the characteristics of the distributed goods (property or labor), and the specifics of distribution (the creation of a common pool of resources to which each participant has the right to apply or individual transfers of resources) set the structure of the P2P network, and become the basis for community-building.

Sharing economy and community-building

Companionship attracts potential newcomers to the sharing economy. Rosen et al.'s *Couchsurfing* study revealed that different types of activities (hosting, surfing, organizing and attending gatherings, being an ambassador etc.) are positively connected to the feeling of belonging to a community [Rosen, Lafontaine, Hendrickson 2011]. The strongest association was found between participation in gatherings and a sense of belonging to a community. While those participants, who never experienced face-to-face interactions with other members of a community, feel a minimal sense of belonging. A longitudinal study of active couchsurfers shows that participants create strong ties which weaken with time. The strongest ties are created during face-to-face interaction between hosts and guests. Striving to be part of a community is an essential element in stimulating engagement with the sharing economy. Community building is thus not only a driver for participation, but also a consequence.

Ozanne and Ballantine describe the sharing economy in terms of anti-consumption [Ozanne, Ballantine 2010]. They analyze toy libraries, as a reduction in consumption in New Zealand. The motivation underlying constant cooperation with toy libraries are far beyond economic rationality. Ozanne and Ozanne argue that participants find means of expressing anti-materialist values and moving towards “voluntary simplicity” [Ozanne L.K., Ozanne J.L. 2009].

Nelson et al. suggest that downshifting assumes a voluntary reduction of consumption and time devoted to work, for the sake of balance in life. Getting rid of things one does not need follows the same logic [Nelson, Rademacher, Paek 2007]. A decrease in income and anti-materialistic beliefs influence the propensity for sharing, re-using, re-cycling, and home-made items. Material necessity in this case cannot be the primary motive; the economic rationale follows ‘voluntary simplicity’. Consumers seeking to truly engage in de-cluttering or downshifting of material possessions must be able to dispose of goods and decouple notions of identity from goods [Nelson, Rademacher, Paek 2007, p. 152]. Albinsson and Perera view the nature of exchange within sharing economy platforms as generalized or negative reciprocity, which assumes altruistic gift-giving without any return expectations. Systematic participant observation of the Really Free Market showed participants’ willingness to perform social change by contributing to a personal and common good, and by weakening the environment of consumption [Albinsson, Perera 2012].

Empirical studies of sharing platforms show that users are not only motivated by a possible reduction of transaction costs, but also by a whole range of social prerequisites: community-building, ideological attitudes, civic participation, the prevalence of post-materialistic values. Due to the growing atomization of people in society fueled by the technological progress of communication methods, the social meaning of the sharing economy contributes to overcoming social alienation by developing a sense of belonging to a community, debunking “our obsolete market mentality. Sharing not only has the social function of developing a sense of belonging to community, but also responds to the logic of sustainable consumption, calls to overcome the problems of overproduction and excessive consumption, preserving natural resources and protecting the environment” [Belk 2010].

Research question, design and methods

This paper studies the variety of interaction practices and motivations and identifies common and specific features of self-organization by comparing three platforms: *Darudar* (sharing goods), *Bank Vremeni* [*Time Bank*] (sharing time and services) and *Couchsurfing* (sharing accommodation and leisure). Assuming that sharing focuses on the object of exchange, but not on the agents, we conclude that specific features of this object determine one's entrance to the sharing economy. One can offer possessions (either holding it and providing temporal access or refusing to own it) or labor. Our cases meet the requirements of that specification. *Darudar* is a platform where supply and demand for abandoned goods meet, *Couchsurfing* creates a global "housing stock", temporary access to which is available for any registered participant. Finally, *Time Bank* is a way of organizing labor activity on a non-monetized basis.

The research design is ethnographic with an emphasis on the meaning of behavior and the interaction between group members who share the same culture (or, in our case, the same practice of being a part of a sharing economy platform) and this design fits in the sense that we strive to get a picture of how the group works [Creswell 2007]. Brewer defines ethnographical approach as "the study of people in naturally occurring settings [...] by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities" [Brewer 2000, p. 10]. Drawing on 'netnography', or online-based ethnographic observation, we use digital sources of information to study sharing communities. As Kozinets puts it, social networking sites and virtual worlds carry complex markers of diverse cultures, proclaim and stimulate new types of communication and community building [Kozinets 2009].

The methods of data collection include 25 in-depth interviews with experts and active users of the platforms. Preference is given to face-to-face interviews. Compared to telephone or Skype interviews, personal contact is not lost, making the interview more narrative, and the interviewer more involved in the conversation [Vogl 2013]. However, interviews with members of the *Time Bank* community located in Nizhny Novgorod were conducted remotely for practical reasons.

We build a sample on the principle of maximum variability. In each community under study, we select participants with varying degrees of involvement (peripheral and core participants) and varying degrees of awareness of community life (ordinary users and moderators/coordinators/administrative personnel). Moreover, our respondents met the following characteristics: (i) active participation in one of the communities expressed in the experience of being "on both sides" of transfers, as a donor and as a recipient, (ii) confirmed participation in the community for at least one year. The more the user is involved in the exchange, the clearer the picture of the functioning of the community he gets, and the more reflexively he can describe his experience.

Darudar participants were interviewed in Moscow and Moscow region. Firstly, the expert interview with the co-founder was conducted, the other 8 interviews were given by members of the community of different ages (from 22 to 47) and with confirmed participation from 2 to 5 years. *Time Bank* participants, and the director and coordinator, located in Nizhny Novgorod, were contacted via Skype. Compared to the previous case, the interviewed community members were more involved in the life of the platform, with from 5 to 10 years of active contribution to the community. Finally, there were

nine interviews with *Couchsurfers* from Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Stockholm and an expert interview with the ambassador of the project in Saint Petersburg. This community is relatively young, the core of participation consists of people in their twenties, our respondents age range was 21–40, and confirmed participation varied from 3 to 12 years.

The other source of data collected includes ethnography from participant observation of users' offline meetings. According to our assumption, communal meetings gather the core of the community – the most active participants. Although the first purpose of these meetings is the transfer of resources, it is accompanied by continuous communication: the maintenance of established relationships and the establishment of new ones. Our task, in this context, was to record personal interactions through a) direct surveys of participants, b) photographing the typical attributes of meetings, c) collecting personal analytical memos. The latter included a description of the social portrait of the participants of the meeting, their roles (according to the role structure of the community), the proportions of participants familiar with each other, the circles of their movements and the approximate time spent at the meeting.

During the two weeks of fieldwork, we conducted a systematic online observation (in the role of observer-as-participant [Gold 1958]) of web-pages of the three communities, which reinforced the results of the in-depth interviews and participant observation, thus providing a logical conclusion to the triangulation of empirical data. The protocol of observation included general information about the platform, users, creators and coordinators, ways of organizing feedback, and a description of the most typical resources provided by participants for sharing and typical manifestations of relationships (resource offers and responses, potential conflicts). We collected publicly available data – profiles of participants, forum/discussion branches in the communities under study, comments that users leave.

Findings

Processes of community-building as exemplified by the Darudar, Couchsurfing and Time Bank communities

The three communities vary in scale, and the resources for exchange and management. In the following section we address the organizational aspects of the communities, both formal and informal. We assume that what determines the individual interaction strategies of the participants inside these communities is a close interweaving of their top-down rules with informal interaction norms and rituals. Our task is to compare the organizational structures of the communities under study to understand their ability to attract a growing number of users.

Couchsurfing is a host/guest network that unites more than 14 million participants worldwide. Despite the fact, that its primary goal is to allow people to find a place to stay overnight when traveling on a budget, other forms of participation are practiced, such as the organization of events and leisure activities, the offer of guide services, and participation in couchsurfers' meet-ups all over the world.

The smaller-scale *Darudar* – a network for sharing second-hand commodities – has more than 430,000 registered participants from more than 4,000 towns and cities mostly located in post-Soviet countries. Every day at least 200 transactions take place, which is evident from the “gift pulse”, a diagram available on the website, for example, on March 8, 2017, the counter showed 2,000 transactions. The variety of items transferred on a daily basis is difficult to categorize, ranging from a collection of stickers to large household appliances and electronics. Highly sought after categories are clothes, shoes and accessories, goods for children, books and magazines, implements for needlework, cosmetics, and collectibles. *Time Bank*, a local, medium-sized platform, facilitates service exchange based on the hourly activity principle: one hour of your involvement is equal to somebody else’s hour. By donating their time, participants “earn” hours that they can spend on other participants’ services. The platform connects approximately 6,000 users, mostly located in Nizhny Novgorod.

It is vital to keep the size of the sharing community adequate for creating a range of resources for exchange. The creation of a critical mass [Botsman, Rogers 2011] of participation is one of the parameters that propels and sustains the sharing network. What is “critical” here is a possibly wider range of participants and the variety of resources that they bring. The importance of the audience, both in terms of its size and representativeness, is crucial. As mentioned, the *Darudar* community is marked by the supply of a wide range of second hand commodities; *Couchsurfing* participants create the global “housing stock”, and *Time Bank* creates a locally contained society, bringing together performers of a broad range of services.

The following quotation illustrates the possibility of participants staying within the *Time Bank* exchange loop given the combination of resource diversity and local clustering:

“I spent the day of my 30th birthday, using a fifty-percent support from Time Bank members: I had a photographer, DJ, and someone else” (female, 33, seamstress).

The scale of platforms is also connected to their distinct structures of management. Although self-organization underlies sharing platforms, the styles of management within self-organized communities may represent a continuum from a rigid authoritarian structure with an established set of rules to a decentralized structure, the rules of interaction in which each participant establishes himself. The question of how the position of the platform in this continuum affects individual strategies of interaction remains open.

Time bank is the most formally centralized structure. The success of a social project or public organization depends to a great extent not only on a strategy for the presentation and dissemination of information about themselves but also on personalities – those at the center of the system and stimulating development. The centralizing function in *Time Bank* is performed by the project coordinator – Olga Popova, who according to the director of the platform, “is the keeper of traditions of *Time Bank*”. The coordinator forms, supports and disseminates *Time Bank*’s values, and performs regulatory duties. This is a full-time position, with the authority to transform the system. It is also the coordinator’s responsibility to control transactions at their every stage. The team of moderators, led by Olga, decide on admission of new members, and who are guided by the rule: no minors,

people under police surveillance, or registered with drug rehabilitation or psychiatric institutions. The activities shared by *Time Bank* members are also limited. Some types of services in *Time Bank* are prohibited and subject to a punishment (from an initial warning to exclusion). This list includes sexual services, matchmaking and marriage agencies, and anything associated with risk to life and health (non-traditional medicine, manufacturing and distribution of drugs and dietary supplements, issuing prescriptions for drugs and medical certificates). *Time Bank* also dissuades its participants from any quackery, and it prohibits any pseudoscientific counseling, be it clairvoyance, divination, ESP, astrology, numerology or palmistry. Also falling under the ban are real estate and rental housing services, notary services, the activities of financial organizations, funeral services. The rules strictly prohibit from asking for fees for services.

Self-organization and self-regulation with minimal moderation best describes the *Darudar* community. As their critical mass accumulated, participants (who referred to themselves as “accomplices”) developed a certain “code of conduct” and informal ethics of interaction, which often superimposed the formal rules set by website administrators. The key formal rule requires participants to avoid direct exchange. Even though giving brings about a right to draw from the community’s common resource base as needed, in practice few people use this opportunity.

Couchsurfing is completely self-regulated. The only administrative resource available for participants is a multi-level system of verification of identity: that’s how the system provides security. The verification service is additional, and is provided for a small fee, and the participant can skip this step. *Darudar* is not regulated in this way in principle, self-organization provides for itself and therefore the participants themselves discard potentially unreliable users. *Time Bank* does not have a centralized evaluation system, however, the project coordinator is responsible for checking the documented competencies of users providing complex technical services, as well as services related to human physical safety: medical services, children oriented activities, elderly care.

The means of establishing contact in the communities are subject to the organizational regulations, discussed in the previous section. While personal communication mediated through the web-platform is the channel for matching supply and demand in both *Darudar* and *Couchsurfing*, *Time Bank* users appeal to the coordination center.

The coordinator of *Time Bank* herself admits that her schedule is not limited to regular working hours: “communication with participants – in my case – is constant, and quite round-the-clock, ideas about the events can be outlined and edited in the daytime, and even at night”. The position of the coordinator involves the unquestioned trust of the participants, delegating her the authority to choose the contractors and customers, to make reviews of the services, and to ensure the security of transactions. Informants commented: “I communicate only through her; if I need a service”, “only with the help of Olga, I solved the issue”, “I absolutely trust her; if she recommends, I do not even bother checking”, “she is the main link, without her, I wouldn’t know about anyone or anything”. Thus, despite the fact, that both client and provider in *Time Bank* act as agents of choice, the process of matching is mediated via the coordinator’s recommendation.

The good exchanged in *Couchsurfing* has a complex set of parameters. Is the resource limited by any parameters? Should the conditions meet a specified standard? Active community members admit that they do not have a filter for conditions. When searching for a “host”, its geographical location becomes the only selection criteria. Some owners share information about their offer: what kind of bed they provide to the

guest, whether they are ready to share bed linen and bathroom products, whether they provide food and so on, and also discuss what the traveler will need to have with them.

“People usually write at least a little about the conditions in which they live: from an additional sofa in the room to a separate Palazzo, but you never know until the last moment in what conditions you find yourself” (female, 41, teacher).

The conditions are not negotiable. The host’s offer is fixed and the guest is free to take it or leave it. However, practice shows that any product has its consumer. Considering couchsurfing as an innovative way to establish intercultural communication, the participants of this movement assign a secondary role to the conditions. This fact distinguishes *Couchsurfing* from the popular short-term rental service AirBnB – a commercial rival of *Couchsurfing*, where bargaining is built around housing conditions.

The quantitative and qualitative features of the proposed housing are fixed, but the interaction between the guest and the host is something that can be adjusted. Both sides have expectations of the stay and ways of describing themselves as a host or guest. This co-creation is the most important part of couchsurfing, and the whole process starts with it. Therefore, the mutual expectations of the guest and the host are built around the principle of the rejection of the market model of tourism. In the active tourist season, the offer falls: the owners are trying to protect themselves from the travelers who try to use couchsurfing as a free place to stay. The “sterility” of communication disappoints the participants of the process, especially those who are waiting for cultural exchange. To match the expectations, the couchsurfer, who is in the position of the host, offers his guests a unique experience, such as a tour to real “communal housing”:

“I have friends who live in the old Soviet communal apartments, we can go and see their place together” (female, 36, economist).

Guests legitimize their stay by giving the owner the joy of communication, talk about their travel experiences, and acquaintance with their culture. The one who shares his resource, actually shares himself – which means not only opening the doors of the apartment, but also trying to leave guests the memory of himself and his city. In response, guests try to meet the needs of their hosts, to stimulate the expected cultural exchange.

“When I stayed in Israel, I fried cottage cheese pancakes, gave a host to try Russian cuisine. When I came to London, I brought magnets and postcards” (female, 30, intern).

How to create such beneficial partnerships? By opening access to your resources, and selecting a counterparty for it, the couchsurfer selects the lifestyle of the counterparty. *Couchsurfing* is about how lifestyles will (not) converge. The value of solidarity is what

describes couchsurfers' lifestyle the best: participants describe themselves as open to the world, free of prejudices, highly trusting of strangers and sincerely willing to come to the rescue.

"The site has a detailed questionnaire, and there are not just questions about where I work, where I live, but what I can teach. How can I change the world, what are my dreams? I always pay attention to how the person answers them" (female, 26, marketing specialist).

Rosen et al. present a social portrait of the *Couchsurfing* participant on the basis of 1,094 participants living in 82 countries. They found that the majority (54%) are men from Europe and the United States (more than 70% of participants) with a median age of 27 [Rosen, Lafontaine, Hendrickson 2011]. These findings correspond with the participation statistics on the *Couchsurfing* website, according to which young (up to 29 years old) men represent the core. The researchers note that the social profile of the participant of such a global platform generally coincides with the internet audience. Participation in the sharing economy (including both commercial and non-commercial components) is a characteristic of young, highly educated Europeans with high-income [Andreotti, Anselmi, Eichhorn, Hoffmann, Micheli 2017, p. 4]. *Couchsurfing*, therefore, unwittingly establishes pre-requirements for participants – they must be able access internet, have sufficient level of knowledge of foreign language for communication, the ability to travel.

"I know that differences are important, but I must admit that this is psychological mechanism. I look for people who can talk about philosophy, literature, open-minded people, who like to travel and travel a lot, speak many languages, who can teach me something. I like to host people who are willing to listen to my music also" (male, 22, student).

The *Darudar* system, as opposed to the other two communities, delegates the choice of recipient to donor only. What becomes decisive in choosing/asking for the object which can be desired by any participant, is an explicit justification for the same. For example, a participant comments his/her choice in favor of a prospective recipient:

"This should be a person who is really interested in this gift rather than somebody who just saw and decided: oh, why not. I will always choose a person who is interested and who knows what he is writing about, knows what it is. For example, I once collected [figures/images of] turtles. And I prefer a person not just with a child who wants a toy. I prefer somebody who collects" (female, 22, teacher of English).

The *Darudar* network is not predicated on the principle of cushioning needs. It can be supposed that the world of extended networks does not appeal to such categories, unlike networks of strong personal ties.

Potential recipients are required to motivate their requests, and among the socially approved ways of doing this are collecting, interests and hobbies, personal empathy between provider and recipient, and other non-economic factors that the parties of the exchange share. A socially unacceptable substantiation in this regard is the argument of material need and poverty, which irritates the “accomplices”.

“Darudar is just swarming with this. On one occasion we gave a thermos to somebody on these grounds, and then it started... ‘I have many children, we really need it, we are so poor and unhappy, so please give it to me’. Otherwise they collect something for orphanages, but at the same time they do not take anything, and there is no confirmation that they really collect for orphanages. However, somebody is whining to this effect on our website all the time” (female, 31, designer).

The invention of the “self” in the sharing communities

Having determined the specificity of collaborative consumption in the three communities, we finally ask: what turns consumers into sharers? What motivates consumers endowed with not only economic but also cultural capital [Schor; Fitzmaurice 2015] to practice alternative forms of exchange and join the sharing economy movement?

Sharing, with its underlying logic of access rather than of private ownership, prioritizes access over possession, undermines previous definitions of objects, expands the idea of “self” and creates new identities. Our possessions are the main source and also a reflection of our identity, representing the so-called “extended self” [Belk 1988]. The expansion of “self” in collaborative consumption leads to other metamorphoses: we bring our “I” to the level of social aggregates to include those with whom we share our good. It sharpens our sense of belonging to an imagined community of consumption by making our “I” an integral part. Following Anderson’s idea of imaginary communities, these communities are not based on the physical co-presence of participants but on a mere sense of belonging [Anderson 1991]. According to Belk [Belk 2010], the virtual communities of the sharing economy become a certain third space (after home and work) for permanent participants, where they spend a lot of time while feeling themselves accepted.

“I was able to see that people, of course, acquired very strong [ties] ...” (male, 40, co-founder of Darudar).

Ongoing social activity is what legitimizes membership in the sharing community. Making a resource ready for exchange, choosing its recipient, communication before, during and after become a fully-fledged part of social life. Community members are not simply interested in direct sharing, but they take part in meetings and events, following pre-existing patterns and inventing new practices of interaction.

One such repeated practice is the general meeting of *Darudar* “accomplices”. In Moscow, such meetings are held weekly on Trubnaya Square, rain or shine. The public

infrastructure of the square is ruled and chalked: there are places for regular participants. A participant told us that she has occupied the same position from the very first meeting. She is not only an active member of the community but also a “postie” of the project. *Darudar*’s “postal service” is another activity upheld by its participants. These people collect parcels for their fellow “accomplices” living in the regions, and send them via “posties on the ground”, who then distribute these parcels to recipients. Observing such a meeting, we concluded that every Friday, from six to half past seven, Trubnaya Square turns into a place of friendly gatherings. However, the lively chat is interspersed with sad stories. For instance, one woman neither proposes nor looks for anything: she lost her only son two years ago, and since then, communicating with *Darudar* “accomplices” helps her deal with depression. On the opposite side of the square, a boy with disabilities has a nice talk with the “posties”: he has brought with him a collection of coins to be transferred to a collector in another city.

“People come there to talk. A lot of people come with children, who become involved in this process from the very beginning. And it is clear that these people have known each other for years. At these meetings, people find each other by nickname and they call up each other waving their hands to be spotted. Many of them wear colorful garments and accessories to be seen from afar. In general, there is a very positive, friendly atmosphere, everyone is cordial and smiling. It charges you with energy” (female, 22, teacher).

Having received a “charge of energy” and taking home a gift, the “accomplices” are very eloquent in their thanking others for sharing the joy of communication. The Institute of Gratitude on the website is another interesting practice that culminates the endless stream of exchanges. “Gratitude” is the proof placed on the website that the item has found its addressee. The more colorful the proof, the more positively loaded return the donor receives: *“photos are a norm of etiquette, and not posting a photo is bad form”* (female, 22, teacher).

These episodes bear an important semantic load: this ongoing process of informal norm-making elicits the reason for the community to continue. The circulation of objects, each of them accompanied by a certain social ritual, is necessary for inventing new rules and rituals, observing the preexisting ones, and engaging in endless community building. Only in this way is *Darudar* membership guaranteed: participants must be constantly investing their resources in order not to leave the network. The process of decluttering, is prolonged:

“In the first place, I keep returning because I keep discovering something that needs to be given away. Secondly, I started to miss the girls. Not even the girls per se but the atmosphere of meeting” (female, 47, housewife).

Members of the *Couchsurfing* community also agree that the platform is a third home for them, this home being the whole world. A multi-million strong community bears the imprint of the real world, divided by cities, countries, and culture. Closing these

gaps is the key meaning of the interaction among community members. Local networks stretching to more than 200,00 towns and cities contribute to the integration of their members, cultivating diversity: “you know that you have friends in any city, you come somewhere and you are not alone” (female, 26, marketer).

Those looking for accommodation, perhaps, play a greater role in ensuring cultural exchange. It also depends on the host, how deeply the visiting couchsurfer immerses themselves in the local environment. Striving to share their space, the host proposes not only their living space but also their personal space and daily routine. This is a much closer relationship than the one that the “accomplices” experience at the *Darudar* meetings discussed above, because the parties of exchange in couchsurfing communicate literally day and night.

“I welcome to my home those who want to communicate and walk together. I tell them about local routines, answer their questions, we walk together, such as to the colonnade [of St. Isaac’s Cathedral] and along the rivers, we rent bicycles, meet other couchers, play board games, cook” (female, 31, marketer).

Each visit by a guest is a journey without leaving your home. By opening the door to a traveler, the host not only strives to show their hospitality in showing their city, but they want to derive an immaterial benefit for themselves from the stay of the “other” in their house. Just like the guest, the host wants to get an impression – by cooking or by listening to stories from the couchsurfer’s life. In the long run, the host gets an important contact: they have friends elsewhere in the world.

Returning to the professional environment of *Time Bank*, we noted the proclivity of its participants to be socially responsible. Professionals say that in the long run they are attracted by the non-monetized benefits of a range even wider than you can find working for short-term profits in the market. Stressing the contrast between the inanimate market and the highly personified *Time Bank* community, informants in the latter case note the openness and sincerity of communication, cohesion, and a “pleasant bustle”.

“Judging by myself, we promote our interests and realize our needs, such as helping, giving, being useful, carrying out some kind of mission. Not only to cash in here and now, money-money-money. We must still give” (female, 33, seamstress).

What meanings underlie such desires? Community members emphasize that they are not an interests-based community but are united by a commonality of values. They are led not by commercial interest but by a desire to interact with other people. With them, regular communication accompanies any transaction, and it intensifies at their regular meetings, at *Time Bank* events and at participant master classes. They engender interest not only in their activities but also for the people who carry out them. A *Time Bank* participant is thought of not only due to his or her professionalism but also as a “pleasant interlocutor”, “interesting person”, “extraordinary”, “developed”, “interested in his own growth and development”, and capable of satisfying many needs at a time, which is not encountered in the market.

We are positive that many people participate in the sharing economy in order not to feel existential loneliness. Offering their resources (be it a material object, service or access to property); figuratively, the participant distributes particles of themselves to others, be it their talents and capabilities, their ability to communicate and empathy. By being involved in sharing, people involve in social activity and overcome alienation.

In the ordinary sense, social alienation is a lack of close contacts or cold, superficial and mistrustful relationships. Modern communication technologies exacerbate the problem: in constant indirect interaction, face-to-face dialogue is replaced by communication simulacra, and the while people's own representations in internet-based social networks is an idealized virtual construct, an illusory imprint of the real "I". The abundance of superficial communication atrophies the need to establish deep relationships, thus contributing to loneliness. In his "Escape from Freedom" Fromm writes about moral solitude, or the lack of value-based connectedness to others [Fromm 1994]. This situation is worse than physical loneliness, because what is lost is the very sense of belonging to a community. Overcoming this loneliness is possible, as shown by the participants of the communities that we studied.

"You find yourself in an apartment, in a family where people share with you their real lives. You are neither a tourist nor a traveler; you are a friend. The older we become, the less socially acceptable are chances to start communicating with other people. And this is just a very good chance: you find people who are absolutely the same as you are" (female, 41, teacher).

Informal expectations of collaborative consumption are growing exponentially: the further the exchange is removed from the market, the more informal commitments it creates. When one side of the exchange is deprived of the opportunity to simply pay and part ways, the exchange ritualizes and intertwines into social relations. Participants of *Darudar* incessantly maintain and create novel practices of involvement; *Couchsurfing* stands out by its cultivating hospitality, and *Time Bank* supports its participants in their desire to be thought of by others. Involvement in these processes creates multiple motivations to be part of a community, to build and prove their belonging, to show loyalty to a community.

Conclusion

Starting with the idea that the sharing economy is an innovative and unique in its rationality social phenomenon, we strived to unpack its functional principles.

This phenomenon receives various interpretations in the literature, by using different concepts explaining the organization of economics. The logic of the market and reciprocity become the main antagonists of collaborative consumption. Theorists of the sharing economy maintain that an unclaimed asset in personal possession has the potential for commercialization and, eventually, for a sharing economy [Botsman, Rogers 2011; Gansky 2010]. Some large-scale market players are also not far behind: internet-based businesses specializing in coupling supply and demand within P2P networks (like AirBnb or Zipcar car rental) are not shy to promote their services under

the sharing economy label. Researchers locate hybrids within collaborative consumption by representing it either as an exclusive system of ownership rights [Lessig 2008] or as a system of redistribution located somewhere between gift exchange and the market.

In this study, we theorize sharing as a separate principle of resource allocation, defined by the primacy of the good rather than by the relationship of the donor and the recipient. This implies that sharing exceeds the boundaries of kindred, friend, partner, and other personal relationships – the counterparty is selected from among participants in an extended social network. The communities of people who can enjoy the benefits of shared access to resources include thousands of users of a virtual sharing platform. This requirement separates the sharing economy from small-scale local goods re-use initiatives. The platforms that we portray as part of the sharing economy exist in a virtual and anonymous social world. Moreover, we refer to a community as part of the sharing economy if it is non-profit and self-organized. We introduce the following definition of the sharing economy: it is a non-profit exchange via a digital platform and an anonymous P2P network, whose members invest their individual resources and use resources of others.

We have applied this theory to the empirical cases of three Russian platforms, previously unstudied in the paradigm of sharing. Avoiding a conventional framework for considering non-economic forms of exchange, such as “survival strategies” connecting personal ties, we assumed that sharing is focused on the object of exchange rather than on the agents of exchange and their relationships.

Likewise, the specificity of the object of exchange, and not the agent, determines the fulcrum of the sharing economy, where entry is the offer either of property or of labor. The three cases that we have selected for the field study meet this specificity: *Darudar* is a platform for matching the supply and demand for goods; *Couchsurfing* is a platform that creates temporary access to a global housing stock by registered participants; and *Time Bank* is a coordinated network for gratis labor activities.

The three qualitatively different cases show us that a close interweaving of formal rules and informal norms and practices determines the individual strategies of participant interaction. Table 2 summarizes the main organizational aspects of these communities.

Table 2. Main organizational aspects of the communities under study

Communities	Darudar	Time Bank	Couchsurfing
Resources	Second-hand commodities	Services	Accommodation
Size of community	Approximately 500 thousand	5,5 thousand	14 million
Management	Self-administration (minimal moderation)	Centralization (leader's authority)	”Controlled anarchy”
Degree of formalization	Formally, direct exchange is prohibited. Informal norms of communication (informal sanctions)	Strict formal rules (formal sanctions are specified)	Informal interaction regulated by morals and ethics
Establishment of contact	Via personal communication	Via coordinating center	Via personal communication
Subject of choice	Donor	Both client and provider	Both host and guest
Criteria of choice	Argumentation of need	Coordinator's recommendation	Matching life-styles and expectations of stay

The sharing principle involves three points. First, there needs to be the accumulation of a critical mass – at which point the system becomes stable enough due to the number of participants and the diversity of their resource potential. Second, there is a heterogeneous social portrait of participation and lifestyles. Thirdly, there is the ability to self-regulate. The latter feature, as we argue, serves as a driving mechanism for sharing. Constant communication between participants sustains the community and contributes to the practices of community-building. We found, that ongoing social activity is what legitimizes membership in the sharing community. Making a resource ready for exchange, choosing its recipient, communication before, during and after become a full-fledged part of social life.

Discussion: social underpinnings of the sharing economy

Benkler laid the foundation for the development of ideas on the sharing economy by revealing a combination of emerging technology and unutilized assets that drive the sharing mechanism [Benkler 2002]. What motivates individuals to share instead of commercialize on secondary markets, when it comes to underutilized capacities? When technology allows the widespread distribution of small volumes of surplus capacities, social exchange surpasses secondary markets. This could be explained by intrinsic motivation and a reduction in transaction costs [Benkler 2004]. Further research has made this phenomenon dependent on social rather than economic assumptions, showing that in the long term, it is not transaction costs, but rather community-building which motivates people to join the sharing economy movement [Lessig 2008].

However, the connection between technological development and the growing need for social communication has been highlighted in the classic sociological literature. Durkheim expanded on the atomizing effect of technology, increasing individualism and the division of labor: “the latter’s chief characteristic is to have swept cleanly away all the older social forms of organization. One after another, they have disappeared either through the slow usury of time or through great disturbances, but without being replaced” [Durkheim 2005, p. 355]. Social psychology continues the thought, offering to solve a paradox: our contacts gather like a snowball, but we do not become less lonely. A key argument of such research is the fact that technological developments, which were conceived as connecting, have created alienation between people. Social relations degrade in constant interaction with artificial intelligence. As Turkle puts it, “digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other” [Turkle 2011, p. 1].

Is the social practice of sharing able to solve this paradox? To help overcome social alienation? Participants of the communities studied are clearly aware of their position and understand that the exchange situation, in which they put themselves, differs both from the market and from the neighboring community. What is their rationale for sharing? It is the desire for a community that leads them to send their “I” to an aggregate level, starting with someone immediate, with whom they share their good. Both the act of separation from material property and the feeling of sharing your possession improve the sense of belonging to an imagined community of consumption by making our “I”

an integral part. In a practical sense, sharing is transformed into a chain of activities: preparing your resources for exchange, choosing the recipient, and communication before, during and after, which help develop a comprehensive social life. When offering to share material and non-material objects, participants offer their recipients a part of themselves – talents and opportunities, communicative abilities, empathy and belonging to a cultural tradition – in return receiving an opportunity to brighten their day and engendering a feeling of unity.

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Экономика совместного потребления и ее парадоксы: социологический анализ российских сообществ

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Аннотация

В фокусе исследования находится экономика совместного потребления (*sharing economy*) – явление, получившее неоднозначную трактовку в существующей литературе. То, что выводит экономику совместного потребления на совершенно новый уровень – это диджитализация. Интернет-платформы – медиаторы между частными пользователями – анонимизируют участников сделок и переносят обмен в мир расширенных сетей, соединяющих людей с большим количеством незнакомцев, тем самым создавая сообщество, в котором никто не знает друг друга поименно, но обладает правом вкладывать ресурс и пользоваться ресурсами других. Вопрос, которым мы задаемся в предложенном исследовании, – почему при всех рисках, связанных с декоммерциализацией рыночных отношений в экономике совместного потребления, количество ее пользователей неуклонно увеличивается? Что мотивирует ресурсообеспеченных пользователей, обладающих высоким уровнем не только экономического, но и культурного капитала, включаться в экономику совместного потребления? Мы ставим перед собой следующую цель: сравнить разнообразие практик взаимодействия и мотивацию пользователей трех платформ совместного потребления (Дарудар, Банк Времени, Couchsurfing), а также выявить общие и специфические черты самоорганизации сообществ.

Исследование опирается на методологию этнографического подхода и нетнографии, использующейся для анализа культур цифровых сообществ. Методом сбора данных является проведение 25 глубинных интервью, а также включенное наблюдение на общих встречах участников сообществ.

Стремясь уйти от конвенциональной рамки рассмотрения внеэкономических форм обмена через стратегию выживания, основанную на подключении личных связей, мы предположили, что «совместность» в экономике совместного потребления – это обособленный принцип распределения ресурсов, характеризующийся первичностью блага, а не характерных особенностей отношений между донором и реципиентом. Входным билетом в сообщества становится предложение собственности или труда. Три кейса, которые мы отобрали для полевого исследования, отвечают этой специфике: Дарудар, площадка встречи спроса и предложения на отчуждаемое от себя благо; Couchsurfing, платформа, создающая глобальный «жилищный фонд», временный доступ к которому получает любой зарегистрированный участник; и, наконец, Банк Времени, способ организации трудовой деятельности на безвозмездной основе.

Качественно разные по своей организации случаи показали: тесное переплетение формальных правил и неформальных практик определяет индивидуальные стратегии взаимодействия. Принцип совместности приводится в жизнь тремя структурными категориями: первая – это накопление критической массы, точки, в которой система становится достаточно инертной для того, чтобы поддерживаться за счет достаточного количества участников и разнообразия ресурсного потенциала; вторая – гетерогенный (с точки зрения стиля жизни) социальный портрет участия; третья – способность к саморегулированию.

Участники четко осознают свою позицию в сообществе, понимая, что ситуация обмена, в которую они себя поставили, отличается как от рынка, так и от дачного кооператива. Что мотивирует ресурсообеспеченных пользователей становиться практиками совместного потребления? Очевидно, что это стремление к обществу, заключающемуся в выводу своего «я» на агрегатный уровень, включению в него того, с кем участник разделяет благо. И акт разделения, и чувство совместного обладания совершенствуют ощущение принадлежности к воображаемому сообществу потребления, делают наше «я» его неотъемлемой частью. В практическом смысле совместное потребление превращается в цепочку повторяющихся манипуляций: подготовку ресурсов к обмену, выбору реципиента, а также коммуникацию до, во время и после непосредственного обмена, формирующих полноценную часть социальной жизни. Делая предложение поделиться материальными и нематериальными объектами, участник движения предлагает реципиентам часть себя – таланты и возможности, способность к коммуникации, эмпатию, принадлежность к культурной традиции, взамен получая способ скрасить одиночество и укрепить чувство единения.

Ключевые слова: совместное потребление, экономика совместного потребления в России, совместное потребление и дар-обмен, нетнография, кейс-стади, Couchsurfing, Дарудар, Банк Времени

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