

# Digitally-Mediated Resource Sharing:

## Understanding Consumer Experience & Perception of Practices

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### Summary

Digital ethnography represents an emerging approach to research, useful at understanding the connection of online and offline mediated practices. As such, it is relevant for studying consumers' experience and perception of digitally-mediated platforms within the sharing economy, which promote resource sharing among strangers. However, platforms describe their consumption practices differently, either as renting, sharing, or borrowing/lending. Does this have any impact on how consumers experience and perceive their consumption practice? And, what implication might this have on upscaling or diffusing sharing models that support sustainable development?

I propose digital ethnography can study the online platforms using digital content analysis of webpages and social media. Findings can be triangulated with the offline study of participants' consumption practices via ethnographic interviews, the go-along method, and focus groups.

I tested the methodological feasibility in a mini-ethnography. The findings illuminate tensions between how a bikesharing platform frames its activities and how its activities are discussed online. Furthermore, experience with one participant also highlighted this tension. They elaborated that renting is more of an economic transaction whereas sharing is more of a social activity. The preliminary analytical conclusions demonstrate further research is needed.

Finally, I reflect on the role of digital ethnography and potential enhancements to my research design for future research. In particular, as a limitation, I think it is important to better connect the online and offline field sites. Finally, I suggest ways to ensure ethical considerations are handled appropriately when dealing with online social media content and human participants.

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# 1. Introduction

The study of the sharing economy is inter- and trans-disciplinary. As such, researchers draw on a toolbox of qualitative and quantitative methods to study the phenomenon from numerous fields of study: sustainability science, law, economics, and various social science disciplines.

Of particular interest to me is examining the sustainability potential of the sharing economy. In contrast to some disciplines, I adopt a critical realist ontology, which accepts that there exists some reality only probabilistically apprehendable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, I am less interested in questions of place, self, identity, sociality, etc. Instead, my research focuses on the organisational models present within the sharing economy, their impact on consumption, and the strategies to institutionalise sharing as a mode of consumption.

Despite sharing being a long-practiced form of consumption, the concept ‘sharing economy’ has emerged only recently as a result of advancements in information and communication technologies. Literature describes the sharing economy as an umbrella term to describe disparate social and economic practices. Organisation models facilitate some exchange of goods and services via sharing, renting, borrowing/lending, among others.

My research thus far has engaged in the academic debate pertaining to the definition of the sharing economy. However, I have found this to be a frustrating exercise, as researchers conflate related terms (e.g. collaborative consumption) and take for granted the consumer experience/perception of the disparate consumption practices (e.g. sharing, renting, borrowing/lending).

I hypothesise that consumers experience and perceive the consumption practices of sharing, renting, and borrowing/lending differently. I wish to test this hypothesis and to elaborate on any differences and their potential implications for sustainability.

Therefore, I wish to ask the following research question:

RQ1a: How do consumers experience various consumption practices (sharing, renting, borrowing/lending) within the sharing economy?

RQ1b: How do consumers perceive various consumption practices (sharing, renting, borrowing/lending) within the sharing economy?

RQ2: Are there any differences in consumer experience and perception between consumption practices?

This paper is developed for the course *Digital Ethnography (SADE001)* at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University. As such, this paper serves as the examination essay for the course, where I strive to elaborate on a methodology to test the above hypothesis, to support my advancement in my PhD studies, and to fulfil the requirements of the course.

In the following sections, I elaborate on a proposed methodology, describe a mini-ethnographical experience, provide preliminary analytical conclusions, and reflect on these methods as well as discuss potentials and limitations of digital ethnography in this capacity. Experiences gained from this mini-ethnographic experience will help improve the research approach for future research in test cities – Amsterdam, Toronto, Melbourne, Sao Paulo, Seoul – as part of my project. Furthermore, the answer to these research questions will better elucidate the consumer experience, which is currently missing from academic discourse.

## 2. Digital Ethnography

The internet and the way it contributes to our everyday existence is taken for granted (Hine, 2015, p. 9). As internet continues to mediate our lives, interesting digital technologies and platforms continue to emerge. Similarly, researchers are finding increasingly novel approaches to study our social interactions and lived experiences on- and off-line (Hine, 2015, p. 15), an emerging research approach called digital ethnography, which merges internet research and ethnography.

Internet research describes a wide-ranging number of practices by researchers: collecting data or information via online interviews, surveys, and data scraping; observing or participating in online communities; engaging in online data processing, analysis, or storage; studying online development of software, codes, and technologies; examining the structures of online systems, interfaces, and features; employing digital, visual, or textual content analysis; and understanding creation, production, consumption, use, and regulation of digital spaces (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, pp. 3–4).

Ethnography as a concept is “variable and contested” (O’Reilly, 2012, pp. 2–3), described by some as “becoming increasingly fragmented” based on data, disciplines, and ethnographic approaches (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 125). O’Reilly (2012, p. 11) critically examines competing definitions and presents key features of ethnography, namely: immersion in context with direct and sustained contact with human participants; recognition and respect of the complexity of the social world; evolution of research design as the study progresses; and knowledge production pertaining to the wider context that is rich and convincing. As such, ethnography can be described more as an approach or philosophy on how research should be conducted rather than a set of prescribed methods to be carried out in sequence (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 10). Instead, it harvests methods such as participant observation, fieldwork, interviews, and conversations (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 10).

Marwick (2013, p. 114) clarifies the distinction between ethnographic interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographic interviews focus on participants’ meaning-making process whereas ethnographic fieldwork describes the process of observation and participation. These concepts are an extension of methods from ethnography, adapted for a digital context.

Ethnography and internet research have only (e)mmerged in the last decades, starting with Hine (2000) and her book *Virtual Ethnography*. Since, methods to study the online and offline experience have surfaced including netnography (Kozinets, 2009; O’Donohoe, 2010) and digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015), among others. Once again, Hine (2015) has literally written the textbook on *Ethnography for the Internet*. In motivating ethnography for the internet, she conceptualises the Three E’s: Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday. She describes the internet being increasingly *embedded* in everyday objects (e.g. Philips Hue), our everyday routines (e.g. Hungrig), and our everyday processes of meaning-making (e.g. social media microtargeting) (Hine, 2015, pp. 33–34). The way in which internet has become embedded in our lives is in part a product of our *embodied* engagement with social media and digital platforms (Hine, 2015, p. 44). Much of our internet usage has “become mundane and unremarkable... becoming simply an infrastructure that offers a means to do other things” (Hine, 2015, p. 46). However, it is these *everyday* structures, and the processes of embeddedness and embodiment, that warrants critical examination by researchers.

In order to study these structures and processes, online and offline field sites are created. Researchers interested in local changes and culture relating to increasingly interdisciplinary fields of study now require multi-sited research (Marcus, 1995, pp. 100, 102). In particular, digital ethnography benefits from multi-sited research approaches when interested in the interaction between online and offline experiences, as described by Marcus (1995, p. 103), the contrast of the produced content and the reception/experience of such productions.

### 3. Methodology

In exploring the online and offline experience of consumers using platforms within the sharing economy, I will rely on multi-sited research. Drawing on Marcus (1995, p. 108), I will “follow the metaphor”, in contrast to the people, the object, the biography, or the conflict, among others. Online, I study the way organisations, and others, describe their activities (sharing, renting, borrowing/lending). Offline, I explore the consumer experience and perceived experience relating to the consumption practice.

#### 3.1. Ethnographic Strategies to Study the Online

Data from each selected organisation is collected, particularly from their webpage, including their description of their activities, blog posts, or relevant news. When relevant, past catalogued iterations of organisation websites will be collected via The Internet Archive: Wayback Machine (<http://archive.org/web/>). Moreover, user-generated content is also collected. This may be from the platform, where applicable, and relevant social media content (e.g. Facebook, Twitter).

This data is analysed using digital content analysis, building on my past experience with NVivo. The data will be coded for context when describing the consumption practice ‘renting’, ‘sharing’, and ‘borrowing’/‘lending’. Moreover, the corresponding actor (e.g. organisation, user) to the described consumption practice is retained (as a case in NVivo) to examine if different actors describe the practice differently. Any temporal changes in this description is equally interesting, to discover if the use of language to describe consumption practices has changed over time. These findings are compared and/or triangulated with the study of the offline.

#### 3.2. Ethnographic Strategies to Study the Offline

In conceptualising the study of the offline, I draw on the go-along method (Jørgensen, 2016; Kusenbach, 2003). This method is described as a blending of ethnographic observations and ethnographic interviews (Jørgensen, 2016, p. 37), where the researcher observes the participant in a natural experience while also questioning the participant’s process of meaning-making (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463).

The offline field site is constructed around an organisation(s), and the subsequent consumption practice, during a visit to our case cities. The type of organisation will dictate the venue this contact will take place (e.g. in-store, at home, in a public place). Participants will be provided the necessary context and asked for consent. A researcher will observe the user’s engagement on the digital platform, using the go-along method. In particular, this method is chosen because it allows the researcher to actively analyse “the subject’s stream of experience and practice in relation to a given setting” (Jørgensen, 2016, p. 39). When possible, the exchange will be recorded. Afterwards, the researcher will conduct a semi-structured ethnographic interview.

## 4. Mini-ethnography

For the purpose of this assignment, I wanted to test the above research design. Firstly, I needed to identify an organisation I wished to investigate. I sought to study bike sharing in Malmö and selected a platform I was already familiar with called Donkey Republic. The company operates in Malmö, as well as nearly 60 other cities in Europe and North America. Based in Copenhagen, the company started in 2015 after developing an electronic bike-lock, which they developed into a self-service bike sharing system (Donkey Republic, n.d.).

On 25 May 2018, I reviewed their webpage (<https://www.donkey.bike/>) and related Twitter content. Primarily, the webpage is customer-facing; however, there are pages for bike owners and other partnerships. Only the customer-facing pages (e.g. homepage, about us, city-specific page for Malmö) were captured and processed in NVivo. Furthermore, the tweets and replies from/at the official Donkey Republic twitter account were captured and processed in NVivo.

On 27 May 2018, I recruited a friend to participate in a 'go-along'. This friend was someone who was interested in biking but was less familiar about my research interests and coursework. I was able to record our conversation, which allowed me to focus on observation and asking questions. We sat outside; the participant downloaded the app, discussing their observations and thoughts as they began to interact with the app. When initiating the go-along, I was deliberately vague in describing Donkey Republic, not mentioning the words renting or sharing.

## 5. Preliminary Analytical Conclusions

The customer-facing webpages as well as screen-captures of the app interface were analysed in NVivo. Permutations of renting dominated (22 occurrences) over similar permutations of sharing (10 occurrences); however, the context of these words were vastly different. For example, renting was used to explain the consumer practices (Figure 1). In contrast, sharing was used in relation to contested terms such as 'sharing economy' and 'bike sharing', used towards the bottom of the homepage (Figure 2).

The twitter data included all tweets, retweets, and replies from the official Donkey Republic twitter account ([@donkey\\_republic](https://twitter.com/donkey_republic)), approximately 1,600, from 21 May 2015 until 19 May 2018. The word rent (and its permutations) occur in 70 of the 1,600 available tweets. Similarly, the word share (and its permutations) appears in 121 tweets. However, 'bikeshare' or 'bikesharing' appears in 558 tweets. Again, this use of language is interesting; people describe and associate Donkey Republic with bikesharing, despite the organisation distancing itself by framing its activities as renting. This tension is worthy of further study.

Finally, while data generalisability is limited, the go-along and semi-structured interview demonstrated relevance in asking the above research questions. Without prompting, the participant likened the digital platform to a bikesharing app. This suggested that the participant understood the platform tacitly as a bikesharing platform, without defining bikesharing or reflecting on this implication as a consumption practice.

In the interview afterwards, we focused on the participants understanding of renting and sharing. They described renting as an economic transaction between themselves and a business; in contrast, they described sharing as something that does not involve money, often with another person. Moreover, they reflected on the platform Donkey Republic making it more convenient to access a bike, despite feeling better about borrowing a bike from a friend.

Figure 1. Renting | Donkey Republic Homepage 'How it works'

## How it works

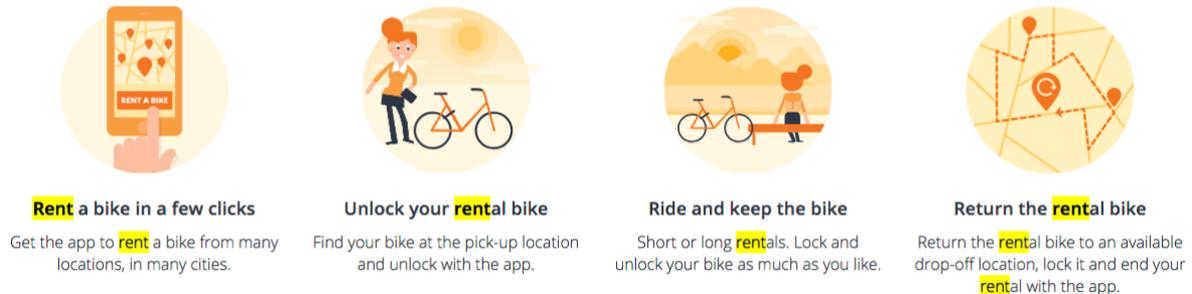


Figure 2. Sharing | Donkey Republic Homepage 'Explore cities on 2 wheels'

**Barcelona** | **sharing economy**  
**Explore Barcelona like a local, get on the sea on a local's boat**  
Renting a bike in Barcelona is the easiest way to explore what the streets have to offer and it is...  
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Based on the mini-ethnography, there exists tension in how people understand bikesharing and their consumption practice. It may be that people perceive bikesharing as renting access to a bike, despite being called sharing. More participants are needed to draw any further analytical conclusions, in particular, the impact of the digital platform on the consumers' experience and perception; however, preliminary observations suggest relevance in studying the above research questions.

## 6. Reflections

From my reading of the literature, there appears some disagreement whether one can study an online community solely (boyd, 2015, p. 83; Hine, 2015, p. 22). Frankly, I am more comfortable from behind the computer rather than out in front of it. And, I do think that research can explore meaning-making by observing, participating, and interacting with participants online. Nonetheless, I am moved by arguments made by Miller & Slater (2000), boyd (2015, pp. 83–84), and Hine (2015, p. 6), in particular, that face-to-face interaction helps to establish context to better understand participants' mediated practices.

As such, I think that digital content analysis, the go-along method and the ethnographic interview proved formidable and appropriate in understanding participants' digitally-mediated resource sharing.

As discussed, digital ethnography allows for the construction of dual or multiple field sites. However, it is difficult to move seamlessly between the online and offline environments (boyd, 2015). In particular, in this mini-ethnography, the study of the digital webpage and social media were disconnected from the participant's experience, as they had not previously visited the website or interacted on social media. In order to overcome this limitation, I suggest many more ethnographic encounters would help to establish a pattern, despite potentially being disconnected from digital content analysis.

The above methodology considers ways this may be scaled up for research in the five cities under investigation in my project. However, based on the mini-ethnography, I would be more deliberate in choosing the location of the go-along, sharpen the questions asked during the ethnographic interview, and select an organisation that is not carsharing or bikesharing, as this introduced increased complexity and context not considered.

boyd (2015) suggests that a limitation exists in conducting digital content analysis when one does not understand the context that it is produced. As such, I think it is important to understand the motivation of the platform to frame its activities in any one way. Furthermore, Hine (2015, pp. 50–51) highlights the need of the ethnographer to “triangulate their own perceptions with those of other participants”. Lastly, ethical considerations are necessary when researching online social media or community platforms as well as interacting with research participants. Markham & Buchanan (2012) elaborate on numerous ethical tensions to be considered in this study, namely, the interaction with a human subject and the expectation among users that communication is private.

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