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## **ACCESS TO PARTICIPATION IN THE SHARING ECONOMY: THE CASE OF LOCAL ONLINE EXCHANGE IN A SINGLE PARENTS' NETWORK**

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This paper examines the social implications of the online sharing economy for a specific use case: single parents in need of local goods and services. The sharing economy is an emerging phenomenon that encompasses the use of networked tools to enable a range of social and economic exchanges, as well as co-use practices such as hospitality exchange, ridesharing, and recycling of used goods. We present a case study of local online exchange among an existing community network of single parents, including participant observation and thirteen formal, semi-structured interviews. In addition, we discuss our collaboration with the community to design an online exchange network that prioritized their existing needs. This research addresses issues that can hinder the emergence of sharing practices—even when the potential benefits of participation are considered desirable and necessary by the target users. Our analysis demonstrates how community members were tempted by the social and material resources that participation in an online exchange network might provide. However, we found that the initial time investment and social commitment needed to gain access to these resources proved to be a significant hurdle for adoption. Through our empirical analysis, we discuss how unique challenges of single parenthood sometimes impeded opportunities to build trust and take part in online sharing activities. The results of our research highlight the challenges of user-focused design, and complicate the dominant narrative of the sharing economy as an accessible and convenient alternative for traditional markets.

### **Introduction**

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What has come to be known as ‘the sharing economy’ or ‘collaborative consumption’ is an emerging phenomenon that encompasses the use of networked tools to enable a range of sharing, exchange, and co-use practices, such as hospitality exchange, ridesharing, and recycling of used goods. Advocates laud the sharing economy as a (at least partial) solution to the challenges posed by the ongoing financial and environmental crises and as a welcome way to help people reconnect with others in their neighborhood and beyond.

Others, taking a critical perspective, call for a careful consideration of the social implications of this technology-driven phenomenon. For instance, ongoing scholarly debate regarding the labor conditions of those taking on crowdsourcing tasks (see e.g. Martin et al., 2014) is now being extended to on- demand mobile work (Teodoro et al., 2014). As another example, Edelman & Luca (2014) point out discrimination as an important unintended feature of online marketplaces.

Building on fieldwork we conducted with single parents in the San Francisco Bay Area, this paper considers access to participation in local online exchange and issues that can hinder sharing practices from taking off even when the potential benefits of participation are considered desirable and needed. In doing so, it helps complicate the narrative of the sharing economy as an accessible and convenient alternative for traditional markets.

## **Case Study**

The founder of a single parents’ network in the San Francisco Bay Area reached out to us in the fall of 2010, looking for a bartering site for the community she was setting up. Over the following months, we launched into this case study, collaborating closely both with the founder of the network and the team developing and running the local online exchange service Kassi (nowadays known as Sharetribe) as the service was being adapted for and introduced to the single parents’ network. The service was originally developed for a student community in Finland, as a part of a research project in which the authors participated, too, so we were eager to see how it could become useful in a different context. Next to the co-design process, we observed and took part in events of the network and, later on between November 2011 and May 2012, conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with members of the network. We are currently in the process of analyzing the interview transcripts and our field notes in detail. While the service did not take off, we feel that what we learned in the process can speak to central issues of participation in sharing activities.

## **Beneath the Veneer of Shared Experience**

*“There’s some challenges about being a single parent single parents get that other people don’t. I think anyone who has kids has really gotten that before they had kids, you don’t understand what it’s like to have kids. To take it a step further, people that have kids that are not single don’t understand what it’s like to be a single parent.”*

-Father of a nine-year-old daughter

Single parenthood functioned as the logic of organizing for the network. The shared experience of being a single parent was intended to be the glue that would turn the network into a supportive community. The founder of the network, a single mother with two young sons, envisioned the network as an opportunity to facilitate the everyday lives of single parents, allow them to discuss emotions and thoughts with peers, gain knowledge regarding parenting, share material resources, and simply fight the isolation single parenting can cause.

Beneath the veneer of shared experience, we discovered an astonishing diversity among the members regarding their ages, the ages of their children, their financial situations, employment, the social support available for them, as well as the histories of how they had ended up being single parents. As one interviewee pointed out, there was a need to have “more in common than just being a single parent” – that shared circumstance alone was not enough to unite the members. Moreover, the members differed in their hopes for what the community could be and the kinds of goals that could be attained with the help of the local online exchange service.

### **Gaining Access to Resources**

*"Part of the problem with being a single parent is it's kind of a vicious circle. Because you're a single parent, you tend to not have enough time. Because you don't have enough time, it's harder to get the resources that you would need to make being a single parent easier."*

-Mother of two adopted children

A repeating theme in the interviews was the participants' experiences of the difficulty to make the time for participating in the network's activities. Participants also emphasized the importance of strong, solid ties with other community members. Such personal connections were seen to be key for building the trust necessary for engaging in exchange activities fraught with risk, such as organizing carpooling to facilitate children's school rides.

One of the central dilemmas the network as a whole faced was that while members were tempted by the social and material resources participation could provide, the initial time investment and social commitment needed to gain access to these resources was difficult to make. The single parents we interviewed and interacted with were typically juggling a multitude of responsibilities in time- crunched everyday circumstances. Thus, despite at times dire needs for neighborly help and social support, participation in the network's activities, let alone adopting a new online service, was not an obviously available option for them.

### **Conclusion**

Contrasting this case study to prior work on local online exchange in a student community (Suhonen et al., 2010; Lampinen et al., 2013) highlights how the risks related to participation in the sharing economy may be weighed very differently in different contexts. While some forms of participation in the sharing economy, such as the local online exchange activities we examine here, do not necessitate a direct

monetary investment, other requirements, such as the necessity to plan ahead and commit time, may block access to participation and its benefits.

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