ACADEMIA | Letters

Hard Lessons from the Sharing Economy

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I would like to use this experimental format that Academia.edu has facilitated to provoke two conversations, one macro and one micro. The macro conversation is about the role of Marketing academia as a discipline. Readers who have seen the recent issue of *Journal of Marketing Management* on Gender may have seen my commentary and recognize herein echoes of my thesis there. Specifically, I want to continue to push the field to consider its axiological position. What is the purpose of our research? What are we hoping to accomplish through the processes of science such as it is? This is the macro conversation. To particularize this discussion a bit, I share an accelerated autoethnography from a decade of studying the sharing economy. Thus, I hope to practice what I'm advocating here by showing a particular context in which our axiological uncertainty has left us with a real conundrum in terms of evaluating our research: irreconcilable criteria. I turn first to the micro.

The Sharing Economy

Permit me an abbreviated autoethnography. I finished my doctorate in 2014. In the years of my program, the hot topic on which much attention was being focused was the sharing economy or collaborative consumption. You see, there is a great variety of opinions on the particular nomenclature surrounding this mode of exchange. That's part of the appeal, of course! Being a student and seeing an opportunity to do my dissertation work in an "important" (which is to say hot) and "emerging" (which is certainly not to say new, as we tell ourselves we are above transparent neophilia) field, I jumped on board. Starting in 2012, I began organizing some recreational consumption I had been doing since before my doctoral program into a coherent data

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collection effort which then continued for several years. I did an ethnography of craft beer festivals. I'll spare you the particulars, but it's worth sharing a few insights as part of this argument.

First, and based on my experience presenting this research and going through the review process with it, you might have noticed that the industry I selected would not be considered a "sharing economy" industry by most marketing scholars. Craft beer festivals aren't Uber or Airbnb or Zipcar or couchsurfing. And yet, I found that the supposedly defining features of the sharing economy were present in the craft beer indusstry, which is the second point.

There is nothing unique about those supposedly defining characteristics of the sharing economy. Putting aside the question of whether "sharing" even exists in a meaningful theoretical sense, I found the hallmarks of this "new" and "emerging" mode of exchange in a traditional consumer packaged goods industry. Collaboration? You bet, even among direct, mutually acknowledged competitors. Access? Absolutely, including large-scale C2C systems. Platforms? Yep, apps and websites and all fully market mediated. All of these trends that allegedly delineated the sharing economy were also manifest in the economy writ large. The sharing economy was a reaction to the networking of everyday life, stagnant wages in the core of the capitalist world system, and a reeling society after the 2009 financial crisis, and those issues touched the whole of the economy.

The entire premise of this stream of research is fundamentally and, in my opinion, irredeemably flawed. I'm not the first person to point this out, of course. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2015) make clear in their title that the sharing economy has nothing to do with sharing. Ertz (2020) caught my eye with her premise that the sharing economy is really just a buzzword gone conceptual. I agree on both counts there. So why has there been this enormous amount of

attention leveled towards a system that is not new, is just predicated on a media buzzword, and that has an Orwellian twist to its name? Well, my case was very typical. The logic that led me to write my dissertation and, even somewhat half-heartedly, commit my junior career to the flavor of the decade was reproduced consistently. Scholars have secured tenure and promotion, earned recognition from their peers, and gained media commentary credibility by studying this phenomenon. There have been debates about the degree of collaboration (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Ertz 2020); the definition of sharing (Arnould and Rose 2016; Belk 2010); the logic of exchange (Lamberton and Rose 2012); the feasibility of managing the sharing economy (Habibi, Kim, and Laroche 2016; Davidson, Habibi, and Laroche 2018); the solidity and liquidity of consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). It goes on and on. There is always a new framing for the phenomenon, a new critique to mount, a conceptual hair to split, a scholarly bone to pick.

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The question thus becomes whether that is a problem. And I believe that the only way to answer this question is to sort out our own axiology.

Axiological Discrepancies

While we as a field have certainly done some soul searching with due diligence on the topics of ontology and epistemology, we have yet to exercise the same critical reflective rigor (Anderson 1986) towards our axiological position. Major journals in the 1980s and 1990s played host to a fairly consistent stream of articles (cf. Anderson 1983, 1986; Hunt 1983, 1984, 1990; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Murray and Ozanne 1991) which saw Marketing navigate in miniature the broader cultural assimilation of postmodernism into the neoliberal regime. So while we can accept an element of relativism— what else could be meant by the axiom that the customer is always right?— and certainly of constructionism, it as yet remains

unclear precisely what our goals are in generating knowledge. Are we stewards of marketing, improving capital's ever-more-efficacious techniques of persuasion, or are we critics of marketing, raising alarm bells about its intrusion into every facet of quotidian life? This confusion, or at least ambiguity, makes it very difficult to negotiate the role of our own personal projects as academics and, to the heart of the matter, to evaluate the success of a given research stream. But I believe it is critical for us to make these decisions as a field so that we may do just that.

As it stands, I believe there are irreconcilable criteria at place in our axiological view. On the one hand, there is a view of Marketing as a discipline that is distinctly instrumental. Marketing is what we do, both internally and externally. We are to apply the scientific method to studying the demand-creation and facilitation functions of capitalism. We are to improve Marketing practice, validate instruments, suggest techniques, and generally engineer the Marketing apparatus. Naturally, with this comes an axiological criterion for research that is predicated on practical relevance. We need to generate as much research as possible to reach as many practitioners as possible and have as great an impact as possible. An interesting, if somewhat insidious, extension of this logic is that we ourselves are navigating a corner of neoliberalism. Higher education is increasingly subject to the logic of the market. We need more publications to secure employment, improve our labor value, and generate social and cultural capital. We need research that lands an interview on CNN or a speaker series with Unilever's brand wing. This raises our visibility and amplifies our voices to practitioners, thereby circling back to the original premise: improving Marketing practice.

On the other hand, there is a critical perspective on Marketing academia. In other words,

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we take Marketing as our object. Just as the astronomer does not, or at least only rarely and in

the most philosophically extended terms, relate to and identify with the celestial objects and processes that she studies, we hold Marketing at a distance and attempt to understand it, its role in our society, and perhaps even serve as canaries in the coalmine when some trend bodes negatively (by whatever standard you'd like to assess that). The axiological criterion here would be whether research helps us understand Marketing rather than improve it, or even whether it enables us to identify positive and negative implications for Marketing in our lives, both in the grand political and quotidian senses.

So far, it seems to me that we have proceeded in a big tent fashion, as if both of those things are accommodatable within Marketing scholarship; we are doing both. But let's return to the micro case. What are we to make of a stream of research like these ten years of study of the sharing economy? Applying the logic of the former criterion, our intensely academic jargon laced debate about the distinguishing features of the sharing economy, its theoretical underpinnings, its divergent validity from other modes of exchange, even the name of the thing, is singularly unlikely to have improved Marketing practice. One strains to imagine a reader of one of our journals immediately throwing it down and reaching for the phone because "this changes everything."

The logic of the latter criterion fares no better. Has our research unraveled a new form of exchange? Or has it obfuscated the total hegemony of capitalism, giving uncritical credence to the popular notion that the texture of the economy represents true variance and not total homogeneity with surface-level differences? Have we improved consumers' lives? Are governments more likely to respond to the Covid crisis more responsibly than they did the financial crisis, having learned of its ill effects from our studies?

Rather than doing both applied and critical scholarship, it seems as if we have done neither, at least with respect to major current topics such as the sharing economy. I think that picking one will allow us to consolidate our efforts towards the goal. And I think having the discussion is worth at least a published letter or two.

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