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Sharing Versus Pseudo-Sharing in Web 2.0

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KEYWORDS Collaborative Consumption. Collaboration. Exchange. Gift. Reciprocity. Community. Internet. Technology. Share

ABSTRACT The Internet has opened up a new era in sharing. There has also been an explosion of studies and writings about sharing via the Internet. This includes a series of books, articles, and web discussions on the topic. However, many of these apparent cases of sharing are better characterized as pseudo-sharing – commodity exchanges wrapped in a vocabulary of sharing. The present paper reviews subsequent research and theorizing as well as controversies that have emerged surrounding sharing and what is best regarded as pseudo-sharing – a wolf-in-sheep's-clothing phenomenon whereby commodity exchange and potential exploitation of consumer co-creators present themselves in the guise of sharing. The paper begins with a pair of vignettes that highlight some of the contested meanings of sharing. By detailing four types of pseudo-sharing and four types of sharing that are specifically enabled or enhanced by Internet technologies, the paper argues that pseudo-sharing is distinguished by the presence of profit motives, the absence of feelings of community, and expectations of reciprocity. It concludes with a discussion of theoretical, practical, and ethical implications of pseudo-sharing and offer suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

What we share is at least as important as what we own; what we hold in common is at least as important as what we keep for ourselves; what we choose to give away may matter more than what we charge for. In the economy of things, you are identified by what you own – your land, house, car. In the economy of ideas that the web is creating, you are what you share…. The biggest change the web will bring is in allowing us to share with one another in new ways (Leadbetter 2009: 6).

'Sharing' is used for different social practices with different functions and different motivations. It is used for a multitude of social and ethical realities. There is a danger of conflating different social qualities of sharing which in turn may produce distortions, illusions, and delusions (Wittell 2011: 4).

According to a simple definition, "Web 2.0, is another name for the *Social Web*. It refers collectively to websites that allow users to contribute content and connect with each other" (Carroll and Romano 2011:190). This differs from an earlier era in which web pages were largely static presentations and online interaction was primarily via e-mail. According to Belk (2010), the Internet has "ushered in a new era of sharing." But his paper focused more on the basic nature of sharing without examining this conclusion in detail. He offered the sharing prototypes of mothering and the pooling and allocation of household resources versus the commodity exchange prototype of buying a loaf of bread at a store for money (Belk 2010). But this distinction has been complicated by recent practices and articulations of online "sharing" activities, going by names like "collaborative consumption" (Botsman and Rogers 2010), "the mesh" (Gansky 2010), "commercial sharing systems" (Lamberton and Rose 2012), "product-service systems" (Mont 2002), and "access-based consumption" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Within this maze of terms, it is sometimes difficult to discern where sharing ends and commerce begins. It is argued that some of the different phenomena now flying under the banner of sharing are not sharing at all, but merely appropriations of this socially desirable term.

METHODOLOGY

It is enlightening to begin with two vignettes; one involving polarized media responses to Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) study of Zipcar and the second involving equally polarized responses to a change in the tax status of Couch Surfing.org. This is followed by an interpretation of these diverse reactions and a discussion what these conflicts may tell us about the nature of sharing, consumer co-creation, business co-optation, and community. The paper outlines several types of sharing and pseudo-sharing. It concludes with a discussion of the implications of this distinction and offers some suggestions for consumer sharing research within Web 2.0 and future technologically enabled sharing realms.

Vignette 1: Dymythologizing a "Sharing" Business

There is a small scale neighborhood-based car sharing organization in Göteborg, Sweden called Majorna (Jonsson 2007). It has 29 cars and about 300 members. The organization has no employees. Instead members take turns jointly performing such tasks as washing and maintaining the cars, IT programming, and making decisions about insurance, car replacement, and whether to accept new members. There is a strong sense of community in the organization and some members worry that it is getting too big to personally know everyone who participates.

There is a much larger organization named Zipcar that is currently expanding from its U.S. base. It is the world's largest car sharing organization with hundreds of thousands of members, thousands of cars, and hundreds of employees, and was recently acquired by Avis. Arrangements for reservations, car selection, pickup, drop off, and payments are all conducted online. In their recent study of Zipcar, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) report that despite the authors' initial expectations of finding a Majorna-like community among members of this commercial venture, participants fail to feel any sense of attachment to the organization, the cars, or fellow Zipcar members. Zipcar's efforts to foster such a sense of mutual identity and brand community both online and at a face-to-face level have largely failed. Members do not want to meet other members, they either take or fail to return possessions that others have left in the vehicles, and they seemingly operate primarily from selfish, pragmatic, and individualistic motivations rather than out of altruism, concern for the environment, or concern for the collective good. They appreciate the organization's Big Brother monitoring and penalizing of members who turn in cars late, dirty, or with no gas, because they don't trust the other members to behave responsibly.

To some in the media, these findings make perfect sense and show the domination of self interested motives over romanticized views of a new Edenic age of sharing (for example, Badger 2012). But to others, like Neal Gorenflo (2012), co-founder and publisher of *Sharable* magazine, these findings are simply wrong. "How can you possibly come to valid conclusions … with a sample size of 40? You can't" he argues. Gorenflo suggests that the findings would be quite different in member-owned cooperatives and other non-profit sharing organizations. He concludes:

Clearly self-interest and sharing go together. These services wouldn't work on pure altruism or self-interest. There's a varying mix of both in all services. The promise of the sharing economy isn't about the defeat of self-interest, it's about the alignment of self-interest and the common good [emphasis in original].

Although Gorenflo fails to distinguish ethnography from survey research, he is right that the findings of this study do not negate altruism in other sharing economies and he raises important questions in arguing that all such ventures work on a combination of altruism and self-interest.

Vignette 2: A Non-profit Sharing Site Becomes a For-profit Business

Like Zipcar.com, CouchSurfing.org is a large organization with three to four million members. But quite unlike the impersonal relationships among members of Zipcar, members of CouchSurfing offer free stays at their homes to other members from around the world; few acts could be more personal. As the many testimonials on their website verify, these visits are apt to result in friendships that last beyond the visit and create a feeling of generosity and warmth toward fellow members. The site itself was operated as a non-profit organization from 2004 through 2010 when it became a for-profit corporation. According to an account in *Inc.* magazine:

CouchSurfing had never been just a business. It was more like a movement, an army of four million members who behaved more like activists than consumers. They volunteered their time as customer service reps, translators, even Web developers. The company's guiding principles promised that CouchSurfing would operate as a nonprofit. Now Fenton and Hoffer had to break that promise. Could they do it without alienating the very people who were both using and helping run their site? (Lapowsky 2012).

Fenton and Hoffer, the principles of CouchSurfing, have indeed built up a loyal set of members and volunteers. They charge a $25 verification fee to authenticate the name and address of those who wish to enhance their online reputation and they encourage those who have acted as hosts or guests to post their comments and reviews in order to provide greater safety for members. Users also post photos and comments in their profiles and the overwhelming majority of their comments about their CouchSurfing experiences are positive. Guests are encouraged to bring a small gift, cook a meal, or help out around their host's home, but no payments are allowed. Hosts typically help escort guests around their city or at least advise them on what is worth seeing and doing. Hosts and guests often keep in touch with each other after the visits, and between 12 and 18 percent of hosts visit their former guests (Marx 2012). The CouchSurfing website is the conduit for all this. The organization primarily earns money through the verification fees.

CouchSurfing still largely operates in this way, but the 2010 change to a for-profit corporation, together with the receipt of $7.6 million in venture capital caused a backlash among some members. Thousands of members joined a protest group on the CouchSurfing website and 800 signed a petition opposing the new legal status of the organization. As a *New Yorker* article observed:

Certain diehards simply do not like doing business with the Man, or even doing business. From their perspective, CouchSurfing's raising capital is the equivalent of the Salvation Army's developing nuclear weapons. The discussion group on the CouchSurfing Website that is entitled "We Are Against CS Becoming a For-Profit Organization" has more than three thousand members (Marx 2012).

Although the experience of sharing accommodations remains the same for members, there may be a somewhat lessened sense of community as a result of the organization's for-profit status. Still members appear to remain a much stronger community than is the case with users of Airbnb.com, a for-profit home sharing organization which takes a commission on the rental prices (usually hundreds of dollars) that members charge for "sharing" their homes with unknown visiting others. One CouchSurfing member who commented on Lapowsky's (2012) article made this comparison:

It's weird that Airbnb is depicted [in the media] as competition. Most of the thousands of people I met who are into hospitality exchanges wouldn't even consider renting out their space to strangers. And giving and sharing is just much more appropriate when it's organized by a non-profit. I feel awkward [now] hosting people through CouchSurfing, knowing that that's creating value for shareholders, who will want to see some return on investment (Lapowsky 2012).

There may well be some age, income, and lifestyle differences between the young "hippie" patrons of CouchSurfing and the older "yuppie" patrons of Airbnb (O'Regan 2009), but the disruption caused by the change in legal status of CouchSurfing suggests that part of the difference in sense of community is due to the different shades of sharing involved..

RESULTS

Semantic Confusion

There are a number of other new contexts that also contribute to the many shades of sharing through the Internet that are exhibited by the organizations and people embracing the term. Unlike the hard goods of cars and homes, digital files of music, videos, books, and software can be digitally shared or exchanged with no loss of the original nor any necessity for the physical presence of the recipient. Such sharing has precipitated culture wars, new intellectual property legislation, and characterizations that on one hand label file sharing as theft, counterfeiting, and piracy (for example, Choate 2005; Ernesto 2012; Giesler 2008; Hopkins et al. 2003; Johns 2009; Sinreich 2013). On the other hand these same practices have been characterized by their defenders as gift economies, sharing the wealth, and partaking in the digital commons (for example, Aigrain 2012; Benkler 2006; Giesler 2006; Hyde 2010; Lessig 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2007). Likewise anti-file sharing actions have been labelled with an array of euphemisms ranging from "property protection" to "fencing the intellectual commons" to "the rape of the commons."

Although these semantic battles are overtly contentious, there are other firms embracing the term sharing that have not faced much open controversy, but are nevertheless subject to growing criticism about their appropriation of the sharing vocabulary. As John (2013a, 2013b) demonstrates, Web 2.0 sites are pervaded by references to sharing and the term is used in an increasingly all-inclusive manner. Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, Twitter, wikis, Tumblr, Amazon, Yelp and many other Web 2.0 sites invite us not only to click a "share" button to call content to the attention of our friends and others, but also to "share your photos," "share your opinions," "share your videos," "share your thoughts," "share interesting websites," "share the experience," and "share the love." While these invitations have specific referents, John (2013a) finds that these referents have become increasingly fuzzy such that we are now invited to "share your life," "share your world," "share your feelings," "share the real you," or simply "share." In fact, sharing has become the defining characteristic of social networking sites, Web 2.0, and perhaps even the Internet as a whole. Sharing has come to mean participating online. The connotations of sharing, John (2013b) notes, are interdependence, trust, community, leveling, selflessness, giving, and caring—a virtual *kumbaya*[1] of joy, commensality, and fellowship, even if the majority of those with whom we are sharing are unseen and unknown others.

Significantly, as with file sharing, participating in many Web 2.0 sharing cultures does not cost us anything; we lose nothing and potentially gain much from others' online sharing. Instead, the way that most online sharing sites monetize or profit from offering platforms on which we can share with others is by selling information about users to advertisers who want to reach audiences with particular characteristics and interests. Moreover, rather than seeking our permission to sell or transfer our information to "some of the wealthiest organizations on the planet" (John 2013a), we are asked for permission to "share your information with third parties." This sharing framing, according to John, mystifies enormously profitable transactions that exploit our free labor and make selling our information seem to be a magnanimous act that is part of the same *kumbaya* spirit used to elicit our contributions in the first place (see also Hesmondhalgh 2010; Terranova 2000, 2004; and Zwick et al. 2008). Consumer contributions to open source software, freeware, and fan fiction are other forms of sharing and free labor that may be subject to this same critique of exploiting free labor provided by consumers (for example, Hemetsberger forthcoming; Lanier and Schau 2007).

More semantic confusion is found in the terms used to characterize the larger nexus of online "sharing" practices. In addition to "collaborative consumption," "the mesh," "commercial sharing systems," and "access-based consumption," as referenced in the paper's opening paragraph, these activities have also been described as prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Toffler 1980), co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Lanier and Schau 2007), co-production (Humphreys and Grayson 2008), consumer participation (Fitzsimmons 1985), and online volunteering (Postigo 2003). The thread that unites all these views is generally un-compensated online consumer sharing. New "sharing" practices facilitated by the Internet also extend offline and may involve compensation. Grassmuck (forthcoming) calls the sum of all such practices "the sharing turn." Examples of this sort of offline sharing (facilitated by the Internet) include neighborhood tool sharing, toy sharing, Freecycle, eBay, Craigslist, Kijiji, Really Really Free Stuff, and Tripadvisor (for example, Arsel and Dobscha 2011; McCartney 2012; Ozanne and Ballantine 2010; Willer et al. 2012).

Clearly both sharing and the various terms for sharing and pseudo-sharing (practices masquerading as sharing) have proliferated in the digital age. The questions of how to make sense of these shades of sharing and what distinguishes them are the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Besides the sharing prototypes of mothering and pooling and allocation of household resources (Belk 2010), sharing has also been defined as "the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use" (Belk 2007: 127). Belk (2007) also stipulates that:

Sharing is an alternative to the private ownership that is emphasized in both marketplace exchange and gift-giving. In sharing, two or more people may enjoy the benefits (or costs) that flow from possessing a thing. Rather than distinguishing what is mine and yours, sharing defines something as ours. Thus we may share a vacation home, a park bench, or a bag of jelly beans. We may also share more abstract things like knowledge, responsibility, or power. In each *case all of those involved in the sharing have something (a share) of the costs or benefits of a thing. Sharing … includes voluntary lending, pooling and allocation of resources, and authorized use of public property, but not contractual renting, leasing, or unauthorized use of property by theft or trespass. We can share not only places and things, but also people and animals (to the extent they ours to share), as well as our ideas, values, and time. I don't include the simple coincidences that we may "share" a common language, place of birth, or set of experiences. These are all involuntary coincidences that do not depend on volitional sharing (pp. 126-127).*

By this definition, some of the preceding examples are clearly sharing, some are clearly not sharing, and others require further analysis to properly parse them. One of the key determinants is whether the thing being shared is considered to be "ours," if only temporarily, rather than "mine" or "yours." In the categories that follow this is one of the criteria used to distinguish several types of pseudo-sharing from sharing.

Pseudo-sharing

Pseudo-sharing is a business relationship masquerading as communal sharing. It may not be altogether unwelcome and it may be beneficial to all parties as well as friendly to the environment. But it is not sharing, despite promoters often employing a sharing vocabulary. Four types are common.

1. Long-Term Renting and Leasing: If we rent an apartment or lease a car, there is no sense of mutual ownership with prior or future occupants. Instead our long length of occupancy gives us a chance to think of the home or vehicle as belonging to us individually. These are also commercial transactions. The role of the Internet is limited here and pertains mostly to locating and comparing possible choices before committing to one. Nevertheless, this initial category of not sharing forms a good anchor for the discussion that follows.

We may take pride in the rental house, apartment, or car's appearance and decorate and accessorize it to personal tastes. For example, Miller (1988) finds that residents of a housing estate in the UK, often modernize their kitchen cabinetry and fixtures, even though they do not own their homes and will either have to restore them to their original condition prior to the next owner taking possession or convince the council to be happy with their upgrades (see also Gregson 2007). Renters still feel constraints on renovating however. Dolan (1999) found that when Margaret Thatcher encouraged British renters to buy their residences, one of the first actions of those who did buy was to make the facades of their homes noticeably different from their neighbors'. This is important because such customization is a ritual of possession – a rite of incorporation helping make a possession "our own" and a part of our extended self (Belk 1988).

While not as fully empowered to customize possessions as home owners, McCracken (1988) details the rituals that renters can and do go through to make their rented home or used car feel like their own. They include ritually cleaning it, removing signs of prior owners, photographing it, and furnishing it to personal tastes. Even hotel rooms can be temporarily made to feel like they belong to us by deploying certain of our possessions within them (Bardhi and Askegaard 2009). Miller (2001) suggests that our fears of ghosts and haunting stem from the fact that houses outlive their occupants and even with proper rites of incorporation we may still continue to associate a home with its former tenants. Because home is regarded as a safe haven and a key expression of our selves, to feel alienated, haunted, and fearful in our homes is especially traumatic. This is one of the reasons that horror films about the supernatural are so impactful when they are set in the home. The centrality of home to identity is also a reason that it is a chief site of hospitality sharing rituals as we will see later.

This is not to say that renting and leasing necessarily create a proprietary sense of individual responsibility and many landlords will attest to the lack of care by some residents. But feelings of attachment and expressiveness are more likely with long-term renting and leasing than is the case with short-term renting. This is also not meant to disparage renting and leasing, whether long term or short term. Such practices can potentially reduce consumption, reduce costs, benefit the renters and lessees, benefit the environment, and lessen wastefulness (Moeller and Wittkowski 2010; Mont 2002). But it is rare that long-term renting and leasing lead to a feeling of something being shared with prior or future renters and lessees or a feeling of community with them by virtue of a sense of joint ownership over time.

Time-share vacation homes occupy a somewhat intermediate status in that they are owned jointly on a long-term basis, but are used individually on a short-term basis. When the use of a time-share property is able to be swapped with the use of other time-share properties, there is likely even less attachment. Phenomenologically such rotating time-shares are more like the next category of short-term rentals. They lack a sense of communal ownership and do not nurture pride of possession.

***2. Short-term Rental*:** Short-term rentals generally fail to be instances of sharing for quite different reasons from long-term rental and leasing. Think in this case of short term tool rental, car rental (either by the hour or by the day), and tuxedo rental. Even in instances like Zipcar where users pay a yearly fee for membership, in addition to hourly fees, members are unlikely to feel a sense of shared ownership as Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found. Most of the for-profit "sharing" businesses that Botsman and Rogers (2010) use to exemplify "collaborative consumption" also involve short-term rental rather than sharing.

Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) Zipcar informants cited utilitarian rather than communitarian reasons for belonging to the organization. Most members aspired to own a car eventually and saw renting by the hour as a money-saving short-term expedient. They compared participating in Zipcar to renting a hotel room in which no sign of prior tenants was acceptable or desired. They also compared Zipcar use to non-membership car rental by the day and saw no special obligation to take care of the vehicle, because they knew someone else would take responsibility for cleaning, maintaining, and repairing the car.

Truly communal organizations like Majorna might foster a sense of communal ownership, but most commercial organizations like Zipcar probably do not. As we saw with Couch Surfing.org, even in the absence of usage or membership fees, the introduction of a profit motive by the organization can reduce the feeling of sharing among some members. But there is a magnitude of difference when participants also charge each other a fee, as with Airbnb.com. By attaching a usage fee, hosts become more like hotel proprietors. While some CouchSurfing members form long term relationships, this would be less likely if a fee were paid to hosts, effectively moving the transaction out of the realm of the social and into the realm of business. Consider the case of babysitting. When a relative cares for our child this is sharing and compensation is generally unthinkable. We may pay a neighbor's child a fee for babysitting, but we also regard the family of babysitter as friends and neighbors. But a commercial babysitting service tends to be still less personal and relationships are more likely to end when the sitter leaves our home. Trust in relatives and the neighborhood sitter is fostered by closeness and familiarity, whereas trust in the commercial sitter is fostered by the screening processes of their organization and its guarantees and liability insurance. Notably business relations were not always this way (Granovetter 1985; Silver 1990) and there are many small shops that still largely operate on this more personal "mom and pop store" basis, especially in India which contains half the world's retailers (Varman and Costa 2008, 2009). These merchants share merchandise among themselves when they run out, do not insist on immediate payment from customers, and charge lower prices to poorer customers—regarding patrons as the friends and neighbors that they are, rather than anonymous consumers. But in big box retail stores today it is surprising if a clerk even recognizes us.

Just as apartments and houses have a lengthy history of long-term rental, automobile companies have long offered leasing as an alternative to owning. Recently however, companies such as Mercedes, BMW, Volkswagon, Audi, and Peugeot, have begun to offer their cars for short-term rental in a manner similar to Zipcar (Firnkorn and Müller 2012; Nelson 2013; Rosenthal 2013; Wohlsen 2013; Wüst 2011). These automakers offer hourly rental cars in an expanding array of cities around the world. General Motors, in conjunction with RelayRides.com, facilitates peer-to-peer rental (see below) using its On-Star communication technology. The incentive in each case is to preclude disruptive technologies by competitors from swamping their business and to keep a share of the automobile market at a time when an increasing number of people are foregoing car ownership due to high prices, the high cost of vehicle operation, parking, insurance, and maintenance, and the decreasing desire among younger consumers to own cars.

3. Online Sites' "Sharing" Your Data: Real sharing and sense of community can be fostered on social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter. We can share with friends, special interest groups, and even unseen and largely anonymous others who have access to our profiles, postings, and comments. However the ubiquitous "share" button and invitations to share from the SNSs are best regarded as nicely packaged invitations to provide content to sustain the site, encourage more participants, and in so-doing provide information that can be sold to advertisers, marketers, and research firms. Humphreys (2006) and Singh and Lyon (2013) analyze how Amazon.com uses such information and its consequences. Suppose you visit Amazon, order a book, and place another interesting title on your Amazon wish list:

Before you even reach your destination, you are under surveillance. Cookies in your computer, there since your previous visits to the website, identify you to personalize your return to Amazon.com's homepage. "Hello, Peter. We have recommendations for you!" The list of default advertisements is customized to a rubric of your tastes and interests based on your purchase history. One offers photo albums. This reminds you of a conversation with your son the day before. He suggested that you upload your personal photographs to SmugMug for easy online storage. You open a new tab in your internet browser and make your way to the SmugMug homepage. "Hello, Peter. Click here to donate". How do they know your name? You empathize with the charitable request for donations and get your credit card details ready. But there is no need. Even though you have never before visited this website, it already has a record of these personal details (Singh and Lyon 2013).

Although such customization may not be altogether unwelcome, this is not the sort of "sharing" you had in mind when you agreed to a long-ago forgotten terms-of-service contract with Amazon about how they might "share" your information with interested third parties. Knowing that it might be seen by others, perhaps family members seeking to find a gift for you, you knowingly enter items on your Amazon wish list. But providing your purchase history, credit details, wishes, and other information to companies who are seeking customers with your profile is not exactly what you bargained for. This is not sharing. It is instead a shady sharing surrogate.

4. Online-facilitated Barter Economies: Barter economies lie somewhere between market economies and sharing economies. Even though they involve reciprocal exchange, they do not typically involve money. It is chiefly this lack of money that offers an illusion of sharing according to some, like Botsman and Rogers (2010). They label participation in barter communities a "collaborative lifestyle". Starting with Adam Smith, the tale traditionally told about barter is that it was the first economic system that allowed division of labor and trade. In this story that economists tell, because barter depended on a double coincidence of wants between two trading partners, money eventually grew up in order to make such trade more efficient. But there is a problem with this story, as Graeber (2012) observes:

The story, then, is everywhere. It is the founding myth of our system of economic relations … most people on earth couldn't imagine any other way that money possibly could have come about. The problem is there's no evidence that it ever happened, and an enormous amount of evidence that it did not (p. 28).

Humphrey (1985) provides the most definitive support for this conclusion, but also observes that barter nevertheless exists today:

No example of a barter economy, pure and simple, has ever been described, let alone the emergence from it of money; all available ethnography suggests that there never has been such a thing. But there are economies today which are nevertheless dominated by barter, and here anthropology can both learn from and add to the ancient debate (p. 48).

Although she was writing at a time before the Internet, Humphrey (1985) observes that barter still occurs within money economies, that it is most likely to occur within a community where people know one another, and that it is especially likely when small social groups want to maintain autonomy from the larger economy and its institutions. Seven years later when computerized barter networks had emerged, Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) still found that most barter exchanges were sociable non-commercial transactions between people in ongoing relationships. Graeber's (2012) interpretation of recent evidence is different, however. He concludes that barter today is more common if people do not know one another, have no sense of mutual trust, and bring their knowledge of money economies to bear within barter economies. A combination of both sets of conditions seems to best describe instances of barter economies in the digital world. The Internet makes the double coincidence of wants easier to bring about, special currencies do sometimes emerge, and the size of the group can be larger than in societies with simpler technologies; as a result, in Graeber's view, barter is no longer restricted to familiar participants transacting among themselves.

Still, some Internet-facilitated bartering occurs at a neighbourhood level. Someone can offer babysitting or yard-care in exchange for tax advice or carpentry. The Internet site brings together the barter pairs on which such direct exchanges depend. Goods as well as services can enter into such organized sharing. A benefit beyond the exchange and possible tax savings is autonomy from the national economy and a sense of community (Humphrey 1985). But more geographically distant bartering via Internet brokering is closer to Graeber's (2012) model. Businesses as well as individuals can get involved in such barter. When shippable goods or services are able to be delivered at a distance, proximity is not a barrier. In both the close and distant models, new barter currencies sometimes emerge to facilitate transactions (Jordan 2009; Spitznagel 2012). With currencies there no longer needs to be a direct pairing of bartering partners. The new currencies may be specific to the barter group or more universal as with Hub Culture's Ven global virtual currency which is similar to the virtual currencies within some online role playing games and virtual worlds such WOW Gold in World of Warcraft, Simoleans in The Sims, and Linden dollars in Second Life.

Because barter involves reciprocal exchanges of either goods and services or of monies and virtual currencies, it is only pseudo-sharing, even if it is at a neighborhood level with face-to-face transactions. If virtual currencies in barter economies are able to be converted into national currencies (as is often the case in role playing games and virtual worlds), any sharing illusion in barter drops away and it becomes a more transparent and familiar commodity exchange.

Sharing Digitally

In spite of the proliferation of pseudo-sharing spawned by Web 2.0, there are also a number of true sharing forms that have also emerged. There are exceptions, but the following categories of sharing in a digital age comply more than those above with prior definitions of sharing (Belk 2007, 2010; Belk and Llamas 2012a, 2012b). In terms of the opening vignettes, they are more like CouchSurfing and Majorna than Airbnb and Zipcar. After considering the different types of Internet-aided sharing the paper will more analytically examine sharing versus pseudo-sharing in our digital era.

1. Intentional Online Sharing of Ephemera: Intentionality is invoked here to distinguish online sharing from unintentional sharing with websites and advertisers. When you freely and without compensation write a blog, comment on a blog, respond on a forum, post photos or videos, tweet, retweet, write on someone's Facebook wall, contribute to a Wiki, write code for an open source program, pass along an interesting URL, write a personal e-mail, compose a text message, write an online review of a book, movie, or restaurant, or answer a question someone has posted to list-serve, you are sharing. You are sharing more ephemeral information, opinions, expertise, or less ephemeral productions such as source code, photos, or videos. As part of a group of others doing the same thing, you are very likely contributing to feelings of community. Your contribution is jointly shared by members of this community. Your generosity is likely to enhance others' inclinations to also be generous. Perhaps it is your own sense of gratitude in finding others' helpful contributions online that has led you to make your own offerings when you can, even though there are no obligations of reciprocity and you may not know those with whom you share. Even within an online group of personal friends, such online sharing at most involves only indirect reciprocity rather than paired direct reciprocity. You become part of a commons (Eisenstein 2011). You participate in a sharing economy (Lessig 2008). You are engaging in collaboration (Reagle 2010; Shirky 2010). You are creating and recreating community (Benkler 2011; Eisenstein 2011). You are contributing to "publicness" (Jarvis 2011). And you may even be a part of the A2K (Access to Knowledge) movement (Krikorian and Kapczynski 2010).

Although these phenomena and nomenclatures may be new, the sharing ethos behind them is not. Fiske (1991) calls communal sharing one of four basic types of social relationships and notes that solidary and unity are its goals. Graeber (2012) observes:

All social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism (p. 95) … Shared conviviality could be seen as a kind of communistic base … [and] helps to emphasize that sharing is not simply about morality, but also about pleasure. Solitary pleasures will always exist, but for most human beings, the most pleasurable activities almost always involve sharing something: music, food, liquor, drugs, gossip, drama, beds. There is a certain communism of the senses at the root of most things we consider fun (p. 99).

Although some of these sharable things are shared offline and are considered in the next sharing category, the important point is that we share things online, in part, because it brings us pleasure. It could also enhance our reputation, although online anonymity does not preclude generous sharing. And to the extent that our online contributions can be considered a form of confessing our foibles, failings, or shortcomings, we may even then be purging and cleansing ourselves in a way that also brings satisfaction (Aho 2005; Foucault 1968, 1998; Taylor 2009).

2. Online-facilitated Offline Sharing: One example of online-facilitated offline sharing

is the practice of listing free goods on Craigslist, Kijiji, Really Really Free Market, Freecycle, or similar sites. These sites put those with goods they no longer want together with those who want them. Technically there is an exchange of ownership and thank-yous occur in most cases, which are counter-indications of sharing according to Belk (2010). However, because most such exchanges occur within communities, they can be considered sharing in the broader sense of neighborhood sharing. That is, the neighborhood as a whole retains ownership. It would be more of a counter-indicant if someone claimed such free merchandise in order to sell it to someone else. It would be in the spirit of sharing however if they too give the good away when they no longer want it. Really Really Free Market also offers intangible goods like singing, ideas, skills, smiles, and other talents, which eliminate the exchange of ownership counter-indicant in any case (Arsel and Dobsha 2011). These sorts of "free to a good home" sharing instances fall within the set of practices that Botsman and Rogers (2010) call redistribution markets. However in order to be sharing we need to exclude selling for cash through online services like eBay. This is unlikely to create a sense of community and is a case of commodity exchange rather than sharing (Belk 2010).

In cases like Majorna car-sharing and many bike-sharing organizations, the Internet facilitates scheduling the sharing among participants. The same is true of tool-libraries, carpooling, community supported agriculture, and other neighborhood sharing organizations. For example, starting in a neighborhood of Melbourne, The Sharehood has spawned a number of neighborhood sharing groups in which participants offer the free use of many of their possessions including books, bikes, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, recipes, fruit (in season), computer advice, DVDs, and much more. It was founded by Michael Green when he needed to use a washing machine. He knew there was a laundromat 10 minutes away, but realized that there were many washing machines not being used in the homes he would pass along the way. Saving money and getting what you need is part of the motivation for such cooperative ventures, but according to Green the ability to meet and interact with neighbors is an even more important rationale. Such practices are a subset of those Mont (2002) and Botsman and Rogers (2010) and call product service systems. However these authors also include examples (for example, Zilok rental) that fall in the category of short-term rental rather than sharing. Where fee-based rental is not involved however, product service systems are a part of the exceptional sharing category that Belk (2010) refers to as borrowing and lending. What is new is that such borrowing and lending are increasingly being facilitated by the Internet.

3. Peer-to-peer Online Sharing: Peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing initially blossomed when Napster facilitated the free exchange of MP3 music files. Although the music was made available online for others to download and resulted in no loss of the original file, there were nevertheless efforts to enforce reciprocity so that downloads were balanced by uploads (Giesler 2006). Slater (2000) found the same to be true in earlier exchanges of sex pictures on Internet Relay Chat networks. These pressures to reciprocate push these examples of P2P sharing into reciprocal gift exchanges (Belk 2010). True P2P sharing is found in peer-to-peer support groups such as those for patients with Alzheimer's disease and their care givers (Leadbeater 2009). Another good example is Kickstarter, which solicits funds for creative ventures like proposed films, plays, and books (Gansky 2010). Donors may receive token merchandise like pens and coffee mugs for their contributions, and they may also gain e-mail access to the creators they help fund, but creators retain 100 percent ownership of their creations. While Kickstarter is North American, there are similar crowdfunding sites operating in other countries. The UK crowdfunding organization, Zopa, has begun to expand internationally.

Business has generally not responded well to P2P sharing of intellectual property

like recorded music, films, computer games, and software. Giesler (2008) details the dramatic phases of battles between file sharers and the recording industry. The industry has brought suits against file sharers, seeded the Internet with fake files, obtained additional intellectual property legislation, and insisted on Digital Rights Management software (see also Aigrain 2012). The recording industry eventually embraced Apple's iTunes store and other online music sales sites as further discouragements to file sharing, but a large amount of P2P file sharing still exists.

As noted in the short-term rental section above, there are also P2P rental organizations like RelayRides for "sharing" your car. But these are commodity transactions rather than sharing, as is also true of peer-to-peer financial lending organizations like Prosper, Lending Club, SmartyPig, and Kisskissbankbank (Gansky 2010).

4. Online Facilitated Hospitality: We share because we enjoy the conviviality of a sharing and caring community. But we also share because it is the moral and right thing to do. Moral principles underwrite the ethos of hospitality, which primarily involves sharing food and shelter. The reference here is to person-to-person hospitality rather than the consumption of the "hospitality industry," which is an oxymoron and a form of pseudo-sharing. Recall that CouchSurfing involves person-to-person hospitality, while Airbnb involves something closer to commercial "hospitality." Arab hospitality offers another good person-to-person example. It prescribes that guests at the door are to be housed and fed for three days before even inquiring about their identity and purpose (Sobh and Belk 2011). Hospitality involves sharing such things as food, drink, and home without charge with others who are not normally a part of the household (Visser 1991). The words hospitality and hostile have a common root and underline the danger of hosting strangers. The generosity of hospitality and the prescribed rituals for hosts and guests are a way of mitigating this danger and precipitating friendship rather than animosity (Sobh and Belk 2011). In many cultures those who share food are strictly forbidden from harming one another. There is an Arab story of a burglar who puts his finger in a jar to see whether it contains sugar or salt. Realizing that he had eaten from the owner's larder, he dutifully put back everything he had taken (Graeber 2012: 101). Similarly, in Homer's *Odyssey* Odysseus cannot kill his wife's suitors because they are guests in his home. With mobile phones, e-mail, and social media to arrange things, Odysseus might have been much better informed during his trials and his wife would not have given him up for dead. Today these technologies are key means of pre-arranging hospitality visits.

DISCUSSION

The preceding section has argued that money, egoistic motives, expectations of reciprocity, and lack of a sense of community are major criteria by which sharing and pseudo-sharing may be distinguished. In order to more fully understand Internet-facilitated sharing and pseudo-sharing it is useful to return to Belk's (2010) notion of "sharing in" versus "sharing out" and consider how and why the shades of sharing and pseudo-sharing that have thus far emerged in our digital age operate as they do. As Graeber (2012) argues, no one shares all the time, but communistic sharing is the foundation of all human societies. When we share inclusively – that is when we incorporate those with whom we share within out aggregate extended self (Belk 1988) – we engage in sharing in. In this case the feeling of de facto mutual ownership applies and a sense of community is fostered and reinforced. We most often think of family, friends, and neighbors engaging in this sort of sharing, but it can also include unseen online others who are part of a consumption community. On the other hand, when we share through sharing out, there is no sense of mutuality or community. This is most likely be the case if that which is being shared is either replicable (like digital music files, advice, manuscripts, or photos), or is divisible such that the parts can stand alone as pieces of a former whole (like pieces of a pie). Divisible goods can be physically separable like pieces of a pie or temporally separable like a periods of time when we have access to a good like a time-share condominium or a rented car. In the temporal case, rather than getting "our share" of the pie, we get "our share" of the time that the condo or car can be used. While sharing out can be found in both, sharing (for example, sharing fruit from your trees with whoever wants it), and pseudo-sharing (for example, getting your share of a time-share condo), sharing in is likely only in true sharing. If a sense of community and aggregate extended self *were* to emerge among members of a time-share condo, it would be a sharing/pseudo-sharing hybrid.

Some have suggested that "sharable" things possess certain characteristics. Benkler (2004) and Rose and Poyner (2007) suggest that sharable goods are "lumpy" and "granular." Lumpy goods are only available in discrete bundles. Computers, for example, are said to be lumpy because they only come with certain capacities, regardless of our needs. In the 1960s and 1970s mainframes were time-shared, presumably due in part to their lumpiness. This became unnecessary with personal computers. But personal computers are still seen as relatively lumpy and they are able to be shared in other ways such as SETI@home in which people share their excess computer capacity to help search for extra-terrestrial intelligence by processing radio signals from space.

Granularity means that a good is expensive so that it is only affordable through sharing. We can't afford to own our own power plants or telephone systems, so we share the electricity and telephone services provided by governments or large public corporations. Granularity can also lead to developing public goods like parks, roads, and police services.

In a more recent paper Lamberton and Rose (2012) specify the various forms of utility that a good may provide in order to be sharable. They hypothesize that it should have some combination of favorable transaction utility similar to that of ownership, storage utility from not taking up our space, anti-industry utility by acting against the power of large corporations through sharing rather than buying their goods, environmental utility by doing less harm to the environment and creating less waste, and social utility in gaining approval from our reference groups. Notably, this view of social utility is different from the sense of community and aggregate extended self that may result from sharing in (Belk 2010). Finally Lambert and Rose (2012) suggest two individual variables thought to facilitate sharing: that consumers do not view the good to be shared as part of their identities and that they have some prior knowledge of the (commercial) sharing arrangement so as to reduce uncertainty. They report a survey and two lab experiments in support of these hypotheses.

However, the more significant distinction between cases of sharing and pseudo-sharing depends not so much on the characteristics of the thing to be shared as it does on the intentions of those participating in the sharing (Wittel 2011). The key intention in sharing is not granting or gaining access, but helping and making human connections. Hospitality is a good example. But in an affluent Internet age sharing may be losing some of the moral power and sharing character that it once had. As Eisenstein (2011) argues, technology has had a great deal to do with this:

The technology of the phonograph and radio helped turn music from something people made themselves into something they paid for. Storage and transportation technologies have done the same for food processing. In general, the fine division of labor that accompanies technology has made us dependent on strangers for most of the things we use, and makes it unlikely that our neighbors depend on us for anything we produce. Economic ties thus become divorced from social ties, leaving us with little to offer our neighbors and little occasion to know them. The monetization of social capital is the strip-mining of community… the oft-lamented vacuity of most social gatherings arises from the inchoate knowledge, "I don't need you" (pp. 76-77).

Putnam (2000) observes much the same thing in analyzing the decline of neighborliness and community. And what Americans refer to as Social Security is not social at all; it instead provides financial security that makes us *less* dependent on others. We are most likely to find true social security today among the poor and among those facing disasters who really need each other in order to survive (for example, Erikson 1976; Stack 1983).

Although Benkler (2004) compares sharing excess computer capacity for projects like SETI@home to sharing cars in carpooling, there is a lack of sense of community in the former projects, as Wittel (2011) argues:

For Benkler both [carpooling and distributed computing] are examples of 'social sharing'. [But] what works with respect to the realm of economy does not work with respect to the realm of the social. To put it bluntly, carpooling produces the social, it produces social processes, social proximity, and quite likely some form of interaction, maybe even conflicts and/or social bonds. Distributed computing – even though this is a project of immense economic, environmental, and ethical value – produces nothing but computing power (p. 4).

It is not that the voluntary unpaid activity of devoting excess computer capacity to SETI@home does not involve sharing at all, but in Belk's (2010) terms, it involves sharing out rather than sharing in. That is, it is unlikely to result in the participants feeling a sense of mutual community, trust, and aggregate extended self through their participation in distributed computing. What we are beginning to see here is that if sharing in is the clearest case of sharing, sharing out occupies an intermediate status between sharing in and pseudo-sharing.

It is fitting therefore that a large part of the rationale for participating in neighborhood sharing groups like The Sharehood is to meet, interact with, and get to know our neighbors; that is, to facilitate sharing in. There are also computer and smartphone applications specifically designed to get to know our neighbors – virtually at first and once we have a certain level of familiarity and trust, face-to-face (for example, Stross 2012; Tedeshi 2007). In making this transition we move from weak ties to strong ties (Granovetter 1973), from bridging capital to bonding capital (Putnam 2000), and from sharing out to sharing in (Belk 2010). That is, we move from being strangers toward being friends.

But non-face-to-face Internet communities and sharing online can also build and strengthen friendship. The presence of "regulars" among the others who frequent these internet communities has led to comparisons to the physical places that Oldenberg (1989) called "third places." Eladhari (2007) and Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) are among those who have suggested that cyberspace can provide third places. A third place is neither home (first place) nor work (second place), but rather a location that people frequent and where they feel happiness, recognition, and acceptance. Rather than the brick and mortar third places that Oldenberg (1999) delineated (for example, cafés, pubs, bars, and coffee shops), the Internet equivalent includes forums, blogs, online massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like World of Warcraft, virtual worlds like Second Life, social media sites like Facebook, and other sites that we regularly visit and where we recognize others, interact, and get to know people, if sometimes only by pseudonyms. Using Oldenberg's (1999) criteria for third places (neutral ground, status leveling, conversation, accessibility, regulars, a low profile, a playful mood, and a home away from home), Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) find that MMORPGs are perfect examples of third places. As with Anderson's (1991) concept of imagined communities at a national level, Steinkeuhler and Williams find that physical presence is not needed in order to develop a sense of community in such online sites. One concomitant effect is a sense of hospitality and sharing within such communities – both through sharing physical goods and by sharing help, information, music, links to amusing or useful Internet sites, or self disclosures (for example, Born 2011; Brown and Sellen 2006; Martin 2012).It is a fundamental mistake to consider commercial pseudo-sharing ventures as operating under the same principles as true sharing. For example, to specify only utilitarian motives in sharing or to diagnose consumer exploitation and marketer co-optation in consumer cocreation of content is to try to apply the criteria of marketplace exchange to the wholly different system of sharing. In his blog, technology writer Nicholas Carr, for example, calls consumers providing content "digital sharecroppers" and compares them to sharecroppers in the antebellum South who owned neither the land nor the majority of the produce they grew on tenant farms. But as Shirky (2010) objects,

What if the contributors aren't workers? What if they really are contributors, quite specifically intending their contributions to be acts of sharing rather than production? What if their labors are labors of love (p. 58)?

Shirky also asks rhetorically whether beer-drinking consumers shouldn't all drink beer at home, since it costs so much more at a bar. The reason we do not drink beer solely at home is that we appreciate the social experience of drinking at a bar. This is not the "social utility" that Lamberton and Rose (2012) specify of gaining the social approval of our reference group. It is rather the camaraderie that we enjoy in third places, whether in the physical world or online. In a similar way to Facebook, YouTube, and blog aggregators, the bar owner is offering something beyond just drinks and a place to consume them. He or she is offering the social atmosphere freely provided by other patrons. Whether you are looking to meet someone, to engage in conversation, or simply not to feel alone, a beer is worth more in the bar because of the presence and social contributions of others there. The same is true of our Web 2.0 participation.

This doesn't mean that consumers are never exploited online or that people don't sometimes voice a concern that they should get paid for their contributions to Huffington Post, AOL, or other online sites. But these are the exception rather than the rule. Lessig (2008) gives a familiar example:

You have neighbors. They (or you) will sometimes need help. Once one asked me: "my car battery is dead. Can you give me a jump?" After we got his car started, he tried to hand me $5, "What the hell, Ted," I said. "This is what neighbors do." Then I thought, but didn't say: Anyway if you were going to pay me for this hassle, it's going to be a lot more than $5 (p. 146).

Money profanes the sharing transaction and transforms it into a commodity exchange. There are numerous examples like this in everyday life both online and off. By and large, online the distinction between sharing and commodity exchanges is sharper than offline. Some voluntary payment freeware and pay-what-you-will releases of music or books are exceptions, but generally online we don't have the option of offering someone $5 for their contribution and quite likely insulting them if we were to do so. Most often it is clear whether something is being shared or sold. That's why introducing the profit motive to CouchSurfing was controversial. It is also why trying to introduce communal sharing motives into Zipcar was unsuccessful.

There may nevertheless be combinations or mixed motive sharing/sales arrangements as well as hybrid models. CouchSurfing as a for profit corporation is an example. Writing free book reviews for Amazon is another. But the mixed motives are not among the participants but rather between them and the Website. Thus the shareholders in CouchSurfing and Amazon are focused on profits while the surfers and reviewers are most likely to be sharing. Because direct reciprocity is not involved, the two motives do not come directly into conflict. Hosts and guests using CouchSurfing do not exchange money, nor do reviewers and readers on Amazon. But then, neither do the participants in Zipcar. So we come back to the intentions of the participants as being the critical element in determining sharing versus commerce. Where the main intent is to profit, even the trappings and vocabulary of sharing cannot hide the commodity exchanges taking place. Where the main intent is to enjoy the human interaction of sharing, any thoughts and mechanisms of commodity exchange become antithetical to what is going on – like offering $5 for helping get my car started.

It is clear that the Internet, and especially Web 2.0 activities, have opened up many new possibilities for both sharing and pseudo-sharing. Bringing people together for both communal and utilitarian purposes is now greatly simplified compared to pre-Internet days. Before the Internet if you wanted to find others with a passion for mushroom hunting, building model airplanes, preparing foods without cooking, or writing and reading fan fiction for Xena Warrior Princess, it could be a real treasure hunt to find like-minded people. Today they are all a few keystrokes away. What may start as sharing out with distant others can quickly become sharing in with new friends once such common interests are established. Like Oldenberg's criteria for a third place, there is a leveling of participants so that doctors and dogcatchers are equals within their realm of shared interest. The Internet is such an open treasure chest of whatever may interest us, that it is difficult to resist the urge to share and participate. We just need to be aware that we may also encounter those who are using a sharing veneer as a disguise for profit-motivated pseudo-sharing activities.

We are just beginning to grasp how the Internet and Web 2.0 are impacting us as consumers. One comparative case study (Willer et al. 2012) examined users of two P2P sites: Freecycle (which facilitates sharing) versus Craigslist (which offers a pseudo-sharing guise for money-mediated commodity exchange). They found of those who enjoyed each site's benefits, only the Freecycle users reported high levels of identification with the organization and high degrees of solidarity with other users. The Freecycle users were also more likely than the Craigslist participants to choose directing compensation to the organization than obtaining a chance at winning a prize for themselves. These findings are consistent with the differences outlined here between communal sharing and the less communal and more egoistic pseudo-sharing, even though Freecycle largely involves sharing out rather than sharing in. It is expected that cases of sharing in should also involve greater feelings of group identification and solidarity than cases of sharing out, but this conclusion awaits further comparisons.

A SNS site like Facebook is more likely to involve sharing in. Burke, Marlow, and Lento (2010) found that greater use of Facebook was associated with greater social well-being in the form of greater bonding social capital and lesser feelings of loneliness. However, this survey research cannot distinguish whether SNS participation creates these feelings or whether people with more bonding social capital and less loneliness are likely to participate more heavily on SNS sites. Another survey (Shaw and Gant 2002) found that use of one-on-one online chat sessions was related to lesser feelings of loneliness and depression and greater feelings of perceived social support. But again, further research is needed to better tease out what was causing what in these findings and the specific role that sharing plays.

Another survey-based study (Gaskins 2011) reports that online sharing is a good predictor of offline sharing, although direction of influence is a question here as well. The same study, conducted in conjunction with *Sharable* magazine, found that 78% of participants said they were more open to the idea of "sharing" with strangers because of their online experiences. A slightly lesser percentage (67%) reported that they would be more inclined to share personal possessions if they could make money from it. Thus, the study finds a combination of sharing and pseudo-sharing reported motivations and supports *Shareabile* founder Neal Gorenflo's contention that a combination of egoism and altruism underlie sharing. However the research methods of this study are not disclosed and additional research is needed that better distinguishes sharing and pseudo-sharing.

Cross-cultural studies are also needed with regard to sharing. This is especially desirable in cultures with less independent or individualistic senses of self (for example, Doron 2012, James 2011; Steenson and Donner 2009). Given the use of reputational systems not only in pseudo-sharing sites like Amazon, but also on sharing sites such as CouchSurfing, the effect of such formal guarantees of trust versus more informal and direct means of trust-building online are also worthy of further study (Massum and Tovey 2011; Sacks 2011; Solove 2007). Interesting new sharing phenomena that are ripe for study include the sharing of passwords between partners (Richtel 2012; Sacks 2012), the sharing of virtual possessions (Odom et al. 2012), and our willingness to archive and share information about ourselves (Derrida 1995) — potentially information that will remain indefinitely accessible, even after we die (Carroll and Romano 2011). Given the changes that have taken place in the past 10 years with sharing and pseudo-sharing, thanks to the Internet and Web 2.0, it is likely that the next decade will also be full of new sharing ideas, new shades of sharing, and new questions for consumer sharing research. By that time it may be clearer whether the Internet has indeed "ushered in a new era of sharing" (Belk 2010: 715) or whether more profit-motivated pseudo-sharing becomes dominant. It is vital to conduct research bearing on this important distinction.

NOTE

2 A Gullah spiritual song first recorded in the 1920s, stereotypically sung around summer camp campfires and during the American folk music revival of the 1960s. It has come to represent good times in shared communal experiences.

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