Between Pressure and Flexibility: Provider Scheduling in the Sharing Economy

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Abstract: The sharing economy offers individuals various opportunities to generate additional income through sharing their personal possessions with strangers. The flexibility promised by sharing platforms, to share when and how often individuals prefer, has been highlighted as the key advantage of the sharing economy model. However, for sharing platforms which rely on ongoing and reliable sharing among private individuals, a tension can be observed between platforms encouraging and discouraging this flexibility. Simultaneously, the ostensible flexibility and informality of the sharing economy must increasingly reconcile itself with the reality of over-work and full-time engagement, whereby individuals may face pressure to provide a mixture of platform and individual factors. In this contribution, we conduct an initial exploration into this tension between flexibility and pressure in the sharing economy. Using data across twelve European countries, we differentiate perceptions of flexibility and control among those who share their assets. The findings indicate that perceived pressure to provide varies by country, sharing frequency, motivation, most frequently used platform, and is based on whether individuals depend on the income from sharing. Perceived schedule control varies by age, education, country, and motivation. Taken together, the results show a picture where those most involved and dependent on sharing their assets feel the most pressured, while young, lesser educated providers also have least perceived schedule control. Thus, our study presents providing in the sharing economy as a more hierarchical activity than one might assume based on media and platform narratives.

Keywords: sharing economy, flexibility, control, scheduling, platforms, survey, quantitative

1 INTRODUCTION

By popularizing asset-sharing among private individuals, sharing platforms have contributed to the global economy by opening up previously untapped sources of income (Alkhatib, Bernstein, & Levi, 2017; Lampinen & Cheshire, 2016). With an estimated 17% of EU consumers having used some form of sharing platform (Eurobarometer, 2016), the growth of the sharing economy has been heralded by some as an empowering transformation, responsible for increasing overall market flexibility (European Commission, 2016). Current platforms, in co-opting the sharing narratives of early pro-social movers, self-define the experiences they offer as social, casual, and flexible (Codagnone et al., 2016; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Martin, 2016; Walker, 2015). The flexibility promised by sharing platforms, whereby individuals retain control over when, how, and how often they provide their assets, has indeed been highlighted as a *key advantage* of the sharing economy model.

However, within the broad commercialisation of the sharing economy, a duality has evolved where users must reconcile the idea of flexibility with a transactional reality. The sharing economy is dominated by platforms which are, at least according to company narratives, merely the technological intermediaries which enable peer-to-peer transactions (Gillespie, 2007, 2010; Smith & Leberstein, 2015). Thus, since platforms generate revenue primarily as mediators in peer-to-peer transactions, sharing platforms rely on ongoing, frequent, and reliable sharing among private individuals (Newlands et al., 2018). Thus, a tension can be observed between platforms needing to advertise the benefits of schedule flexibility while simultaneously maintaining a reliable user base. In addition, the alleged flexibility of the sharing economy must increasingly reconcile itself with the reality of over-work and full-time engagement, whereby individuals may face various pressures to provide more often than they would have preferred, particularly amongst those who provide their assets akin to a full-time job (Böcker & Meelen, 2016; Schor & Attwood Charles, 2017).

This exploratory study thus attempts to assess two key issues concerning provider flexibility, following a recent academic trend towards empirically examining the opinions and behaviours of sharing economy providers. In a first step, we investigate the antecedents of perceived schedule control, conceptualised as a desirable aspect of the sharing economy. In a second step, we investigate the antecedents of perceived pressure to provide, conceptualised as a negative and undesirable aspect. The central research questions of the paper are therefore: *How pronounced are schedule control and pressure to provide among sharing economy providers? What antecedents affect providers' experience of schedule control and pressure to provide?* This article proceeds as follows. After the introduction, we offer a short literature review on the dichotomy of provider flexibility and platform control, situating the study within literature on flexibility and scheduling in the sharing economy. In a next step, we describe the data and methods used for analysis. This is followed by an overview of the results. We conclude the article with a discussion of the key findings and how they relate to previous research on the topic.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

An important incentive for providers in the sharing economy is the alleged flexibility of providing, where providers should control certain parameters of the sharing transaction. Although there remains an ongoing debate within the academic, legal, and policy spheres to identify the appropriate legal status of providers (Carboni, 2016; Cherry, 2016; Kassan & Orsi, 2012; Pinsof, 2016), the platforms are self-conceptualized as simply the products that providers are paying to use in order to conduct their own business as independent contractors or 'microentrepreneurs' (Cherry, 2016; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). As such, flexibility and control would be an expected part of the provider experience. Providers on many sharing economy platforms, for instance, can determine a *price* or price range for the transaction (Newlands et al., 2018). However, providers are nevertheless required to follow strict guidelines as to how, when and where they may offer their assets (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017; Van Doorn, 2017).

With specific regard to temporal flexibility, previous literature has acknowledged schedule control as a key theme of the sharing economy. The value of this flexibility is particularly evident for people who are not employed full-time, for example students or individuals with care responsibilities. As Sundararajan (2016, p. 11) notes, "[p]erhaps the flexibility and fluidity of contracting through digital platforms rather than working a day-job can be empowering."

However, as Lambert et al. (2012) and Lehdonvirta (2018) have noted, there is a question of how temporally flexible these new economic forms can be. As Wood (2016) notes, scheduling is bound up in power relations. There is thus a call for more nuance in understanding what is meant by flexible scheduling, with a distinction to be made between worker-controlled flexibility and manager/platform-controlled flexibility (Hyman et al., 2005; Lambert et al., 2012; Lehdonvirta, 2018). Recent studies on the sharing and gig economies have taken a critical stance on provider flexibility, showing that there might be less control and flexibility than expected or advertised by platforms. Lehdonvirta (2018), in a qualitative study of three crowd-work platforms, found that schedule flexibility is limited by both structural and cultural-cognitive constraints. Structural constraints include the reliance on the income from the work and work availability. The more available work was and the less dependent on the work the interviewees in this study reported to be, the more they felt they had control over their schedules. Among the cultural-cognitive constraints are (a lack of) motivation and procrastination. Lehdonvirta (2018) also shows platform differences in how schedule flexibility is afforded differently by each of the three platform investigated.

Questions have also been raised as to the role of the platform in pressuring providers to participate more often than they would have liked, where platforms act in an advisory capacity, nudging providers in a form of 'soft control' (Glöss et al., 2016; Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Van Doorn, (2017), for instance, has critically discussed how platforms use 'nudges' to suggest and encourage work, all as part of the 'choice architecture' (Sunstein, 2015). A primary example is how ride-hailing platforms can automatically allocate 'matches' for a sharing transaction, whereby the provider has only the option to either accept or reject and is not able to select based on profitability (Lee et al., 2015; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Slee, 2015; Van Doorn, 2017). It is through such pressures that sharing economy platforms are exerting their quasimanagerial power over their providers, (Newlands et al., 2017a, 2017b; Scholz, 2008).

3 METHODS

To assess schedule control and pressure to provide in the European context, we conducted an *online survey* across twelve European countries. The field work took place in June and July 2017. For the recruitment of participants, the research team collaborated with a leading ESOMAR-certified, international, and UK-based survey provider to access a high-quality respondent pool in the form of a consumer panel. A total of 6111 responses were collected, with a nationally representative profile of the age group 18-65 in terms of key attributes such as age,

gender, and area of residence. Respondents received a small financial reward. The median response time was 760 seconds (12 minutes and 40 seconds) and quality assurance guaranteed that low quality respondents (e.g., those speeding or through-lining) were replaced. Depending on their answers to a filter question, respondents were grouped into one of four response streams: providers, consumers, aware non-users, and non-aware non-users. 556 (9%) respondents in our sample were classified as providers, 1143 (19%) as consumers, 3818 (62%) as aware non-users, and 593 (10%) as non-aware non-users. In the following, we focus on the providers (N=556).

For the *data analysis*, we conducted a linear regression in Stata v.14 IC. Robust standard errors were used to account for possible heteroscedasticity. A test for multi-collinearity – with the post-estimation vif command in Stata – showed the absence of serious multicollinearity (the highest VIF being 2.06).

Due to space and time constraints in the survey, we relied on a one item measurement for schedule control and pressure to provide respectively. Both items were assessed on 1-5 Likert scales and the items were newly developed. More information on the wording of the dependent variable is available in the next section. The independent variables can be grouped into two categories: *demographic predictors* and *sharing-related predictors*. The demographic predictors and their measurement are: age in years, education in ISCED categories, gender in two categories (female; male), working status in two categories (working; not working), income in four categories (very low: <= -1SD; slightly low: > -1 SD <= mean; slightly high: > mean <= +1 SD; very high: > +1 SD), and country of residence (in dummy variables, with Denmark as the reference category).

The sharing-related predictors are: sharing frequency, sharing motives, reliance on the income from sharing, and most frequently used platform (Airbnb; BlaBlaCar; Uber; Other). Sharing frequency was assessed with the question "How frequently do you provide on the sharing platform?". Respondents could answer on a 9-point scale, ranging from 1-less frequently, 2-once a year, and 3-several times a year, up to 8-daily, and 9-several times a day. Thus, higher values indicate higher frequency. The average frequency was 3.8 and the median 3 (standard deviation 2.2). This corresponds to between once a month and several times a year. To assess users' *motivations* for using sharing platforms, we used four items oriented on motive typologies from previous studies (Bucher et al., 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; Hawlitschek et al., 2016). One item captured financial benefit, one the social aspects of sharing (e.g., meeting new people), one hedonic aspects (e.g., having fun), and one social responsibility (e.g., sharing is the right thing to do). The question wording was: "How much did the following considerations affect your decision to use the sharing platform?" and users had 5 response options to answer the question, ranging from 1-not at all to 5-very much. The most frequently used platform was assessed through an open text field, where providers could indicate which platform they used most often. Airbnb, Uber, and BlaBlaCar emerged clearly as the most frequently used platforms. Since the remaining platforms had low or very low prevalence, we decided to group these into a platform category 'Other'. Finally, reliance on the income from sharing was measured with a self-developed item with three response options. The prompt was: "The income I get from providing on the sharing platform..." And providers had to select one of the following three options: "... is my main source of income"; "is a good way of supplementing my main income"; "... is just something I earn on the side, but I don't really need it".

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 displays the item wording and basic descriptive statistics. For the *schedule control* item, responses indicate that many providers feel they can determine their own schedule, thus reporting relatively high flexibility. On the other hand, the average scores for *pressure* show moderate agreement to slim disagreement, almost a third of all providers feel pressured to provide more often than they would like (30.4% somewhat or strongly agree).

	I determine my own schedule.	I feel pressured to provide more often than I would like.		
Mean	3.75	2.87		
Median	4.00	3.00		
Std. Deviation	0.98	1.13		
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Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the dependent items

N=556 Providers; 1-5 Likert scales: 1-strongly disagree, 2-somewhat disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-somewhat agree, 5-strongly agree

To analyse the results further and consider what factors might determine the perception of schedule control and pressure, Table 2 shows the regression results.

Independent Variable	Dependent variable: I determine my own schedule.	Dependent variable: I feel pressured to provide more often than I would like.
Age	0.15*** (0.00)	0.02 (0.00)
Education	0.07+ (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Gender (Ref. = male)	-0.05 (0.08)	0.01 (0.09)
Working Status: Working	-0.01 (0.10)	0.03 (0.12)
(Ref. = not working)		
<i>Income (Ref. = very low)</i>		
Slightly low	0.06 (0.13)	0.14* (0.14)
Slightly high	-0.00 (0.14)	0.21*** (0.14)
Very high	0.07 (0.14)	0.08 (0.16)
<i>Country (Ref. = Denmark)</i>		
France	-0.00 (0.18)	0.11+(0.21)
Germany	-0.10+ (0.20)	0.02 (0.22)
Ireland	-0.01 (0.20)	0.10* (0.23)
Italy	-0.14* (0.18)	0.19** (0.22)
Netherlands	0.01 (0.28)	0.04 (0.32)
Norway	-0.10 (0.19)	0.04 (0.21)
Poland	-0.07 (0.21)	0.12* (0.22)

Table 2: Regression results

Portugal	0.02 (0.21)	0.08 (0.26)
Spain	0.07 (0.19)	0.07 (0.22)
Switzerland	0.001 (0.20)	0.03 (0.22)
UK	-0.03 (0.20)	0.02 (0.24)
Sharing Frequency/Intensity	0.01 (0.02)	0.10* (0.02)
Sharing Reliance (Ref. = Main		
Source)		
Supplement	-0.10+ (0.12)	-0.06 (0.14)
Minor Side Income	0.08 (0.13)	-0.16* (0.16)
Motives: Financial Benefit	0.21*** (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)
Motives: Social Benefit (Meeting	0.07 (0.05)	0.13* (0.06)
People)		
Motives: Hedonic Benefit (Fun)	0.06 (0.05)	0.14* (0.06)
Motives: Social Responsibility	0.13** (0.04)	0.01 (0.05)
Platform (Ref.= Airbnb)		
BlaBlaCar	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.14* (0.15)
Uber	-0.07 (0.15)	0.11* (0.19)
Other	-0.07 (0.11)	0.09 (0.13)
Constant	1.96 (0.34)	1.33 (0.38)
R ²	0.24	0.24

N=554. Two missing values because two respondents did not provide their income. Standardized regression coefficients (Betas) are displayed. Robust standard errors are in brackets. p < 0.1, p < 0.05, p < 0.01, p < 0.001

Of the demographic predictors, age and education have a significant effect on schedule control. Older and educated providers report more schedule control than younger and less educated providers. The country differences are small and the biggest outlier is Italy, where providers enjoy significantly less control than in Denmark. The difference between Germany and Denmark is significant at the 10 percent level and also in a negative direction, showing that providers in Germany feel they have less schedule control. The reliance on the income from sharing has a weak and negative effect, with the middle category (supplement) being the least flexible one. This might indicate a curvilinear or u-shaped pattern, where those in the middle are least flexible. It could be that combining different jobs for this group is a challenge to their schedule and which leaves little flexibility. However, we could not test this with the data at hand. Finally, motives play a major role in fostering schedule control. Providers who have financial motivations and those with social responsibility motives score considerably higher on perceived schedule control. The other two motives are insignificant, indicating that they do not play a major role. The positive, rather than negative, effect of financial benefit motives is interesting and somewhat surprising. We would have expected strongly financially motivated individuals to display low scheduling control due to the willingness to accept as many gigs as possible. However, this is not the case and we speculate that financially motivated providers might be better able to determine their schedule due to potentially more efficient time management. As shown in the context of crowd-work, procrastination is seen as constraint to flexibility (Lehdonvirta, 2018) and it could be that financially motivated providers are less likely to procrastinate. Future research could pick this up and look in more depth into the intersections of motivations and flexibility. Overall, we are able to explain about a fourth of the variance in schedule control. Future research should include more platform and design characteristics to increase this value.

Turning to pressure to provide, we find limited demographic effects. Only income and some of the country dummies are significant. As for the former, respondents with medium income report the highest pressure, pointing to a curvilinear pattern. The findings are in line with those on sharing reliance in the previous regression. Again, it appears that those in the middle of the spectrum are most at risk. Italy, Ireland and Poland stand out as countries with particularly high pressure. The fact that Italy fares worst in both regressions indicates that the conditions in this country for providers might be worse than in most other European countries. Sharing frequency has a positive and significant effect on pressure and so does income reliance (note that the negative effect is due to reverse coding). In other words, more frequent providers and those who rely more strongly on their income from sharing feel more pressured. Finally, motives again play a role. However, the two insignificant motives in the previous regression are now significant, while the two significant motives in the previous regression are now insignificant. Providers who are socially and hedonically motivated feel more pressure to provide than those who are not. This points to the fact that socializing and wanting fun might not only have positive sides. Uber drivers are more pressured than BlaBlaCar drivers, Airbnb hosts, or providers on smaller platforms. Thus, platform differences become visible. In accordance with the findings on schedule control, we are able to explain about a fourth of the variance in provider pressure. Again, the inclusion of more detailed platform and design characteristics as well as additional life circumstances outside the immediate sharing transaction could prove useful in explaining more variance.

Overall, the findings on schedule control and pressure to provide are somewhat complementary although not completely. Complementary patterns are visible for the motives and for income or reliance on the income from sharing as well as – at least partly – for the country of residence. The demographic effects, on the other hand, and those of sharing frequency indicate that schedule control and provider pressure might be distinct phenomena.

5 CONCLUSION

Summing up, our initial exploratory study – one of the first to approach the topic from a quantitative, user-focused angle – showed important predictors of schedule control and pressure to provide in the sharing economy. We found that frequent providers, Uber drivers, highly socially motivated providers, those with medium incomes and those who rely strongly on their income from providing are particularly vulnerable to platform pressure. Older and more educated providers, by contrast, and those motivated by financial benefits and social responsibility report higher levels of flexibility. Platforms might want to reconsider their practices along these lines to make the sharing economy more enjoyable and less pressured for providers.

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