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A return to *Gemeinschaft*: Digital impression management and the sharing economy

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The sharing economy claims to be "disrupting"[1] the world as we know it, using big data, innovation and responsiveness to change the world into "neighbors helping neighbors."[2] Suddenly an app and a smartphone is all you need to hail a cab, hire a handyperson, or find a hotel room; and in each case, you're working directly with individuals through peer-to-peer connections, as opposed to corporations. The breathless consensus is that the so-called sharing economy will return us to the idyllic days of *Gemeinschaft*, where everyone knows your name, people trust each other, and resources are used in a more efficient and environmentally-friendly-way.

Digital records are the key to working together in the sharing economy or "gig" economy. In *Gemeinschaft*, reputations could follow a family for forever, and today one's Facebook trail is everlasting. Sharing economy services often link through Facebook and LinkedIn accounts for identity verification, attempting to digitally recreate the neighborly interactions and social network linkages that defined pre-industrial society. Users are also asked to post personal photos and profiles and to communicate before each stay or task. Workers are rated on responsiveness and performance, with low scores triggering instant, unappealable termination. Meanwhile, TrustCloud is working to collect people's "online data exhaust," posts from Facebook, Twitter, and TripAdvisor that could be used to calculate reliability, consistency, and responsiveness – a "trust rating"[3] similar to the credit rating of the offline world.

Most people are familiar with the idea that first impressions matter. Employment advice handbooks are chock-full of suggestions on how to dress for the job you want, the appropriate fingernail length, even advice on which piercings are appropriate where. But whereas in *Gemeinschaft*, where reputations were formed over months and years of interactions with an individual and his or her family, in the sharing economy, impressions are formed in a millisecond as someone scrolls down a screen, viewing a dozen or more competitors. In addition to managing their first digital impression, workers must also manage themselves "on the job" to ensure that they receive positive reviews that can also make or break their sharing economy success. As a result, managing impressions is a circular reaction where successful management leads to more bookings, resulting in higher placement in site search algorithms and more work – and where negative impressions can quickly spiral into unemployment.

In this chapter I use interviews with 27 gig economy workers to explore how they present their digital selves and engage in face-to-face interactions to further support those selves, with the goal of generating positive impressions and digital reviews. I was interested in how users picked their photographs (whether of themselves, their homes, or food) and of the text descriptions they provided. What tactics do they use to market themselves? When it comes to face-to-face encounters with clients, how do they ensure that their carefully crafted online persona is deemed an authentic and accurate representation? How does the process of being actively reviewed on a daily process affect their interactions with others? In a world where one comment on Twitter can result in virtual – and sometimes actual – mob action (Ronson 2015), what does it mean to have your digital identity determine your employability?

The sharing economy

The sharing economy is a catch-all term for "'peer-to-peer' firms that connect people for the purposes of distributing, sharing, and reusing goods and services" (Mathews, 2014). The concept encompasses everything from multi-billion dollar companies such as Airbnb (room rental) and Uber (on-call taxi and delivery service) to free durable good sharing sites such as Neighborgoods. Definitions of the sharing economy vary and often seem arbitrary: Airbnb is seen as the epitome of the sharing economy, but traditional bed and breakfasts are not. Ebay, the online marketplace of essentially everything, is hailed as an early founder, but free local libraries and parks are not. Juliet Schor, a preeminent researcher in the field, notes that definitions of the sharing economy tend to be "pragmatic, rather then analytical: self-definition by the platforms and the press defines who is in and who is out" (Schor, 2014: 2). The general view is that the sharing economy "represents an innovation that is capable of re-allocating wealth across the 'value chain,' specifically away

from 'middlemen' and towards small producers and consumers" (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2014: 4).

The sharing economy, also described interchangeably as connected consumption, collaborative consumption, or the on-demand economy, is generally dated to the 1995 invention of eBay by Pierre Omidyar (Alden, 2014). Later contributory organizations included Craigslist.com and the free hospitality exchange website Couchsurfing.org, founded in 2003. The rise of the sharing economy is thought to be "fueled by the convergence of smart phone ubiquity; secure cashless payment systems, and the relatability and transparency of customer review sites," but not all of the impetus is technological (McGowan, 2014). The recession and post-recession fall-out also meant a need to monetize possessions, to make do with less, and the rampant underemployment of college graduates (McGowan, 2014). In addition, the gig economy's focus on laissez-faire capitalism and deregulation suggests strong neoliberal roots (Hill, 2014) and earlier efforts to shift risk to workers and consumers (Hacker, 2006).

Goals of the sharing economy range from reversing economic inequality to stopping ecological destruction to countering materialistic tendencies to enhancing worker rights and empowering the poor (Mathews, 2014). But as Jon Evans, *TechCrunch* writer and self-described "relatively-wealthy techie" points out, the "'sharing economy' is mostly spin. It mostly consists of people who have excess disposable income hiring those who do not.... Far more accurate to call it the 'servant economy'" (Evans, 2013). This focus on the workers as the ultimate in at-will employees – hired for a few hours or days and actively reviewed all the while – is at the forefront of my research.

Three sharing economy companies

Founded in San Francisco in 2008, Airbnb was created by two roommates who couldn't make rent that month. In an oft-repeated story, the founders of Airbnb rented out three air mattresses for $80 a night over the weekend of the Industrial Designers Society of America conference and soon had a business (Friedman, 2013). In May 2015, Airbnb's website noted that it had more than a million listings worldwide in 190 countries; by November of the same year, the number exceeded 2 million. The website allows hosts to list their home or extra space[4] online and to rent it out to guests. The company operates as a listing service and escrow account; payment for the host is held until the guest arrives and ensures that all is as expected.

Kitchensurfing is a personal chef service. The platform offers two opportunities for chef rental: a Kitchensurfing Tonight dining option[5] that costs approximately $25 per person and where diners choose from one of three pre-set menus, or Traditional Kitchensurfing, a personalized, anytime option for up to $100 each. The $25 per person is all-inclusive: a chef arrives with

all of the necessary ingredients and cooking tools, cooks and serves the meal, and then cleans up afterwards. Tips and transportation are also included in the $25 price. The second, more expensive and expansive option, Traditional Kitchensurfing, allows clients to choose a chef from more than 100 different menus and to personalize the menu to their liking and guest count. Options range from $40/head cocktail parties to $100/head formal dinners for up to 16 people.[6]

TaskRabbit is a personal assistant service that allows people to "live smarter by connecting you with safe and reliable help in your neighborhood" (TaskRabbit, no date, a). Users answer a series of questions about the task that they want done (errand running, cleaning, Ikea furniture assembly, party-planning, etc) and are given an algorithm-selected listing of available Taskers[7] and their hourly rates. Taskers are interviewed and background checked by the company and receive task assignments based on their availability, or can be requested specifically by a client.

Research project

This chapter investigates, through in-depth mixed-methods research, how sharing economy workers utilize impression management to market themselves. This study is part of a larger qualitative study on the sharing economy, the changing nature of work, and how social inequity contributes to the sharing economy. Respondents for this study were recruited through messaging tools available on Airbnb and Kitchensurfing websites and through direct contact with workers. In addition, several respondents were recruited through online discussion boards such as the New York City TaskRabbit's Facebook page. I focused my research on workers who work within the five boroughs of New York City.

I interviewed 27 people: 14 Airbnb hosts, 6 TaskRabbit workers and 7 Kitchensurfing chefs between March and May 2015. Matching the heavily White demographics often found in sharing economy services, 19 of the participants were White, 4 were African American or Black, 1 was Hispanic and 3 identified as racially mixed. Sixteen were men and 11 were women. Their ages ranged from 20 to 54, with 85 percent in their 20s and 30s. Education levels also varied: 11 had a Bachelor's degree, six had a graduate degree (JD, MD, PhD, or MA), and 8 described themselves as either currently students or with some college or graduate credit hours. One international respondent described himself as having a high school diploma and one had an Associates degree. Ten were married or living with a partner; two of the single respondents mentioned definitive plans to move in with a significant other within the next few months.

All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the length of the interviews ranged from just under an hour to slightly more than three hours,

although most were approximately an hour and 45 minutes. I used Weiss' (1994) interview matrix to guide the interview as needed, but I generally relied on a more conversational method, which allowed interviewees to discuss additional issues that they felt were relevant and to provide stories about their experiences in the sharing economy. Each respondent was also given a short two–page survey to assist in gathering demographic information such as race, age, income, education, marital status, and the number of hours worked each week. Anonymity was assured and all names were changed.

I tape–recorded and transcribed all interviews and systematically coded categories using a standard system as utilized by Taylor and Bogdan (1984). I then analyzed the data using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and an inductive approach, allowing the concepts and theories to emerge from the data.

Impression management strategies

In *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Erving Goffman (1959) examines how people guide and control the impressions that others form of them, a concept he calls "impression management." With the language of theatre, Goffman utilizes the concepts of a front region or stage, where the performance is conducted, and the back region, where one prepares for the performance, stores props, or can otherwise relax. According to Goffman, social interaction rituals reflect power dynamics among individuals as they work to create and maintain a positive image of the self. Most people want to think the best of themselves and to emphasize the positive in the online marketplace.

Impression management is often used to influence the outcome of job interviews (Ralston and Kirkwood, 1999) and in promotion decisions (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1991). However, in the sharing economy, where work may last only a few hours or days and "job searching" is constant, impression management takes on additional importance in hiring. In addition, sharing economy workers can become, in Goffman's (1963) terms, "discreditable" if they present too rosy a picture, generating claims of false advertising. Likewise, a sharing economy worker in particular must always be a "disciplined performer" with "self–control" who "does not give the show away" (Goffman 1959: 216).

Goffman's work is usually applied to face–to–face interactions and has been used to analyze such unrelated phenomena as how presidents utilize first ladies (Klapp, 1964), how female psychopathic killers work to diminish accountability (Perri and Terrance, 2010), how presentation of self can be used to motivate one to exercise (Martin Ginis et al, 2007), and how mothers use children's appearances to maintain their identities (Collett, 2005). Although the technical core of the internet was developed in the late 1960s, the World Wide Web wasn't established until 1989, roughly seven years after Goffman's untimely

death. However, applying Goffman's work to internet interactions is hardly unprecedented. Papacharissi (2002) and Dominick (1999) applied Goffman's concept of impression management to examining personal homepages, Dwyer (2007) explored impression management on instant messaging platforms, and Pollach and Kerbler (2011) used the same concepts in their analysis of chief executive officer (CEO) profiles on corporate websites.

Respondents believe it is important to market themselves well on the various platforms through photography, text descriptions, and their general responsiveness to potential customers. To explain the front stage strategies used by sharing economy workers, I first explain the reasons behind these front stage/back stage performances, and provide a few typical points made by members of the sharing economy. I then explain how respondents interpret each strategy before focusing on status symbol crafting and utilizing external resources.

Front stage presentations

Goffman (1959: 22) defines the front as the "expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance." This equipment includes the setting, which features furniture, décor and physical layout, and together "supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action" (1959: 22). The personal front is often divided into appearance and manner. Appearance can include race and sex, but also age, clothing, and facial expressions. Meanwhile, manner can be thought of as how one carries oneself, for instance, are one's interactions egalitarian or haughty?

Although the importance of worker photographs varies on Airbnb, Kitchensurfing and TaskRabbit, all three sites require workers to provide a photo, and workers repeatedly noted the importance of appearing friendly or maintaining a friendly manner in the photos they utilized.

> I made sure to smile – and smiling indicates friendliness – so I wanted people to know that I'm a friendly person. (Samantha, 23, Airbnb host)

> I want people to look at my picture and say, 'oh my goodness, that guy looks like fun and I want to hire him' and then when they meet me they think 'that's exactly the guy that I thought I was hiring.' (Robert, 28, TaskRabbit)

Smiling is important to successful impression management. Research by Peace, Miles, and Johnston (2006) suggests that genuine smiles in advertisements are more likely to lead to more positive evaluations as compared to neutral

and faked smiles, and work by Scanlon and Polage (2011) showed significant preference in respondents' likelihood to purchase products when accompanied by a smiling photo. Some workers, such as Ashaki, a 35-year-old Kitchensurfing chef, mentioned being told by consumers that their smiling even landed them the job: "They're like, 'We like that you smiled on your picture and that made us feel like you are friendly. That's the reason why we went for you.'"

A photo of the individual worker is important, but depending on the service being offered, workers are often given additional tools with which to market themselves. For instance, individuals who list homes or rooms for rent on Airbnb are called "hosts" by the company. In addition to their individual profiles, hosts are also responsible for creating a listing profile. Hosts write catchy headlines, select pictures of the rental space and themselves, provide house rules, descriptions of the space and surrounding neighborhood, a personal profile, and set their availability and rates. Although Airbnb provides some suggestions of what hosts should include in each section of their listing, the content is very much in the hands of the user. Even though homes are often viewed as back stage locations where one can relax and be one's self, a home listed on Airbnb is suddenly front stage. Just like a real estate broker may stage a home, Airbnb hosts can carefully curate their listings, shaping the back stage in order to create authenticity. As a result, hosts utilize each section of their listing to convey a particular impression of themselves to prospective guests.

For Daniel, a 31-year-old branding professional, and his girlfriend, the text descriptions of their home were a deliberate effort to address topics that they felt people would be concerned about. Daniel says that their listing utilized such phrases as "a smoke-free house keeps our linen fresh" in a conscious and intentional effort to let people know that it was a clean and smoke-free apartment. He explains,

> And even just like little things, like, 'We always have avocado available in the kitchen for you guys.' Yeah, it was a very conscious effort to make it like a certain personality and like, here's who you're going to be staying with without saying it that directly. Like we definitely want to give people clues for like, you know, you're going to be with a couple, we're young professionals and we're probably not going to be out drunk all the time, but we're probably going to come home late. And it helps people who also do that to be like, 'oh cool, I can probably find a bar with them.'

Reassurance is a common theme among Airbnb users. Many are conscious of the fact that strangers are renting out space in their homes, and that Airbnb is still a relatively new service that not all people are entirely familiar – or comfortable – with. In particular, there's a perception that single women may be wary of staying with male hosts and as a result, men often listed female

partners as co-hosts, referenced them in the listing or put the listing in the name of a girlfriend.

> The first time we went on, it was my boyfriend who made the profile and he used a picture of me and my name because he felt that a woman was like safer. He didn't ask me but this was his rationalization afterward, and then we packaged ourselves as a couple which was also a calculation about making ourselves appear normal. (Ramona, 28, Airbnb host)

Single men were being careful to mention female partners or to take photos that showed them with female friends in order to reassure prospective guests. This need to provide assurance that women won't be sexually assaulted in the home of a stranger also extended to gay men:

> I provide a couple of photos of myself. I don't state that I'm gay in my profile but I think some people can pick up on that which, obviously for women probably, is very ... reassuring, yeah.... There's also one of me and my best friend T–. Oh, yeah. That's right. That, I think, was probably also somewhat reassuring to women to see me with another normal-looking girl having a good time. (Andrew, 28, Airbnb host)

Given that single travelers and women make up a considerable portion of the traveling public (Rosenbloom, 2014, 2015), being successful in this reassurance can literally make or break a host's listing success.

Taskers, workers affiliated with the personal assistant service TaskRabbit, are limited to approximately 150-word descriptions of themselves and their work skills. Perhaps because of this limitation, they repeatedly mentioned that they didn't believe that people read the actual text accompanying their profile; however, they still used the text descriptions to make themselves seem like a safer hire by highlighting their education level and prestigious alma maters.

> Interviewer: Were there things that you did on your profile to make you seem more trustworthy?
> Jamal: You dropped the S word.
> Interviewer: You dropped the S word?
> Jamal: Stanford.

For Jamal, a 25-year-old African-American man with a college degree from a highly prestigious university, noting that he attended Stanford was a way to emphasize his qualifications and assure potential TaskRabbit clients of his legitimacy.

For Kitchensurfing Tonight chefs, who arrive otherwise sight-unseen at a client's home, name dropping must be done verbally. Ladu, a 39-year-old dreadlocked black man from the West Indies, explained that he deliberately mentions cooking at one of the most famous and iconic New York City restaurants when he needs to reassure people of his qualifications.

Storing the self in back regions

Examining the back region allows us to better identify the hidden work involved in the presentation of self. Airbnb hosts in particular walk a fine line in their impression management strategies. Although the home is often seen as a prime back stage region, for Airbnb hosts, their homes are transformed into front stage regions as the homes are staged, photographed, and displayed online for public perusal and renting. In addition, because guests are paying for the space, the act of purchasing brings a certain expectation of service. Hosts must provide the New York City local living experience, while protecting themselves and their belongings. They have to ensure that guests have a place for their possessions without putting personal items at risk of being used or broken. In order to maintain the impressions they cultivated through their profiles, hosts also utilize Goffman's concept of backstage. Goffman (1959: 112) defines the backstage as a place where the impression fostered by a performance is knowingly contradicted. In the back region, "stage props and items of personal front can be stored … different types of liquor or clothes, can be hidden so that the audience will not be able to see the treatment accorded to them in comparison with the treatment that could have been accorded to them." Many hosts discuss preparing their homes in advance of renting them out. This preparation has two purposes: (1) it allows hosts to hide or protect items that are perceived to be valuable from their guests, and (2) it allows the home to mimic the clean, organized state depicted in the Airbnb listing. In accordance with Goffman's description of the backstage, a closet is often used to hide or remove items that could otherwise be used by guests.

Items that are left behind run the risk of being damaged. Amy, 36, an Airbnb host who had temporarily moved with her family out of their apartment in order to register her child in a better school, expressed dismay at leaving behind personal items and was one of the few to tell the story of a destroyed memento, a handmade airplane that she had given her child. Amy noted, "I was really torn to leave personal things but we're in a much smaller place, I couldn't move everything."

Ramona, a graduate student who rents out her apartment with her boyfriend, illustrates this backstage management of the setting perfectly. Like many hosts, she hides valuables, stores them with friends, or takes them with her:

> My boyfriend has a projector, which is an $800 thing, which feels valuable [laughs] and so we put that up away in the back of a closet. We take all our booze out of the cupboard and put it in the closet and ask people not to go into the closet. The closet is never locked but it's just kind-of packed full of stuff and the booze is hidden. [laughs] Those are our priorities: booze and electronics.

But as the conversation continues, perhaps feeling uncomfortable with the impression she is creating as someone for whom "booze and electronics" are priorities, she redirects her description of hiding things to more of a focus on how she ensures that guests get the "hotel experience."

> It's usually less about hiding valuables and more about like clearing space. So we clear cupboard space, we clear out the fridge, we clear out our dresser drawers, we clear out the clothes racks in the room. We kind-of make our place into a hotel so that when they get there it's less like they're living in our space.

For some, the clearing of space not only made their home but also served the goal of making it easier to clean between guests:

> I did a lot of making space for people on surfaces and things, so that you could very easily arrive and settle in the place and then pack up and leave without feeling like you had to go into cabinets and all that kind of stuff. And like making space for hanging clothes, for example, and space in the fridge…. So one of the things that I adapted was that I didn't have anything on my floor. Everything had legs or was sort of light so that vacuuming can be very easy and quick. (Matthew, 36)

In this way, Matthew also takes advantage of common strategies in hotel rooms – lightweight, legged furniture and few additional items – that make it easier to clean the room between guests.

Even though Airbnb often emphasizes that guests get the authentic experience of staying with locals, the locals I interviewed made a conscious effort to reduce their physical presence and to allow guests to take the space and "make [it] their own." Samantha, a 23-year-old host, went so far as to emphasize this freedom to create in the listing photos she featured of her room: "I made sure my room was clean and clear of personal stuff because I wanted them to know, it's like a canvas, which is how I leave it."

For TaskRabbit and Kitchensurfing workers, their backstage occurs off-stage, before they arrive at the client's home. Workers with both groups mentioned using time between gigs to rest and recharge on the subway, grab a slice of pizza, or visit a Starbucks bathroom. For Kitchensurfing Today

chefs, the additional backstage work of prepping that night's meal (cutting up vegetables, assembling spice packets) is done at the commissary kitchen by other cooking personnel, making it easier for them to remain within their 30-minute face-time time limit.

Impression management: a team effort

Goffman notes that the effective presentation of self requires the collaboration of a team of social actors. Two cast members that contribute to the digital performance are the product itself (that is, the space on Airbnb and the food on Kitchensurfing) and external resources via legitimizing reviews. Although it is common to think of the performance team as being actual individuals, such as the audience or co-stars, the utilization of static images or places has precedence in work by Bonsu (2007) analyzing how obituaries from the Asante people of Ghana are used to craft self-presentation strategies and Zavattaro's (2013) work on place-branding. Airbnb hosts and Kitchensurfing chefs in particular used status symbols and external resources to market themselves.

Crafting the status symbol

Goffman writes that a status symbol can "express a point of view, a style of life and the cultural values" of an individual (1951: 295). Even as work in the US becomes increasingly service-based, most workers are not located in other people's homes, or make money by renting our their own homes. As a result, Airbnb hosts and Kitchensurfing chefs must use status symbols to demonstrate to potential clients that they are "one of our kind."

Even though hosts and chefs are the ones providing the labor and often mention trying to offer a personal experience, they are given second billing in the listings compared to the product on offer. For Airbnb, the main photo is of the apartment and the image takes up approximately half of the screen vertically. By comparison, the image of the host is roughly the size of an American quarter. On Kitchensurfing, the main chef-listing page features 12 different food photos with chef thumbnails that are approximately a tenth of the size of the food images. Food remains front and center with the Kitchensurfing Tonight service. Chefs hired through the weeknight service are assigned via algorithm and only the food is featured – consumers don't know who their chef will be until that evening's assignments are made and distributed via email around 4pm. Both traditional Kitchensurfing chefs and Airbnb hosts are conscious of the power of the status symbol in their midst, and actively work to showcase it through photography, often putting more attention to the photos and description of the "product" than of themselves.

For instance, James, 36, noted that he "put very little thought into my profile." By comparison, he took "probably like 40 shots" for the apartment's listing on Airbnb and then chose the best 12 to feature. He explains,

> I was conscious with the opening shot. Everyone else has a picture of their living room. I have a picture with a view from my roof.... Because people are looking to come to New York and here's a picture of the skyline in New York versus a tiny spot. It's like tiny spots? There are plenty of those. Here's a beautiful view. Then I have a pool on my roof, I feature that too.

The status symbol of the gorgeous apartment or beautifully plated food is not only given the most attention in the performance, it's also given attention in the marketing that leads up to the in-person performance. Even though James notes that the outdoor rooftop pool is only open for approximately three months of the year, it gets much more attention on his listing and from guests than his personal information, and helps to differentiate his listing from the rest. For Ashaki, a chef who specializes in Western African food, making food the star comes with additional challenges. She explains,

> If you ever Google African food, they just slap it on the plate. I'm like, 'What is this?' If you know it, you're like, 'Wow. It's delicious,' but if you see the picture, if you've never tried, you're like, 'I will never try that.'... I try to really make sure that images are really captivating, and they make you want to basically eat it off of the page.... That way, it helps the customer ... to book me.

Even though Ashaki spends hours sourcing, prepping, transporting, and marketing her farm-to-table food and Kitchensurfing describes itself as "putting chefs in your kitchen," she is very much put second to the food in her listing. As a result, in response to this challenge of marketing Nigerian food, Ashaki took advantage of Thanksgiving to enlist her family to stage and photograph the items on her Kitchensurfing menus. She explains, "It dresses it up. It makes it more presentable, more appetizing. You want to try it. It's not just cooking. It's just the presentation of it. It's everything."

However, the sharing economy is not just about marketing. There's also a fine line between selling and over-marketing. Users who run afoul of this division are likely to experience negative reviews as a form of user policing. Too many negative reviews can result in reduced bookings in the future, or, in the case of TaskRabbit, possible deactivation from the platform. As a result, hosts emphasize the best parts of the space that they're renting, while still being careful to note any possible problems.

> When I was making the profile, it was all about the location. I
> mean, it's a good location, and it's really close to great restaurants,
> easy access to the subway, it's a clean room, it's got good windows
> and good light. So for me, it was more about, you know, making
> the room seem desirable, because it is.... I mean at the same time,
> I don't have a door, I just have a curtain that blocks my room,
> so I put that in there as a disclaimer. 'This room doesn't actually
> have a door that separates it from the living room.' (Samantha, 23)

Most people would never rent a hotel room that didn't have a lock, much less
a room that was missing an actual door and an entire wall, but in the New
York Airbnb world, such a room can be listed for $95/night. Still, Samantha
is conscious that such a room might not qualify as a room for everyone,
describing her notation as a "disclaimer" so that she can repudiate any possible
claims of misrepresentation.

Photos can also be used as visual disclaimer, to help minimize the expected
status of a product that has been reviewed favorably. Joshua, 32, who runs
a sell-described Airbnb "syndicate" of roughly 10 apartments split between
multiple user profiles had an apartment that he designated, "The Dungeon."
The tiny, box-like ground floor apartment had problems with mice, kitchen
sink drainage, and a front door lock that was constantly breaking; eventually
Joshua gave the space up. He explains, "I still had like four stars which is
actually a good lesson for anyone doing Airbnb. Just because a place has a lot
of stars, you should still look at the pictures, and say what does this look like?"

Harnessing external resources

Reviews are powerful in the sharing economy, with users alternatively
describing them as exciting and scary. There's a common perception that bad
reviews can make or break a listing. At the same time, the user reviews are
also seen as a marketing resource. Given by an outsider, positive reviews are
often seen as an endorsement and can make it possible for a user to move up
in the placement algorithm and to receive more bookings, even in unrelated
areas, as this Tasker mentions.

> It's also really great to get the reviews because that's how you get
> more clients and when clients want to hire you they see that and
> they say, 'oh well, they have great reviews.' And it may not even be
> in the task that you are doing but they see that you have reviews
> and so that's a really good thing. And especially when you have a
> review and the task that you've already done and people see that,
> that moves it forward. (Robert, 28, Tasker)

All workers studied discussed actively working to ensure that their reviews were positive. Common strategies for Airbnb hosts included making sure that the home had plenty of towels, special bath products, a well-stocked medicine cabinet, and even leaving gifts for their guests.

> I try to provide some sort of like granola or a couple of pieces of fruit. I will normally put like two or four juices in the fridge depending on how long their stay is ... it depends also who is coming. If it's like a fun couple maybe I'll think, 'oh they'll like this beer' or if I have someone coming for their honeymoon, I'm going to definitely buy them like wine or champagne, those sort of things. (Brittany, 24)

> First it was just a box of chocolates then I was like, I don't want to give chocolates to everyone, I want them to feel special. So sometimes I do wine – sometimes I'd get Broadway tickets. (Aalia, 30)

Leaving items for guests isn't perfunctory, but is a part of making it a personalized experience and is intended to make a visitor feel special. Hosts who don't provide gifts often work to make guests feel unique through personalized service.

> I try to build goodwill mostly being like an on-demand concierge because I tell them they can always reach me on the iPhone, via text message, if they have any questions.... I consider myself an expert on the city so I'm more than happy to share that, especially for people who are interested in the same things as I am. I want them to have the best experience possible so I encourage that they use me as a resource. (Andrew, 28)

The focus on the self as a resource also allows users to educate users, and, if especially successful, they may find that the user reviews assist in their marketing. Ashaki, a chef, often finds that her clients' exposure to African food is limited to Ethiopian cuisine. As a result, she must actively work to educate her clients about the food by comparing it to other items they may have tried:

> There's one particular review that had my thing. I think that was almost eight months ago when I got it. My whole thing is trying to make connection about African food for people. Kind of, 'You might have tried tamales before. We have *Moi Moi* that is Nigerian that's almost similar to tamales, but they're not the same.' The process of cooking them is the same because you put them in plantain leaf. It's black-eyed beans versus corn. You put different

> seasonings. So they are from the same family, but they're just a different flavor. That customer made that connection. When she did my review, she basically did a lot of that like, 'When me and my husband tried it, it reminded us of tamales. When she cooked this, it reminded us of this.' I love that.

For Ashaki, careful management of her interactions with clients can also result in harnessing those clients to further her mission of explaining what her food is, giving additional legitimacy to her listing.

Given the risk of negative reviews, users also actively worked to transform problematic situations. Airbnb hosts who encountered unhappy guests utilized a number of strategies including offering to buy dinner; delivering wine, chocolates and presents for a child; letting ill guests stay after the customary check-out time; letting guests check in during the middle of the night; and delivering space heaters when an apartment was too cold. Sometimes their efforts result in a positive review after all, but hosts also noted that sometimes their additional efforts may have simply prevented a negative review. Joshua explains:

> Some people don't review because they forget or maybe they were dissatisfied in some way, but they don't want to ruin your profile. That's why I respond and am very friendly with people because I think it makes it harder to give someone a terrible review if you talk to them and they've been helpful.

Discussion

Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft is often described as the city-country divide. For Tönnies (1887), *Gemeinschaft* was a community focused on primary relations organized by natural will, house, village, and town, with a focus on collective consciousness and effervescence. In a *Gesellschaft*, connections are abstract and more tenuous, bonds have to be imagined and connections organized through contracts. By this definition, when one moves to a "modern" day society – or at least a city – one loses the community connections of *Gemeinschaft*.

But the sharing economy paints itself as a solution, as a return to small town or even village life. The sharing economy is thought to make trust easier because electronic trails are supposed to make it easier to know everyone. In the small community of old, reputations could follow a family for forever, but today people are equally followed by their online personas. Yet rather than lead to a wholesale embracing of trust, every interaction is turned into a performance. In the past, home was viewed as a refuge from the workplace, a place without the pressures of performance for pay. But with Airbnb hosts renting their entire homes or "sharing" them with guests, the home is transformed from a refuge

from the marketplace to an additional performance space, a place where the back stage is displayed front and center as a way to support authenticity and build trust. Likewise, the rise of TaskRabbit and Kitchensurfing also bring workers into the home and contributes to the division of labor: cooking and errand running become the activities of those for hire.

As the ultimate in temporary workers, members of the sharing economy must actively work to cultivate and maintain positive impressions among users. Through photos and text descriptions, workers focus on creating positive impressions of themselves and their sharing economy work. They utilize Goffman's concept of the backstage to literally hide the personal – whether valuable possessions or their own eating and bodily functions – in order to provide positive impressions to prospective clients. Sharing economy workers also craft stars, manage social risks, and harness reviews in their digital impression management strategies. This digital crafting of profiles may contribute to the sense of community, but is also necessary to employability.

Rather than returning to the community-focused *Gemeinschaft*, the rise of the sharing economy commodifies services, adding a paying component to things that used to be done for free and turning "neighbors helping neighbors" into a quantifiable and reviewable performance. Instead of returning to the pre-industrial village, the sharing economy extends the Industrial Revolution.

Notes

[1] Disruptive technology, according to Clayton Christensen, is when a product or service relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors (see www.claytonchristensen.com/key-concepts/#sthash.3Ae1oMhH.dpuf). This technology does not have to be groundbreaking; it just has to start to edge out established competitors – something Airbnb and Uber are doing quite well.

[2] TaskRabbit, one of the sharing economy companies explored in this chapter, describes itself as, "an old school concept – neighbors helping neighbors – reimagined for today" (Taskrabbit.com, no date, a).

[3] Readers may note that some of the terminology in this chapter contradicts standard definitions, such as the use of "trust" to describe background checking and identity verification or "home sharing" to describe charging someone to sleep in your spare room. I argue that this expropriation is often crucial to the marketing of sharing economy (Ravenelle, under review). Likewise, in regards to the use of "disrupting," many sharing economy companies use this term to describe their services, although their use of the term is often at odds with commonly accepted definitions of disruption as "groundbreaking" or "wreaking havoc."

[4] Airbnb's definition of extra space is especially broad. Listings include everything from a spare bedroom to treehouses to castles to sleeping in the trunk of a Tesla.

[5] Although Kitchensurfing.com is available in seven cities, this new weeknight dining option is only available in Manhattan, south of 116th Street and was launched in 2015. As a result, I refer to these as Kitchensurfing Tonight and Kitchensurfing Traditional.

[6] The gig economy is constantly changing. In the fall of 2015, Kitchensurfing noted that it was disbanding the Traditional service and focusing entirely on Kitchensurfing Tonight. A future article will address the effect this sudden service change had on workers.

[7] Originally, the workers were called "TaskRabbits." In 2014, as part of an overhaul of the system, the workers were renamed the less disparaging "Taskers."

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