Situating BlaBlaCar in the Sharing Economy: An analysis of interpersonal interactions

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Summary

In this thesis, I analyse the main sharing economy actors and their commitment to creating meaningful connections and not merely empty transactions (TED, 2012). In order to investigate this claim, and because the sharing economy is a big umbrella term, where many different business models get lumped together, I picked one specific case to analyse, namely the long-distance ridesharing platform BlaBlaCar.

The first chapter is dedicated to establishing a working definition of the sharing economy and highlighting three of its main features: technological enabling, interpersonal nature and inter-platform diversity. In the next step, I present a summary of the main criticism voiced against the sharing economy, specifically from a perspective concerned with interpersonal interactions. After an introduction to BlaBlaCar and a presentation of its workings, I show that the critique cannot adequately be applied to BlaBlaCar. I argue that this creates an opening for further investigation, which I support by highlighting the unique characteristics of BlaBlaCar that allow the platform to dodge the critique.

In chapters two and three I focus on the concepts of trust and solidarity. The sharing economy in general, but also BlaBlaCar in particular crucially relies on strangers interacting with each other. Such a commitment requires at least some minimal level of trust in each other. The importance of trust is of particular prominence for BlaBlaCar, because people risk not less than their physical integrity when sharing a car with a person they have never met before. This is why the sharing economy platforms use a variety of elaborated technologies to foster trust among their participants. However, precisely because of the many technological tools used, critiques have argued that trust is not necessarily the right concept. I address these concerns by conducting a conceptual analysis of both trust and solidarity. Grounding my investigation on the one hand in the technology employed by these platforms and in the marketing material of BlaBlaCar on the other hand, I am able to ground the proposed conceptualisations in real-world phenomena. In order to present the specific characteristics of what I call instrumental trust and solidarity respectively, I place these conceptualisations on one end of a spectrum. On the other end are conceptualisations that I call relational trust and solidarity respectively, which aim to show alternative understandings as strikingly as possible. In doing so, I contribute to conceptual clarification of two related concepts, which are of particular importance in the sharing economy.

I argue that the main sharing economy actors predominantly rely on an instrumental understanding of trust and so does BlaBlaCar, despite the unique position it finds itself. Because

these platforms crucially rely on an active community that provides and consumes services, they put in a lot of effort to create a sense of community among the participants. This is an additional tool to foster trust, because allegedly people can trust the community members. I scrutinize this claim by arguing that the mere fact of belonging to a community indicates little about the trustworthiness of its members. This is why I introduce the concept of solidarity as a measuring stick of the interactions of people in a community. I argue that the communities of the main actors in the sharing economy can be characterised by instrumental solidarity. While initially, the BlaBlaCar community exhibits also predominantly features that contribute to an instrumental understanding of solidarity, because of its unique features, it is in a position to move along the spectrum towards a more relational conceptualisation.

I conclude by highlighting the lack of relational conceptualisation of trust and solidarity among the main sharing economy actors, which I argue creates a one-sided image of human interactions and as such does not necessarily contribute towards establishing meaningful connections. Therefore, the aims proclaimed by these actors and the values that are embedded in the technology they use to achieve these aims stand in contradiction with each other. Further research could flesh out the framework even more, by describing the mechanism of how individual actors or communities can move from one end of the spectrum towards the other, or by analysing the instances where the trust among strangers gets misused and the smooth functioning of the technology get interrupted.

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Contents

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the extent to which the sharing economy can live up to its own aspirations of connecting people in a way that goes beyond "empty transactions" (TED, 2012) but instead enables them to establish "social connections" (Schor & Vallas, 2021, p. 375). Even though there has been much criticism towards the sharing economy, this aim remains barely addressed by the critics and a thorough analysis of how people interact within the context of the sharing economy has been lacking thus far. Consequently, what I focus on in this thesis is the way in which interpersonal interactions are performed and executed in the context of the sharing economy.

This analysis is influenced by the fact that 'the sharing economy' is a very broad umbrella term under which many different processes and exchange modalities get lumped together. This leads not only to an unclear definition of what is precisely meant by this term but also to a heterogeneity of (business) models that these actors follow. Under the label of the sharing economy, for-profit organisations like Airbnb and Uber as well as non-profit organisations like couchsurfing and timebanks can be found. Consequently, the critique that is voiced against the sharing economy in general does not necessarily apply to all its participating actors equally well, especially because it is most often derived from the few big players in the field. Therefore, in order to have a more nuanced understanding of the sharing economy, my analysis refrains from taking an already well-analysed actor as its starting point.

This is why the investigation into the sharing economy is grounded in a very specific case study, namely BlaBlaCar. Due to the specific characteristics of BlaBlaCar (As will be thoroughly elaborated on in chapter one) it serves as a suitable case where the conditions in which the interactions take place are of a different kind as compared to major actors such as Airbnb and Uber.

The general idea behind BlaBlaCar is that people can publicize on the platform a planned journey that they are going to do with their car and the number of free seats that are left (BlaBlaCar, 2023c). Other users who want to travel to the same destination on the same day can then contact the driver and for a small fee join the ride (BlaBlaCar, 2023c). In doing so, BlaBlaCar brings people together that never met each other before and places them in the same car for a decent amount of time. BlaBlaCar presents itself as "foster[ing] enriching exchanges" among the car-poolers (BlaBlaCar, 2018, p. 9). By promoting the social aspects of sharing a

ride, BlaBlaCar neatly represents the social aims of the sharing economy. In addition to this, it encompasses both the physical as well as the virtual realm of social interaction and thus can serve to bridge the gap between the two and as a suitable entry point to investigate the digital technologies used to enable these interactions among strangers. Consequently, exploring the ridesharing platform BlaBlaCar is an excellent case study to base the research on and contributes to a better understanding of the sharing economy and its way of bringing people together.

The main research question that I will address with this thesis is the following: How do the specific conceptualizations of trust and its neighbouring concept of solidarity promoted by BlaBlaCar, that guide the interpersonal interactions within its community differ from those of the main actors within the sharing economy? In order to answer this overarching question, each chapter is dedicated to a specific sub-question. The question that guides chapter one is: How can the interpersonal interactions facilitated by BlaBlaCar be situated against the background of the criticism directed at the interpersonal interactions generated by the sharing economy in general? By answering this question, I am able to argue for the unique position and features of BlaBlaCar, that justify further investigations. I will start by establishing a working definition of the sharing economy and providing an overview of the critique that has been raised against it in the previous years. All this is framed with a specific focus on interpersonal interactions in order to be appropriately positioned to make a well-founded evaluation of the social aspirations of the sharing economy. Further foundations covered in this chapter are an introduction to BlaBlaCar and its workings. Thanks to this setup, the interactions happening in the context of BlaBlaCar can then be assessed against the overarching framework constituted of the sharing economy and its critiques.

Chapter two will answer the question: How can the conceptualisation of trust facilitated by the technology used by BlaBlaCar be situated along a spectrum that is derived from the technologies utilized by the main actors of the sharing economy? For the sharing economy to function well, consumers and providers rely on some form of trust that they can base their interaction on. Because the sharing economy enables interactions between strangers, there is no a priori reason for them to trust each other. This is why, the sharing economy actors use a variety of technological measures that are supposed to give an indication of the trustworthiness of an individual. These technological tools sparked interesting questions, for example, whether it is in fact people who trust each other or merely trust the tools to safeguard a secure transaction. Other critics have insisted, in reminiscence of Cold War tensions, that trust, but verified actually

means there is no trust.[1] The point of these critical voices is to raise the question whether interpersonal trust, i.e., trust established between two people, is even the right concept to apply within the context of the sharing economy. What results is a situation where there is a disagreement about the use of trust as a concept.

Such a situation is described by Löhr (2023b) in his article about disruptive technologies as conceptual disruption. His main point is that many scholars have already identified social disruptions caused by novel technologies, but he advocates that there is also the possibility of conceptual disruption. The definition he gives of conceptual disruption is the following:

> A conceptual disruption is any intentional or unintentional challenge or interruption of the ways in which an individual or group has intuitively classified individuals, properties, actions, situations, or events, leading to a classificatory conflict or uncertainty, i.e., a conflict or uncertainty about the application conditions of a word or concept. (p. 3)

This means, that when relevant actors disagree and need to reflect about the right conditions that allow for a concept to be applied, an instance of conceptual disruption happens. To borrow his example, with the introduction of mechanical ventilation came along a conceptual disruption of the concept of death. Because patients can be kept alive despite no significant brain activity, there was uncertainty about whether 'dead' is the right concept to apply for this state. This conflict was resolved by introducing the concept of 'brain death'. Because the above-mentioned conflict about whether trust is the right concept to use presents us with precisely such unclarity, my conceptual analysis of this thesis will be informed by his framework.

The steps of his framework that I will rely on are: 1) Identify the disruptor 2) Identify the disrupted concept 3) Identify possible solutions to the disruption. Furthermore, I will combine the framework with his argument made in Löhr (2023a). In this paper, he argues that what philosophers should be primarily concerned with when investigating conceptual change is a "change in a network of interrelated concepts" (p. 1). Because most concepts are intertwined with neighbouring concepts, a conceptual change in one of them most likely also affects the related concepts. In the example of brain death, Löhr (2023a) would probably argue that scholars should also investigate the concept of 'alive' because a conceptual change in 'death' also affects the related concept 'alive'.

Combining the argument concerning networks of concepts and the framework for the study of it, leads me to the third chapter of this thesis. The guiding question will be: How can solidarity

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[1] I would like to thank my supervisors for pointing this out

be conceptualised in its relation to trust to adequately characterise the BlaBlaCar community? Solidarity is important in the context of the sharing economy because it can be used to characterise a community, a concept frequently evoked by sharing economy actors. Solidarity emerges when a community agrees to a specific set of shared values towards the realisation of which its members cooperatively work. If participants know that they work together with the same goal in mind, it also becomes easier to trust each other. And vice versa, if people trust each other, they are more likely to act in solidarity with each other. Because trust and solidarity coevolve and co-constitute each other and our common understanding of trust undergoes some changes due to the use of trust-enabling technologies, it is likely that solidarity is at least affected by it as well. This motivates the conceptual analysis of both these neighbouring concepts.

Furthermore, the concepts of trust and solidarity and their respective conceptualisations can tell a lot about the interpersonal interactions taking place in a community. Certainly, people interact differently depending on the level of trust in each other. While I might disclose my deepest fears to my best friend, or task them with babysitting my child, I would hardly do the same with the mailman. However, I trust the mailman to deliver my vase in an unbroken condition, because it clearly lies within his responsibility. Similarly, I might shave my head in solidarity with a family member who is undergoing chemotherapy, but I might not do the same for a business colleague. The point is, that the way people interact with each other, and the expectations one can reasonably have of each other, is influenced and depends on (among other things) a common ground of trust and solidarity. Therefore, investigating the possible conceptualisations of these values in the context of the sharing economy can tell a lot about the interpersonal interactions taking place.

The geographical scope of this thesis is restricted to Western Europe and its cultural settings, therefore all the literature that is concerned with investigating BlaBlaCar that is used for this thesis will be restricted to case studies of this geographical area. In addition to contributing to a better understanding of the sharing economy, this research also adds to the existing literature on solidarity by highlighting the close connection to trust that is required for solidarity. The importance of trust has been made obvious by the sharing economy and as such provides an ideal stepping stone to start investigating the relationship between trust and solidarity. This will be a humble attempt to start filling this gap, since in the scholarly discussion surrounding solidarity, there is a striking absence of trust as a concept (With the notable exception of Sangiovanni, 2024).

The methodology and method of this thesis

In order to support this investigation and in line with the narrative of contrasting personal relationships with empty transactions, I will use a comparative methodology throughout my thesis. In particular, I will conduct concept analyses that allow me to juxtapose different conceptualisations of certain values. Such a comparison allows for a better understanding by critically contrasting different concepts and as such making the individual feature more explicit and tangible

Therefore, in chapters two and three I will compare two different conceptualisations of trust and solidarity respectively. One of the most common solutions to conceptual disruption proposed by Löhr (2023b) is the combination of established words (as is the case with 'brain' + 'death'). I will follow this route by introducing the notion of 'instrumental trust' as a conceptualisation of trust that can be derived from both the technologies used and the marketing discourse promoted by the sharing economy actors. In order to exemplify and highlight the characteristic features of this conceptualisation, I place it on one end of a spectrum. On the other end is a conceptualisation I call 'relational trust' that opposes its instrumental counterpart as distinctively as possible. In doing so, I can carve out the individual characteristics more precisely. I will also use this spectrum of opposing conceptualisations in chapter three, where I introduce the conceptualisation of instrumental and relational solidarity.

Nevertheless, it should be understood that the two 'extreme positions' at the opposing ends of the spectrum presented in the two comparisons throughout this text most likely do not exist in their purest form in reality. These specific conceptualisations are used to exemplify the differences between the positions, while most often one feature might be more prominent while another is not present at all, thus providing a mixture and gradation along the spectrum

In line with the chosen adjusted framework by Löhr (2023a; 2023b), the method I use to answer the research question is conceptual analysis. In order to regain conceptual clarity, it is most certainly useful to analyse the disrupted concepts. The conceptualisation of trust will be derived from the technological tools used by the sharing economy actors. Together with a literature study of the relevant technologies, this allows me to ground the conceptualisation close to reality. The evaluation of BlaBlaCar will mostly be informed by their marketing material. To devote an entire booklet to the trust-fostering technologies (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016), shows the importance of trust for BlaBlaCar, but also provides rich material to derive specific conceptualisations from. Because of the power and reach such marketing material can develop, I take it to be a fruitful starting point for investigations. The same method will be used to study

solidarity. A literature study on solidarity will ground and inform a critical reading of the second major booklet (BlaBlaCar, 2018), that focuses on the relationships emerging in carpooling. The method will be completed by empirical work about BlaBlaCar, conducted by other scholars. Although their research question is not identical to mine, their data is nevertheless crucial to gain valuable insight into participants' perspectives on the ridesharing service. By combining these approaches, additional knowledge is gained not only about BlaBlaCar in particular and the sharing economy in general, but also about the concepts relevant within its context, such as trust and solidarity.

1 The sharing economy, its critiques, and BlaBlaCar

1.1 Introduction

From its earliest days on, the goals of the sharing economy, or collaborative consumption as it was sometimes called, have been ambitious. Emerging in the years following the Great Recession, it proclaimed to provide an appropriate answer to decreasing trust in big, globally operating, impersonal cooperations (Schor, 2020, p. 3; Schor & Cansoy, 2019, p. 55). By putting individual people in the focus of the transaction, the sharing economy served as a medium to make these transactions more personal and familial. Partly due to the lack of financial means, a central dogma that pervades the sharing economy is that temporary access to a shared good is preferred over possession and ownership of these goods (Murillo et al., 2017, p. 68). Because the access is provided by other individuals, this sharing activity entails an essential necessity to bring people together and creating interactions between them.

However, roughly a decade in, the sharing economy developed into a broad and diverse field, that include timebanks, open learning platforms, and food swap opportunities as well as big flagship companies such as Airbnb, Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit, and Kickstarter. Needless to say, given this huge diversity of services and business models, the nature of interactions that take place within the context of these specific platforms greatly diverge. Nevertheless, it is mostly the big players that have generated some serious concerns about the nature of the sharing economy, resulting in the claim that it is just another, more perfidious way to exploit workers. Because the critique addressed towards the sharing economy is mostly extrapolated from the big companies and subsequently generalized over the entire economic branch, this often does not do justice to the diversity of the field. As a result, this criticism does not necessarily apply to all actors within the discipline equally well.

One of the actors that manages to dodge some of the critique is the ride-sharing platform BlaBlaCar. I will show in this first chapter of the thesis that this is indeed the case and thereby justify and motivate a closer look at BlaBlaCar. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to highlight the unique position of BlaBlaCar within the sharing economy and to identify the features that allow for this position to be taken. The way I am going to carve out the niche for BlaBlaCar is by analyse it against the background of the general criticism that is raised against the sharing economy. In doing so, I am able to show that in the case of BlaBlaCar, the critique is not entirely justified, which makes it worth of further analysis. The guiding research question for this chapter will be: How can the interpersonal interactions facilitated by BlaBlaCar be situated

against the background of the criticism directed at the interpersonal interactions generated by the sharing economy in general?

In order to answer the research question, I will first provide a working definition of the sharing economy. Understanding the sharing economy is an absolute prerequisite for a deeper analysis of the alleged trust-generating mechanisms and will therefore set me up for the following chapters. Based on the working definition, some of the major points of criticism are presented and elaborated on, all with regard to the interpersonal interactions that are facilitated by the sharing economy. After this basis is established, I will turn to the case study of BlaBlaCar. I introduce the company and explain its business model. By presenting the nature of the company, it is furthermore possible to carve out the specifics that demarcate BlaBlaCar from other players in the field. This allows me to analyse how well the criticism targeted at the sharing economy is relevant in the case of BlaBlaCar.

With regards to the framework adapted from Löhr (2023b), answering this research question will contribute in two ways. On the one hand, it provides a broad overview of the environment the trust-generating technologies are situated in. This provides the necessary background for a closer analysis of these mechanisms in the following chapter. Secondly, by using BlaBlaCar as a case study, this chapter identifies and characterizes one important actor in this discussion. With the help of these two points, a first step is taken to answer the main research question, because in order to situate BlaBlaCar and its value conceptualisation against the background criticism, it is essential to first understand this criticism.

1.2   What precisely is the sharing economy?

In this section, I explain the main characteristics of the sharing economy. I will do this by elaborating on what I believe are the three most important features of the sharing economy today. These are technological enabling, the interpersonal nature, and inter-platform diversity. For a thorough understanding of the concept, I will also include some history of the sharing economy including its founding vision and dreams it aspired.

If we want to have a discussion about BlaBlaCar and its situatedness within the sharing economy, it is crucial to first have a clear, common understanding of the sharing economy itself. Unfortunately, despite existing for more than ten years, scholars, journalists as well as economic actors claiming to operate within the sharing economy have had a difficult time agreeing on a shared definition. In fact, one of the main consensus among these actors is precisely that there

is no consensus about the definition (Schor & Vallas, 2021, p. 373). Nevertheless, in an ambitious attempt to provide conceptual clarification, Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al. (2022) analysed a number of articles and distilled a definition out of it. Their proposal is the following: "The sharing economy is a closed socio-economic system facilitated by digital platforms which match peer-to-peer service demand and offer based on the rules and culture of the platform actors" (pp. 34 – 35). The provided definition gives us an idea of the key characteristics of the sharing economy, namely the interpersonal nature (peer-to-peer), technological enabling (digital platforms), and inter-platform diversity (rules and culture of the platform actors). In what follows, I will briefly elaborate on these three features in turn, while being fully aware that this separation is rather theoretical, and the categories overlap and influence each other.

The least disputed of these features is what I called the technological enabling of the sharing economy. It is certainly true that some forms of sharing have always been present in the history of humanity, yet these sharing activities have mostly been restricted to the close social circle of an individual. The increase in the sharing scope coupled with the direct involvement of the individual sharers characteristic for the contemporary 'socio-economic system' was only possible with the rise of specific technologies, such as the internet and smartphones (Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al., 2022, p. 30; Schor & Vallas, 2021, p. 371). As we will see in more detail in chapter two, this expansion is closely linked to changes in the way people perceive and distribute trust. However, it is crucial to understand that what sets the sharing economy apart from earlier acts of sharing is the scope within which the sharing can take place. Technologically enabled, actors within the sharing economy take advantage of this enlarged reach to optimally match offer and demand. In most cases this takes place on sophisticated platforms, easily accessible through mobile apps (Schor & Cansoy, 2019, p. 51; Szabó & Gupta, 2020, p. 50). In his book that analyses the sharing economy, Slee (2017) summarizes this trend on the point when he concludes that, "To build a "peer network" means, first and foremost, to build an Internet software platform" (p. 15). The interpersonal activity of sharing an asset thus moves beyond family, friends, and one's close social circles, and opens up possibilities to share with strangers one has never met before.

The second central attribute of the sharing economy is its interpersonal nature. This refers to the aspiration of the sharing economy to move away from a more traditional business-to-customer (B2C) setting towards a so-called peer-to-peer (P2P) structure instead (Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al., 2022, p. 32; Schor, 2020, p. 16; Szabó & Gupta, 2020, pp. 50 - 51). This means that there is no company providing the commodities, but rather that individuals can

advertise their personal belongings (and in some cases also their time) that they are willing to share with others. As an example, opposed to a car rental agency providing an array of cars to choose from (B2C), individual car owners offer their car to be borrowed by other individuals (P2P). As such, the very nature of sharing has not changed, as it still happens between individuals and consequently relies on some form of interaction between two people. The role of the platform in that regard is to enable the individuals willing to share.[2]

Another aspect that falls into this category is the tacit agreement of reciprocity prevailing on these platforms, which turns participants into providers and consumers at once, creating what Miguel, Avram, et al. (2022) call 'the prosumer'. Sharing economy platforms encourage people not only to consume, e.g., to make use of the offers of others but also to provide, e.g., to advertise an asset they are willing to share. Such advocated reciprocity is crucial for the functioning of the platform, because otherwise there would be a mismatch between demand and offer. All these aspects highlight, that even though the circle of sharing might has expanded, the activity is nevertheless grounded in (at least) two individuals interacting with each other and in the process create a certain kind of relation between them. In addition, they again show the crucial role the digital platform plays in these forms of sharing.

The third key characteristic of the sharing economy and its platforms is that the landscape is highly diverse and various different approaches to it exist. This variety is captured in the term inter-platform diversity and refers to the 'rules and cultures of the platform' mentioned by Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al. (2022). While most of the platforms emerged out of a shared commitment to bring about a specific future, the 'sharing economy manifesto' as Murillo et al. (2017) call it, they diverge in the way in which they intend to bring it about. Social interactions and solidarity among its participants are central pillars of this manifesto, as highlighted by sharing economy proponent Rachel Botsman who claims that one of the goals of the sharing economy is to "make meaningful connections, connections that are enabling us to rediscover a humanness that we've lost somewhere along the way" (TED, 2012). The idea behind this rediscovery is embedded in an avoidance of big corporations and a reorientation towards solidaristic exchanges among peers. Sharing time, assets, and skills in an egalitarian way within a community of like-minded people was framed as bringing back the possibility to connect with your peers. The egalitarian nature in this context is meant to capture a sharing activity that takes place in the absence of any hierarchies and happens among equals.

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[2] Obviously, not all platforms rely on physical interactions to the same extent. For a discussion and classification of the various forms of interactions, see Hesse et al. (2020).

Other key points of the utopian vision aspired by the sharing economy include a democratic, flat structure as well as empowering ordinary people (Murillo et al., 2017, p. 68). What is most often understood with empowerment in the context of the sharing economy is the idea of free and flexible working conditions, in the absence of a tyrannic boss. Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al. (2022) add to this the minimal bureaucratic necessities and lack of investments required for participation (p 32). The extent to which a platform fosters one of these characteristics over another is related to its business model, but in general is up to them. Whereas one platform might put more emphasis on the low bureaucratic hurdles to participate but less on the democratic structure, another platform might do the exact opposite. Consequently, what emerges is a multitude of approaches towards sharing idle assets that differ from one platform to another. This is what I call inter-platform diversity.

Precisely these shared assets are also something that is highly diverse across platforms. Some platforms facilitate accommodation, others operate within the mobility and ride-sharing domain, while again others promote the sharing of food, skills, or even time. What is being shared often influences the participants in a specific branch of the sharing economy as well as the platform's culture and rules. This creates a feedback loop, where a platform specific vision is shared among its participants, but which can diverge immensely between different platforms.

This huge diversity is one of the reasons, why there is no generally agreed-upon definition of the sharing economy. Influenced by the multiple possible attitudes towards the sharing economy, a rag rug of varying definitions emerges, among which most of them "seem to be largely shaped by the author's ideological standpoint and/or academic focus" (Murillo et al., 2017, p. 67). Not surprisingly then, there is also no agreement whether the sharing economy is a social movement or a mere business model.

Nevertheless, the provided working definition by Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al. (2022) is broad enough to accommodate this diversity while at the same time highlighting the key characteristics of this specific branch of the economy. Furthermore, it allows to grasp the criticism directed at it. This is the topic of the next subsection.

1.3 <u>What is the criticism targeted at the sharing economy with regards to the interactions between individuals?</u>

In what follows I will lay out the most prominent points of critique towards the sharing economy and highlight the relevance of these points with regard to both the individual participants as

well as their relations with each other. My main aim of this analysis is to investigate the kind of interpersonal interactions promoted and facilitated by the sharing economy. The analysis follows three major lines of critique, namely the questionable empowering possibilities, the incentive to competition and the lack of egalitarian structure

The first point that I would like to delve into is the claim that the sharing economy does not serve to empower ordinary people as it promised. As mentioned above, in the context of the sharing economy, empowering is mostly taken to encompass flexibility and freedom with regard to the working hours and amount. This is often connected to the idea of being one's own boss and low bureaucratic effort to participate.

Orienting their criticism at one of the most well-known sharing company, Uber, scholars usually find little debris of the original aspirations. While it might be easy to become an Uber driver, once actively working on the job, the reality is hardly empowering for the individual. Operating under strict surveillance, with challenging, external goals imposed on the drivers and without any social safety net, drivers are not in a particular empowered situation (Mosaad et al., 2023, p. 4; Slee, 2017, pp. 67 – 69). While it might be objected that it is better to have a bad job than none at all, the working conditions of the drivers are in no relation to the empowering aspirations of the sharing economy. Furthermore, researchers have shown that on most platforms operating within the sharing economy, discrimination prevails (Fitzmaurice et al., 2018, p. 83). This discrimination can take many forms, depending on the platform, but it is obvious that such a way of treating individuals is clearly not empowering them.

In addition to this, the initial vision of the sharing economy has been that individuals can flee the yoke of a tyrannic boss and become their own boss, free from external supervision and control, making a business as one deems right. This would lead to an empowerment of the individual, but also towards a more egalitarian organization. The above-mentioned technological surveillance possibilities, coupled with strict success criteria paint a different picture. The boss has not disappeared, it merely changed form. A shift happened from a single, human individual, to an anonymous technological apparatus with opaque decision mechanisms. Furthermore, because much of the assessment criteria and potential future sharing opportunities are based on reviews and feedback from customers, providers in the sharing economy are also dependent on the consumer's goodwill. Not surprisingly, many providers are afraid that they might receive bad ratings which will hamper their future possibilities (Köbis et al., 2020, p. 326). As such, it is not only the anonymous technology that stepped into the position of the new boss, but potentially also all consumers of a service. As a consequence, the relationship between

the provider and the consumer always operates under the constant tension that every interaction will influence the ratings given and received respectively. What remains is a situation under constant evaluation where no misstep is allowed. The one authoritative supervisor might have disappeared, but the providers in the sharing economy are far from providing as they please.

What happens with these ratings and reviews is that they are published online to inform potential future customers about the quality of the provider. While the individual's reputation has always in some way influenced the sharing activity, having a public profile is not completely new. However, what is new is the scope with which the reputation of people travels. Because online reviews are published online, they are accessible to anyone. Together with their importance for future bargains, this has led to an insolent situation where providers pressure their customers to leave overblown reviews (Köbis et al., 2020, p. 330). Such behaviour risks treating one party of the sharing deal as little more than a means to receive positive ratings. Obviously, this trend is closely connected to the point mentioned above, that every aspect of an interaction can and will be reviewed. What ultimately emerges is a situation in which people want to be social and outgoing, not because they see value in that, but because it will be reviewed positively and consequently lead to further earnings via the platform. The reasons why people engage with each other and treat others in a certain way substantially changed with the introduction of online reputation systems. The situation gets further affected, if there are monetary incentives at stake, as is the case in the biggest sharing economy players. Taken together, there is not only a risk that providers treat consumers as means to an end, but equally, consumers might start treating providers as just a means to an end as well in order to get the service they requested.

In sum, the alleged empowering possibilities of the sharing economy have faced some serious setbacks, affecting both the individual but also the way in which individuals interact with each other.

The next point of criticism that also deeply affects the individual is the necessity to turn oneself into either a brand or one's own boss. One explicit manifestation of this development is that providers in the sharing economy are encouraged to see themselves as "micro-entrepreneurs" (Fitzmaurice et al., 2018, p. 82; Murillo et al., 2017, p. 71; Schor & Vallas, 2021, p. 380). Adhering to this narrative means that participants need to market themselves on the platforms, turning themselves and their capabilities and skills into a commodity available for sharing. Under such a regime, interpersonal sharing results mostly because providers were able to promote themselves successfully on the platform. As such, free competition among the

providers is encouraged, not only between platforms but also between participants on one and the same platform. Features like the 'superhost' on Airbnb are the ultimate excrescence of this trend, rewarding them with more visibility and thus higher earning potential (Airbnb, 2024). It has additionally been shown that providers with more positive feedback ratings can get away with increasing their prices for the same service (Köbis et al., 2020, p. 323). Thus, on a very personal level, the sharing economy encourages people to embrace and adopt market logic and transform themselves into competitors against each other.

Lastly, critique concerning the interpersonal interaction and its egalitarian nature has been voiced claiming that in fact hierarchies and different treatments between individuals exist. The above-mentioned 'superhost' badge on Airbnb comes with increased visibility and profit possibilities for selected individuals, and consequently, the platform does not treat all its participants equally. Similarly concerning, the platforms perpetuate discrimination against minorities, leaving them with lower acceptance rates and longer waiting times for ride-sharing services when compared to non-minorities (Köbis et al., 2020, p. 327). In addition to this, there are also reports of homophilic tendencies on the platforms, meaning that participants prefer to interact with people like themselves (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2021, p. 92). Such developments clearly undermine the egalitarian promise of the sharing economy and overshadow the encounters between individuals on these platforms and (potentially) in physical space.

What remains is to see how well these claims apply to my case study, BlaBlaCar. Because the sharing economy is a big umbrella term, many diverging business models get lumped together under it. However, this means that the general critique does not necessarily apply equally well to all the businesses underneath the umbrella term. It is thus crucial to understand how a specific company within the sharing economy operates before the general critique is expanded and applied to them. As I will argue, the three points of critique regarding the interpersonal interactions elaborated above do not satisfactorily map onto BlaBlaCar. This puts BlaBlaCar in a niche position when it comes to those interactions. In what follows, I will briefly explain what BlaBlaCar is and how it functions. This will provide me with the basis on which I can assess the applicability of the critique.

1.4   An introduction to BlaBlaCar and the way it works

Originating in France in 2006, the idea behind BlaBlaCar is to make use of the idle car seats by enabling people to share a ride. As such, BlaBlaCar can be characterised as a ridesharing or

carpooling platform, specifically for long-distance or intercity trips. The name of the company refers to their option to self-indicate one's talkativeness, on a scale from Bla to BlaBlaBla, meaning from least to most chattiness (Saxena et al., 2020, p. 124). A couple of years ago, the platform counted over 100 million members (BlaBlaCar, 2021). In 2024, the company operates globally, with carpooling offers in countries such as Brazil, India, Mexico, and Turkey and scholars generally agree that BlaBlaCar is the world's largest intercity carsharing community (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2021, p. 84; Farajallah et al., 2019, p. 25; Guyader, 2018, p. 704). However, its longest and strongest presence is in Southwestern and Central Europe, where it has operated for more than ten years in countries like France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Belgium, and Poland (European Comission, 2017, p. 16). Due to its longstanding presence, the majority of scholarly articles, news reports as well as user reviews originate and revolve around this area. In order to treat these sources appropriately, this study will therefore also focus on the same geographic region.

The major difference to other ride-sharing services is the fact, that people post trips online that they plan to do anyway, making the event of the trip independent of any passenger. The idea is that people share a planned trip and people who happen to have the same (or close) destinations can join the car ride for a small fee. It is crucial to note, that this contribution is only thought of as a compensation for travel expenses, such as petrol costs, and tolls and that drivers cannot make a profit out of offering their car to others (Saxena et al., 2020, p. 122). BlaBlaCar ensures this policy by proposing a specific price for a trip, based on variables such as total kilometres of the trip and an estimate of fuel consumption that drivers can adjust up or down, but only to a certain degree (Farajallah et al., 2019, p. 16). The company sustains its operations by taking a small service fee from the passengers when they book a ride whereas the driver does not pay anything (BlaBlaCar, 2023c). In order to ensure a safe environment for women during the trip, BlaBlaCar offers a 'Ladies only' option that allows, as the name suggests, only female passengers and drivers to be part of the group (BlaBlaCar, 2023d).

Once people have completed their trip and reached the desired destination, they are incentivised to rate the journey and their experience of it. There are several key features about the ratings and its process; People are encouraged to rate each other on a scale from 1 to 5, and ideally also provide a short, written review. The other people's ratings are only made available to a participant if they have rated the others (BlaBlaCar, 2023e). This is supposed to encourage peer feedback which gives people an indication what to expect on a journey. Additionally,

passengers can anonymously rate the driving skills of the driver. I will discuss the nature of the rating system and its shortcomings later on.

While BlaBlaCar started as a long-distance car-sharing platform, it expanded its scope of operations since. Back in 2018, BlaBlaCar launched BlaBlaCar Daily, which is an application tailored to bring carpooling into the daily commute of people, by allowing for short-distance travel to and from work (BlaBlaCar, 2023f, p. 5). However, as of now, this specific form of carpooling supported by BlaBlaCar exists exclusively in France. One year later, BlaBlaCar acquired Ouibus, which is among the largest bus operators in France (Hanchuk et al., 2023, p. 6). Since then, other bus operators have been added, and plans exist to also integrate trains into their offerings (BlaBlaCar, 2023f, p. 4). The ultimate goal is to create an intermodal network that connects various modes of transportation that allows an "unprecedented door-to-door solution for all" (BlaBlaCar, 2023f, p. 6). While these are certainly interesting developments and visions that shed some light on the motivation behind BlaBlaCar, my focus will be exclusively on the long-distance, ride-sharing segment of BlaBlaCar. It is this specific offer that, as I will show, is the most interesting when it comes to interpersonal interactions among participants in the sharing economy.

In addition, BlaBlaCar is nicely situated in the middle of two axes in the sharing economy. First of all, there is money involved, which makes it different from sharing activities that operate without the use of money. But at the same time, there are limits to the influence of money with BlaBlaCar, since users cannot make a living from it. Therefore, with regards to the financial situation, BlaBlaCar is in a nuanced middle position between the two extreme cases. With regards to the size of the platform and the community, BlaBlaCar is again situated in an interesting place in between the two extremes. It is certainly bigger than for example local shared gardening projects, while at the same time, it is smaller than the sharing giant Airbnb. Both these middle grounds create a niche for BlaBlaCar that makes it a unique case that is influential enough to give the case significant weight, yet at the same time (at least partially, as I will show) escapes the common criticism of the sharing economy

1.5   The unique features that characterize BlaBlaCar

In order to highlight the importance and novelty of this analysis, it helps to pinpoint what demarcates BlaBlaCar from other services, both within the sharing economy and within the transport sector. If there is reason to suspect a difference in how well the general critique applies

to BlaBlaCar compared to other sharing opportunities, it is crucial to understand the features that enable this avoidance. In what follows, I elaborate on the unique features of BlaBlaCar with regards to the interpersonal interactions that are facilitated by the platform.

Starting with the more traditional inter-city transportation possibilities, bus and train, the main difference is that in the case of BlaBlaCar, the participants share for the time of the journey a clearly confined space, namely the car. The nature of the relationship between the driver and the passenger in a bus is distinctly different from the one in BlaBlaCar. The driver in the bus conducts the vehicle because it is their job, thus they are professional drivers ordered to drive the bus from A to B. This stands in sharp contrast to someone who happens to drive from A to B on an arbitrary date and decides to offer their seats in the car. Furthermore, the bus provides more anonymity, less social pressure to talk to any of the co-voyagers let alone the driver. Of course, someone may start chatting with their seatmate on a bus or a train, but the likelihood is significantly lower than when two people specifically arrange to share a car. From a perspective concerned predominantly with interpersonal interactions, busses are quite similar to trains, where the likelihood and the necessity for interactions are rather low.

If the hypothesis is that sharing a car is the quintessential feature, then a comparison to Uber shows otherwise. While it is true that in both cases a small physical space gets shared, Uber operates predominantly within cities and seldom in between them. As a consequence, the rides with BlaBlaCar are decisively longer than those with Uber, which in turn increases the likelihood of interactions that go beyond an instrumental engagement. If passengers only spend five minutes in the car, there is no time to go beyond superficial small talk. However, when people spend a couple of hours together in the same car, the possibility to develop a conversation further and discover interesting aspects and opinions about one another clearly increases. In addition to the confined, shared space, another unique feature of BlaBlaCar that influences interpersonal interactions is time.

Furthermore, if the participant's interactions should not be a mere means to get from A to B, there need to be some guardrails to the influence of the monetary side. This is another difference between Uber and BlaBlaCar. While Uber can be profitable for the drivers, BlaBlaCar does not allow that. These systemic barriers prohibit that the platform and with it the community falls completely for the monetary gains resulting from the participation. There are clear limits to the extent to which the commercialisation of BlaBlaCar is possible. As a consequence, the economic aspect, while still present, is moved very much to the background of the sharing activity on BlaBlaCar and therefore has less impact on the interactions.

In this section, I identified the key demarcation criteria that set BlaBlaCar apart from other platforms within the sharing economy and transportation possibilities. In doing so, I highlighted the most important characteristics of BlaBlaCar, which in turn created an opening for BlaBlaCar to be in a position to evade the general criticism targeted at the sharing economy. This will be the next point of focus.

1.6   To what extent does the general criticism directed towards the Sharing economy also apply to BlaBlaCar?

My next question will be if and how this specific form of the sharing economy is different from other offers and to what extent the general criticism does (not) apply. In what follows, I will go through the various points of criticism and analyse for each if they hold true in the case of BlaBlaCar. The order will be equal to the discussion about the general critique targeted at the sharing economy. Throughout this analysis, references and comparisons to other, similar services will be made thereby highlighting the differences between them.

The first critique thrown at the sharing economy is that it fails to empower ordinary people as it promised it would. In order to analyse BlaBlaCar and its empowering possibilities within the context of the sharing economy some distinctions are necessary. It is certainly true that the initial hurdle to participate and the bureaucratic inconveniences are kept to a minimum. Likewise, drivers can freely choose to offer a trip or not, make a detour and adjust the price within reasonable bounds, giving them freedom and flexibility to adjust the interaction with the platform to their needs and wants. Furthermore, the pressure to meet certain criteria is clearly lower when compared to other sharing economy platforms such as Uber or Lyft. This has to do with the business model, as BlaBlaCar drivers are not able to make a living from the journeys and the destinations themselves stand in the foreground. Drivers for Uber are required to have an excellent rating, both explicitly from the company but also more implicitly from the customers, otherwise they get "deactivated" (Slee, 2017, p. 68). While it is certainly also important for BlaBlaCar drivers to have a decent rating, it is equally important that the pick-up and drop-off points match the needs of the passenger. Lastly, the criticism regarding the lack of social benefits hardly applies to BlaBlaCar, as the very nature of the platform only allows for monetary compensation and makes it impossible to fundamentally depend on it to make a living.

However, having said that, it is not the case that BlaBlaCar is free from any drawbacks. A study based on data gathered in France found that drivers with Arabic-sounding names sell fewer

seats when compared to drivers that have a French-sounding name (Farajallah et al., 2019). This shows that also BlaBlaCar is not immune to digital discrimination which of course is the opposite of empowering for the affected individuals.

The fact that people cannot make a living out of BlaBlaCar is also the main reason why the narrative to escape a beastly boss does not apply to BlaBlaCar. People need to be in some alternative sort of working scheme to earn money besides participating in BlaBlaCar as a provider. This is also confirmed by a study by Arcidiacono and Pais (2021). In order to get a better understanding of BlaBlaCar users, they conducted numerous interviews and analysed over 600 questionnaires. With regards to the working situation of BlaBlaCar users, the results are rather clear: About 82% of BlaBlaCar users are (self-)employed, whereas the rest are mostly students. The nature and style of employment are not important to dive into, the point being that BlaBlaCar does not serve as an escape route from an unhappy employment situation.

When trying to address the question whether the rating system produces instrumental engagement on BlaBlaCar things become a little complicated.

With regards to the motives, studies have shown, that initially many BlaBlaCar passengers engage in the service predominantly because it serves as a cheap travel option and they want to save money (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2021, p. 90). Presented in such a way, it looks as if people are primarily motivated by self-interest and getting fast and cheap from A to B. Such an attitude towards people who are willing to share their spare seats in their car seems to be evidence for a more instrumental engagement with each other. The social exchanges are a side-product that comes along with this kind of travelling.

However, interesting developments happen when people start using BlaBlaCar more often. Various studies have shown that the way people characterise their relations to other BlaBlaCar participants changes after an initial phase towards a sense of community-belonging which is felt as a positive impact on personal relationships.

For example, after having conducted 70 semi-structured interviews with people who used BlaBlaCar at least twice, Setiffi and Lazzer (2018) found a significant transformation of the notion of 'the stranger'. By asking users to reflect on both their first and their most recent ride-sharing trip, they could trace this development. Because of the high vulnerability one is exposed to when sitting in a car with a stranger[3], many people chose to be accompanied by a friend the

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[3] This is also part of the reason why trust is so relevant for BlaBlaCar to function. I will go into this in chapter two.

first time they used BlaBlaCar. However, after multiple rides, the authors identify a tendency of the users to adapt to this unknown, by embracing it and perceiving it as an opportunity to meet new people. This emerging opportunity to meet new people constitutes a shared goal that allows regular users to "transcend economic circumstances" (p. 91). Nevertheless, the authors understand that the pool of BlaBlaCar users is not a homogenous group, and different motives might exist as well.

Another study done by De La O Hernández-López (2023) analysed 1000 reviews of experienced users (i.e., more than five trips) to investigate the social and relational identities of frequent BlaBlaCar users. Using a computer-mediated discourse analysis perspective, the author highlighted the way in which many users used the review system to relate to their travel mates, as opposed to simply evaluating the service (as would be the case in the more traditional B2C business models). In doing so, the author argues that the main purpose of these feedbacks become "relating to others or enhancing pre-existing relationships" (p. 154), which in turn creates and shapes their relational identity.

These are just two examples that highlight an interesting change of attitude towards BlaBlaCar and its users. Apparently, when people are more familiar with BlaBlaCar and use it more often, the driver is no longer seen as someone who merely transports one from A to B, but as a member of a community that the people want to engage with and get to know. While saving money is of course still relevant, there are also other incentives that make people share a journey. Not surprisingly, the company fuels this narrative by presenting itself as "foster[ing] enriching exchanges" (BlaBlaCar, 2018, p. 9) that should counteract social isolation and highlight the community of BlaBlaCar users. While these claims might be a bit exaggerated, there nevertheless seems to be evidence that frequent BlaBlaCar users transcend a mere economic, instrumental motivation.[4]

The second point of criticism is the imposed need for individuals to turn themselves into microentrepreneurs on the sharing platforms. As I have already mentioned above, the urge to meet certain criteria is less strong with BlaBlaCar when compared to other sharing instances. Nevertheless, also on BlaBlaCar hierarchies and rankings exist among the participants. Drivers that meet certain criteria can earn a "super driver" badge which gives them additional visibility and consequently increases the chance of bookings. Similar to Uber, and also in a different context Airbnb, some of the criteria require high average ratings, both overall as well as driving

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[4] See chapter three for a deeper analysis of the BlaBlaCar community

skills ratings (BlaBlaCar, 2023a). While such mechanisms are intended to reward safe and reliable drivers, they nevertheless promote a perception of the individual as a brand that needs to be marketed. The same holds true for another label that is distributed based on the experience of the users. On a five-scale ladder, participants are ranked based on their profile completion, the number of ratings, the percentage of positive ratings and their seniority on the platform (Farajallah et al., 2019, p. 19). On the top of the experience ladder, people get the label "Ambassador", which might be contacted by BlaBlaCar to participate in workshops or review certain novel features (BlaBlaCar, 2023b). Even though the pressure to achieve these levels and badges might not be as devastating as in the case of Uber, the general mechanisms are roughly the same. And they are precisely the ones which foster microentrepreneurial understanding of the individual.

With regards to the alleged egalitarian nature of the sharing activities, the first point of note is that as already mentioned above, also for BlaBlaCar certain achievements can be 'unlocked' and badges earned. These features undermine the egalitarian nature of the platform, where all participants are supposed to have equal chances of buying and selling their seats. Furthermore, Arcidiacono and Pais (2021) discovered some "homophilic dynamics" (p. 92) on BlaBlaCar, which means that individuals tend to interact with people similar to themselves. While such a dynamic is not per se problematic, it becomes an issue when one subgroup of people becomes dominant, and their rules and norms stand in tension with the values of another subgroup. Again, pointing to the study done by Farajallah et al. (2019), some initial outgrowths of such tendencies are already present on the platform. While BlaBlaCar clearly distances itself from any form of discrimination, Arcidiacono and Pais (2021) rightfully point out, that these homophilic tendencies are in fact encouraged by the platform (p. 92). Aiming to ensure enjoyable car rides, users are encouraged to fill additional information into their profile, such as hobbies and abilities, that should enable people to connect with like-minded ones. As a consequence, there exists a tension between the egalitarian aspirations of the platform and the homophilic tendencies people manifest.

Taken together, the three major lines of critique with regards to the interpersonal interactions facilitated by the sharing economy clearly do not precisely map onto BlaBlaCar. Together with the unique features that allow for this avoidance and the precarious physical safety situation, this motivates a deeper analysis of the ridesharing platform.

1.7   Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to analyse how the interpersonal interactions facilitated by BlaBlaCar can be situated against the background of the criticism directed at the interpersonal interactions generated by the sharing economy in general. I started by providing a working definition of the sharing economy, with a special focus on the way it relies on individuals to interact with each other. Next, I presented the reader with the most common critique directed at the sharing economy with regards to the interpersonal interactions facilitated by the sharing economy platforms. After introducing the main characteristics of BlaBlaCar, I identified key features that place BlaBlaCar in a unique position, namely the minimal financial influence and the commitment of the participants to share both time and space. Following this introduction, I tested how well the general implications of engaging in the sharing economy also are an issue with BlaBlaCar. Most noteworthy due to the reduced external pressure on the individual, most implications are less impactful in the case of BlaBlaCar when compared to other actors in the sharing economy. Interesting enough, despite the fact that an initial engagement with BlaBlaCar is often motivated by financial reasons, most people tend to move beyond this kind of reasoning and adopt a more engaging stance towards the ridesharing service. Such a possibility clearly sets BlaBlaCar, and the interpersonal interactions enabled by it, apart from other actors in the sharing economy.

By answering this research question and thereby carving out the niche for BlaBlaCar, I covered essential groundwork to situate BlaBlaCar within the sharing economy environment. I argued that due to its unique characteristics, it is significantly different from other platforms, while at the same time being a highly relevant actor within the field. Doing so contributed to the main research question by highlighting the adequacy of choosing BlaBlaCar as a case study. The fact that part of the criticism clearly does not apply to BlaBlaCar motivates further analysis and comparison with the main players in the field.

Therefore, it is now time to move deeper and focus less on the actions, but more on the values and prerequisites that enable these interactions. For BlaBlaCar to function, it is crucial that strangers are willing to get in a car with each other. Because passengers and drivers expose themselves to great risk and vulnerability, there need to be some mechanisms in place that make these interactions happen. In essence, BlaBlaCar needs to establish an environment, where people are willing to put their physical integrity in the hands of a person they have never met before. An analysis of the technologies and mechanisms they employ to make this work and what emerges out of their workings will be covered in the following chapter.

2   Trust in the sharing economy and beyond

2.1   Introduction

Most of the research articles concerning the sharing economy sooner or later mention the importance of trust. Despite its omnipresence, in a literature review, Räisänen et al. (2021) found that less than half the papers actually define what they mean when speaking of trust (p. 4). Not surprisingly then, they called for researchers to investigate the nature of this concept and provide a definition of it (Räisänen et al., 2021, p. 8). This chapter is an attempt to answer this call, and to define the nature of what I called 'instrumental trust'.

By introducing the concept of instrumental trust, two things are already answered: First, despite the doubts whether trust is the right concept to use, I decided to hold on to this concept, not least because of the widespread use in the literature. Second, I nevertheless agree that there exists a conflict whether trust can appropriately be applied in such a context. The way in which I propose to solve this conceptual disruption is by combining two established words, i.e., 'instrumental' and 'trust', in the same way 'brain' and 'death' were combined to create the concept of brain death. By doing so I use one of the proposed solutions of the framework by Löhr (2023b) that informs the entire thesis.

This investigation will be guided by the insight that different kinds, or subcategories of trust exist (Baier, 1986, p. 232), and instrumental trust is only one specific conceptualisation of trust. In order to highlight where instrumental trust differs from other forms of trust, I juxtapose it to another conceptualisation of trust, namely relational trust. While the former is based on a contractual and individualistic understanding of the collaboration, the latter takes into account the social embeddedness of the involved people and is much broader in scope. While I can instrumentally trust my supplier to deliver the books I need for a class, it would most likely be beyond the scope of our interaction for me to trust them to look after my child. I am going to show that such an interaction would require another form of trust, namely relational trust.

The choice of comparing the two kinds of trust is in line with my research focus revolving around interpersonal relations. Furthermore, by comparing two ends of a spectrum against each other, the individual features and characteristics stand out more sharply and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the two conceptualisations. Importantly, both kinds of trust are concerned with trust between people, but their nature is significantly different. To make this distinction helps to understand different conceptualisations of trust, yet in the marketing material of big sharing economy players, such a distinction hardly shows up. In most cases, it is simply spoken of 'trust'. I think lumping different conceptualisations of trust simply together

leads to an overgeneralisation and as a consequence might mislead the (potential) participants of the sharing economy. Therefore, I think it is crucial to not only define instrumental trust, but also to clearly show where it differs from relational trust. Doing so will further contribute to conceptual clarification and provide insights into the application conditions of instrumental and relational trust respectively.

Because of the chosen case study for this thesis, the research question will be the following: How can the conceptualisation of trust facilitated by the technology used by BlaBlaCar be situated along a spectrum that is derived from the technologies utilized by the main actors of the sharing economy?

As a starting point, I borrow the definition of Mayer et al. (1995), who define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (p. 712). Such an understanding of trust is suitable for the case at hand because it adequately captures what is at stake when interacting with strangers in the sharing economy. In all these cases, customers cannot control the providers, and consequently they need to trust them. Because when people get in a car with a stranger or book a room in their apartment, the stakes are quite high. This explains and justifies the focus of the literature and the platforms on trust.

This chapter is structured as follows: To begin with, I highlight the importance of trust within the sharing economy, and why it is necessary to investigate it. After a brief historical overview of how we came to live in a time when people trust sharing platforms, I will present the key technologies these platforms use to establish trust between people who have never met each other. I understand the entirety of these mechanisms and techniques as the technology that ultimately caused the unclarity related to trust. Therefore, identifying and analysing the workings of these technologies is one of the steps proposed in Löhr's framework (2023b) required to regain clarity. Deriving from these mechanisms, I highlight the major characteristics of instrumental trust. In the next section, I introduce the concept of relational trust as the opposing end of the spectrum and show how the two conceptualisations of trust differ. Ultimately, I investigate what kind of trust BlaBlaCar is trying to establish with its main framework.

2.2   Why is trust relevant?

Given that this chapter is all about interpersonal trust, I first want to briefly establish, why this focus is important. When it comes to sharing, we have always relied on trust. As Szabó and Gupta (2020) have put it quite bluntly "To share is to trust" (p. 53). When we lend an asset to someone else, we trust that the trustee handles it with care, and returns it in the same state as it was before. If person A would know for a fact, that person B is incapable of driving a car, person A would not let person B borrow their car, because the risk of an accident is simply too high. Person A would only reasonably consider sharing their car, if they know that they can trust person B to return the car in an undamaged, fully functional state. Consequently, trust and sharing have always been deeply intertwined with each other.

However, what has changed with the rise of the sharing economy is the scope of people with which we share. As I already elaborated in the previous chapter, sharing was traditionally reserved for close social connections such as friends, family, and the local community (Miguel, Martos-Carrión, et al., 2022, p. 30). With the rise of novel technologies, the circle of people with whom someone is able to share has expanded, but it does not necessarily follow that people are willing to share with a stranger on the other side of the world. Like in the ancient form of sharing, in order to make it happen, the two involved people need to trust each other. Because there is no a priori reason why someone should trust a random stranger, we usually refrain from sharing with people we do not know. Even worse, most people experience what scholars have called "stranger-danger" bias (Berg et al., 2020, p. 223; Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 27; Szabó & Gupta, 2020, p. 55), according to which we have an inherent tendency to associate strangers with danger. Such an innate characteristic of human beings is a big hurdle to overcome if the scope of sharing should successfully be expanded.

The problem is that it is difficult to trust a person one has never met before, has no information about previous interactions, or even a hunch concerning their motivations. Thus, for the sharing economy to be successful, it is crucial to overcome this bias and foster an environment where strangers trust and consequently share with each other. If the scope of sharing is to expand, what equally needs to expand is the "circles of trust" (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 31) e.g., the social circles of people one is willing to attribute trust to. Only if someone is able and willing to trust a person they have never met before to spend the night at their place or get in a car with them, the sharing economy can succeed. In sum, the importance of trust in connection to sharing is not particularly new, what is new is the unprecedented expansion of people someone is willing to trust. Because of the centrality of trust with regards to sharing, and the

importance to foster a trustful environment, actors within the sharing economy have put a lot of energy and resources into this challenge. They have established a plethora of mechanisms and technologies that should allow two strangers to trust each other. In what follows, I am going to scrutinize these techniques and see whether they are successful or not. Doing so will provide the basis for a thorough discussion on trust itself.

2.3   The idea of trust in entities other than humans

Before I start exploring the way in which sharing economy platforms try to establish trust between the users, an additional clarification is necessary. While there is much debate about the nature of trust and how to demarcate it from neighbouring concepts, scholars usually agree, that trust is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, that can be directed towards many entities, not necessarily humans (Botsman, 2017, pp. 17 – 18; Gruber, 2020, p. 2; Hawlitschek et al., 2016, p. 27). To place trust outside of the human realm is not something exceptional, but rather something people have been doing for quite some time. In complex political, governmental, and financial systems, it is often not possible to trust an individual but to rely on their embeddedness into an institution which one then grants their trust. This is what scholars call "institutional trust" (Berg et al., 2020, p. 221; Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 28; Szabó & Gupta, 2020, p. 56). It is a form of trust that is not directly established between two individuals, but rather between an individual and a system that is deemed trustworthy. Individuals within a trusted system can benefit from the fact that others see their system as trustworthy and are more easily seen as trustworthy persons as well. Thus, there is an interaction between the different forms of trust.

Not surprisingly then, within the context of the sharing economy, many researchers have investigated not only if and how two participants come to trust each other, but also what role the platform, which mediates the encounter, has to play. While the findings exhibit some divergencies between each other, there is a common agreement, that the platform, and specifically trust in the platform itself, helps in facilitating trust between the involved individuals (Berg et al., 2020; Gruber, 2020; Hawlitschek et al., 2016; Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018). As such, under certain conditions, the platform is able to present itself as a trustworthy institution which can then lead to the establishment of trust between the platform users. Similar to well-known brands that enjoy a certain degree of trust (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 29; Sundararajan, 2017, pp. 109 - 110), the platform and the company it stands for can be awarded trust by individuals.

While I fully acknowledge this interwovenness of the different forms of trust, my main focus will not be on how individuals come to trust a platform. In line with the previous chapter, my main interest is in interpersonal relations, and consequently, trust between individuals, not between a person and an institution. Obviously, the interactions that happen between individuals can only take place because of certain technologies employed by the platform. These are precisely the techniques that I will scrutinize in detail below. However, I will not go into questions that are concerned with how the platform manages to establish trust in their business in the first place. For example, having an appealing webpage might make a user trust the business more easily. These questions are certainly interesting in themselves, but do not primarily focus on the trust between two people using the platform and are therefore of minor importance for my thesis.[5]

2.4   How the sharing economy platforms use technological tools to promote trust

Because of the importance of trust for sharing economy platform, they have developed a wide array of elaborated mechanisms that aim to establish and facilitate trust between the individuals that are meant to share with each other. In what follows, I will briefly go over the most common way this challenge is approached.

The first mechanism for an individual to convince others that trust in them is well placed, is by connecting the profile on the sharing economy platform with the person's social media profiles (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 32; Räisänen et al., 2021, p. 6; Ter Huurne et al., 2017, p. 493). This is supposed to not only show a person's popularity, which on the internet serves as a means to establish trustworthiness, but it also allows to transfer digital "social capital" (Botsman, 2017, p. 28) from one platform to another. What sociologist usually refer to when speaking of social capital are the connections and bonds between individuals, based on shared values and the resulting reciprocal support and trustworthiness within the network (Botsman, 2017, pp. 28 - 29). In the age of social media, an increasing part of people's social capital is established online. Because it takes a decent amount of time to earn and establish such capital, it would be a flawed situation if the established trustworthiness of one platform could not be transferred to another. In addition, also the platform operators have an interest that such social capital can be carried over, because it provides them with users who are from the beginning

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[5] For a rich account on how the relation between technology and humans gets mediated, see Verbeek (2015)

potentially seen as trustworthy. Thus, the technological possibility to link different online profiles with each other proves to be a common method to signal a person's trustworthiness.

The second common method for a platform to support a trustworthy appearance of its users is by distributing achievement badges and displaying additional information about the user such as membership duration or the number of completed transactions (Hesse et al., 2020, p. 5141; Räisänen et al., 2021, p. 7). Achievement badges are a way for the platform to show that the earner of the badge fulfilled several transactions to the satisfaction of the involved participants. As has been established in the previous chapter, such certificates are usually tied to more or less tight criteria, and to earn such a badge is to signal that one is capable of providing a service that meets the standard set by the platform. This is used to show potential sharing partners that they are about to engage with a trustworthy individual. In addition to this, information regarding the membership duration or the amount of successful sharing activities further is intended to signal a certain seniority, which can be connected to experience and trust.

The technology that has received the most attention when it comes to trust within the sharing economy are feedback mechanisms, reviews and ratings (Berg et al., 2020; Hesse et al., 2020; Köbis et al., 2020; Ter Huurne et al., 2017). Closely connected to the idea of social capital, these systems allow users of the platform to rate and review each other and in such a way help (or hinder) each other to establish a positive reputation on the platform. The idea behind such reputation systems is that if enough people leave a review of how they experienced the interaction with another person A, the next person to interact with person A can make use of these reviews and distil the trustworthiness of the person A out of it. Because such technical mechanisms function best when a large collection of individuals review and rate each other, while each individual only contributes marginally to the overall trust that is generated, the sharing economy proponent Rachel Botsman (2017) calls this form of trust "distributed trust" (pp. 50 – 51). Users on sharing platforms review and get reviewed relentlessly and heavily rely on it in their decision-making process. [6]

2.5   What kind of trust is this? The conceptualisation of instrumental trust

After having established the ways in which sharing economy platforms use technological means to facilitate what they call trust, I will now look closer at the nature of this specific subcategory

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[6] It is important to note, that many scholars have pointed out the biased nature of these review systems. For discussion on it see Berg et al., (2020) or Slee (2017), chapter six

of trust. For the purpose of this text, I shall call this specific conceptualisation of trust 'instrumental trust'. I argue that introducing this specific subcategory contributes towards conceptual clarification. In the following paragraphs, I will highlight some key characteristics of this instrumental trust, namely, its quantification, the transactional nature, and the immediacy of its establishment and shed some light on the consequences that arise from these features.

The first feature I want to analyse arises out of the omnipresence and the importance of the rating systems and I call this feature the quantification of trust. What these rating technologies try to do, is to quantify the trustworthiness of a person and as such make it commensurable and comparable. Such a way of presenting the trustworthiness should help consumers to quickly compare numerous offers and providers and thereby smoothen the decision-making process. Consequently, these systems contribute to a reduction of the complexity of a situation. With reference to Luhmann, many scholars elaborated on the complexity-reducing nature of trust (Berg et al., 2020, p. 223; Gruber, 2020; pp. 2 – 3; Keymolen, 2016, pp. 34 - 35). Given the overwhelming number of possible choices on sharing platforms, these ratings systems can help users simplify their lives, by making a pre-selection of possible interaction partners. In such a way, the technologically enabled instrumental trust helps to make good, safe choices in a sea of options.

One thing should be pointed out with regards to the quantification of trust and its way of reducing complexity. First of all, trust comes in many shades and sizes, and various special cases, sub-forms, or exceptional instances exist. In the words of Botsman (2017), "Put simply, trust is highly contextual" (p. 17). However, as soon as a number is put on such a big concept as trust, it gets torn out of the situational circumstances and all context is lost. The assumed advantage of numbers is that they are easy to compare with each other because they are independent of the context. Another entity that is easy to compare and measure is money. Like simple numbers, a currency is a worldwide established, comparable, and tradeable entity. The appeal of money is that everybody approves it and is willing to engage in exchanges based on financial means. Economic actors within the sharing economy make use of these similarities when they introduce the term "trust capital" (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016, p. 10) or claim that trust is the currency of the sharing economy (TED, 2012).[7] Fuelled by this narrative, the

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[7] For an interesting account on why dignity should be considered the currency of the sharing economy, see Gertz (2024), chapter six

technological reduction into a currency and the conversion into a comparable, tradable entity, tears trust out of the context it originally arises in.

The transactional nature of the instrumental trust is the next feature I will elaborate on. Because trust is a central feature of many aspects of life, it is not surprising that researchers from various fields have investigated it, such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, and not last economy. Because the context of this analysis is the sharing *economy*, it does not surprise that the economic sector had had a strong influence on the conceptualisation of trust. Expressions like trust capital, as introduced above, clearly show this leverage. But in fact, also many definitions of trust are strongly influenced by this transactional character, a development that deeply bothered Baier (1986) and that she called "contractarian prejudices" (p. 258). The central features of these definitions are 1) that they are outcome-oriented, there is something to gain if person A trusts person B and as a consequence of the trust the transaction costs are reduced. Furthermore, the trust is a means to an end, because it is established for the purpose of facilitating transactions and because the involved parties want the commodities, they are trading, 2) these definitions are ultimately individualistic because the central question to ask is what it takes for person A to trust person B. From such a starting point, trust can then often be understood as a certain mental phenomenon or condition that makes person A trust person B.

These two features of the contractarian understanding of trust are also present in the instrumental trust promoted by sharing economy mechanisms. Obviously, there is a financial benefit for both the sharers within the sharing economy. It is an economic gain for the providers if they happen to have a free bedroom and are able to rent it via the Internet and in this way get some additional income. But it is also profitable for the consumers because they find accommodation that is cheaper than a traditional hotel, and allegedly more personal, local, and authentic. Thus, the trust that these two parties rely on can be understood as a means to personal benefit, which also already shows the individualistic nature of the interaction. Additionally, most of the technologies used by the platforms to establish trust are oriented around the goal of making a consumer trust a provider. A transaction will take place, if there are enough "trust cues" (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 31), e.g., personal information, high ratings, and achievement badges, in place that make the consumer trust the provider. Consequently, the aim is to bring the consumer in such a state, that they are willing to trust the interaction partner. In sum, the transactional nature is a clear characteristic of instrumental trust.

The last point that is crucial for understanding instrumental trust is the immediacy with which it can be established. Reducing the needed time for the establishment is in line with the general

philosophy of the sharing economy platforms, as they crow with "simplicity, immediacy and speed" (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018, p. 29). These are all values that foster an environment that allows for efficient transactions. When engaging in such an environment, the overarching values promoted by the platform might influence the values of the users as well. The culture that gets worshipped at the top slowly trickles down and affects an individual's habits, values, and norms. Because sharing economy platforms value this immediacy it is only consistent that the instrumental version of trust that they promote also operates under this value. Thus, instrumental trust is earmarked by short establishment time, and a sense of immediacy.

2.6   The other end of the spectrum: Relational trust

In the following section, I will present a different conceptualisation of trust which I will call 'relational trust'. I will elaborate on and discuss some of its main features. I will show that these characteristics position relational trust at one end of an axis with instrumental trust located at the other. By providing this comparison, it becomes clear where precisely the differences between the two conceptualisations lie. The most important characteristics of relational trust are that it is valuable in itself, it relies on a relational understanding of individuals, and it is non-immediate.

The first aspect of importance when it comes to this conceptualisation of trust is that it does not revolve around transactions. What looks like a simple linguistic trick is in fact able to nicely capture the essence of this approach. Instead of saying "I trust you to do xyz", it is more accurate for relational trust to simply say "I trust you". Such an understanding of trust is actually quite similar to our understanding of other complex, social values such as love and friendship. People usually say, "I love you" and "I am your friend" and do not add a clause or a restriction to it, as for example in "I am your friend for getting a promotion" (Holton, 1994, p. 70). Such a conceptualisation of trust does not rely on any means that will be achieved through the two involved parties trusting each other, but instead, the value created lies in the establishment of the trusting relation itself. As such, relational trust does not operate in the classic "trust triad" (Baier, 1986, p. 336; Holton, 1994, p. 67), which composes itself out of person A who trusts person B with a valued thing. However, because relational trust is not instrumentalized for a further purpose, it is of dyadic nature (E.g., person A trusts person B).

Because relational trust is not outcome-oriented, it allows for a thicker conceptualisation of trust. With instrumental trust in the context of the sharing economy, what is accounted for by

indicating the trustworthiness of a person is simply how reliable they are with regards to payments, their punctuality, and additional aspects such as the cleanliness of the car or the shared apartment (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2021, p. 99; Slee, 2017, p. 91). On the one hand, by doing so, the understanding of trust is narrowed down to a few critical boxes that need to be ticked in order for a person to come across as trustworthy. But on the other hand, also the scope of further deductions with regards to the trustworthiness of a person that can be made is rather limited. Just because a person has a five-star rating on Airbnb, I am not able to tell whether I am safe to get in a car with this person. And vice versa, simply because my Uber driver is top rated, I would not feel confident spending the night at their place. Thus, instrumental trust provides a rather narrow, or thin understanding of trust.

Relational trust on the other hand would allow to draw the above-mentioned conclusions that seemed dubious. If two people establish relational trust between each other, the trust is not limited to one specific activity or one specific characteristic of the involved people. Rather, relational trust generates an "atmosphere" or an "environment" of trust (Niker & Sullivan, 2018, pp. 177 - 178) that allows the involved person also to be trusted with something where no previous record exists. As Holton (1994) puts it, when relational trust prevails, "I will in general be more ready to trust you" (p. 71). As such, relational trust is able to provide a more holistic assessment of trust and can thus be understood as thicker in comparison to instrumental trust.

The next point I want to mention, for clarity's sake, is that relational trust moves beyond the individualistic conceptualisation of trust and provide a relational, interpersonal, mutual understanding of it. With relational trust, the question is not what it takes for person A to trust person B, but rather what the involved individuals can do in order to foster a relationship that provides fruitful ground for trust to grow. It is not about measuring all the relevant features and synthesise them into a single trust score, but rather to understand and acknowledge the social embeddedness and the inherent relational character of human beings. Relational trust, according to such a worldview, can only be found within the interpersonal relationships of multiple people (Niker & Sullivan, 2018, p. 174).

Lastly, it should be pointed out, that such relational trust takes time to be established, again, similar to friendship and/or love (Holton, 1994, p. 71). It takes lots of repeated interactions, shared experiences and a deep understanding of each other to build such a relationship. As such, the immediateness with which instrumental trust is established stands in clear contrast to the slow-evolving, patiently growing relational trust.

2.7 What conceptualisation of trust does BlaBlaCar promote and facilitate?

Now that I have established two opposing conceptualisations of trust, instrumental trust and relational trust, I will analyse which of the two is more suitable for the kind of trust BlaBlaCar promotes. My analysis will be guided by their D.R.E.A.M.S. framework (see Figure 1) to establish trust as presented in their publication "Entering the Trust Age" (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016). As the letters in the acronym each stand for a specific aspect of their framework, I will discuss them in this order.

The first letter, D, stands for declared (information). What is meant by this is that users are encouraged to declare some key features about themselves, such as name, age, preferences and a short description about themselves, as well as to upload a photo (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016, p. 18). While it is certainly of fundamental importance for relational trust to have some basic information about the involved individual, it is not necessarily a prerequisite to know each other's precise age. Certainly, at some point during the development of the relationship, people's ages will get mentioned, but it is in no way as centrally featured as it is on BlaBlaCar profiles. In addition, as I have shown above, to provide this sort of information is one of the
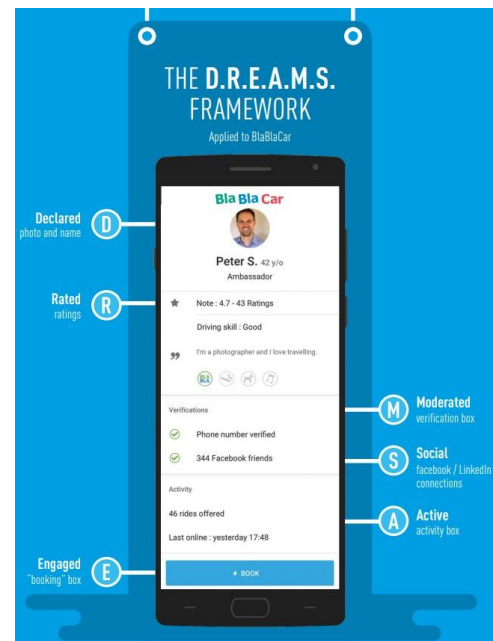

Figure 1: The D.R.E.A.M.S. framework of BlaBlaCar. Copied from Mazzella and Sundararajan (2016)

key methods sharing platforms use to establish instrumental trust. Thus, this first measure to establish trust lies clearly within the realm of instrumental trust.

The next letter in the acronym, R, stands for rated. This refers to the feedback mechanisms and peer-reviewed reputation BlaBlaCar relies on to establish trust (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016, p. 18). I have discussed the functioning of this specific system in great detail above, therefore I will not go into it again. Needless to say, for relational trust, no such aggregated score exists, and this mechanism is a clear feature of instrumental trust. [8]

In the acronym, E stands for engaged. The authors present it in such a way, that they connect the full engagement of an individual to their commitment, in specific their financial

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[8] In a TEDx talk delivered by BlaBlaCar's co-founder Frederic Mazzella, he highlights the immense savings in time and energy by using these reputation technologies. This further shows the importance of immediacy and efficiency for the sharing economy platforms. See TEDx Talks, 2012

commitment ahead of the shared ride (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016, p. 18). Having secure payment options is a typical characteristic of sharing economy platforms and one of their mechanisms to ensure a trustful environment. Because I understand this technique as primarily a method for the platform to present itself as trustworthy and is a necessary background condition for interpersonal trust to emerge, I have not discussed it in detail above. Similarly, since the two accounts of trust I have presented are exclusively about interpersonal trust, this specific feature of the framework fits neither of the two conceptualisations.

A stands for active. While the user's activity on the platform falls into this category, Mazzella and Sundararajan (2016) make it clear that it is also important to publicly publish this kind of information, such as the "level and frequency of a user's activity" as specified by the number of rides and an estimate within what timespan users can expect a reply from each other (p. 18). Even though it is not explicitly stated, publishing this kind of information is in essence the same as awarding badges, with the exception that the users in question have not earned a badge yet. As such, this method of establishing trust testifies to an instrumental version of trust. It might be objected that also interactions under relational trust people 'award' badges and certificates, albeit in a distinctively different form. Parents might let their children in on a family secret, and in this way show their trust. However, the standardized and comparable forms of the different badges within the sharing economy in general in with regards to BlaBlaCar in particular, are again along the lines of instrumental trust.

The second to last letter, the M, stands for moderated. In the context of BlaBlaCar, this refers mainly to the fact that the users have the option to let their profile be verified by a third party (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016, p. 18). The kind of information that can be verified on a profile are the contact or bank details. Such verification processes, to ensure that behind the profile is a real human, are characteristic mechanisms to establish instrumental trust.

The last letter in the acronym, S, refers to social. In this category falls the option for the users to connect their profile with "their existing online identity" (Mazzella & Sundararajan, 2016, p. 18). Basically, this means that there is a possibility for BlaBlaCar users to link their BlaBlaCar profile to their other social media accounts, yet again a common way amongst sharing economy platforms to establish instrumental trust between the users.

Taken together, it has become evident, that the kind of trust BlaBlaCar promotes on its platform clearly falls into the category of what I have called instrumental trust. Most of the technological tools BlaBlaCar uses are in the same or similar form also applied by various other sharing

economy players. The steps that the platform takes up to the point that people get in a car with a stranger are much aligned with the main sharing economy technique. Despite the high stakes involved with BlaBlaCar, they rely on the very same mechanisms as any other sharing economy platform and encourage the same kind of instrumental trust.

2.8   Conclusion

The goal of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, I set out to answer the call of Räisänen et al. (2021), to provide a clear definition of the kind of trust that is dealt with in the sharing economy (p. 8). This is what I have called instrumental trust. This conceptualisation was derived from the main actors in the sharing economy. In order to present its features more prominent, I juxtaposed it with a conceptualisation of trust that I called relational trust. In doing so, the discrepancy between the two was shown. Lastly, I analysed what kind of trust is advertised on the ride-sharing platform BlaBlaCar. By scrutinizing their proclaimed trust-establishing framework, I found that all its features are targeted towards establishing instrumental trust. This conceptualisation of trust is not only promoted in their marketing material, but it also underlies the technological tools they implement on their platform. While it is certainly hard to judge what users actually experience, the conceptualisation of trust that is embedded and promoted by BlaBlaCar is clearly instrumental. In this regard, this conceptualisation does not diverge much from the one of the major actors in the sharing economy. Despite the unique position of BlaBlaCar, the technology used serves the same ends and is informed by the same value conceptualisation.

The second aim of this chapter is to provide conceptual clarification with regards to trust in the context of the sharing economy. By specifying and separating the two conceptualisations linguistically, this conflict can be resolved. By comparing instrumental trust to a conceptualisation of trust that is diametrically opposed, the individual features can be carved out more pronounced. To simply merge them together under one big label 'trust' is not precise enough, misleads the participants of the platform and causes conceptual unclarity. Furthermore, it creates the image according to which instrumental trust is equivalent to trust in its entirety, which is clearly not the case.

However, there is one more way in which sharing economy platforms aim to foster trust among its participants, namely by creating a sense of community. In the text step, I will therefore

analyse the nature of these communities and establish the connection between trust, community, and solidarity.

3 The nature of sharing economy communities

3.1 Introduction

In chapter two I have shown the various mechanisms that sharing economy platforms use to establish instrumental trust between its users. However, there is one more technique they rely on, namely, to promote a sense of community among its members as various studies have shown (Celata et al., 2017, p.5; Ronteltap et al., 2020). The underlying assumption is that by fostering a sense of belonging to a community, people are more inclined to trust in-group members and consequently are more likely to share with each other. I want to challenge this assumption because I think that the simple fact of belonging to a certain community says little about the trustworthiness of its members. Even if we can describe various kinds of communities, such as online communities, geographic communities, or brand communities, simply describing the *kind* of community leaves open the question of if, and what kind of trust is or can be established among its members. For example, an active sports association might be constituted of members whose shared interests go beyond merely sporting together, and they might spend a lot of their free time together and even organize trips. Such a community most probably exhibits a different form of trust, than an association whose members exclusively join for practice and afterwards head straight home again.

The more general point that I am interested in is that, if there should be a link between being part of a community and being able to trust each other, there needs to be an additional criterion that tells us something about the kind of relations people have with each other in a specific community. I propose solidarity, and more precisely the specific kind of solidarity that prevails in a community, as a good indicator of this social cohesion.[9] Whereas trust usually revolves around a specific action that should or should not be taken (E.g., going into a car with a stranger), I use solidarity as a descriptive concept that informs about the social ties of a group. Rooted in the sociological tradition, I adopt the definition provided by Ter Meulen (2016) according to which solidarity is "the degree of social cohesion in a group or society whereby individuals, because of various motivations, are willing to serve and promote the collective interest of the group or of society" (p. 518). From this definition, we can understand solidarity as a concept that tells us something about the interpersonal relations in a group, namely the cohesion among its members.

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[9] For the scope of this thesis, I remain in the sphere of social solidarity as opposed to moral or political solidarity. For a distinction between the three, see Laitinen (2015).

The notion of solidarity is further suitable because it is able to characterise a community of strangers that unite for a common cause (Sangiovanni, 2015, p. 341; Scholz, 2023, p. 20). Because the sharing economy ultimately is about connecting strangers, to use the term solidarity to talk about the interactions between them is appropriate. Following the read thread from the previous two chapters, the focus on interpersonal interactions, such an understanding of solidarity adequately captures the scope of this research. The research question that will guide this chapter will therefore be: How can solidarity be conceptualised in its relation to trust to adequately characterise the BlaBlaCar community?

Importantly, as I will argue in more detail in the first section, trust and solidarity are closely connected. From the brief introduction above, it should not be too difficult to see how: The closer the social ties within a group, the more likely a member is to trust another. But the inverse is also true: The higher the levels of trust among the members of a group, the stronger the cohesion. Because of the close connection of these two concepts and following the recommendation of Löhr (2023a) to study networks of concepts (e.g., the relation between concepts) rather than isolated concepts, I will continue my investigation from the previous chapter by taking a closer look at solidarity.

In line with the previous chapter and the overall methodology of this thesis, I will introduce two specific sub-categories of solidarity in this chapter, namely instrumental solidarity and relational solidarity. As we will see, this overarching definition is able to capture both ends of the spectrum, making it a suitable definition and further proving that the two sub-categories are indeed *sub*-categories of a bigger concept. While the former is of a transactional nature and primarily concerned with the outcome of the collaboration, the latter starts from the conceptualisation of the individual as fundamentally socially embedded and crucially dependent on other members. Such a version of solidarity can ultimately lead to the emergence of a perceived 'we'.

After having established these two conceptualizations, the lines connecting the different sub-categories of trust and solidarity will be elaborated on. In doing so, I will also show how the different understandings affect the communities that exhibit the respective conceptualisations. After having established these connections, I will analyse the communities that exist within the sharing economy, and on which end of the spectrum they can be placed. Ultimately, I will scrutinize the BlaBlaCar community with the newly established tools in order to see what kind of solidarity can appropriately characterise its community.

3.2   The way in which trust, solidarity, and community are interdependent

First, it should be made explicit, that the notions of trust, solidarity, and community are interwoven and mutually influence each other, which also motivates the investigation into them. Because if there is conceptual unclarity about trust and it is closely related to solidarity, it is reasonable to assume that the concept of solidarity is affected as well. This is also the argument by Löhr (2023a) for analysing networks of concepts. In the following section, I will try to characterise these concepts to get a clearer understanding of each of them and show how they relate to each other.

In order to establish the connection between the three, I will start by establishing the connection between solidarity and community. Solidarity is a widespread concept and is applied in many different situations. For example, we say that teammates shave their heads 'in solidarity' with their friend who undergoes chemotherapy. Already from this example we see that there is an inherent communal aspect (the team) to solidarity. Consequently, acting in solidarity is not something that can be done alone. It needs at least one person (or group) acting in solidarity with another, making it an inherently intersubjective action. Especially if the focus is on solidaristic relationships, to only have one person involved would be similar to a one-sided love relationship (Laitinen, 2015, p. 149). Even forms of "private acts of solidarity" (Zhao, 2019), those acts where a single person privately stands in solidarity by boycotting a certain company, or by taking a moment of silence, are never in full isolation. These acts happen in support of another actor with which one can express one's solidarity with. As such, solidarity inherently requires at least two parties between which acts of solidarity can emerge and as a such, already situate solidarity in context of a group or community.

The way that researchers tend to link solidarity and community more generally, as is also evident from the definitions provided above, is by introducing the shared goals of a community, a common good or collective interest that is produced or strived for (Derpmann, 2015, pp. 115 – 116; Lindenberg, 2015, p. 32; Ter Meulen, 2016, p. 518). The idea is that when people start cooperating within a group, they do so in order to achieve a certain goal that would be inaccessible to the individual. To ensure the success of working together and that everyone adheres to the same goal, such a community start to implement a set of norms that should guide the actions of the members (Lindenberg, 2015, p. 30; Sangiovanni, 2015, p. 343). Because these actions are first and foremost concerned with regulating the cooperation in such a way as to best promote the collective commitment, Lindenberg (2015) calls them "solidarity norms" (p. 41). They are what ultimately unites people to work together, contribute to the identified goal

and allows them to operate within a community. Thus, within a community, solidarity describes the degree to which members adhere to these norms and based on this commitment, contribute towards the shared, overarching goal.

However, it is not always a given, that all the people have good intentions, or even act in accordance with the group interest. Simply because a person contributed once and adhered to the norms does not make it certain that they will do so again. Thus, an important temporal aspect is added to the group dynamics. The way these uncertainties are addressed is by introducing the concept of trust. When a group can trust that a crucial member will contribute with their skills until the goal is reached, it allows to establish a plan, that should mitigate the uncertainties about the future (Lindenberg, 2015, p. 39). As such, trust serves as a kind of tool to anticipate the future commitment of people towards the shared goals, and consequently the bigger the trust, the more safely the group can plan its actions. But trust is also directly connected to past events. When people enjoy a certain reputation or esteem, it is because of their actions and what they did in the past. As such, the possibility to trust another person, based on their reputation, is linked to their previous commitment towards a shared goal. The social esteem that some individuals enjoy is a result of living up to other people's expectations and in doing so confirm their trust.

It is on this basis that Lindenberg (2015) sees trustworthiness, as a particular important norm of solidarity (pp. 39 – 41). However, as is highlighted in the definition of Ter Meulen (2016), individuals can have various motivations why they commit to a community goal, leaving room for the possibility of free-riders, selfish behaviour or even deception. To simply claim to act in solidarity and thus contribute to a goal is not enough, group members also need to be able to trust each other that their motivation is sincere. It is on this basis, that one of Sangiovanni's (2024) criteria for a person to act in solidarity is established. He states, that acts of solidarity are possible, when "we trust each other to play their part in X and Y, trust each other's commitment, trust that we will not bypass each other's will, and trust each other to share one another's fate" (Sangiovanni, 2024, p. 17). People generally do not blindly act in solidarity with others, but rather they expect the other party to contribute as well. This expectancy towards the other manifests itself in the level (or lack) of trust that the involved actors can raise.

It is important to point out, that in most communities, there is a clear link between the group-specific goals and the extent to which people are expected to be committed. The goals, and consequently the obligations that arise at the workplace are completely different than those in a football club and those are different again to those in a revolutionary army (Derpmann, 2015,

p. 108). The extensiveness of the claims group members can have on others, and the demandingness of the expectations is to a large extent defined by the goals a community tries to achieve. To end global injustice is clearly a different scope than to win the next football game. Obviously, the goals alone do not determine the level of personal contribution, but they provide a good indication about what to expect from people. Therefore, the extent to which solidarity and trust are both necessary and can potentially be expected from the members is directly linked to the aims of a community.

In order to bring some conceptual clarification to the discussion and in line with the previous chapter, I argue that it is helpful to introduce two specific conceptualisations of solidarity. As such, these sub-categories can be a useful tool to more accurately characterize the interpersonal relationships and to specify the social cohesion in a particular community.

3.3   The characteristics of instrumental solidarity

In line with the conceptualisation of instrumental trust in the previous chapter, in this chapter I want to introduce the notion of instrumental solidarity. This specific conceptualisation of solidarity is rooted in an individualistic, contractual understanding of relationships that is outcome-oriented. It is based on relatively small overlaps of interest and narrow in scope. I will discuss these characteristics in turn.

The first aspect of instrumental solidarity is its contractual logic. Such a version of instrumental solidarity is conceptualized by Thijssen (2012), who highlights the contractual logic and rational considerations underlying this version of solidarity (p. 459). Crucial to his understanding of instrumental solidarity is the idea that the main driver for helping someone is an implicit accumulation of credit, an investment into the future, that positions the helper in a beneficial situation for potential future interactions (Thijssen, 2012, p. 463). In a similar vein conceptualises Hechter solidarity, who describes solidarity as a "function of the extensiveness of corporate obligations and the degree to which individual members actually comply with these obligations" (Thome, 1999, p. 106). Both these accounts have in common that the main driver for people to act in solidarity with another person or group is because in doing so, the person acting in solidarity a) benefits from the produced common goods and/or b) they can accumulate credit that will ultimately predispose the others to contribute again to the shared case. These rational, calculative considerations are what underlies the contractual character of instrumental solidarity.

Another feature that shines through in these rational considerations is the individualistic nature of instrumental solidarity. One of the reasons why a person might start engaging with a community in the first place is to achieve certain aims that the person alone would be incapable of achieving. During the cooperation, what keeps people in check and ensures ongoing contribution is the adversity that would result from possible sanctions of the group (Thome, 1999, pp. 106 – 107). Such an approach to cooperating on a common cause certainly gets the job done but the point of importance is that the underlying motivations emerge from an individualistic perspective on the collaboration. It is because the individual can gain something of importance to themselves that the decision to join the community is made to begin with.

The focus on what an individual can get out of a collaboration is also crucial for the next characteristics of instrumental solidarity. It is centred around the outcome, the ends of a shared action, with lesser attention on the collaboration itself. Because the main focus is on the goals that a community wants to achieve, this is also the main mechanism binding the individual members together. Due to the prominent position of the overarching aims, it is also only in direct reference to these aims that the communal obligations are determined and once a goal is achieved, there is no direct necessity to continue the collaboration (Harvey, 2007, pp. 23 – 24). The extensiveness of the obligations of members in a community that exhibits instrumental solidarity is restricted to a goal that is usually already known before individuals join the community. As a consequence, the general perception of these kinds of communities can be conceptualized in terms of a means to an end. Thanks to the communal collaboration, each involved actor is able to improve their own situation, something that could not be achieved by acting alone (Harvey, 2007, p. 24). Thus, the outcome of the cooperation is what attracts the most attention.

The last point that characterizes instrumental solidarity is the narrow scope in which it can be applied. As I have shown above, the main reason why people collaborate in instances of instrumental solidarity is because they want to achieve a goal that they are unable to achieve alone. While such a communal effort might be able to unite people from various backgrounds, it is also the only feature that brings these people together. As such, instrumental solidarity is restricted to a specific context and circumstances under which people are willing to act in solidarity with each other. Take as an example a small, local bakery. I value the specific pastry they provide; I cannot create them on my own and I cannot find them in the supermarket. The baker on the other hand can only survive with their business if enough people buy their products. Consequently, we both need each other to achieve our goals, be it to get delicious pastry or

make a living. Nevertheless, it is not directly clear from my commitment to shop at their bakery that I would also join the baker in a women's rights protest for example. The collective interest and with it the commitment between the baker and me is first and foremost centred around the product they provide, that I would like to buy. The instrumental solidarity between me and the baker might make me do a detour on my way home, or accept additional time to do groceries because in doing so, we contribute towards the goal of our transaction. Joining a protest would be completely detached from this goal and as such would at least require renegotiation of the solidarity norms between the baker and me. Thus, the scope of actions that follow from instrumental solidarity is rather narrow.

3.4   The characteristics of relational solidarity

I want to juxtapose this conceptualisation of solidarity with another, one that I call relational solidarity. While such a sub-category of solidarity originates from the same consideration that is used to highlight the connection between trust and solidarity, as I will show, it also clearly moves further. The central feature of this subcategory of solidarity is that it acknowledges every individual's social embeddedness and fundamental interdependence with other beings. From this starting point, several further characteristics of relational solidarity follow, namely the value in solidarity itself, the shared reality of a 'we' that can emerge, an accommodation of differences between individuals, and the flexibility of its applicability. In the following section, I will discuss each of these features in turn.

The first characteristic that I want to elaborate on is the social embeddedness of the individual. Such a view on solidarity asserts that it cannot be conceptualized exclusively from an individual's perspective, but rather, can predominantly be found in between people, in their connectedness with each other (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 288). As such, relational solidarity is a fundamental relational conceptualisation of the more overarching and general umbrella term solidarity (Hence the name). Such an understanding of solidarity relies on an understanding of the others not as "the limitation but the precondition of my own freedom" (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 295). It is by the acknowledgement of the profound importance of others in our own lives that relational solidarity is grounded. It stresses the social interwovenness of human beings and takes it as a starting point from which further characteristics follow.

One of the aspects that emerges out of a commitment to social relations is that relational solidarity has value in itself instead of having predominantly instrumental value for the people

involved. As such, relational solidarity is in line with the claim of other scholars who advocate for an understanding of solidarity that is non-instrumental (Ter Meulen, 2016, pp. 525 – 526). The idea that solidarity can have value in itself emerges from the understanding that people are dependent on each other, even when formulating their goals. As such, relational solidarity moves beyond the calculated cooperation of two individuals to achieve their own goals, because they are simply incapable of describing their goals apart from the goals of the other (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 293). At the core of such an understanding is the idea that the advancement of others is significant in the success of projects which are important to me (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 292).

In communities where relational solidarity prevails, there is increased likelihood that something emerges that goes beyond the self and the other. Many scholars have labelled this entity as a 'we' which develops in certain solidaristic communities (Derpmann, 2015, p. 119; Jaeggi, 2001; Ter Meulen, 2016, p. 524). According to Baum, such a 'we-ness' rests on "a perceived fit of commonality, contrast, and complementarity between actors" (Baum, as cited in Thome, 1999, p. 108). In order to achieve common goals, people who act in relational solidarity with each other come to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual actor contributing towards the goal. The resulting sense of the community as being a collective entity, something that is larger than what its constitutive members make up can lead to such a strong identification with the group that the self/other distinction becomes less relevant (Zhao, 2019, p. 7). This again shows the relational character predominant in this sub-version of solidarity.

The above-mentioned 'we-ness' is further crucial because it not only highlights the acceptance but also the appreciation of individual differences that are necessary for relational solidarity to flourish. A community at large can benefit from individual specialisations and differentiations because it allows for fitting distribution of labour (García Martínez, 2022, p. 218; Scholz, 2015, p. 728). It is not that people act in solidarity with each other despite their differences, but precisely because of their individualities. To accommodate for the "radical pluralism of liberal societies" (p. 102) is also a concern for Honneth, which ultimately culminates in his theory of recognition (Honneth, as cited in Thome, 1999). Out of the interactive relationships between individuals, a shared "value horizon" (Honneth, 1996, p. 126) can emerge, against which the actions towards the common goals can be evaluated. Due to the shared horizon, people are able to recognize the various contributions of other individuals and get recognition for their own contribution towards the shared goal. Such a conceptualisation of solidarity thus relies on and appreciates the different ways of life.

The last important aspect that results from the social embeddedness of every individual and the subsequent emergence of a 'we' is that the nature of this developing entity is not in any way predefined, but rather is freely mouldable of the actors involved. The community acting in solidarity with each other can actively shape the background horizon (Honneth, 1996) and/or the "social bonds and interdependencies" (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 298) respectively, in order to create a common entity that encompasses all the different ways of being in the world. What such an understanding of the shared group essence ultimately allows for, is to expand its horizon and thus the scope of people that can be part of the community. Because the 'we' in a relational group setting "is not simply 'given' but has to be constituted" (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 299), the dimensions of the solidaristic sphere are extendable both in terms of people included but also with regards to the scope of actions. As such, the diversity of actions that can be reasonably requested while not pushing the limits of the communal obligations increases in groups that display relational solidarity.

3.5 The relations between specific conceptualisations of trust and solidarity and the consequences for the community

Now that I've established two conceptualisations of solidarity and specified their characteristics, I will connect these to the specific conceptualisations of trust I introduced in the previous chapter. To make this connection further allows to shed some light on the characteristics of the respective communities that exhibit either version of it.

The first point that I want to stress though, is that both trust and solidarity, the way I introduced and conceptualized them, and their various forms are not clearly demarcated from other subcategories. At best, instrumental trust/solidarity and relational trust/solidarity can be seen as two opposing ends on a continuum. The borders of these categories potentially are fuzzy, blurry, and frayed, and one characteristic might even be found to a small degree at the other end of the spectrum. Therefore, not necessarily all the described characteristics need to fit neatly into communities, but they should provide a sense of orientation that allows a better understanding of the dynamics at play within those groups. In fact, this unclear distinction even follows from the previously introduced mouldable nature of the 'we' in solidaristic communities. If we are able to shape the community values and goals, it does not come as a surprise, that instrumental solidarity can turn into relational solidarity and vice versa. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine such developments when associations become tighter, or the social ties become looser. As such, the borders between different sub-versions are very permeable.

Having said that, it should nevertheless be possible to characterise communities with the help of the concepts introduced in this and the previous chapter, at least on a conceptual level. Due to the nature of instrumental solidarity, it can be expected that communities that exhibit predominantly this kind of solidarity tend to exhibit norms that are primarily oriented towards achieving the agreed-upon goal. In line with the established instrumental solidarity is the tendency that the commitment of the individual is equally centred around achieving this goal. As such, the commitments that can be expected of people are precisely targeted to meet a specific aim, but it is difficult to translate them to different scenarios with different needs. This was precisely the point in the bakery example introduced earlier. Relying on the task-specificity of instrumental trust, these kinds of communities ensure that members get what they signed up for. As such, these communities operate within the contractual logic characteristic to both instrumental trust and solidarity. Establishing instrumental trust between the members is thus a suitable way to ensure the smooth and efficient execution of the task at hand. There might not be a particularly strong shared background amongst the members, but there is also hardly any need for it. The power of instrumental communities is to efficiently achieve the shared goal.

On the other hand, in communities that show mainly relational solidarity, the goals and values that the members of such a community can strive towards tend to be broader in scope and debatable. While there might still be one single overarching goal, there are multiple ways in which to contribute towards it, which can ultimately lead to a multitude of different actions taken. Because it is not necessarily clear what the role and contribution of an individual will look like before actively engaging with the community, the array of potential instances where members rely on trust and solidarity is rather wide. As a consequence, people occasionally need to trust each other with actions where no specific record exists. The atmosphere of trust characteristic of relational trust enables communities to do precisely that, thereby opening up the possibility and fostering the emergence of relational solidarity. As such, communities that operate predominantly within the realms of relational solidarity also tend to rely on relational trust for their functioning.

Additionally, I would assume that groups which display relational solidarity understand their members as fundamentally embedded, dependent, and connected to their social surroundings. Because of such an understanding, the structures of social cooperation prevailing within a group come to be the necessary background conditions that allow an individual to thrive (Jaeggi, 2001, p. 295). Such an understanding of the self within a social setting is also at the core of relational trust, which further highlights the close relation between these two specific subcategories of

trust and solidarity. Consequently, communities that demonstrate predominantly relational solidarity, are most likely also associated with relational trust.

3.6   The characteristics of the communities that are promoted in the sharing economy

After having established the spectrum of solidarity and how it relates to the communities among which it emerges, I now want to analyse the sharing economy in light of these novel insights.

The first point of importance when analysing the community of any sharing economy platform is the fact that, for a number of reasons, the platforms fundamentally rely on an active community for the proper functioning of the system and for value creation. If there is no one offering their room on Airbnb, there is also no one renting it and consequently, the platform cannot collect a margin of the transaction. Thus, having an active network is central for sharing economy actors (Reischauer & Mair, 2018, p. 230). As I have already shown in chapter one, resulting from such a centrality is the incentive for the community to grow, resulting in an increase of transactions. However, with an increase in size, comes also an increase in managerial technologies to administer the community (Celata et al., 2017, p. 361). Platforms use a variety of means to create this sense of community, as was the motivation for this chapter, and one of them is to actively elicit this communal sense (Celata et al., 2017, p. 361). Furthermore, one of the common goods that the sharing economy community creates is the proper functioning of the reputation systems (Slee, 2017, p. 144). Without members who actively rate and review each other, the proper functioning of the platform could not be sustained. All these points show how the community is put to instrumental use by the sharing economy businesses, but this does not necessarily translate to the interactions between the members.

However, the instrumental understanding of the community seems to influence the interactions between the individuals as well. The way in which people engage in Airbnb or Uber is mostly contractual and individualistic. People order an Uber because they want to get from A to B, not because they want to have an inspiring interaction. The fact that most hosts are no longer present when renting an Airbnb shows the same development (Celata et al., 2017, p. 360). This is why, Reischauer and Mair (2018) call these platforms "transaction platforms [that] offer the means to complete a contract" (p. 227). Operating under such a logic, these platforms are highly outcome-oriented, because people use them for the speciality of the shared asset they offer, that they would like to get. This uniqueness in the offers also points to the limited scope of the aims

strived towards in the community. The goal on Airbnb is to find a room, and not to share a ride. All these features point to a rather instrumental understanding of solidarity that prevails in the general sharing economy community. Because these communities are largely built on instrumental trust, as I have shown in chapter two, it is no surprise that also instrumental solidarity dominates.

3.7   Where does BlaBlaCar fit into the picture?

The only thing that is now left to do is to analyse what kind of solidarity is most likely at play in the case of BlaBlaCar. The main question that I will address in this section is whether the BlaBlaCar community can best be described by instrumental or relational solidarity.

The first point to highlight is that equally to all the other sharing economy actors, also for BlaBlaCar, the community is the place of value creation. Without people offering and accepting free seats, there would be no profit to be made for BlaBlaCar. Likewise, BlaBlaCar fundamentally relies on participants to rate and review each other, otherwise the reputation system would not work. And lastly, as much as any other platform, so does BlaBlaCar elicit a sense of community to foster trust among its members. Therefore, from the platform's perspective, community is first and foremost of instrumental value.

Following from such an instrumental understanding is the first point that I want to mention, namely the transactional nature of the cooperation in the context of BlaBlaCar. Certainly, the entire setup that precedes the ridesharing is highly transactional in character. The right trip gets singled out, pick-up and drop-off points get agreed upon, and lastly money is transferred. By adhering to the platform norms, the involved parties can benefit from the common good that is created, namely, to travel cheaply. In leaving a review after the ride, people help each other to build trust capital, which, if appropriate, puts them in a favourable position for future transactions with other members. Seen in such a light, the solidarity that enables such a cooperation is clearly instrumental in nature.

From the clearly defined goal the next feature characteristic for BlaBlaCar can be pinpointed, namely the clearly defined boundaries of the scope of solidaric actions. People want to have a cheap option to travel, or a compensation for taking other people as passengers. Norms that provide guidance and actions that result in a smooth execution are exclusively focused on this task. As such, it comes as no surprise that Arcidiacono and Pais (2021) identified in their empirical study that BlaBlaCar-users understand the act of giving each other feedback in the

form of ratings as a "social norm" (p. 98), because such a commonly agreed upon contribution does indeed facilitate that others can achieve the goal as well. As such, the feedback mechanism does its job well, but it is also fundamentally limited to providing information relevant to ridesharing with a stranger. To extrapolate from such a rating on any other case, would certainly be a gamble and to expect members to even contribute to any other case is at least uncertain. For example, it could potentially be expected from passengers to help change a tyre in case of a puncture during the ride, because it is clearly connected to the shared goal. On the other hand, letting a person sleep in the car because they have no place to stay would highly depend on the two people involved and is anything but a given. Such a highly specific application of solidaristic actions, characteristic of instrumental solidarity, can thus also be found in the case of BlaBlaCar.

In line with this understanding is the fact that the main interest for people to engage with BlaBlaCar is out of economic interests (Setiffi & Lazzer, 2018, p. 87). Nevertheless, people also enjoy the social aspect of BlaBlaCar, however only under the condition that they are able to save money (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2021, p. 90). People have a specific place they want to go, and if there emerges an interesting conversation on the way, this is a bonus. As such, originating out of a very transactional, outcome-oriented interaction, something more can potentially emerge. During the many hours spent in the car together, participants might be able to change position along the solidarity spectrum. Even though the goal was initially defined, the likelihood that the goal changes or becomes secondary is significantly higher in BlaBlaCar when compared to the big sharing economy players. Such a possibility highlights the flexibility with which BlaBlaCar participants walk along the spectrum of solidarity, and how they perceive the community. Despite the platform being of transactional nature, the unique features of BlaBlaCar, as carved out in chapter one, allow for the initially defined goal to be adapted, which points in the direction of relational solidarity.

Furthermore, one aspect of relational solidarity is that it values individual differences in ways of being and contribution towards a shared value horizon. If we take the statements of BlaBlaCar users seriously, that they want to meet strangers and have interesting conversations (Setiffi & Lazzer, 2018), then interpersonal differences are a key resource to draw from. Broadening one's own sociocultural horizon through discussion with strangers is a perfect example of a project that cannot be conducted alone. It is based on a socially embedded understanding of the individual, that values the cultural richness that diversity has to offer.

Consequently, engaging in BlaBlaCar with such a mindset clearly predisposes a person to see the community through a relational solidarity lens.

In sum, despite being a transaction platform, the unique features of BlaBlaCar allow it to move away from the instrumental end of solidarity. The sociability with which people engage in the ride-sharing activity can benefit a lot from interpersonal differences and as such contribute to a more relational understanding of the community. However, such an approach to carpooling is highly personal and it is therefore difficult to extrapolate to the entire community. Nevertheless, BlaBlaCar is certainly better situated than the hegemonic players in terms of realising alternative modes of communities and as such circumventing reified forms of life.

3.8   Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to analyse the concept of community as it is used by sharing economy actors. I proposed the notion of solidarity as a measuring stick that can provide information about the interactions in a community. By establishing a foundation that showed the relation between trust, community and solidarity, it became clear, that the overarching notion of 'solidarity' is simply too broad to capture the range of different social interactions possible between humans. In order to address this issue, I introduced and juxtaposed two conceptualisations of solidarity, namely instrumental and relational solidarity. After the major characteristics of them were presented, I highlighted the connection between instrumental and relational trust and solidarity respectively and showed how it influences the understanding of the community. In the last step, I scrutinized the sharing economy to see whether it shows more characteristics of instrumental or relational solidarity. Clearly, the instrumental aspect outweighs the relational ones.

The case for BlaBlaCar was slightly more complicated. While it certainly operates under the same technological and economic necessities, the unique features of the long-distance ridesharing allow for people to move along the solidarity spectrum. By not only accepting but also valuing individual differences, relational solidarity within the BlaBlaCar community can emerge. As a consequence, BlaBlaCar does not exclusively rely on the instrumental conceptualisation of solidarity, as has been the case for trust.

Answering the research question of this chapter also allowed for additional conceptual clarification of trust's neighbouring concept of solidarity. Because of their intertwinement, the uncertainty of application in one equally affects the other. With the distinction between

instrumental and relational conceptualisations of these two concepts, I contributed to clarifying their usage. By introducing the same subcategories for trust and solidarity, the solution provided fits neatly into the proposal by Löhr (2023a), to analyse networks of concepts.

Furthermore, by theorizing about the way in which the respective conceptualisations affect people's behaviour, expectations, and commitment, I was able to create the vocabulary required to talk about the interpersonal interactions within the context of the sharing economy.

4   Conclusion

The research conducted in this thesis was motivated by the lack of clarity surrounding the interpersonal interactions enabled by actors in the sharing economy as well as a divergent understanding of the sharing economy itself. Furthermore, the technologies used to enable the interactions between strangers in the sharing economy caused some conceptual unclarity with regards to the notion of trust.

The first chapter was thus an attempt to address the root of the problem and to provide an introduction to the sharing economy, a cohesive summary of its main features as well as the points of criticism that has been raised against it. Throughout the analysis, it became clear that the main actors within the sharing economy could not live up to the original promises such as empowering ordinary people and enabling sharing in an egalitarian way. Furthermore, it even incentivises self-branding and competition among the participants. However, the critique is often inferred from a handful big actors in the field and then extrapolated to the sharing economy in its entirety. In order to get a more nuanced understanding of the sharing economy, I grounded my investigation in one specific case, namely BlaBlaCar. Due to the unique features of BlaBlaCar, I showed that the criticism does not apply to BlaBlaCar very well. This new insight puts the criticism directed at the sharing economy into perspective, as it clearly shows that it does not apply to every single actor. It further motivated a closer investigation of BlaBlaCar and the values influencing the interactions facilitated by the platform.

One very important concept in the sharing economy is trust, yet up to this point it remained rather ambiguous how researchers used it (Räisänen et al., 2021). This is why, in the second chapter, I investigated the technology used by the sharing economy actors to allegedly foster trust. Adhering to the same methodological approach throughout the thesis, I compared two opposing ends of a spectrum that represent different ways of conceptualising trust. Resulting from such a juxtaposition the specific features have been made explicit and two specific subcategories of trust, namely instrumental and relational trust, have been established. This comparison highlighted that in order to make BlaBlaCar work, the company relies on a very specific, instrumental understanding of trust, which leaves alternative ways of understanding neglected.

By orienting my conceptualisation of instrumental trust at the technologies sharing economy platforms use to establish it, I managed to articulate a specific conceptualisation of trust that is

predominant in the sharing economy. In doing so, I provided a reliable definition of trust that is now placed at the disposal of actors concerned with trust in the sharing economy. As such, it can be used to assess the way the platforms (do not) make use of the distinction. In the case of BlaBlaCar, the interpretation of trust is left to the (potential) participants, which might lead to some fundamental mismatch between various understandings. This is problematic because it might create false expectations that can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction and ultimately to a termination of participation.

Furthermore, the introduction of instrumental trust contributed to conceptual clarification and as such is align with the framework adopted for this thesis. While it has been questioned if these technologies are indeed able to foster trust between the participants, or whether trust is even the right concept, I argued that this specific conceptualisation of trust can appropriately describe the interactions in the sharing economy. This does not exclude the option, as I have shown, to conceptualise trust differently.

The third chapter of this thesis was concerned with neighbouring concepts of trust, namely solidarity and community. I proposed solidarity as a suitable characteristic to describe a community. Again, using the methodology of establishing a spectrum with two opposing conceptualisations, I introduced the notion of instrumental and relational solidarity. Similar to instrumental trust, instrumental solidarity relies on an individualistic, contractual understanding of the relationships and is outcome oriented with a very specific focus. Relational solidarity on the other hand leaves room to shape the common goal of the community, is valuable in itself and profits from individual differences.

I argued that the communities in the sharing economy in general tend to exhibit primarily instrumental solidarity. Rooting from an instrumental dependency on the community on behalf of the platform operators, the interactions among participants tends to be on the instrumental side as well. Despite using very much the same mechanisms to foster a sense of community, BlaBlaCar is able to move away from the instrumental end of solidarity towards a more relational understanding. As I have shown, BlaBlaCar manages to make use of the individual difference among its participants in such as way that it contributes to a relational conceptualisation of solidarity. Furthermore, the features that set the ridesharing of BlaBlaCar apart from other offers in the sharing economy also contribute to a community that is more on the relational side of solidarity than the communities of the major actors of the sharing economy.

Because the conceptualisations I present are grounded in the technology used by most of the sharing economy actors, the specific conceptualisations can be used to characterise the interactions facilitated by most of these actors. As I have shown, these interactions are most likely to fall into the category of instrumental interactions, enabled by instrumental trust and solidarity. While there is nothing inherently bad per se in these interactions, it nevertheless only represents a small fraction of all the possible ways people can interact with each other. With regards to the utopian dream of the sharing economy that motivated this thesis, e.g., to make meaningful connections and rediscover humanness, it is certainly questionable whether a merely instrumental interaction fosters these aspired meaningful interactions. There is a clear contradiction between what the main sharing economy actors promote to do and the values that are embedded in the technological instruments they use to achieve this goal. Highlighting this controversy brings new material to the discussion by presenting a new line of critique towards the sharing economy.

4.1   Limitations of the study

My investigation of BlaBlaCar was mostly grounded in their marketing material. This material can be quite powerful, because this is what companies use to present themselves to the public, often in a favourable light. It creates an influential narrative of the company and the interactions that it enables. To look behind this façade can help rendering the culture of BlaBlaCar tangible and unambiguous and allows for a well-grounded decision on behalf of the participants whether they want to join this cooperation or not. However, using a lot of marketing material also comes with some limitations. While it can be reasonable expected that the material indeed represents the company's values, it is a different question whether it actually reaches and influences the target audience. Even though the potential impact that this promotional material can have, it is no guarantee that it actually has the desired effect on the participants. Nevertheless, I am convinced, that by grounding my research also in the technology in use, the analysis is at least of conceptual value. In addition, further research could make use of this framework to see whether other services within the sharing economy also promote these kinds of interactions and in doing so, make explicit norms and customs in other sharing activities.

One limitation of this thesis is that it contains only empirical material from authors investigating BlaBlaCar with a different question in mind and the marketing material of BlaBlaCar itself. While this literature was certainly crucial to build my argument, my attempt to accurately describe a real-world phenomenon lacks some empirical evidence. As a consequence, the

theoretical elaborations can neither be confirmed nor disproved based on collected data of participants in the sharing economy. Such data would be of high value, as it would provide insights into the way in which participants perceive their interactions and specifically question their understanding of relations, trust, solidarity, and community. In order to further strengthen my distinction between instrumental and relation conceptualisations, it would be of great value to test these concepts in the field.

4.2   Future recommendations

Within this thesis, there was only space to investigate the proper functioning of the technologies and the interactions that result from them. However, it would be interesting to analyse instances where trust in other people was misplaced. Since instances, where people trust each other but get disappointed, existed long before the emergence of the sharing economy, it can be assumed that such cases also happen within the sharing economy. If a friend of mine promised to pick me up at the airport but failed to do so, the least I can expect is some explanation for the behaviour. Maybe they had good reasons to miss the appointment. Depending on the outcome of the discussion, I might consider twice whether to ask that same friend if I ever need a lift again. Thus, the basis on which the mutual trust was built underwent some shaking. However, it is unclear how such a situation would translate into the sharing economy environment. What would be the consequences if I booked an apartment, but upon arrival I realised that the apartment had fewer beds than promised? Or how should I react if the driver who offered me a ride never arrives at the agreed pick-up location? One possibility is of course to leave a bad review on the account of the responsible provider, but is that a proper way for people to address misused trust? And what would be the consequences of a practice of publicly denounce people for failing to meet an agreement? Further research could investigate these instances where the system fails, where the smooth functioning gets interrupted, and consequently, the basis upon which trust is built gets disrupted.

While researchers can make use of the established conceptual clarification to analyse different actors within the sharing economy, it would further be interesting to see if the newly found conceptualisations of personal relations, trust, and solidarity also can be found in other cases outside the sharing economy. Because these are crucial values when thinking of community and relations to other people, it would be interesting to see how other actors that specifically focus on these aims navigate the instrumentality of trust and solidarity. A good example is FriendMatch, a website exclusively dedicated to meeting new friends (FriendMatch, 2024). The

goal of the people using this service seems pretty clear: To meet new friends. Maybe they moved to a different country and want to be integrated better or feel less lonely. This would hint towards rational considerations. In that regard, it could be argued that these services rely on instrumental trust and solidarity for their functioning. However, the goal of this instrumental engagement is motivated by a desire to move towards the relational end of the spectrum (That is of course, presumed the soon-to-be-found friends should not be treated as means to an end). Because of this clear intention to move along the spectrum, this presents an interesting case. Analysing such cases could provide more insight into what it takes for relations between people to change position on the spectrum, e.g., what it takes for individuals to experience trust and solidarity differently.

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