Article

Fostering Community Values through Meal Sharing with Strangers

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Abstract: This paper studies a Dutch meal sharing platform in order to understand what it means to engage in face-to-face sharing with strangers and what the performance of such transactions entails. I hypothesize that this meal sharing platform is a form of community self-organization, aiming to replace the anonymity of the food system by the creation of community relations through sharing. I used semistructured interviews, participant observations, and autoethnography to investigate the social aspects involved in this type of sharing. Focusing on rules of engagement, trust, exchange, and commodification, I argue that while first encounters in stranger food sharing may be awkward, people enter the transaction from a perspective of trust. While sharing meals through this platform is a form of true sharing and no direct reciprocity is required, consumers see their appreciation for the meals as a way to reciprocate. In that sense, positive reviews consolidate the relations between cook and consumer. Money also plays an important role in the transaction, enabling it to take place as it clarifies roles and responsibilities and shows genuine interest. However, commodification also means that users are looking for value for money, while simultaneously they expect the price to reflect the initiative's "noncommercialness". I conclude that there is a clear social element in this particular type of meal sharing that distinguishes it from more mainstream economic transactions. Being based on real connections, this particular performance of sharing is a way to socialize the economy, and to tackle local community problems.

1. Introduction

Sharing has always happened among close kin family members and friends [1,2] but—especially in industrialized urban societies—digital technology has enabled new forms of sharing, such as those associated with the sharing economy. Although the term sharing economy is generally used to refer to people engaging in sharing activities in organized systems or networks, its broad range of activities, from renting rooms (e.g., Airbnb) and cars (e.g., Zipcar) to sharing tools (e.g., Peerby), hampers a clear understanding of what "counts" as sharing. For instance, larger commercial initiatives as Airbnb and Uber are strongly critiqued for failing to act out their role [3] or misusing the sharing narrative as a "thin veneer to hide a predatory business model" [2] (p. 3), potentially disrupting established businesses [4,5]. These initiatives stand in contrast to other, more local and grassroots sharing initiatives, considered anticapitalist [6], and surrounded by a narrative of collaboration and community [3]. Several initiatives within this last category of sharing qualify as self-organizing communities.

Self-organization involves informal practices "that concern different forms of collective action [and] social activism related to proactive civic engagement" [7] (p. 86). Self-organization in urban areas specifically can be defined as "an intentional placed-based and spatially anchored, grass-root and collective phenomenon" [8] (p. 231). In other words, self-organization concerns community members trying to tackle community problems [7], which sharing initiatives of the second type described above

often aim to do. One sector in which community self-organization occurs is the alternative food sector. Citizens organize themselves so as to create alternatives to our current globalized food system, which is heavily critiqued for several reasons, such as its detrimental environmental effects [9], the distance between food producers and consumers [10,11], and the social inequality between those who do and those who do not have access to healthy food [12]. Indeed, while academic and popular accounts of the food system often focus on its shortcomings, "[t]here are a myriad of diverse ways that food economies are being rethought and differently enacted" [13] (p. 1). Examples of community self-organization in the field of food are community supported agriculture projects, farmers' markets, and community gardens.Such initiatives change the food system itself, and food, as such, is also used as a tool to create stronger communities. Sharing platforms as FoodSharing and Mealby bring community members together through food and meal sharing. This is also the aim of Thuisafgehaald (TA), the focus of this paper. This Dutch meal sharing platform enables people to share home-cooked meals with people they do not know, but whom they meet face-to-face when platform users pick up the meal at the cook's house. Although not specifically studied, a first impression is that TA does not particularly induce a more environmentally sustainable food system: (1) TA initially aimed to reduce food waste by having cooks offer leftover meals, but in reality cooks prepare food specifically in order to share; (2) the platform may increase food miles as consumers need to visit the cook to pick up the meal; and (3) TA does not request the use of specific ingredients such as organic or fair-trade. However, sharing activities like this entail economic transactions that are differently approached, executed, and evaluated than transactions associated with the mainstream market economy and the globalized food system. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate what such face-to-face sharing with strangers entails, concentrating on the social elements related to the performance of the transaction.

My argument is as such: food and meal sharing initiatives can be seen as a form of community self-organization, aiming to bring people together over food. In that sense, these initiatives do not so much offer an alternative to the food system itself. Instead, they aim to increase and strengthen social relations in the neighborhood by transforming economic transactions. Transactions take place between peers, rather than that individuals interact with large mainstream (food) corporations: anonymity is being replaced by connections. In the literature on alternative food networks, such changing social relations and economic transactions have been connected to concepts as proximity (e.g., Renting et al. [14]) and reconnecting (e.g., Kneafsey et al. [11]). While these concepts may indeed apply to meal sharing as it is practiced in TA, an important difference with alternative food networks is that TA connects peers rather than primary producers and consumers—cooks prepare meals, but do not reconnect consumers with food production as such. Moreover, cooks may well acquire the ingredients for their meals from the globalized food system. Meal sharing is thus used to reconnect people through (rather than with) food: by increasing social interactions and connectivity between individuals such urban self-organization can nonetheless increase proximity [8].

Nevertheless, despite the "socially-progressive feel-good rhetoric" [2] (p. 3) that surrounds smaller, community-initiated food and meal sharing initiatives, Cruz et al. [5] warn us that the social reality of sharing is complex. The dichotomy sketched above, between companies using the sharing rhetoric for economic gain and self-organized communities aiming to create a better world, is obviously too simple. The "nitty gritty of sharing practices" can be found between both extremes [15] (p. 279). This implies that the sharing economy should be seen as pluralist rather than monolithic, suggesting that it offers options for a more cooperative economy as it portrays possibilities of doing economy differently [3]. By presenting performances of transactions within meal sharing, I aim to add to an understanding of this plurality of sharing activities. That way I intend to increase knowledge of self-organizing communities, specifically regarding the sociality of transactions performed through and within such communities. Such a social entry point is important, as research on the sharing economy has so far mostly focused on economic and technical aspects of sharing [15]. I concentrate on how sharing transactions are being experienced and come about, specifically investigating the daily reality and lived experience of sharing.

In the next section I describe the case study—the meal sharing platform Thuisafgehaald—and the methods used to study it. I then present the results in four different sections, each starting with a vignette originating from my field notes. These vignettes function as illustrations of and starting points for discussing the elements that distinguish the transactions in this sharing platform from more regular market transactions: rules of engagement, trust, exchange, and commodification. In the discussions and conclusion section I argue that while consumers are not necessarily motivated by the social aspects of meal sharing, these aspects are an important part of its performance, distinguishing it from other, more mainstream economic activities. This implies that while the meal sharing platform does not contribute to a more environmentally sustainable food system, it does create opportunities for a food system that fosters community values. Finally, I argue that by linking cooks and consumers in the neighborhood, TA works towards solving local community problems.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Thuisafgehaald

The Dutch online platform Thuisafgehaald ("Picked up from home"), which will referred to as TA in the rest of the paper, was launched in 2012 as a social enterprise. It is a meal sharing platform, on which people who like to cook (cooks) share their meals with others (consumers) for a monetary compensation. TA is supply-oriented: cooks offer meals, setting prices, and a time slot and location for pick-up. Consumers browse the website for cooks and meals or sign up for emails with current meal offers. Meals are offered the same day or up to two days in advance. Consumers send the cook a request for a meal on offer, which the cook then confirms. See Figure 1 for a graphic representation of the ordering process. The price of a meal is set at an amount that covers grocery costs, sometimes including a little extra for gas. An average meal costs €4.50. Consumers pick up the meal at the set time at the cook's home. Hence, while the match between cook and consumer takes place at the platform, the actual transaction takes place in the cook's kitchen. This implies that unless cook and consumer have previously engaged in a transaction, they have not met when agreeing on the exchange. Digital pre-face-to-face meeting communication before the actual exchange is limited. The meal request sent by the consumer admits a few lines but is basic: TA advice is to write how many meals are requested at what specific time. The cook's acceptance email contains address information and possibly personalized greetings.

Figure 1. Thuisafgehaald's (TA's) ordering process. Translation: (1) Register, (2), Order, (3) Pick-up and meet, and (4) Eat at home. Source: Thuisafgehaald [16].

TA is the biggest meal sharing platform in the Netherlands, currently consisting of approximately 10,000 cooks and 70,000 consumers [17]. Figure 2 shows the availability of meals in Utrecht, where TA originally started. The TA website lists guidelines that advise on cooking hygienically, linking to a letter by the Dutch Authority on Food and Wares which states that if a charity or similar organization works according to these guidelines it meets health and safety regulations as put down in the law [16]. TA is a social enterprise and does not make a profit, which distinguishes it from other meal sharing

platforms [18]. Cooks consider themselves volunteers: while some home cooks use the platform to gradually engage in professional catering, for most cooks their participation is a hobby [19]. The platform is financed by subsidies, and by a commission of ten percent per transaction. TA defines profit in social and sustainable terms with the chief aim to improve the world by contributing social and sustainable added-value to society [16]. TA's aim is "All about making something valuable (like leftover food) end up where it is needed (with hungry neighbors)" [16]. (All Dutch phrases used on the website, as well as interview quotes and field note excerpts, were translated by the authors.) TA's goals are thus mainly ideological: (1) connecting strangers who live in the same neighborhood through the sharing of meals; (2) providing homemade meals to people who (temporarily) cannot prepare a hot meal themselves; and (3) offering a healthier, homemade alternative to fast-food for those who are not willing or able to prepare a hot meal themselves [16]. The website also matches people who are (temporarily) unable to cook for themselves, such as elderly or disabled people, with a cook who prepares them a meal on a regular basis (e.g., once a week) and brings that meal over. This service is not the topic of this paper. Although the benefits of the sharing economy are often assumed rather than proven [2], research suggests that the platform does create long-term matches between cooks and consumers, with both personal and societal added value (e.g., enabling people to live independently) [20]. Seeing that TA aims to use healthy meals to connect people—and thus consists of community members trying to tackle real community problems—it can be considered a form of self-organization.

Figure 2. Meals available in Utrecht (dark blue pans refer to meals currently offered; light blue pans refer to cooks not currently offering meals). Source: Thuisafgehaald [16].

2.2. Methods

TA consists of two main user groups—home cooks and consumers. This paper is mainly based on the experiences of consumers (two other papers discuss home cooks: Veen and Dagevos [19] and Dagevos and Veen [21]). I used two main methods to study TA: semistructured interviews and participant observations. Fifteen consumers were interviewed by MSc student Lian Angelino. (I supervised the thesis project of Lian Angelino. We discussed her findings on several occasions. Her thesis examined the everyday practices of TA consumers and how people choose to use TA on a particular day. Although she did ask for motivations to be involved and the social elements of the actual meal sharing engagement, this was not the main focus of her analysis and conclusions. For this paper I looked into Angelino's interview data in a different light by comparing it with my own participant observations, and choosing a different focus. Angelino was not involved in this particular analysis.) Recruitment of respondents started through convenience sampling via personal networking and a post in the TA Facebook group. Personal contacts with three cooks allowed Angelino to recruit consumers during pick-up moments. Participation in meal sharing also gave access to potential respondents. Snowball sampling enabled her to increase the number of respondents. The final sample was a varied

group (four men and eleven women, varying in age between 25 and 90, with different household and working situations). Interviews were semistructured. We developed the interview guide together, focusing on how and why interviewees got involved in TA, respondents' experiences as consumers, relations with other participants, and the daily reality of picking up meals and how that evolved. Interviews lasted between twenty and eighty minutes and took place at a location suggested by the respondent, usually the respondent's home. Interviews were recorded and transcribed ad verbatim.

I engaged in the practice of food sharing as a consumer (n = 12). These participant observations helped me get familiar with activities related to meal sharing and with concepts used by cooks and consumers, but were especially useful for experiencing food sharing and its transactions first hand. In order to engage in the practice as any other consumer, I did not set any criteria for which meals to pick up. Rather, meal selection depended on my own meal preferences regarding convenience, price, and planning. I kept a field diary to describe and reflect on my experiences. In this paper I make extensive use of these field notes, in an ethnographic fashion. In other words, I use my own experiences as an important data source. This practice of trying to understand an aspect of the world that involves and exceeds ourselves, based on our own experience and narrative is called autoethnography [22]. Autoethnography is an accepted research strategy and can be used as a single method [22]. I used my reflections, however, to complement the semistructured interviews, as they helped me understand the practice of and transactions within food sharing in an embodied way, experiencing the feelings interviewees described first hand. Moreover, autoethnography enabled me to capitalize upon the situatedness in the research context that resulted from the participant observations [23].

The data were manually coded. I did not establish codes beforehand, but looked for recurrent themes within the interview transcripts and my field diary, especially for the social elements of the sharing practice and the specificities of the transactions. In an iterative process of going back and forth between the interview transcripts, my own experiences and associated reflections, and the analysis, I found a number of issues, or subthemes, that were largely related. I then brought these subthemes back to the four main themes discussed below, and revisited the material.

3. Results

This section presents four vignettes, each followed by a discussion. Each of the four themes—rules of engagement, trust, exchange, and commodification—illustrates an element strongly associated with the transaction resulting from using TA, which is specific to this type of sharing activity, and vastly different than transactions around food acquisition in more traditional settings such as the supermarket.

3.1. Rules of Engagement

"After registering for Thuisafgehaald, it takes a week before I pick up my first meal. Somehow it feels awkward. Now I have finally taken the step and ring the doorbell. As soon as the man who opens the door shakes my hand to introduce himself, I cannot suppress the urge to tell him that this is "my first time". I feel as a newbie who does not know the rules—how to behave in this situation. When I follow him to the kitchen, I give the meal containers I brought to his wife Minako (pseudonyms are used in order to maintain anonymity), the one who is cooking. While she fills them, I look around a bit and we engage in some small talk. Minako tells me that this meal is her children's favorite, and that one is supposed to eat it with a spoon. It is warm in the kitchen—I want to zip open my coat, but I am afraid that this will be considered too '"free", and impolite. When Minako has filled the containers, I leave. I shake hands again, so as to end the encounter appropriately, but it feels weird as I already did so when entering the house. Outside I take my bike and leave–it's suddenly not weird at all anymore and I feel happy and relieved about the experience." (translated from field notes, 12/02/2016)

Transactions associated with the mainstream market economy, such as those in the supermarket, have clear rules to most consumers, and the social element is in general limited. Picking up a meal

in a stranger's kitchen is a different story and can be awkward. Indeed, meeting others face-to-face may retain people from joining a sharing platform: they may prefer distant and impersonal relations that are less risky [6]. One of the reasons for the "riskiness" of face-to-face interactions in less common situations—such as those associated with TA is that the rules of engagement of those transactions are initially unclear. This makes it difficult to act according to each other's expectations [24]: how to behave when engaging in meal sharing is surrounded by uncertainty. While email contact before pick-up does give some initial clues, for example, about how formal the cook wishes to interact, this contact is generally limited to confirming the request and giving an address, and therefore does not do much to break the ice. Indeed, although Bos and Owen [25] argue that online spaces can function as an additional layer to real-life connections, they acknowledge that the virtual connection should be seen as "supplementary capacity rather than as a substitution for sociomaterial reconnection (p. 12)."

This uncertainty about expectations explains the uneasiness of my first TA experience: I was unfamiliar with the expectations of the cook and with what was seen as appropriate behavior for a consumer picking up a meal, while I wished to be considered polite and worthy of the transaction. Although most respondents did not reflect upon their first experience with TA, the following quote illustrates the awkwardness of not knowing "the rules of the game" when starting a new activity that involves human interactions.

> "I was curious to know what it [sharing meals] is like because it was kind of scary to, I just started living in Rotterdam, to right away offer a meal and that people enter your house without you knowing exactly how it goes, so I thought I will first see how it works as a consumer." R1

Consumers will discover the rules of engagement simply by engaging in meal sharing. However, most consumers visit a limited number of cooks only, who then collect a relatively steady group of consumers. Over time both parties know what to expect and through their regular face-to-face encounters they create routine transactions. In fact, cooks who have shared a certain number of meals are mostly "sold-out": they cater to a regular set of consumers who more readily pick up a meal when they see it being posted from this particular cook. This illustrates the fact that new encounters remain more risky than existing relations.

> "But it is also uncomfortable in the beginning. You enter someone's house and you are not sure. I think that this keeps me from having a larger group of people where I pick up meals." R2

> "There are a few people, one to four, of which I know when it is them [to offer a meal] then I will consider it, you know, will I pick it up today. And when I see them [in the email] then I think, oh, one of them is available, doubt a little, think, consider, yes, I will order." R11

Nevertheless, most participants argue that the social element of TA is the charm of the initiative. The small-talk during transactions is an important part of the TA experience, and even though most respondents are content with the pick-up moments being short, meeting each other and making simple conversation is the glue that makes the transaction work—making it more than simply peer-to-peer service-delivery:

> "I think [the social aspect] is indeed important. Because if someone next door would cook very nice but I wouldn't feel, I would not feel comfortable around that person, I think it matters. I would rather not do it." R2

> "And I saw the cook was a little nervous and I said take it easy, I am not in a hurry and so some people are . . . you start talking and that is nice." R9

In sum, meal sharing is an unfamiliar situation, implying that it can be scary and awkward because people are unsure about how to behave. Simultaneously, however, sharing a moment with a fellow resident is what makes the TA experience worthwhile. In that sense it is similar to meeting strangers through Airbnb, which is both unique and familiar, as "guest and host are stranger-participants in a community orientated around the value of sharing unique experiences" [3] (pp. 124–125). As argued by respondent 12: "It is also just nice, that people make an effort (. . .), that they let you into their house, I really like that, very sympathetic."

3.2. Trust

> "I really enjoy my first meal at Minako's. However, me and my partner feel that the portions are a bit too small for us. When rating the meal later that night, I carefully choose my words. First I make sure that my note reads that the meal tasted very good. And while I add that the portions were a bit small, I legitimize my claim by adding that my partner is very tall and that I breast feed and am therefore continuously hungry. Nevertheless, I feel bad about this afterwards and for a long time I am reluctant to visit Minako again." (translated from field notes of the author, 12/02/2016)

Sharing was historically limited to people's immediate social networks. Sharing platforms enable sharing with strangers, but not knowing each other increases the risks involved [26]. Information asymmetries arise because parties are unaware of the intentions of the other [27]. Moreover, exchanges taking place on such platforms can be rather intimate. This goes particularly for sharing food, especially when prepared by unknown cooks [26]. Ingesting food into our bodies and sharing food are not the same as sharing tools.

Engaging in transactions with strangers thus involves information and economic risks [28]. These are mitigated by trust [27]. Trust can be defined as the feeling that the trustee will behave in a certain way [28] or according to a particular desired scheme of action [5]. Reputation plays an important role in creating trust by informing about past behavior and enabling sanctions in the form of negative reviews [27]. Platforms thus reduce risk by adding rating systems and reviews [26], which make reputation known. Indeed, rating systems have proven to draw large numbers of people to sharing platforms [2]. Trust and reputation are also important when platform users meet face-to-face: usually the exchange only occurs after trust has been created online [3], as is also the case with TA.

TA's rating system invites consumers to review the meal on the cook's profile page by use of a so-called "thank you note". (Cooks cannot rate consumers. Financially the only risk for the cook is that a consumer does not come to collect and pay for the meal. There is, however, a risk in inviting a stranger into one's home. I did not study to what extent cooks perceived this risk valid.) The number of thank you notes can be perceived as a substitute for reputation, although "the probability of sharing a meal is moderated by product and profile information, which also create trust" [27] (p. 14). My research suggests that while the thank you notes are indeed used by consumers when looking for meals ("Reviews are very helpful, also in terms of reliability. (. . .) The reviews give trust that it all goes well," R13), these reviews are mainly employed to consolidate the relation between cook and consumer: they are above all a token of appreciation. Ter Huurne et al. [27] found that consumers generally use thank you notes to leave positive feedback and that they do not express criticism in them. Indeed, all interviewees argue that they would never rate a meal negatively. They would rather write suggestions for improvement in a personal message:

> "Of course one can give suggestions - and I do - but I prefer to do that over the app than on such a public platform." R2

> "In general they just get a positive rating and if it was very good then I express clearly what was good about it and if it was a little less good then I just leave that out of the rating you know. Then I prefer to say that in person." R4

In that sense, my work shows similar findings to those of Ert et al. [28] (p. 71). They hypothesize that the exceptionally high review scores they found on Airbnb may be due to the personal contact experience between guest and host: people "may show a more understanding attitude toward service failures when they have a personal acquaintance with the service provider, and therefore might refrain from providing negative reviews." The authors also contend that reputation is not a necessary condition for trust, as people are known to also trust strangers in the absence of reputational information [28]. This research confirms this: I found that consumers' engagement in the transaction starts from a perspective of trust towards the cook. Consumers rely on cooks' good intentions and cooking skills. Moreover, none of the respondents mentioned any feelings of uneasiness or fear when entering a cook's house. This suggests that the respondents make a similar assumption as Ter Huurne et al. [27]: members of a platform that facilitates socially driven exchanges are less likely to act out of self-interest or to behave opportunistically.

> "In the end everyone [cooks] just really tries hard (. . .). Because I mean you get people in your house, you just want it to be good, and there is direct contact, so you want it to be good, so I cannot imagine that someone would just not really try to cook a nice meal." R1

> "You know everyone cooks differently. And each with different flavors (. . .). So you can just expect anything. (. . .) And if they eat it themselves it cannot be that bad." R3

To conclude, while consumers use the rating system to screen meals, their reliance on reviews is limited and they engage in the exchange from a perspective of trust. Moreover, by only leaving positive reviews respondents acknowledge the vulnerability cooks expose themselves to when cooking meals for strangers and having these rated. The fact that cooks dare to have their meals evaluated implies trust in the consumer as well (besides the trust shown by letting strangers into their houses). This two-sided initial trust makes the system work: relationships developing from shared experiences are deeper when people need to simply trust the other rather than rely on rating systems to provide trust [29]. While I certainly do not want to overestimate the strength of the relationships developed as a result of meal sharing through TA, I do argue that this initial attitude of trust invites positive associations—as well as an effort to abide by the rules of engagement. In that sense, this trusting attitude can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, there appear to be hardly any instances of misuse of the platform.

3.3. Exchange

> "I pick up some sushi at Minako's. She recognizes me as I have been here two times before. She asks me to leave a review on the site if it is the first time that I pick up this particular dish. It is not, but I tell her that I always leave a review. I feel that that is the least I can do in return." (translated from field notes of the author, 19/08/2016)

Reciprocity can be defined as the expectation that when goods and services are produced or traded, other goods and services will be received "in a manner and at a time that is reasonable within shared social norms" [6] (p. 18). Belk [1] argues that, unlike gift-gifting and market transactions, sharing does not require any reciprocity. Indeed, while users of TA can be both cook and consumer, in practice most people take on one of these roles only. Hence, cooks do not get offered meals by the same people for whom they have provided a meal, nor do consumers return the favor by offering meals to others. Reciprocity thus plays a limited role in the exchange. Respondents are aware of this imbalance: "I obviously mostly profit from the sharing economy in that sense because I only pick up meals (R10)."

Uneasiness about this imbalance is small; however respondents did not articulate any "guilt" about being on the demand-side of the platform. Most interviewees argued that they merely react to an offer made by the cooks: they are not asking the cook to prepare them a meal. This attitude of responding to what is on offer is reflected in the fact that most consumers have not used the two

options on the TA platform that do make it possible to actively request a meal. (First, the platform shows a list of 'meals on request'. These are meals that cooks are ready to cook when asked for: consumers may invite the cook to prepare that meal at a specific date. Second, the 'extra plate' option enables the consumer to send a request to all cooks within a certain area, asking them whether they happen to have an 'extra plate' of food left for them to pick up.) While cooks are free to refuse both types of requests, most respondents do not feel comfortable using these options as they seem unaligned with the idea of voluntarily cooking and offering meals.

"These [options] make me feel somewhat embarrassed, then someone has to go and cook for me you know. And that I think . . . . Well I think that is not worth it. I feel like, if someone cooks, enjoys cooking, well and the meal appeals to me—and that almost always happens, that the meal appeals to me—then I just respond to that." R4

Thus, as consumers are not engaged in demand sharing but in open sharing [1], they do not feel the need for direct reciprocity. This does not mean, however, that the exchange is completely one-directional. Interviewees argue that they enable cooks to engage in cooking and food sharing, and that way allow them to practice activities they enjoy. Indeed, in other work [19] I show that for cooks the rewards for their participation in TA lies in this enjoyment. Cooks are passionate about cooking and take pleasure in expanding this practice to serving unknown others. Hence, as for the Bookcrossers studied by Carciolani and Dalli [30], social and symbolic processes like reputation, status, and self-realization provide incentives for cooks to engage in the exchange. Consumers thus feel that it is mostly appreciation that they exchange for cooks' efforts.

"I noticed that people liked to do that for people who are reluctant to cook, cooks enjoy that. And on the other hand I feel that because I pick it up they were able to cook for people. So in that sense you are part of that." R11

To me it is important to give feedback. You see because I have picked up so many meals he knows that I appreciate it, but if you do not know that in the beginning, it is important to me to make an effort. Someone made an effort for me." R2

In sum, consumers do not provide any direct reciprocity, and do not feel the need to do so either. In that sense, TA can be seen as true sharing, as understood by Belk [1]. Nevertheless, consumers do feel that they offer an exchange for the meals they pick up, even if that is simply appreciation, or an enabling of someone else's hobby. In that sense, TA confirms earlier findings that gift-giving and sharing are not always neatly separated and that the relation with reciprocity is not unidirectional [30]. Important in this respect is also that TA is not a "free service", as there is a monetary transaction involved: money therefore also plays an important role in the exchange. It is therefore the topic of the next section.

3.4. Commodification

"I pick up food at Nike's, who lives in an upstairs apartment. I ring the bell and hear something through the intercom. I say "hello", wait, and then Nike comes downstairs. She shakes my hand, introduces herself, and takes my meal containers upstairs, leaving me outside at the front door. It feels very uncomfortable for me to be standing there, and I think to myself that I will never pick up a meal here again," (translated from field notes of the author, 15/02/2016)

In the above I argued that the social element of sharing is an important component of the initiative, and that the small-talk during pick-up moments is what makes the transaction work. The vignette just presented confirms this: not being invited into Nike's private home transformed the transaction into a service. It omitted the friendliness and sociality that usually surrounds the practice, creating

a distance that made me feel that I was doing something inappropriate (i.e., misusing generosity). Hence, the sociality surrounding TA is needed to establish this monetary transaction between peers.

Money transforms goods and services into commodities, alienating producers and consumers and creating a distance between them [5]; interestingly, this distance is essential for the transaction as well. As argued, TA's rules of engagement can be unclear. Money, however, is far from unclear: as prices are set, people on either side of the exchange know exactly what is expected. In that sense, money removes some of the ambiguity of engaging in a different food provisioning activity. Hence, by commodifying the transaction, money clarifies the different roles in the exchange and diminishes the awkwardness that is associated with uncertainty. Money, therefore, functions as a lubricant to regulate the transaction between cook and consumer. Moreover, by offering and accepting money both parties show that they are interested in the exchange. Consumers demonstrate that they are genuinely attracted to the meal by their willingness to pay for it. By accepting—and in fact requesting—money cooks enable consumers to pay for the ingredients used, so that only their time and effort is gifted. This relieves some of the imbalance of the exchange and enables it to take place.

However, the commodification of the meal also leads consumers to evaluate it in terms of value for money. Interviewees compare prices with other food acquisitioning strategies and are looking to pick up not just any meal, but something that meets their specific needs: "Maybe I am critical . . . but, well, for four or five euros, I think, it should be something" (R15). Thus, the fact that people pay for their meal raises expectations and requirements. Moreover, consumers approach TA rather instrumentally, weighing the "costs", which include not only price but also travel and pick-up time, against the benefits of not having to cook and acquiring a healthy, tasty, home-cooked meal. Richardson [3] draws a similar conclusion when she argues that an important factor for people to book a room through Airbnb is the "better value"—rather than the "authentic experience" that people also enjoy.

This is not to say that people do not realize that the meals are relatively cheap, especially when compared to, for instance, takeaway meals or delivery services. However, respondents often argue that TA being "noncommercial" is an important reason for them to be engaged. "Noncommercial" is a translation of a Dutch phrase which was used by several respondents, but which has no equal counterpart in English. It refers to economic profit (and specifically profit maximization) not being the main objective. The term is also used to denote some sort of nonprofessionalism, and often has a sympathetic feel to it. Respondents argue that they want to see the noncommercial character of TA reflected in the meal price. In other words, picking up a meal in a kitchen a few blocks down, where the cook's kids are watching television and family pictures are stuck to the refrigerator, simply has another feel to it than entering a Domino's to buy a pizza: consumers feel that meal sharing is not a commercial activity, and should therefore not be priced as such either.

> "If someone is going to make money then I still like eating something home-made, better than ready-made meals, but the fun of sharing would be lost. (. . .) So no it is not about the money for me either so an extra euro I wouldn't really mind, but the feeling of authenticity needs to remain." R14

> "Because the principle is not that they make a profit. It needs to just, how to say, pay for itself. And so, because if I buy that for ten euros then I might as well somewhere else, at a restaurant, for example, pick up something. So then the principle of TA is not because it . . . I see it as . . . TA as hobby and not as a commercial thing." R3

In conclusion, money plays an important role in TA because it displays genuine interest in the transaction and clarifies what is expected from cooks and consumers. However, the fact that meals are priced also means that they are easily compared to other meal acquisitioning strategies. Consumers argue that the home-cooked meals should be lower priced than more commercial initiatives, even when the meals are considered to be of higher quality. Hence, consumers are willing to pay for meal ingredients and a little extra, but they do not want to pay commercial prices. If the prices are too high, it makes it look like a cook not being genuine. This implies that although people expect a certain

quality because they are paying, prices are to stay relatively low because of what these represent: real people enjoying cooking and sharing the fruits of their labor. This then also explains why people are not willing to pay as much for a shared meal than they would for a Domino's pizza, even though that pizza is arguably less healthy and does not taste as good.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Richardson [3] argued that the sharing economy should not be seen as a coherent set of economic practices, but is best understood as a series of performances. My investigation of meal sharing through Thuisafgehaald focused on the performance of a particular transaction within the sharing economy—face-to-face sharing with strangers—looking specifically at the social aspects associated with that transaction. As I argue that sharing initiatives such as TA can be seen as a form of community self-organization, this adds to an understanding of the sociality of such communities.

Even though meal sharing through TA only requires short face-to-face interactions, my analysis confirms the view that personalized interaction is an important value of sharing [29]. This relational element can be tricky but despite that—or because of that—is also its defining feature. The absence of clear rules about how to behave in sharing situations creates ambiguity, which may lead to misunderstandings and awkward moments. However, such awkward moments can facilitate social interaction as well [24]: people will work together to resolve the associated "weirdness", so that the structure becomes "elastic" (Goffman 1956, in [24]). Indeed, consumers take care in how to deal with cooks, e.g., being positive by default in thank you notes, or urging the cook to not worry when the meal is not yet ready. People also demonstrate "social courage": simply ordering that first meal without knowing what to expect or how to behave. This courage stems from an overall perspective of trust: consumers realize that the meal they pick up is home cooked, so that its quality is not certain, but accept that risk, going by their belief in good intentions. The positive reviews left at the platform form another way to express that trust as well as an appreciation for the cook's efforts. They therefore consolidate the relation between both parties. In that sense, whereas the TA website does not function as a strong online community and members do not participate in virtual community activities (although there is a Facebook group), this research confirms the work of Bos and Owen [25], who argue that online spaces can supplement "sociomaterial connections", that way creating virtual reconnections.

Money is another element that makes the transactions work. Being the perfect expectation manager as a certain element in an otherwise uncertain situation, the commodification of the meal eases the sharing activity. Put differently, monetary compensations can help to establish a basis for trust between previously anonymous sharing parties [31]. Using money in the exchange therefore enables the transaction to take place at all—without it consumers would not feel legitimized or secure enough to pick up meals as it reduces some of the imbalance of the exchange. Simultaneously, however, people seek to mask the monetary element of the transaction. Respondents stress that they want meal sharing to "remain noncommercial". This noncommercialness (or nonprofessionalism) shows in the prices people are willing to pay, but also in the rituals and practices consumers engage in to try and make the exchange less clearly economic. Without such social lubricants the transaction would be interpreted as merely an economic one, which is far more uncomfortable to engage in with neighbors.

The social element is thus needed to make the transaction happen, but interviewees also argued for an appreciation of it. It gives TA its charm and distinguishes it from other more commercial food outlets. In fact, the way in which the food is obtained increases the quality of the food itself. Simply the fact that the meal is shared and acquired from a neighbor makes it more valuable and better food (cf Clark [32] on punk cuisine). Nevertheless, most interviewees argued that they engage in meal sharing in order to obtain a healthy, tasty and affordable meal. In that sense, consumers are driven by rational reasons that are self-serving [33]. My research therefore corroborates the work of Ladegaard [24], who found that while money is an important incentive for Airbnb hosts, they also value the interactions with guests, and provides evidence for Bucher et al. [31], who challenge Belk's

dichotomy between altruistic motivations and utilitarian or economic motivations for sharing, noting the large variety and complexity of sharing motivations.

As argued in the introduction, there is no reason to assume that TA has direct beneficial environmental effects. Hence, in a purely environmental sense, TA does not contribute to a transition towards a more environmentally sustainable food system. (Important to note is, however, that the ecological impacts of sharing are difficult to assess [26]. A life cycle analysis might be helpful in this respect.) Neither does the platform engage with the discourse around sustainable food nor the environmental problems associated with the globalized industrial food system. Indeed, interviewees do not recognize potential environmental benefits of TA and are thus not motivated by them. In that sense, TA consumers have different motivations than those involved in, for example, picking up and distributing food waste (also referred to as food sharing), who are motivated by a wish to realize social change [4]. However, this research shows that the transactions performed in TA are different, and in fact more social, than transactions generally associated with the supermarket or the takeaway joint. Meal sharing carries an element of "compulsory" sociality (Gregg 2013 in Arcidiacono et al. [15]): even if consumers engage simply because they are looking for a cheap meal, the transaction needed to gain access to that meal is different than that within more mainstream food acquisitioning channels. This demonstrates that the sharing economy leads to a re-embedding of market exchanges in society in new ways [15]. Moreover, although most TA consumers interviewed do not specifically look for this sociality, they do appreciate it as an important element of the practice. TA adds social elements to food and eating, thus distinguishing meal sharing from more commercial enterprises; I contend that the platform can be interpreted as an example of what Botsman and Rogers [34] foresaw for the sharing economy: a more human marketplace based on relational logics and real connections, and a real opportunity to foster such community values in market transactions.

It is important to realize, however, that the set-up of TA is such that most interactions are between one cook and one consumer. Of course, consumers may run into each other when picking up a meal, TA does organize events for cooks and/or consumers, and cooks occasionally invite a group of consumers to eat the meal at their place. These are, however, special occasions: most consumers would only meet the cook during pick-up moment. Connectivity [8] between different TA members is thus, in general, limited. Moreover, as argued, most consumers have rather instrumental motivations to use TA: idealistic motivations lie mainly with the initiators of the platform. It is questionable, therefore, to what extent TA can be considered a form of successful urban self-organization, as this requires "spatial proximity, community organizing and collective intentionality" [8] (p. 234). Both community organizing and collective intentionality seem lacking, especially at first sight, because of the singular relations and the instrumentality of aiming for a cheap, healthy and tasty meal.

On the other hand, however, this paper has clearly shown that TA facilitates interactions and relations within neighborhoods, highlighting and drawing upon spatial proximity. Moreover, even though clear "social activism related to proactive civic engagement" [7] (p. 86) is stretching the findings too far, people engaged in TA do share involvement in a food provisioning system that is highly different than visiting the supermarket or the takeaway. They all have had the nerve to offer or pick up a meal and engage in the social elements associated with such sharing. They have entered the private home of a neighbor and have started the sharing experience from a perspective of trust. In that sense, consumers and cooks can be seen as sharing not only a neighborhood, but also a cause, an idea, and an understanding of how fresh meals can be acquired and of how neighborhoods can function. In other words, TA is "not just about shared presence in space, but also about expressing social belonging to specific causes that may have overlapping spatial connotations" [8] (p. 237). Moreover, TA does increase access to healthy, tasty, and appropriate food. It does so through the matching service as described earlier—reaching people who do not possess the right degree of ICT skills or are not mobile enough to pick up meals—but some of the respondents in this paper (who do not use this matching service) also face difficulties cooking for themselves on a daily basis. In that sense, TA is indeed a bottom-up solution to local problems—those associated with (un)healthy eating

and (a lack of) neighborhood relations. Hence, by linking those who like to cook with those who do not have the skills, time, or energy to do so, TA reflects the potential "to launch and sustain an effective, inclusive and proactive community-based, local or sectoral civic activity" [8] (p. 232).

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