

## SHARING RESOURCES ON FACEBOOK GROUPS: POLISH IMMIGRANTS IN GERMANY, NORWAY AND UK

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**Abstract:** Facebook groups enable their members access to diverse resources symbolic and material, scarce and free, exhaustible or renewable. Depending on the group's objective, resources are co-used, gifted, bartered, swapped, freecycled or sold (bought) by users responding to the needs of others or satisfying their own needs. Based on posts collected through the Facebook's Application Programming Interface (API), this study examines sharing of resources among Polish immigrants in Germany, Norway and United Kingdom, belonging to the public Facebook groups. Findings suggest that the most important resource shared by members of Polish immigrant groups on Facebook is job-related information. Moreover, Facebook groups appear to be a popular selling tool and less effective sharing space for Polish immigrants in Germany, Norway and UK. However, some sharing economy models such as freecycling, swapping and bartering are identified based on Facebook posts.

**Keywords:** sharing, Facebook groups, resources, social media.

Social media platforms that have sprung up worldwide in the last decade are referred to a variety of services e.g. social networking sites, blogs, wikis, content communities and virtual worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There is no one universally accepted definition of what social media are, however some characteristics appeared to be particularly important. Firstly, social media platforms are founded on Web 2.0 philosophy (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Secondly, its lifespan and development depend on user-generated content (Fuchs, 2015). Thirdly, the communication infrastructure is based on social networks that are denser, wider and richer in weak ties (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Last, but not least, the core activity that contributes to the global success of social technologies is sharing (Kramer, 2015; Meikle, 2016). Scholars emphasize that without sharing social media would not be able to survive on the highly competitive market of advanced communication technologies. For this reason the biggest social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or LinkedIn are pressured to constantly work on affordances encouraging sharing. Although sharing is both opportunity and threat for users, everyday they bring in enormous amount of resources that are skilfully turned into commodities providing profits to the social media shareholders and owners (Fuchs, 2015). In this view, users are only the "raw material" for the products and services offered by social media developers (Meikle, 2016, p. 33). The opposing view emphasizes opportunities and advantages provided by social

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media for individuals engaged in sharing economy (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), voluntary participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), or ordinary sales activities (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012). In this sense, sharing in social media may generate positive, non-commercial or socially-oriented consequences that exist along with the official strategies of the “sharing industry”.

This study examines sharing activities among Polish immigrants in Germany, Norway and UK belonging to Facebook groups. The following research questions are pursued: Is sharing a new metaphor of selling on Facebook groups connecting Polish immigrants? What resources are shared by Polish immigrants in Norway, Germany and UK? What sharing economy models could be identified on Facebook groups maintained by Polish immigrants?

### SHARING 2.0 AND SHARING ECONOMY

Kramer (2015, p. 5) argues that humans have been sharing resources to survive, but they “continue to share knowledge even though survival is no longer at stake”. For Kietzmann and colleagues (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011) sharing is “a way of interacting in social media”. They emphasize that sharing leads to new connections between users, but also establishes (sets up) connections between users and resources. In the similar vein, Meikle (2016, p. 24) claims that “sharing is part of what’s social about social media”. For John (2013) “sharing is the fundamental and constitutive activity of Web 2.0 in general, and social network sites in particular”. Indeed, the expansion of social media infused a new energy into the debate on sharing among people in modern societies. But what features, forces, or changes have made the concept of sharing so popular in the age of social media?

The essay of John (2013) “The Social Logics of Sharing” could be an interesting answer to this question. He discusses three changes that affected the sharing in the context of Web 2.0. First, he refers to the fuzzier nature of objects that are shared in social media. Nowadays, social media users share hardly quantifiable resources such as photos, videos, information, knowledge or thoughts, which makes the whole activity more complicated and unintelligible. The second shift is associated with sharing standing alone without the object. For example, Facebook’s mission is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected”. The use of share without object(s) in the context of Facebook’s mission, leaves users with unlimited options what resources share on this platform (what a brilliant strategy!). And finally third change, is portrayed by sharing of activities or resources that were not considered as shareable objects in the past. Users are encouraged to share their “life”, “world”, emotions, health, and spicy details from private life. The more details individuals provide, the easier for social media developers to build the data products that are offered to third party companies.

However, there are more features making sharing in social media distinct from prior sharing activities. Meikle (2016) focuses on fusion between the public time that users have for a paid work with the private time reserved for unpaid activities. As a consequence, the borderline between work and leisure becomes blurred. The same process has been reconstructed earlier by Fuchs (2015), for whom this is a basic strategy in the social media economy. Unpaid labor, primarily referred to sharing, has become a source of value for owners and shareholders of social technologies. In this view, sharing in social media is a new metaphor for the exploitation of unpaid users engaged in fashionable practices such as crowdsourcing, swapping, bartering, freecycling, couchsurfing, or carpooling. The critical perspective of sharing discloses some hidden interests and mechanism that are unseen through lens of other theoretical perspectives applied in the study of social media.

Thus, sharing may serve different purposes depending on whose interests are considered – owners or users. When owners perspective is applied, sharing appears to be a commercially tuned activity driven by hidden business goals. At the users' level, sharing seems to be rather spontaneous, grassroots set of actions, with commercial motives hidden among non-commercial goals and rationales. Based on that, sharing may be interpreted as the exemplification of “clash between user tactics and platform strategies” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 20). In this essay the scope of analysis is limited to the sharing practices of users belonging to the Facebook groups. Moreover, sharing is narrowed to certain practices derived from the sharing economy paradigm (Benkler, 2004; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Based on definitions available in the subject literature, sharing economy (collaborative consumption, mesh economy) is understood as a set of actions (a) enabled by social technologies, (b) motivated by needs of others, (c) enhanced by ecological concerns.

There is no agreement among scholars whether transactions where money is involved should be included to the sharing economy paradigm. For example, John emphasized that “Sharing economies are economies that operate without money changing hands and whose goal, by and large, is not to make their participants richer” (2012, p. 179). On the other hand, Belk allows currency mediation in sharing economy. For him sharing economy, or more precisely, collaborative consumption is “people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (2014, p. 1598). Thus, the money mediation remains problematic feature. In the context of the Facebook groups it becomes even more complicated as data scraped through API does not allow to recognize whether users share or sell different resources. Posts are often too short or incomplete to find out whether selling represents traditional or rather sharing economy models. In order to avoid misconceptions, this research focuses on sharing practices without money mediation. These practices include: swapping, bartering, and freecycling. Swapping is operationalized as exchange of similar items, for example books or clothes. Bartering is a more capacious concept and it refers to exchange of different goods, for example books for clothes, or food for furnitures. Finally, freecycling is the act of giving away used, unneeded, or disliked items to others in need (Norton, 2007). Although, such conceptualization narrows the idea of sharing, it is a necessary step in reaching the goals of this research.

### SHARING IN FACEBOOK GROUPS

Facebook, the world's most popular social networking site, attracts more than 1,7 billion active users monthly (Statista, 2016). This is more than the population of China (1.3bln), and tree times more than the population of the European Union made of twenty eight countries. As a consequence, demography of Facebook's users is closest to the offline demographic structure of many societies (Duggan, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Pew Research suggests that Facebook has very engaged users in U.S. with 70% admitting they visit site daily, and 43% logging there more than once a day (Duggan, 2015). Moreover, comparing with other social media platforms, Facebook is the best example of site built upon affordances stimulating a variety of sharing forms (Meikle, 2016, pp. 45-46). The commercial success of Facebook depends on socio-technical innovations encouraging users to bring in, exchange, sell (or buy) both material and symbolic resources.

Among different tools available to Facebook's users, “groups” offer its members unique functionalities designed to promote and enhance sharing. When Facebook was launching

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<sup>1</sup> This pattern is characteristic for societies where Facebook is the most popular (or one of the most popular) social media platform.

“groups” in 2010, Mark Zuckerberg optimistically suggested that “This is going to be a pretty fundamental shift for how people use Facebook (...) The amount of sharing will go up massively and will be completely addictive” (Charles, 2010). Indeed, groups gather individuals around common interests and invite them to share information, knowledge, photos, videos, links etc. under preferred settings of privacy. There are three privacy settings available to administrators of the group: public, closed, and secret. The public group has the most inclusive character. Anyone can find a group, see who is in the group and what they share. The closed status allows only current members to access the posts, but anyone can see who’s in the group. The secret groups are the most exclusive communities on Facebook. Only current or former members can find the group on site, current members can check who is the member, and only current members decide who can join. It seems that privacy settings matter for users sharing scarce, secret or unique resources. What is really important, administrators of the groups are allowed to change the privacy status.

It is impossible to make a systematic review of groups on Facebook, as there are plenty of them gathering from one to millions of members. For example, “Facebook for Every Phone” group has more than 500 millions of members. This is a highly inclusive group attracting users thinking of improving their experience in using Facebook. But there are many smaller, more exclusive groups connecting individuals from all over the world interested in movies, books, fishing, football, traveling etc. Facebook groups could be compared to offline clubs gathering individuals around common goals and interests. Such groupings organized horizontally around common goal or idea embody the transition from collective to connective action proposed by Bennet and Segerberg (2012). Moreover, Facebook groups overcome the limitations of space and time. Presumably, that feature may have positive impact on sharing diverse resources among users.

This study is limited to Facebook groups made by Polish immigrants in the United Kingdom (England and Scotland), Germany and Norway. It is expected that specific personal situations (or prior experience of such situations) e.g. unemployment, ignorance of the law, language barriers, cultural differences, may encourage immigrants to search for or bring resources into the Facebook groups. It also assumed here that Polish immigrants use Facebook groups for more trivial reasons such as general networking, news consumption, spare time, or just for fun. The analysis is further limited to the public groups enabling third party to acquire data through Facebook API.

## **HYPOTHESES**

A commercial success of sharing economy giants such as Uber, Airbnb, or BlaBlaCar undermines the foundations of a new economic paradigm. Critics announced the failure of sharing economy (Kessler, 2015) or even the decline of social media platforms (Wilson, 2014). Some scholars (Fuchs, 2015; Meikle, 2016; van Dijck, 2013) claim that Facebook shapes the sharing practices of users in order to commodify them into salable products. Shall we therefore conceptualize users practices on Facebook in terms of sharing? Agnihotri and colleagues (Agnihotri et al., 2012) demonstrate how salespeople may use social media for their sales strategies. They suggest that social media are effective tools in maintaining closer relations with customers. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc. offer salespeople opportunities to “engage customers one-on-one through attention to their personal events and shared media” (Agnihotri et al., 2012). Building on this proposal it could be argued that salespeople penetrate the Facebook groups connecting Polish immigrants in Norway, Germany and UK. They use various affordances to build trust and attention of Facebook users. Moreover, individuals with non-sales jobs may also use online groups for occasional sale of new or used products and services. At the same time, research suggests that

sharing economy, especially the forms of exchange with no money involved, are rather poorly recognized activities (Smith & Page, 2016). Considering the arguments of critical theorists and the social media selling framework, it is hypothesized here that (H1) selling proposals are dominating in the Facebook groups made by Polish immigrants in UK, Germany and Norway.

Findings of different research show that Poles leave their country primarily for economic reasons. (Work Service, 2014) The looking for a (better paid) job and better place to live. Economic migrations are inherent element of Polish winding history and, what is less optimistic, recent research suggests relatively large fraction of Poles think about leaving their country (Czapiński & Panek, 2015, pp. 146-150). Job and employment are important values for Poles, along with family and health (CBOS, 2014). But these findings are hardly surprising if we consider that since 1989 Poland has had one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. It is therefore expected that work and work-related topics frequently appear in posts of Polish immigrants in Facebook groups. Some of them may try to use Facebook groups to find a job, while others may try to offer job positions (temporarily or permanent) or help in job search. Building on that it is expected that (H2) job-related information is the most important resource shared by Polish immigrants belonging to Facebook groups.

It was mentioned above that sharing economy is a loosely defined concept labeling variety of shares including monetary and non-monetary actions. However, the research shows that people are highly positive about sharing economy, still they have little knowledge about sharing models (Smith & Page, 2016). It would be therefore naive to expect that Polish immigrants involved in Facebook groups are knowingly exercising variety of sharing models. They are rather unconsciously involved in different sharing practices with no (or little) intention to contribute to sharing economy. There is no research showing which sharing models Poles prefer in general, and it is even more difficult to find such research for social media environment in particular. However, it is assumed that members of large Facebook groups rather do not know each other, which may constrain them from gifting and giving different resources for free – freecycling. It is therefore expected that social distances, distrust and little possibilities (or limited time) to recognize true needs of others, make (H3) freecycling little or not practiced method of sharing among Polish immigrants belonging to Facebook groups.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Data*

This study uses posts accessed through the Facebook API via R programming language (The R Core Team, 2016). In total 13 869 posts from seven groups have been collected and 10 186 were analyzed after data cleaning. The stratified sampling was applied to reach approximately similar number of posts for UK, Germany, and Norway Facebook groups. Groups with relatively high number of members (usually around 10k), were considered for analysis in order to get posts from alive and vivid Facebook communities. Due to Facebook API limit, it was impossible to collect expected number of posts from large groups in Germany and Norway. Thus, posts from smaller Facebook groups were added. The strategy was to get as many posts as possible with quite equal proportion for all countries. However, there were more limitations associated with the number of posts that could be downloaded by third party. Details could be found at official website “[developers.facebook.com](https://developers.facebook.com)”, and documentation provided by authors of R package “Rfacebook”. (Barbera, Piccirilli, & Geisler, 2016). Table 1. consists more details on groups that have been analyzed in this research.

Table 1  
Features of Facebook groups

Name of the group	Status	Country	No. of posts downloaded	No. of posts analyzed	No. of members	No. of the group
Polacy w Niemczech (Poles in Germany)	Public	Germany	1 820	1 054	10 014	531242030295057
Polacy w Niemczech (Poles in Germany)	Public	Germany	817	663	4 204	26524038688
Polacy w Berlinie (Poles in Berlin)	Public	Germany	2 000	1 886	19 763	26524038688
Polacy w Norwegii (Poles in Norway)	Public	Norway	2 627	2 234	14 081	2377118572
Polacy w Oslo (Poles in Oslo)	Public	Norway	2 048	1 386	4 373	1421031461484026
Polacy w Szkocji (Poles in Scotland)	Public	UK	2 094	1 642	12 348	636718073026883
Polacy w Anglii (Poles in England)	Public	UK	2 463	1 321	16 321	472154286233346
	Sums		13 869	10 186	81 104	

### Method

The aim of this study is to understand how Polish immigrants from Norway, Germany and UK belonging to Facebook groups share diverse resources in a social media environment. In doing so, the content analysis method has been applied to test hypotheses presented above. The unit of analysis is a Facebook post. Facebook post may include text (string of characters), graphic file, video, or web-link. For the purpose of research only the textual layer of each post has been analyzed. Posts made only by graphic file, video, or link, have been removed from analysis in this research.

The grammar complexity of Polish language (gender system, seven cases, inflection, conjugation) has been partially overcome by usage of ‘Morfologik’ library, that allowed to distinguish cores of the words used in the studied posts. The constraint was related to a character encoding of the Polish signs. In order to improve the quality of the analyzed content, all files were manually controlled and corrected if necessary. Then, frequency of words reflecting searched variables has been counted to verify expected patterns. Due to a large number of posts this study primarily focuses (but not only) on the manifested content (Babbie, 2012, pp. 301-302).

### Coding

The following rules of coding have been applied to the Facebook posts collected in this research:

1. Posts with words sell or price are coded as indicators of the traditional economy models present on Facebook groups – initial step.
2. Posts with words swap and exchange indicate the existence of sharing economy on Facebook (swapping and bartering models).
3. Posts with words give away are also coded as indicators of sharing economy (freecycling model).

Moreover, posts with key-words indicating the existence of the sharing economy models were wholly (manually) analyzed to confirm that single words are referred to the research problem and help to identify resources shared between Polish immigrants, members of the Facebook groups. Ten main categories of resources emerged from frequency analysis of words included in



However, there were many commercial advertisements addressed to immigrants in all three countries. Ads have been posted by private companies and individual users, members of those groups. Some posts included simultaneously selling (price, sell) and exchange offer (swap, barter). In other words, users were trying to sell different goods but they were also considering an exchange for a specific resource.

The analysis further revealed that job-related information is the most popular resource offered and searched by Polish immigrants belonging to Facebook groups (Figure 1). This resource has also appeared in the sharing economy models presented in the Table 2. Polish immigrants use Facebook groups to find temporary replacement, recruit new employees, offer or get an extra job.

Table 2  
*Sharing economy models*

Freecycling	Norway		Germany		UK	
	Offer	Search	Offer	Search	Offer	Search
Animals	6		4		2	
Housing				4 (check-in)		
Furnitures	4		3	1		
Clothes			2	1		
Books		2		3		
Baby & acces.			1		3	
Transport	4		3			
Electronics	1		1			
Hobby / ent.	2		2		1	
Job			2			
Barter / swap						
Housing			1			
Baby & acces.					1	
Transport			1			
Electronics			2		1	
Hobby / ent.	1		1			
Job					2	
Cars & parts			2		1	

Moreover, it was also found that Polish immigrants are involved in two general models of sharing economy: bartering and freecycling. There are number of goods freecycled in Germany, Norway and UK, e.g. furnitures, clothes, books, electronics, baby accessories, or tickets. Polish immigrants use Facebook groups also to give away animals and job offers. Among bartered or swapped resources there are baby accessories, tickets, free seats in cars (usually trips to Poland), car parts, jobs and electronics. Surprisingly, one user from Germany was trying to exchange a house for flat in a specific location.

## DISCUSSION

This study was aimed to identify sharing patterns on Facebook groups among Polish immigrants in Germany, Norway and UK. Sharing was narrowly conceptualized as bartering, swapping and freecycling. Results suggest that Facebook groups for Polish immigrants are the extension of traditional economy models. The H1 assuming that selling proposals are dominating



in the Facebook groups was confirmed. A large number of posts with words “selling” and “price” may suggest that Polish immigrants use Facebook groups primarily to sell diverse resources. The use of Facebook groups for commercial purposes may suggest that sharing has become a new metaphor for selling (Meikle, 2016). However, this claim seems to be little far-fetched, as there are posts in all analyzed groups with the distinct sharing economy offers. In reference to Wilson’s critique (Wilson, 2014), who claimed that sharing economy on social media is a myth, the question is whether Facebook is more selling or sharing platform? Undoubtedly, there are many resources shared everyday on Facebook. But are Facebook’s affordances encouraging the sharing economy models? Facebook groups appear to be a good place to sell different goods for Polish immigrants in Norway and Germany. However, there are many posts with word “price” shared by immigrants from UK. This may suggest that Polish immigrants from all analyzed countries use Facebook groups for selling purposes and there are no specific, country-based commercial practices differentiating them.

Considering that Polish immigration in 21st century is primarily motivated by economic factors, it is hardly surprising that “job offers” and “job searches”, or more widely, information about employment, is the most commonly shared resource on Facebook groups set up by Polish immigrants in Germany, Norway and UK. This results confirm the H2 – Facebook groups may act as an effective “job agency” maintained from below, with no agents searching for profits. The word ‘job’ appears to be particularly popular in posts of Polish immigrants in Germany. This result is compatible with prior research emphasizing “the strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) on the labor market (Batorski, Bojanowski, & Filipek, 2015). Weak ties with acquaintances give individuals better access to diverse resources e.g. information, knowledge, trust (Burt, 2000) that could be mobilized when individuals start searching for a job. On Facebook, users are enabled to maintain a number of “friendships” with acquaintances considered here as a weak ties. A large number of posts with job offers and searches may confirm that Facebook groups are important tool increasing Polish immigrants’ chances on the labor market in Germany, Norway and UK.

It is however interesting that posts with job-related information are most frequent among Polish immigrants in Germany. This may suggest that Poles in Germany prefer to offer or take a job from countrymen. Considering that a new wave of Polish immigration (since 2004) to European countries is rather little organized and many Poles hold prejudice against other Poles abroad, the job-mediating role of Facebook groups appears to be surprising somehow.

Though sharing economy is little supported by Polish immigrants belonging to Facebook groups, freecycling appears to be more popular than bartering and swapping. This pattern is characteristic for all analyzed countries. It means that H3 assuming that freecycling is not practiced method of sharing among Polish immigrants in UK, Germany and Norway, needs to be rejected. On the one hand, this result may suggest that Polish immigrants are conscious consumers with pro-environmental and communal-oriented attitudes. They care about common future and try to reduce the waste. On the other hand, freecycling is the easiest way of recycling. If traditional recycling generates certain expenditures, freecycling allows Polish immigrants to save some money and time. Moreover, freecycling should be also considered as the effect of growing consumption expenditures (Eurostat, 2010). Pervasive marketing and advertisement encourage individuals to purchase new goods and services, to consume more and faster even if there are no real needs behind it (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). ‘Old’ but still working, valuable goods, are replaced by new products and services. Consequently, some individuals may decide to give the ‘old’ goods for free, rather than throw them away to a bin.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has a number of limitations that directly or indirectly affected the final results. First of all, the analysis of Facebook posts have qualitative character as there is no possibility to subset a random sample of posts from Facebook groups set up by Polish immigrants. The total population of groups set up by Polish immigrants is unknown because some of them cannot be recognized as strictly immigrants' groups. At the same time, Facebook API puts a number of restrictions on researchers.<sup>2</sup> There is a limit in downloading (size and time) and only posts from public groups are available for analysis. Due to Facebook policy, private and hidden groups are not available for academic examination.

Moreover, sharing was narrowly conceptualized in order to recognize explicit sharing economy models. Unfortunately, the idea of sharing economy remains ambiguous and it is even more difficult to recognize all sharing activities from the textual layer of the Facebook posts. In order to get more reliable and complete results, future research should apply methods using both textual and graphical layers of posts. Many users use photos and videos to present resources they are willing to share with others. Even in the database used for the purpose of this research, there were many posts with no text, consisting only visual elements. Therefore it seems that methods combining textual and graphical analysis may bring more complex picture of sharing in social media.

As it was mentioned above, to avoid some theoretical misconceptions, this study was focused on sharing without money mediation. However, some posts revealed that Facebook groups' members offer car seats or other collaborative transportation for money. Thus, future research should also focus on sharing economy models such as car-pooling or car-sharing where money exchange is involved.

Moreover, this study does not specifically focus on sharing of information and knowledge among Polish immigrants belonging to Facebook groups. Job-related information is derived from posts consisting words such as *swap*, *exchange* and *give away*. However, it needs to be emphasized that users exchange high volume of information and knowledge on Facebook groups. Undoubtedly, some of these resources may contribute to sharing economy emerging in a digital environment. Therefore, future research explicitly focused on resources instead of sharing economy models, is likely to bring results enriching our understanding of sharing economy on social media.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details check: <https://developers.facebook.com/policy/>

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