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Don't Jump on the Bandwagon: Negative Effects of Sharewashing

Adrian Lehr · Marion Büttgen · Silke Bartsch

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Abstract Access-based service usage, or simply “sharing”, is an emerging consumption trend many companies pursue. As various firms seek to exploit this trend, however, consumers might not perceive these companies’ services to be adequate, especially if they misleadingly present traditional marketplace exchanges (e.g., car renting) as sharing. This paper explores potential consequences of such forms of deceptive communication. Drawing on the concept of greenwashing and on consumer skepticism research, we introduce the concept of sharewashing, which we define as misleading communication that erroneously asserts a firm’s offer as part of the sharing economy. To identify the underlying mechanism as well as the consequences of these deceptive practices, this research refers to three experimental studies. The results reveal negative effects of sharewashing on subsequent usage intentions, compared to both sharing and renting offers. Consumer skepticism mediates the effect between the type of offering and usage intention when a sharing offer is compared to a sharewashing offer, and it leads to lower perceived attractiveness and decreasing recipients’ information seeking tendencies regarding the sharewashing offer. However, this mechanism does not hold true if a rental offer is compared

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to a sharewashing offer, which indicates a different underlying mechanism. From the findings we derive several implications for companies and propose future research directions.

Keywords Attribution theory · Sharing economy · Access-based services · Car-sharing · Sharewashing · Consumer skepticism · Deceptive communication · Deceptive advertising

1 Introduction

Novel consumption modes that do not involve transfer of ownership but instead provide access to physical goods for a limited period of time, such as car-sharing services, have recently expanded (Baumeister et al. 2015; Statista 2020). These consumption modes are known as sharing (Belk 2010) or access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Forecasts predict the sharing economy's revenues to rise to \$335 billion globally by 2025 (Marchi and Parekh 2015), which makes this consumption trend increasingly important to corporate practice. It can also help companies improve their image, largely because consumers generally regard such offers as flexible, innovative, and forward-thinking (Belk 2014b; Baumeister et al. 2015).

While there is a considerable amount of literature on the underlying consumer motivations to use access-based services (e.g., Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Lamberton and Rose 2012; Möhlmann 2015; Lawson et al. 2016; Schaefer et al. 2016a), research has neglected the potential dark sides of this consumption trend, such as a potential misuse by companies seeking to exploit this trend to achieve positive image effects without providing the features that consumers expect from access-based services (e.g., convenience, high flexibility, short-term access to products). Price and Belk (2016) denounce firms' efforts to tout regular marketplace exchanges formerly known as rental offers, as sharing, simply by labeling traditional renting services as "sharing," which is a growing phenomenon in practice (see also Gheorghe 2017; taz 2017). Various companies, such as app2drive or Cambio, claim to offer car-sharing services without exhibiting the main characteristics of a car-sharing service, i.e., being temporally and locally flexible regarding car pick-up and return.

Based on these explanations and derived from the concept of greenwashing, which is defined as misleading claims about environmental practices (Nyilasy et al. 2014; Walker and Wan 2012), we call misleading behaviors regarding sharing *sharewashing*. Thus, we define sharewashing as companies' activities that intentionally mislead consumers with deceptive claims, falsely presenting the firm as part of the sharing economy. Table 1 offers an overview of distinctive characteristics of car-sharing, renting, and sharewashing.

In "real" car-sharing, registered consumers can unlock a car via a smartphone app and instantly use the service without pre-booking or defining their consumption time in advance. In contrast, consumers using a traditional car rental service need to book a fixed consumption time beforehand, and pick up and drop off the car at specific car rental premises (Benoit et al. 2017). Although rental and sharing partially overlap,

Table 1 Characteristics of car-sharing, rental, and sharewashing offers

	Car-sharing offer	Rental offer	Sharewashing offer
Communication of offer	Communicated as car-sharing offer	Communicated as rental offer	Communicated as car-sharing offer
Point in time for pick-up & return	Flexible (no predefined time frame)	Fixed (i.e., predefined time frame, high penalty for overdue returns)	Fixed (i.e., predefined time frame, high fees for overdue returns)
Period of use	Shorter consumption time	Longer consumption time	Longer consumption time
Location of pick-off & return	Flexible (e.g., predefined city areas)	Fixed (e.g., at predefined stations)	Fixed (e.g., at predefined stations)

Based on: Belk (2014a, 2014b), Benoit et al. (2017); CarClub (2018), Moeller and Wittkowski (2010)

the concept of sharing with its innovative business models (Baumeister et al. 2015; Andreassen et al. 2018) and extreme flexibility in sharing offers involves a different consumption paradigm (Belk 2014b; Price and Belk 2016).

The literature on access-based services barely addresses this topic of deceptive advertising. Thus, a deeper understanding of the consequences of misleading communication can help companies anticipate individual consumer responses to such a strategy. Particularly, some companies inaccurately assert an offer is based on a sharing concept to make it appear more attractive. Such attempts to increase consumers' use of their service could have negative consequences. To address the above-mentioned gap in theoretical and managerial knowledge, we investigate the effects of deceptive communication about access-based services, i.e., sharewashing, on consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions relative to communication about both real sharing offers and traditional rental offers. Specifically, we analyze the effects on consumers' passive interest (in terms of perceived attractiveness) and active interest (in terms of information seeking) and on their subsequent usage intention. Further, to disclose the underlying mechanism, we consider whether consumer skepticism mediates the relationship between sincere or deceptive communication regarding the service and the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Our research is grounded in attribution theory (Kelley and Michela 1980), which suggests investigating the causal explanations people give when they confront others' behaviors (Weiner 2000). The theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how consumers process misleading communication. We combine these insights with the concepts of consumer skepticism and greenwashing to contribute to current research in several ways.

First, we advance the literature pertaining to access-based services by introducing the concept of sharewashing as a new form of deceptively communicating a service. While deceptive communication research has mainly focused on firms communicating about their CSR and on the negative effects of greenwashing, we show that it can arise in other contexts as well. For example, such deception occurs when companies attempt to exploit a new consumption trend by entering a market with misleading communication about their service. We provide evidence for the generalizability of this deceptive communication concept and its consequences.

Second, we contribute to research on consumer skepticism in deceptive communication contexts. Our results reveal different underlying mechanisms leading to lower usage intentions for sharewashing offers. While consumer skepticism mediates the effect of sharewashing (compared to real sharing) on usage intention, in that skepticism is higher toward sharewashing than toward real sharing, this mechanism does not hold true for the comparison of rental and sharewashing offers. Hence, entering a highly dynamic and increasingly changing market with a traditional car rental offer can also cause consumer skepticism, but still leads to higher usage intention. This indicates a parallel mechanism that is based on the mere-exposure effect and familiarity with such a traditional market offer and mitigates the negative effect of consumer skepticism on usage intention.

Third, from a more theoretical perspective, we contribute to attribution theory by identifying a mediating mechanism that explains usage decisions in the context of misleading communication regarding services. Our focus is not the attribution process itself. Rather, we highlight a downstream effect of how active and passive interest, resulting from attributions and expressed in response to honest versus deceptive communication, determine subsequent usage likelihood.

To these ends, the paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a short literature review on findings related to access-based services and consumer skepticism, and introduce attribution theory as our theoretical foundation. On this basis, we derive hypotheses and develop a conceptual framework for investigating how misleading communication about services impacts consumer perceptions and intentions. Subsequently, we present three empirical studies and discuss the results, along with their research contributions and implications for business managers. Finally, we note some limitations and directions for further research.

2 Literature Review and Research Model

Our literature review revealed that previous research on access-based services has focused mainly on the individual drivers of and barriers to access-based consumption. Most consumers participate for utilitarian reasons, such as monetary advantage, flexibility, or convenience (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Hamari et al. 2016; Hazée et al. 2017; Lamberton and Rose 2012; Lawson et al. 2016; Möhlmann 2015; Moeller and Wittkowski 2010). Further, research affirms that companies that introduce access-based services are perceived as more innovative and forward-thinking (Belk 2014b; Baumeister et al. 2015). To shed light on the positioning of access-based service providers, Wruk et al. (2019) analyze value propositions and business model features promoted by selected organizations and identify different legitimization strategies. Considering that more and more companies seek to join the sharing trend, there is also an increasing need to clarify what happens when organizations jump on the bandwagon and misleadingly promote their service as a sharing service with the sole aim of achieving positive image effects. Such companies' offers do not have the features typically associated with sharing.

Although various articles on access-based services draw implications for marketing communication (e.g., Ertz et al. 2017; Hazée et al. 2017; Fritze et al. 2020;

Peterson and Simkins 2019), to our knowledge Costello and Reczek (2020) are the only one that empirically investigate how access-based services are communicated and how such communication impacts consumer-related variables (see Table 2). Costello and Reczek (2020) show that, compared to platform-focused communication, provider-focused communication increases consumers' willingness to pay and the likelihood that they will purchase or download a brand's app. Interestingly, so far no empirical research has investigated the effects of deceptive communication of access-based services, despite the fact that Belk (2014a, b) already emphasized the relevance of "pseudo-sharing (practices masquerading as sharing)" (Belk 2014a, p. 10).

This prompted us to extend our literature review to include research on misleading communication and deceptive advertising. Considerable research on deceptive advertising has been conducted on CSR and green advertising, revealing that firms' underlying motivations influence consumers' perceptions. Previous work shows that egoistic or profit-oriented motives for green claims lead to mistrust and skepticism (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013); green advertising combined with poor environmental performance leads to a backlash, including elevated skepticism accompanied by diminished attitudes toward the firm and reduced purchase likelihood (Nyilasy et al. 2014). In the context of green advertising, consumer skepticism refers to a tendency to disbelieve or doubt the accuracy of marketing communication (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013; Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998; Forehand and Grier 2003; Wanner and Janiesch 2019). Our research expands on the notion of misleading advertising about environmental effects, that is, greenwashing. Doing so, we propose that consumer skepticism can similarly result from misleading communication by companies that tout their fake access-based services, a practice we call sharewashing. Thereby we examine the greenwashing concept's transferability to a new and different context.

To date, literature on access-based services addresses consumer skepticism merely in relation to hygienic or environmental concerns (Hazée et al. 2019; Gullstrand Edbring et al. 2016). We want to close the identified gap and shed light on the dark side of access-based services, i.e., jumping on the bandwagon of access-based services and deceptively masking a traditional (rental) offer as a car-sharing offer. Table 2 provides an overview of previous research on access-based services, which investigates or at least addresses one of the topics of marketing communication, deceptive communication, or consumer skepticism.

To understand the consequences of this specific type of deceptive advertising, which we define as consumer-perceived sharewashing, we have chosen attribution theory as the overarching theoretical framework. Attribution theory describes the causal inferences people rely on to explain their own or others' behavior (Brosi et al. 2018; Heider 1944; Kelley 1973; Kelley and Michela 1980). In marketing literature, this theory has served to explain responses to product failures (Klein and Dawar 2004), consumer skepticism (Rifon et al. 2004; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013), and the effects of greenwashing (Nyilasy et al. 2014). Accordingly, attribution theory is likely to explain how consumers interpret a company's communication if it takes the form of sharewashing.

Table 2 Literature overview

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Belk (2014b)	You are what you can access: Sharing and collaborative consumption online	Conceptual	Generic (focus on contemporary sharing activities)	Communication of access-based services	–	–	Typologies of sharing	Internet-facilitated sharing, collaborative consumption, ventures	Review based on an analysis of both scholarly research on sharing and collaborative consumption and media accounts of the latest developments in these contexts	Comparison of sharing and collaborative consumption reveals that both are currently growing in popularity. Examples are given and an assessment is made of the reasons for the current growth in these practices and their implications for businesses still using traditional models of sales and ownership. The old wisdom that we are what we own, may need modifying to consider forms of possession and uses that do not involve ownership

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Costello and Rezek (2020)	Providers Versus Platforms: Marketing Communications in the Sharing Economy	Empirical	Generic (various using real companies)	Marketing communication in the sharing economy (provider vs. platform focused communication)	–	–	Research on P2P business model(s) and marketing communication	<p>Study 1: DV: likelihood to take promotional materials for a P2P firm; IV: promotion focus</p> <p>Study 2a: DV: effectiveness of marketing communication; IV: ad focus; mediating variable: Helping perceptions; moderating variable: business model</p> <p>Study 2b: DV: helping perceptions, willingness to pay, and likelihood of choosing the service, IV: provider-firm independence</p> <p>Study 3: DV: willingness to pay; IV: business model</p> <p>2nd analysis → serial mediation analysis: mediating variables: extent to which the consumer adopts an empathy lens, helping perceptions</p> <p>Study 4a & b: DV: app download likelihood; IV: ad focus; mediating variable: helping perceptions; moderating variable: business model</p>	<p>Six lab and field studies conducted in collaboration with a P2P firm</p> <p>Study 1: two conditions (promotion focus: provider vs. platform)</p> <p>Study 2a: 2 (ad focus: provider vs. firm) × 2 (business model: P2P vs. traditional) between-subjects design</p> <p>Study 2b: two conditions (provider–firm independence: high vs. low) in a between-subjects design</p> <p>Study 3: between-subjects design (business model: P2P vs. traditional)</p> <p>Study 4a: 2 (ad focus: provider vs. firm) × 2 (P2P business model: matchmaker vs. forum) between-subjects design</p> <p>Study 4b: 2 (ad focus: provider vs. firm) × 2 (P2P business model: for-profit matchmaker vs. cooperative matchmaker) between-subjects design</p>	<p>When P2P brands use provider-focused (vs. platform-focused) marketing communication, consumers perceive a purchase as helping an individual provider to a greater extent, which increases consumers' willingness to pay and their likelihood of both making a purchase and downloading the brand's app. This is because provider-focused marketing communication in this context leads consumers to think about their purchase from the provider's perspective, thus adopting an "empathy lens." The authors further show that this effect does not extend to other business models</p>

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Ertz et al. (2017)	An Analysis of the Origins of Collaborative Consumption and its Implications for Marketing	Conceptual	Generic	Communication of access-based services Potential implications for ABS communication such as campaigns promoting access may compare the costs related to the ownership of a good and those of merely "accessing" the good	Research on collaborative consumption (especially macro developments that lead to this type of consumption, e.g., exchange configurations)	Collaborative consumption from an aggregate marketing system perspective, evolution of key macro-level components, implications of collaborative consumption for marketing decision-making, marketing systems and society at large	Interdisciplinary analytic framework	The results reveal that Collaborative Consumption results from tightly technological, economic, political, and societal changes, namely: (1) The web transformed consumers' relationship to objects; (2) advanced economies are becoming more efficient through collaborative exchanges; (3) the withering of the State and its increased adjustment to the market ethos led citizens to mutate from political militants into engaged consumers; (4) consumers view consumption as central projects in their lives

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus of access-based services	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Fritze et al. (2020)	Access-Based Services as Substitutes for Material Possessions: The Role of Psychological Ownership	Empirical	Car sharing, music streaming	Customers' psychological ownership in access-based services; managerial implication: using communication to encourage such ownership feelings	–	–	Extended Self-Theory and Psychological Ownership Theory Symbolic Self-Completion Theory and Material Disposition	DV: material ownership reduction Mediating Variables: substitutive value, usage, psychological ownership IV: Intimacy, identity, communal identification	<i>Four studies:</i> Study 1: an online experiment ($n = 497$), using a between-subject design Study 2: (a + b) survey data combined with real behavioral data or self-reported consumer data, respectively (a = car sharing context, $n = 857$; b = music streaming context, $n = 196$) Study 3: longitudinal design ($n = 553$) to test the dynamic effects of psychological ownership of ABS	The findings suggest that when ABS customers develop a stronger sense of psychological ownership toward the service, they grow to perceive the service as a substitute for a material possession (e.g., owning a car). The findings caution that when it comes to ownership feelings gained through a certain mode of consumption, services can be a valid substitute for material objects in the context of the sharing economy. The results demonstrate that ABS can psychologically satisfy the human need for ownership and accordingly replace material objects. Psychological ownership is a potential determinant of consumers' preference when they can choose between material ownership and access modes of consumption

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Gullstrand Edbring et al. (2016)	Exploring consumer attitudes to alternative models of consumption: motivations and barriers	Empirical	Beds, kitchen furniture, table/chairs and mattresses/bed sheets/towels, wardrobes, soft toys and white goods (in collaboration with IKEA)	Communication of access-based services	–	Hygiene, benefits for environment	Consumer perceptions and attitudes toward access-based consumption (i.e., renting, hiring or leasing products without owning them), collaborative consumption, and shared use	Consumer attitudes, motivations and barriers relating to the three alternative consumption models: models for extending the lives of products (e.g., through reselling of second-hand goods), access-based consumption (e.g., renting and leasing), and collaborative consumption (e.g., sharing platforms)	Qualitative semi-structured interviews ($n = 9$, à 30 min.) and a quantitative survey of young IKEA consumers ($n = 1159$)	The results demonstrate that consumer attitudes to the consumption models vary greatly and depend on the product group. Attitudes toward buying second-hand furniture and short-term renting are largely positive, while attitudes to long-term renting are negative. Collaborative consumption acceptance is higher for seldom-used products

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Hartl et al. (2018)	“Sustainability is a nice bonus” the role of sustainability in car sharing from a consumer perspective	Empirical	Car sharing (B2C vs. P2P)	Offers of carsharing from B2C or P2P may be represented differently when it comes to functional value (cost versus sustainable), as managerial implication	–	–	Theory of consumer choice behavior	Consumers’ perception of and attitude toward carsharing services (in particular value-seeking, convenience, need for affiliation, trustfulness, risk aversion, environmental consciousness, and green consumerism)	Both quantitative as well as qualitative methods were used in three studies: Study 1: online experiment (n = 158) using the projective technique by Haire (1950); Study 2: online questionnaire (n = 127); Study 3: Individual interviews were with eight B2C carsharing users	The three studies show that consumers’ image of carsharing is “greener” than owning a car and that environmental concerns play a role when consumers decide to use P2P services over B2C services. However, interviews with carsharing users indicate that the sustainable impact of carsharing is rather perceived as a positive side effect than a main argument for carsharing

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Hazée et al. (2019)	Sharing Goods? Yuck, No! An Investigation of Consumers' Contamination Concerns About Access-Based Services	Empirical	Car sharing (study 1 & 4) and generic (study 2 & 3)	Consideration of consumers' contamination concerns when designing advertising, promotions, and other communications of access-based services (ABS) as a managerial implication	Contamination Theory	Activated contamination (study 1 & 4) DV: Consumer evaluation of ABS IV: Consumer contamination concerns about ABS (is primed). Physical contact incidence in advertisements Moderator: Interpersonal similarity Pre-activation of contamination (study 2 & 3) DV: Consumer contamination concerns about ABS IV: Product body proximity, brand equity Moderator: Interpersonal familiarity Mediator: competence stereotypes about other users	Four experiments in different ABS contexts: Study 1 ($n = 112$): between-subjects experiment, Study 2 ($n = 439$): 2 (product-body proximity: close vs. distant) \times 3 (interpersonal familiarity: low vs. moderate vs. high) between-subjects experiment Study 3 ($n = 296$): 2 (product-body proximity: proximal vs. distal) \times 2 (brand equity: high vs. low) between-subjects experiment Study 4 ($n = 198$): 2 (physical contact incidence: low vs. high) \times 2 (interpersonal similarity: present vs. absent) between-subjects experiment	The results reveal that consumers experience more contamination concerns about objects used in proximity to their bodies, especially when those objects are shared with unfamiliar users, and that such concerns negatively influence their evaluations of ABS. Consumers also exhibit less contamination concerns about ABS that have high brand equity because of their elevated stereotype-related perceptions of those users' competence. Firms' advertisements depicting physical contact between shared objects and other users negatively influence ABS evaluations by consumers whose contamination concept is activated. This article provides insight for developing products, branding, and communication strategies to reduce consumers' contamination concerns and maximize ABS adoption

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Lawson et al. (2016)	Freedom from owner-ship: An exploration of access-based consumption	Empirical	Generic, with reference to transportation and lodging	Communication of access-based services Suggests exploring the relationships between environmentally friendly advertising, access-based consumers and their perceptions of authenticity to gain further insight into the effectiveness of strategic initiatives related to green marketing in the implications for further research	Access-based consumption, access-based business models	<p><i>Qualitative study</i>: consumer motivations to engage in access-based consumption</p> <p><i>Quantitative study</i>: motivational factors that emerged in the qualitative study—constructs examining economic consciousness, environmental consciousness, status consumption, possessiveness, and materialism; 2. choice confusion, variety seeking, and loyalty are examined as they relate to the findings of flexibility and product trial uncovered in the qualitative study</p>	<p><i>Mixed method approach</i>: qualitative study ($n = 72$): open-ended survey in which participants were asked to recall instances where they may have engaged in access-based consumption to explore consumer motivations for engaging in access-based consumption; answers coded by two independent coders</p> <p>quantitative study ($n = 220$): using MTurk that enables the creation of a segmentation framework of consumers; data analysis: two-step cluster analysis</p>	Identifying four distinct groups of consumers with unique characteristics and varying dispositions toward access-based consumption: Fickle Floaters, Premium Keepers, Conscious Materialists and Change Seekers

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Peterson and Simkins (2019)	Consumers' processing of mindful commercial car sharing	Empirical	Car sharing	Emphasizing the social dimension when communicating environmentally oriented services, such as car sharing, as a managerial implication	–	–	Behavioral Reasoning Theory	DV: Car Sharing Behavior; Mediating Variables: Attitudes, Subjective Norm; IV: Reasons for Car Sharing, Values (Conformity, Stimulation), Reasons against Car Sharing	Web survey ($n = 100$), which was sent to students and (academic and nonacademic) staff via the university's internal server	Findings suggest that subjective norms (thoughts of important others for consumers, such as co-workers) serve an important mediating factor for both consumers' value orientations and reasons for car sharing in their relationship with car-sharing behavior. This mediating role is also observed for consumers' reasons for car sharing—but not for consumers' reasons against car sharing (whose influence on carsharing behavior is mediated by attitude toward car sharing)

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
Wruck et al. (2019)	The Presentation of Self as Good and Right: How Value Propositions and Business Model Features are Linked in the Sharing Economy	Empirical	Different sectors, e.g., transportation, lodging and finance	Examining how sharing organizations position themselves with regard to (1) the values these organizations publicly promote and (2) the business model features they make visible	Potentially misleading value-based communication	–	Neo-Institutional Theory	Value propositions and business model features of sharing organizations with regard to (1) the values these organizations publicly promote to present themselves as “good” sharing organizations and (2) the business model features they make visible to appear as having the “right” organizational model	Explorative study with the three phases of case selection, coding, and analysis: Examination of online self-representations of 62 prototypical sharing organizations in Germany with regard to value propositions and business model features linked in the sharing economy, the findings indicate the different legitimization strategies of grassroots initiatives and platform-based organizations, which are termed “sustainability by model” and “sustainability by feature.”	The analysis reveals two distinct categories of sharing organizations: grassroots initiatives and platform-based organizations. By showing how value propositions and business model features are linked in the sharing economy, the findings indicate the different legitimization strategies of grassroots initiatives and platform-based organizations, which are termed “sustainability by model” and “sustainability by feature.”

Table 2 (Continued)

Author (Year)	Title	Research Approach	Research Context	Research focus	Deceptive Advertising	Consumer Skepticism	Theory	Focal construct(s)	Research Design	Major Findings
<i>This Study</i>	Don't Jump on the Bandwagon: Negative Effects of Sharewashing	Empirical	Scoter & Car sharing	The role of honest and deceptive marketing communication of different types of services	Effects of deceptively communicated services compared to honest new and traditional services	The role of consumer skepticism triggered by marketing communication of different offers	Attribution theory & consumer skepticism	Study 1: DV: usage intention; IV: communicated type of service Study 2: DV: usage intention; IV: communicated type of service; mediating variables: perceived attractiveness, information seeking Study 3: DV: usage intention; IV: communicated type of service; mediating variables: consumer skepticism, perceived attractiveness, information seeking	<i>Three experiments in two ABS contexts:</i> Study 1 ($n=230$): single factor between-subjects experimental design with three levels (scooter sharing, renting, sharewashing) Study 2 ($n=287$): single factor between-subjects experimental design with three levels (car sharing, renting, sharewashing) Study 3 ($n=197$): single factor between subjects experimental design with three levels (carsharing, renting, sharewashing)	The results reveal negative effects of sharewashing on subsequent usage intentions compared to both sharing and renting offers. Consumer skepticism mediates the effect between the type of offering and usage intention when comparing a sharing with a sharewashing offer, also leading to lower perceived attractiveness and decreasing recipients' information-seeking tendencies regarding the sharewashing offer. However, this mechanism does not hold true for the comparison of a rental and a sharewashing offer, indicating that a different underlying mechanism exists

According to Heider's (1944) framework, consumers ascribe two kinds of motives to corporate actions: intrinsic or extrinsic ones (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017; Parguel et al. 2011). Intrinsic motives serve the wider public, while extrinsic motives serve the firm and include an opportunistic element (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017; Skarmas and Leonidou 2013; Romani et al. 2016). The two kinds of motives can also coexist (Ellen 2006). Stronger attributions of intrinsic motives, that is, the willingness to serve a wider public, lead consumers to react positively toward the company. In contrast, predominantly extrinsic motives, associated with the company's sole intention to increase company profits or other business returns, lead to less favorable attitudinal and behavioral responses (Romani et al. 2016). When consumers receive accurate messages about companies introducing a real sharing offer, they might regard these messages as signaling the firms' genuine, intrinsically motivated effort to adopt the sharing economy's values, consistent with altruistic behavior (Field et al. 2018), such as resource conservation. If instead, companies spuriously label their offerings as sharing even when they provide nothing more than a traditional market exchange (e.g., renting), consumers might perceive it as opportunistic, selfish, and untrustworthy behavior demonstrating extrinsic motives. Such firms might appear to be jumping on the bandwagon of the car-sharing trend just to grow their business. Previous research demonstrates that perceptions of such extrinsic motivation generate skepticism (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017). We depict the relationships between the communicated type of service and all other relevant constructs in a conceptual model (see Fig. 1).

In line with this reasoning, people's tendency to use the service should increase if a firm introduces a service that is consistent with the sharing economy's values and with collaborative consumption ideals. However, communicative instruments perceived as opportunistic and extrinsically motivated could instead prompt consumer skepticism and can backfire. Then, similarly to greenwashing, such communication reduces consumers' intention to use the offer (Nyilasy et al. 2014; Leonidou and Skarmas 2017). Since skepticism toward an advertisement decreases purchase intention (Chang and Cheng 2015), we assume that consumers will not only favor true car-sharing offers, but also directly communicated, true rental offers over sharewashing offers. Overall, we posit that this misleading communication strategy has negative consequences for companies that decide to talk the talk without walking the sharing economy walk. These negative effects ultimately might be more harmful than an honest attempt at marketing a classical service (e.g., traditional rental), which would not evoke consumer skepticism in the same way. Thus, we propose:

H1 A sharewashing offer leads to lower usage intention than (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer.

Besides this direct effect, we also investigate mediating mechanisms that could explain purchase decisions in this context. This includes investigating how honest and dishonest communication affects consumers' active and passive interest in using the service. Therefore, next, this research investigates how the communicated type of service affects an offer's attractiveness and consumers' information seeking tendency. In particular, attractiveness refers to an overall assessment of a product or

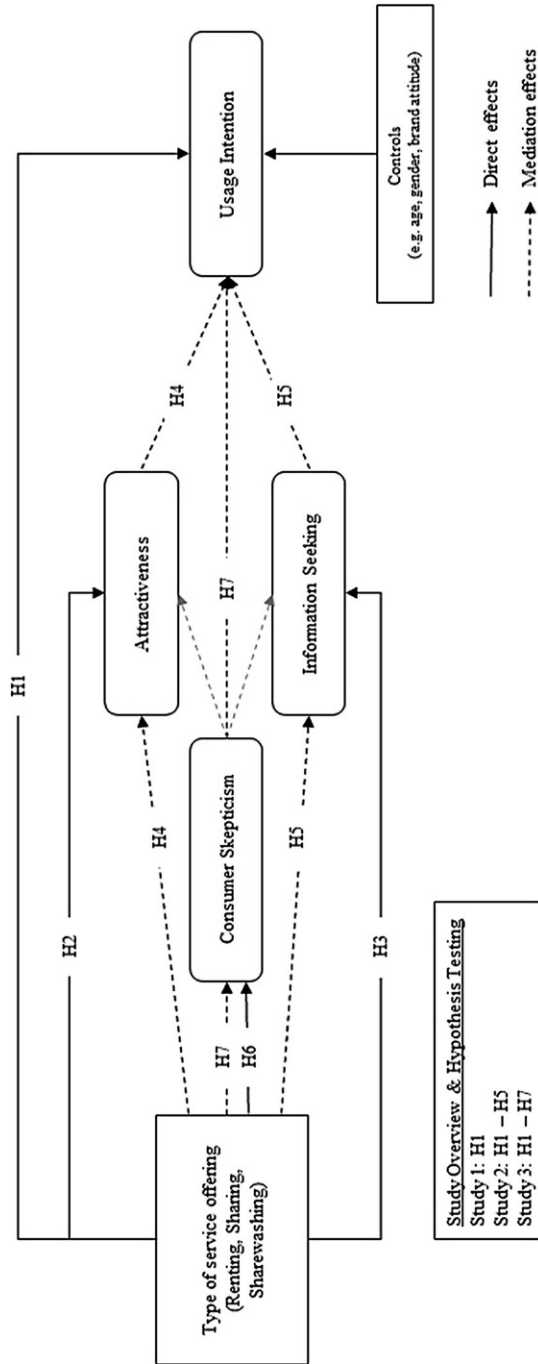


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

brand (Boyd and Mason 1999), which can be interpreted as a kind of passive interest in an offer. Perceptions of attractiveness are likely to reflect consumers' views on the extrinsic and intrinsic motives companies have in their communication: intrinsically motivated offers would appear to be authentic, honest, and thus attractive (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017; Parguel et al. 2011); extrinsically motivated offers, i.e., sharewashing, would not (Nyilasy et al. 2014; Leonidou and Skarmas 2017). Further, we consider perceived attractiveness to be indicative of consumers being likely to adopt new and innovative products (Boyd and Mason 1999), which is particularly interesting when companies enter a market with new offers. Hence, we assume that an honestly communicated service would increase the attractiveness of the offer, while deceptive communication would be perceived as a tactic to enter the market, thereby decreasing the offer's perceived attractiveness. As proposed previously, we suggest that honestly communicating a traditional rental service in a market entry situation would not be as harmful as sharewashing, because it does not evoke the impression of an extrinsically motivated company trying to trick the consumer. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2 A sharewashing offer is perceived as less attractive by consumers than (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer.

Next, information seeking refers to consumers' active interest, manifested as searching for additional information about a particular offer (Ruvio and Shoham 2007; Dholakia 2001). Attribution theory suggests that intrinsically motivated firm actions, including accurate communication about authentic sharing efforts, enhance consumers' evaluation of the firm and its offerings (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017; Parguel et al. 2011), which in turn should prompt positive reactions. Thus, consumers who find an offer appealing start searching for information (Dholakia 2001). Contrastively, misleading, extrinsically motivated communication will evoke consumer skepticism and refusal. For this study, we consciously diverge from claims by Leonidou and Skarmas (2017) who investigated information seeking in the context of greenwashing. They conceptualized information seeking as specific search and scrutinizing behavior to verify doubts related to a product's environmental attributes. In contrast to their study, we conceptualize information seeking as an interest-based construct arising from a deep personal involvement in the purchase decision to gain expertise (de Bruyn and Lilien 2008). Accordingly, in this study information seeking does not refer to an attribute-based information seeking behavior, but to a holistic search that shows interest (Ruvio and Shoham 2007) in collecting more knowledge about the offer in general. Hence, we postulate:

H3 A sharewashing offer leads to less information seeking by consumers than (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer.

Since information seeking (i.e., an active behavioral facet of consumers' interest) is considered integral to purchase decisions and associated with greater purchase tendencies (Demirgunes and Avcilar 2017; Kiel and Layton 1981; Newman and

Staelin 1972), we presume the same for attractiveness (i.e., a passive attitudinal factor of consumers' interest).

In line with the first hypothesis, and consistent with attribution theory, consumers who encounter extrinsically motivated, disingenuous communication might even develop views that diminish the attractiveness of the offer and constrain their desire to seek information about it. Consumer skepticism can evoke negative perceptions of the company and its product (Kirmani 2011). Compared to communication about both sharing and traditional rental offers, sharewashing is assumed to negatively influence consumers' usage intention due to them perceiving the offer to be less attractive (passive interest) and, therefore, restricting their information seeking (active interest). Thus, we hypothesize:

H4 Comparing a sharewashing offer to (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer, the negative effect of sharewashing on usage intention is mediated by the consumers' perceived attractiveness of the service.

H5 Comparing a sharewashing offer to (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer, the negative effect of sharewashing on usage intention is mediated by the consumers' intention to seek information on the service.

Following here, we focus on the underlying mechanism of consumer skepticism, that is supposed to be causal in consumers' perceptions and usage intentions when they encounter a company's offer of a new service. While some research considers consumer skepticism to be a rather stable belief or personality trait (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998), other research shows skepticism to be situational, e.g., provoked by inconsistent and misleading marketing communication (Connors et al. 2017; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). In the case of sharewashing, a company can claim to offer, e.g., a car-sharing service without displaying the service's specific sharing features. According to attribution theory, such a deceptive, extrinsically motivated communication of a service will trigger consumer skepticism, while an accurately communicated car-sharing or a real rental offer will not do so. Hence, we postulate:

H6 A sharewashing offer leads to higher consumer skepticism than (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer.

Once consumers recognize a company's activity as being opportunistic and extrinsically motivated, even as deceptive, their perceptions and behaviors, including their intentions to adopt or use the service (Grewal et al. 1998; Yin et al. 2016) are likely to be negatively affected. Similar to what happens in the case of greenwashing, consumer skepticism can be provoked and can backfire in reducing consumers' purchase or use intention (Nyilasy et al. 2014; Leonidou and Skarmeas 2017). Since skepticism toward advertising decreases purchase intention (Chang and Cheng 2015), we presume that consumers will favor correctly communicated, rental or sharing offers above deceptive sharewashing. Thus, we hypothesize:

H7 Comparing a sharewashing offer to (a) a car-sharing offer, or (b) a traditional car rental offer, the negative effect of sharewashing on usage intention is mediated by consumer skepticism toward the service.

3 Overview of Studies

To test our prediction that sharewashing has a negative impact on consumers' perceptions, and hence, on the companies that use a misleading communication strategy in trying to introduce their services, we conducted three experiments. We used a step-wise approach, which is common in consumer behavior research (e.g., Wu et al. 2017), to investigate the effects of the sharewashing phenomenon. Hence, Study 1 examines the basic question on whether sharewashing negatively affects consumers' willingness to use or purchase the new offer. To better understand the downstream effect of sharewashing, Study 2 analyzes the mediating effects of the offer's perceived attractiveness to consumers, and of their information seeking behavior. Finally, Study 3 sheds light on the underlying psychological process that causes less active and passive interest as well as lower usage intentions for sharewashing offers. Accordingly, we investigated consumer skepticism as a further mediator and its role as causal mechanism. In analyzing the results of these studies, we tested all the hypotheses postulated above.

3.1 Study 1

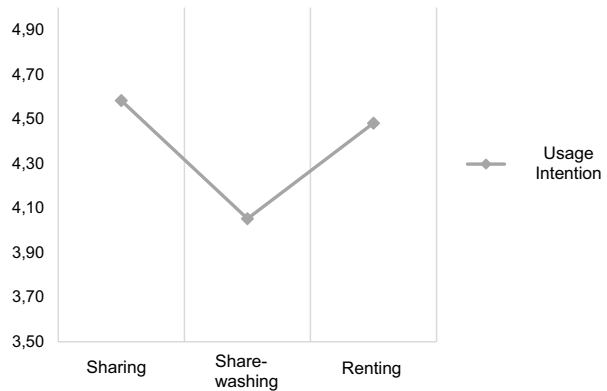
Study 1 provides an initial investigation of the effect sharewashing has on the intention to use a new service a company issues.

3.1.1 Research Design and Sample

To test our hypothesis, we applied a between-subjects experiment with one independent variable on three levels. We created appropriate stimulus material in the form of different communication stimuli that described sharing e-scooters (i.e., electrified motor scooters; see Appendix 1). One stimulus reflected the true sharing condition, in that the stimulus described a highly flexible, free-floating concept that shows a real-world e-scooter sharing offer by stella-sharing. However, we changed the brand name in our experiment. In a second stimulus reflecting a traditional rental offer, we used a description of a more traditional bike rental service. Finally, a third stimulus represented the sharewashing communication strategy by providing information similar to the rental description, but it consistently used the term "sharing" in the header and in descriptions. All three treatments were presented as new offers of the mobility service provider Deutsche Bahn.

Email invitations and survey links to our study were sent through blogs, social media groups, and university mailing lists in Germany. Thus, we invited participants to our study without any specific preselection. We used all available online channels to spread the link. We assigned the participants to one of the experimental groups using a random assignment mechanism in the survey tool Unipark. Respondents

Fig. 2 Mean plot of usage intention—Study 1



were directly informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point during the survey. They were assured that all information they gave would be anonymized to protect their identities, and that analyses would only be conducted on the aggregate level. Further, we included a manipulation check: “This advertorial relates to a sharing offer” for the sharing scenario, and “The offer in the advertorial is presented as a sharing offer” for the sharewashing scenario. Additionally, we inserted an attention check at the beginning of the survey to ensure respondents’ careful attention (Estes et al. 2018). For this we asked whether the presented stimulus communicated a service about an e-scooter. The initial raw data sample comprised 250 respondents. Participants who failed to pass these checks were excluded. The final sample thus consisted of 230 participants, relatively equally distributed across the three scenarios of sharing ($N=69$), sharewashing ($N=80$), and traditional renting ($N=81$). The respondents were between the ages of 19 and 55 (26 years old on average) and most were women (65%).

3.1.2 Measure

To measure our dependent variable, we employed a seven-point Likert scale based on Grewal et al. (1998). Usage intention was captured with items such as “My willingness to use this offer is very high.” The scale was highly reliable ($\alpha=0.893$), exceeding the generally accepted threshold of 0.70 for Cronbach’s alpha (Hair 2010).

3.1.3 Results

To test H1, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with usage intention, which revealed significant main effects of the three manipulations ($F(2, 22)=3.291$, $p<0.05$) on consumers’ intention to use the service. With follow-up univariate ANOVAs, we investigated individual effects between treatments. As postulated, respondents who read the sharewashing stimulus indicated significantly lower intention to use the new offer than those who encountered a sincere communication message about the sharing offer (H1a) ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=4.05$, $M_{\text{sharing}}=4.58$; $F(1,147)=5.10$, $p<0.05$) or a communication stimulus describing the traditional renting offer (H1b)

Table 3 Post hoc test—Study 1

DV	Scenario A	Scenario B	Mean difference (A–B)	Std. error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
Usage Intention	Sharing	Sharewashing	0.5301	0.224	0.019	0.0898	0.9704
		Renting	0.1011	0.223	0.650	–0.3379	0.5402
	Sharewashing	Sharing	–0.5301	0.224	0.019	–0.9704	–0.0898
		Renting	–0.4290	0.214	0.047	–0.8514	–0.0065
	Renting	Sharing	–0.1011	0.223	0.650	–0.5402	0.3379
		Sharewashing	0.4290	0.214	0.047	0.0065	0.8514

($M_{\text{sharewashing}} = 4.05$, $M_{\text{renting}} = 4.48$; $F(1,159) = 3.97$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, we found initial evidence in support of our focal hypothesis, which we display in Fig. 2. These initial results were confirmed by post hoc tests (see Table 3). Beyond these postulated effects, we noted a surprising outcome: we did not find significant differences between the real sharing service and the traditional renting offer ($p = 0.65$), in that consumers demonstrated similar intentions to use these services.

3.2 Study 2

3.2.1 Research Design and Sample

In the second between-subjects experiment, we again used one independent variable on three levels.¹ As in Study 1, we created appropriate stimulus material, namely press releases (see Appendix 2) that in this case considered a car-sharing context, which represents perhaps the most well-known form of access-based services, and thus a very common research context (Roos and Hahn 2017; Schaefer et al. 2016b). By using the car-sharing scenario and thus slightly changing the context, we could also test the initial findings' generalizability. We obtained the true sharing and renting communication stimulus from actual descriptions by car2go and Sixt, respectively. The company car2go is a car-sharing provider that the car manufacturer Daimler launched. It is located in various European cities as well as in North America (car2go 2019). The company car2go that merged with DriveNow (BMW's car-sharing offer), is newly branded as SHARENOW (Mooney 2019). In contrast, Sixt is a traditional German car rental company present in several European countries and the United States. The company transformed its business model in 2019, offering various mobility services such as car rental and ride hailing on one platform (Sixt 2019). However, at the particular time when we conducted Study 2, the brand Sixt did not yet offer car-sharing services. For the sharewashing communication condition, we used their car rental description, but changed the heading and descriptions to

¹ Initially, we also varied the type of car (electric vs. conventional). However, we found no interaction effects along all variables (≥ 0.322), therefore we investigated only the main effect of sharing, sharewashing, and renting while controlling for the possible confounding effects of the type of car (conventional car = 0, e-car = 1).

claim that it represented sharing. Every treatment was branded as a new offer by a car manufacturer (Audi), although such an offer did not actually exist.

We followed the same procedure as in Study 1 to obtain voluntary, anonymous participation for the survey and the attention check. Thus, manipulation checks asked whether the presented stimuli were communicating a sharing or a renting offer (e.g., “This offer relates to a sharing/renting service”). Participants who failed to pass these checks were screened out of the analysis. The final sample consisted of 287 participants, nearly equally distributed across the three scenarios of sharing ($N=95$), sharewashing ($N=94$), and traditional renting ($N=98$). Respondents included a slight majority of women (51%). The average age was 41, with an age range between 16 and 87.

3.2.2 Measures

The observed variables for this study are perceived attractiveness, information search, and usage intention (i.e., intention to use the service). All measures were based on seven-point Likert scales with multiple items to reduce measurement error. For perceived attractiveness of the new service, we adapted a scale from Boyd and Mason (1999) (e.g., “The presented offer can give me real value”). We operationalized information seeking according to van Ittersum and Feinberg (2010) and developed a four-item scale (e.g., “I would directly search for more information about the presented offer”). To measure usage intention, we used the Grewal et al. (1998) scale (e.g., “I would use this offer”). We detail all the measures in Appendix 3.

The reliability assessment for all scales uses Cronbach’s alpha, and all of them exceed the generally accepted threshold of 0.70 (Hair 2010): attractiveness = 0.851, information seeking = 0.921, and usage intention = 0.903. We determined values for each of the constructs by calculating the mean of the items on that scale. We also included gender (0 = female, 1 = male), age (measured in years), type of car, and brand attitude ($\alpha = 0.916$) as control variables in our analyses to control for potentially confounding effects.

3.2.3 Common Method Bias

Due to the study’s research design, common method bias could be a concern. We applied Lindell and Whitney’s (2001) MV marker variable approach to evaluate the severity of this potential common method bias (see also Wang et al. 2017). Thus, we included a theoretically unrelated marker variable in our questionnaire, measuring participants’ attitude toward helping others (seven-point Likert scale, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.902$) adapted from Webb et al. (2000, p. 303), and we applied it as a marker variable. According to Lindell and Whitney (2001) and following current business research (Mandler et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2017), we used the smallest correlation between the marker variable and other variables to adjust the correlations between the variables. As presented in Table 4, none of the significant correlations became non-significant after the adjustment. This affirms that common method bias is not a serious issue in this study.

Table 4 Descriptive statistics and correlations of the constructs—Study 2

	Construct	1		2		3	
1	Attractiveness	1.000	—	0.480	***	0.630	***
2	Information Seeking	0.543	***	1.000	—	0.580	***
3	Usage Intention	0.676	***	0.614	***	1.000	—
	Marker	0.141	*	0.128	*	0.200	**
	Mean	2.980	—	3.170	—	3.940	—
	Std. Deviation	1.580	—	1.670	—	1.560	—

$N=287$. Zero-order correlations are below the diagonal; adjusted correlations for potential common method bias are above the diagonal.

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

3.2.4 Results

In H1–H3, we predicted direct effects of firms' communication to introduce a new service (sharing, sharewashing, and traditional renting) on usage intention, perceived attractiveness, and information seeking. In the related ANOVAs, the communication stimuli represented the independent variable, and the constructs were the dependent variables. A full-factorial, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) showed a significant multivariate main effect of the communication stimuli ($F(6,556)=3.38$, $p<0.01$). Follow-up univariate ANCOVAs revealed more details: intention to use the service was the lowest in the case of sharewashing ($M_{\text{sharing}}=4.29 > M_{\text{sharewashing}}=3.49 < M_{\text{renting}}=4.03$; $F(2,280)=7.54$, $p=0.001$). The results were similar for attractiveness ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.35 > M_{\text{sharewashing}}=2.54 < M_{\text{renting}}=3.07$; $F(2,280)=7.06$, $p=0.001$) and information seeking ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.60 > M_{\text{sharewashing}}=2.77 < M_{\text{renting}}=3.13$; $F(2,280)=6.04$, $p<0.01$). To investigate these effects in more detail using the significance levels of the individual message framings, we analyzed the effects between treatments with post hoc tests. These results revealed that the likelihood of consumers using sharewashing offers was lower than of consumers using the real sharing offer ($M_{\text{sharing}}=4.29$ vs. $M_{\text{sharewashing}}=3.49$, $p<0.001$) or the honest renting offer ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=3.49$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}}=4.03$, $p<0.05$). Thus, Study 2 also confirmed H1.

The results pertaining to attractiveness showed that the sharewashing treatment was perceived as less attractive than real sharing offers, which supports H2a ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.35$ vs. $M_{\text{sharewashing}}=2.54$, $p=0.001$). Similarly, sharewashing was perceived as less attractive than traditional rental offers, which supports H2b ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=2.54$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}}=3.07$, $p<0.05$). For information seeking intention, we found similar patterns: participants were more likely to report an intention to seek information about the sharing offer than about the sharewashing offer ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.60$ vs. $M_{\text{sharewashing}}=2.77$, $p=0.001$). However, the difference between sharewashing and traditional renting was not significant ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=2.77$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}}=3.13$, $p=0.133$), therefore we can only confirm H3a. For a closer look at the data, Table 5 contains the ANOVA results, and Table 6 provides our post hoc tests' findings. In Fig. 3, the effects of sharewashing are plotted graphically.

Besides the traditional (co)variance based analysis of the direct effects in our experimental study, we aimed to investigate indirect effects. To investigate the com-

Table 5 Analysis of covariance results—Study 2

Construct	SS	Df	Mean square	F	p	Means and Significance		
						Sharing	Sharewashing	Renting
Usage Intention	32.549	2	16.275	7.537	0.001	4.29 ^a	3.49 ^b	4.03 ^a
Attractiveness	32.505	2	16.252	7.056	0.001	3.35 ^a	2.54 ^b	3.07 ^a
Information Seeking	31.348	2	15.674	6.041	0.003	3.60 ^a	2.77 ^b	3.13 ^b

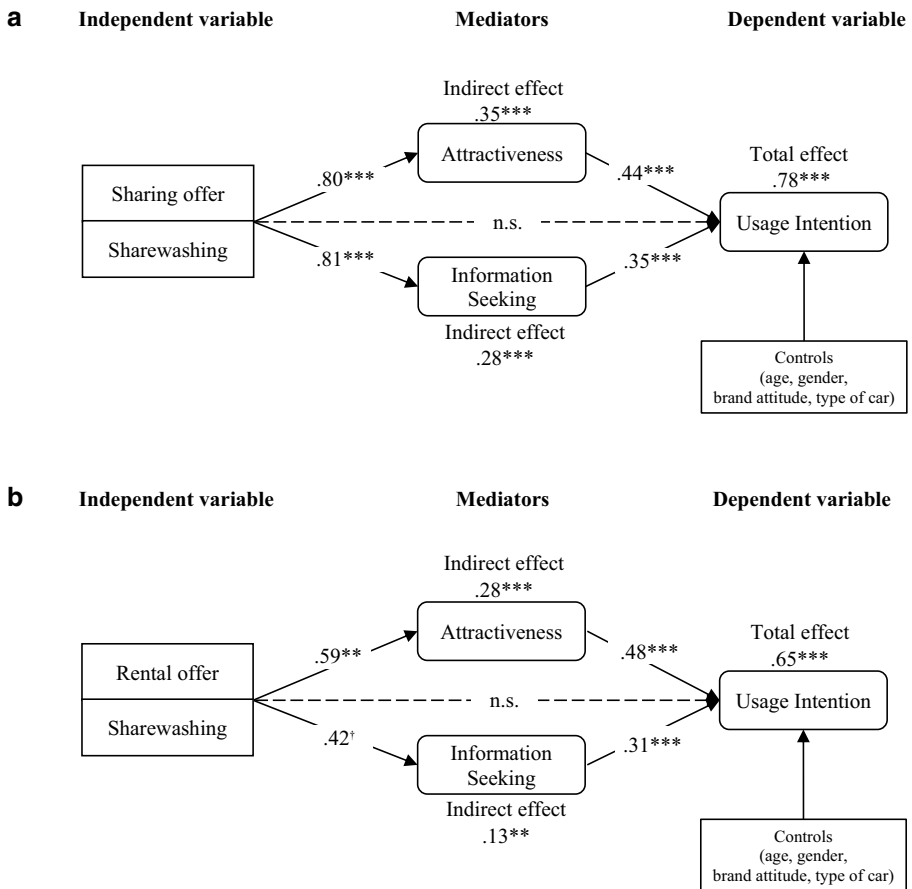
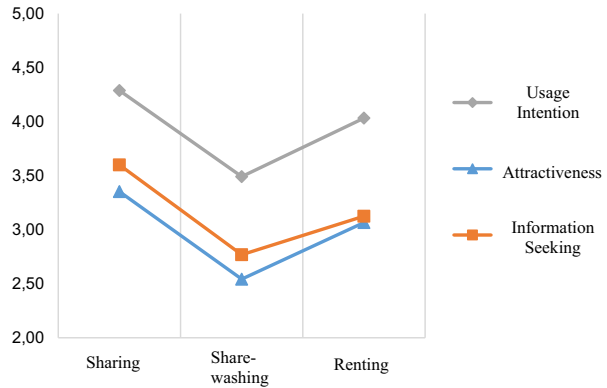
The means in each row with different letters (a,b) are significantly different from each other ($p \leq 0.05$)

Table 6 Post hoc test for dependent variables—Study 2

DV	Scenario A	Scenario B	Mean difference (A–B)	Std. error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
Usage Intention	Sharing	Sharewashing	0.797	0.223	0.000	0.358	1.236
		Renting	0.256	0.221	0.248	–0.179	0.691
	Sharewashing	Sharing	–0.797	0.223	0.000	–1.236	–0.358
		Renting	–0.541	0.222	0.015	–0.977	–0.105
	Renting	Sharing	–0.256	0.221	0.248	–0.691	0.179
		Sharewashing	0.541	0.222	0.015	0.105	0.977
Attractiveness	Sharing	Sharewashing	0.810	0.226	0.000	0.365	1.255
		Renting	0.286	0.224	0.202	–0.154	0.727
	Sharewashing	Sharing	–0.810	0.226	0.000	–1.255	–0.365
		Renting	–0.524	0.224	0.020	–0.966	–0.082
	Renting	Sharing	–0.286	0.224	0.202	–0.727	0.154
		Sharewashing	0.524	0.224	0.020	0.082	0.966
	Information Seeking	Sharewashing	0.831	0.238	0.001	0.362	1.301
		Renting	0.475	0.236	0.045	0.011	0.940
Information Seeking	Sharewashing	Sharing	–0.831	0.238	0.001	–1.301	–0.362
		Renting	–0.356	0.237	0.133	–0.822	0.109
	Renting	Sharing	–0.475	0.236	0.045	–0.940	–0.011
		Sharewashing	0.356	0.237	0.133	–0.109	0.822

munication messages’ mediating effects on subsequent usage intention through attractiveness and information seeking, we also analyzed the data using PROCESS model 4 (version 2.16; Hayes 2013). It relies on ordinary least squares regression and bootstrapping procedures to estimate the direct and indirect effects, as well as mediation, moderation, and conditional (i.e., moderated mediation) processes using dichotomous independent variables. PROCESS produces estimates and bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for the indirect effects.² We started by including sharing and sharewashing as a dichotomous variable in Model A, then compared traditional renting and sharewashing in Model B (see Fig. 4). We ran controls (age, gender, brand attitude, and type of car) as covariates in both models. Unstandardized

² The bootstrapping uses 5000 draws.

Fig. 3 Mean plot of investigated variables—Study 2**Fig. 4** Research models—Study 2; **a** Model A, **b** Model B, † < 0.1; * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$; n.s. (not significant) $p \geq 0.1$

regression coefficients were reported for all analyses (Hayes 2013; Tian and Robertson 2019). The analysis results confirmed our direct effects findings. Specifically, the regressions on attractiveness revealed significant effects of sharing versus sharewashing ($b=0.80$, $t(183)=3.564$, $p<0.001$) and renting versus sharewashing ($b=0.59$, $t(186)=2.77$, $p<0.01$). The regressions with information seeking showed a significant effect when we compared sharing to sharewashing ($b=0.81$, $t(183)=3.450$, $p<0.001$), but the renting versus sharewashing comparison indicated only a weakly significant difference ($b=0.42$, $t(186)=1.81$, $p=0.072$). The regressions for usage intention were not significant. However, this suggests full mediation. Attractiveness mediated the effect of sharing compared to sharewashing on usage intention ($B=0.35$, standard error [SE]=0.11, 99% bootstrap confidence interval [CI]=[0.11, 0.66]) and the effect of renting compared to sharewashing ($B=0.28$, SE=0.11, 99% CI=[0.03, 0.59]), supporting H4a and H4b. We also confirmed that information seeking has a mediating role. Thus, the results confirmed H5a ($B=0.28$, SE=0.10, 99% CI=[0.08, 0.58]) as well as H5b ($B=0.13$, SE=0.07, 95% CI=[0.001, 0.30]). The data further indicated significant total effects on the usage intention dependent variable for sharing versus sharewashing ($B=0.78$, SE=0.21, 99% CI=[0.36, 1.19]) and for renting versus sharewashing ($B=0.65$, SE=0.21, 99% CI=[0.23, 1.07]).

In addition to the hypothesized effects, we observed that participants' perceptions of real sharing and traditional renting offers do not differ; the two offers induced similar levels of approval. This means these types of services did not prompt significantly different usage intentions ($M_{\text{sharing}}=4.29$, $M_{\text{renting}}=4.03$, $p=0.25$) or attractiveness ratings ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.35$, $M_{\text{renting}}=3.07$, $p=0.20$). The difference for information-seeking was slightly significant ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.60$, $M_{\text{renting}}=3.13$, $p<0.05$).

3.3 Study 3

To finally show the underlying mechanism that causes the less favorable results for misleading communication of offers, we replicated Study 2 with the addition of investigating the consumer skepticism's role.

3.3.1 Research Design and Sample

As in Study 2, we conducted a scenario-based, between-subjects experiment with the type of service being the independent variable distinguishing between three levels (sharing, renting, and sharewashing). We used the same stimuli as in Study 2, adjusting only the point of time when the new service would be launched. For data collection, the same methods were used as in Studies 1 and 2. To check for manipulation, we again asked participants how they would categorize the offer (as car-sharing, traditional car rental, or car-sharing offer based on a traditional car rental concept). For the data collection we used the survey tool Qualtrics. The final sample consisted of 199 participants with $N=83$ for the car-sharing, $N=54$ for the renting and $N=62$ for the sharewashing condition. Participants' mean age was 26.8, with a minimum of 18 and a maximum of 69 years. Slightly more women (54.3%) participated.

Table 7 Reliability and validity assessment of constructs—Study 3

	Construct	Alpha	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1	Consumer Skepticism	0.913	0.917	0.788	–	0.427	0.368	0.470	0.255
2	Attractiveness	0.880	0.881	0.787	–0.399**	–	0.754	0.728	0.200
3	Information Seeking	0.882	0.886	0.666	–0.348**	0.660**	–	0.712	0.250
4	Usage Intention	0.890	0.889	0.617	–0.465**	0.643**	0.628**	–	0.205
5	Brand Attitude	0.926	0.925	0.713	–0.196**	0.179*	0.277**	0.185**	–

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$; correlations are reported below the diagonal, heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT values) are reported above the diagonal

3.3.2 Measures

We used the same scales as in Study 2. To measure consumer skepticism, we adapted Babin et al.'s (1995) scale using a seven-point Likert scale with three items (“Concerning the offer, I am skeptical/suspicious/critical”). We assessed the scales’ reliability and validity and found that all the criteria fulfilled the common thresholds so that they could be used in further calculations (Hair et al. 2017; see Table 7). As in Study 2, we controlled for brand attitude, age (measured in years), and gender (0 = male, 1 = female).

3.3.3 Results

To test for the effect the communicated type of service has on consumer skepticism (H6) and usage intention (H1) we conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with age, gender, and brand attitude as covariates. The MANCOVA showed a significant multivariate main effect of the three manipulations ($F(4,386)=8.22$, $p<0.001$). The follow-up univariate ANCOVAs revealed that consumer skepticism was the highest for the sharewashing offer ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=4.65 > M_{\text{renting}}=4.56 > M_{\text{sharing}}=3.57$; $F(2,193)=10.24$, $p<0.001$), and usage intention was the lowest in the case of sharewashing ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=3.36 < M_{\text{renting}}=3.92 < M_{\text{sharing}}=4.36$; $F(2,193)=12.19$, $p<0.001$).

With follow-up post hoc tests we analyzed the effects between the different treatment groups and account for the different sample sizes. As hypothesized in H6a, results revealed higher consumer skepticism for the sharewashing offer than for the sharing offer ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=4.65$ vs. $M_{\text{sharing}}=3.57$, $p<0.001$). Surprisingly, the rental offer caused similarly high consumer skepticism ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=4.65$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}}=4.56$, $p=0.985$), thus, showing no support for H6b. Although we did not hypothesize any difference related to consumer skepticism between the sharing and rental offers, it is interesting that consumer skepticism was significantly higher for the rental offer than for the sharing offer ($M_{\text{sharing}}=3.57$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}}=4.56$, $p<0.01$). Our discussion below will elaborate on this finding in more detail.

The results for usage intention show that the sharewashing offer leads to lower usage intention than the real sharing offer ($M_{\text{sharewashing}}=3.36$ vs. $M_{\text{sharing}}=4.36$, $p<0.001$), which supports H1a. Although consumers tend to use the rental offer

Table 8 Analysis of covariance results—Study 3

Construct	SS	Df	Mean square	F	p	Means and Significance		
						Sharing	Share-washing	Renting
Usage Intention	40,074	2	20,037	12,188	0.000	4.36 ^a	3.36 ^b	3.92 ^{a, b}
Consumer Skepticism	54,209	2	27,105	10,235	0.000	3.57 ^a	4.65 ^b	4.56 ^b

The means in each row with different letters (a,b) are significantly different from each other ($p \leq 0.05$)

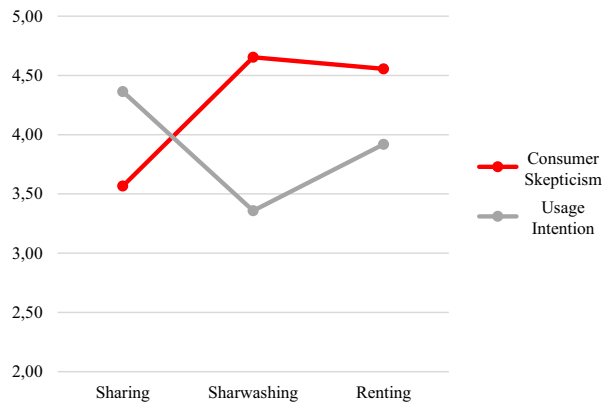
Table 9 Post hoc test for consumer skepticism and usage intention—Study 3

DV	Scenario A	Scenario B	Mean difference (A–B)	Std. error	Sig	95% confidence interval	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
Usage Intention	Sharing	Sharewashing	1.006	0.225	0.000	0.465	1.547
		Renting	0.445	0.234	0.165	–0.118	1.001
	Sharewashing	Sharing	–1.006	0.225	0.000	–1.547	–0.465
		Renting	–0.561	0.249	0.075	–1.160	0.040
	Renting	Sharing	–0.445	0.234	0.165	–1.001	0.118
		Sharewashing	0.561	0.249	0.075	–0.040	1.161
Consumer Skepticism	Sharing	Sharewashing	–1.087	0.279	0.000	–1.759	–0.415
		Renting	–0.989	0.291	0.002	–1.689	–0.290
	Sharewashing	Sharing	1.087	0.279	0.000	0.415	1.759
		Renting	0.098	0.309	0.985	–0.647	0.843
	Renting	Sharing	0.989	0.291	0.002	0.290	1.689
		Sharewashing	–0.098	0.309	0.985	–0.843	0.647

rather than the sharewashing offer ($M_{\text{sharewashing}} = 3.36$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}} = 3.92$, $p = 0.075$), results show support for H1b on a level of merely $p = 0.1$. Additionally, the results revealed that although the rental offer causes more skepticism than the sharing offer, there was no significant difference in usage intention for renting compared to sharing ($M_{\text{sharing}} = 4.36$ vs. $M_{\text{renting}} = 3.92$, $p = 0.165$). While Table 8 shows the ANCOVA results, Table 9 displays the post hoc tests' results. Then in Fig. 5, we plot the effects graphically.

We examined the mediating effect of consumer skepticism (H7) based on a simple mediation model using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS_SEM) (Sarstedt et al. 2020). To compare the different communication stimuli, i.e., the different types of offers, we defined sharewashing as the comparison group (0) for the dummy regressions. Hence, the effects of the sharing offer and the renting offer need to be interpreted in relation to the sharewashing offer (cf. Eggert et al. 2015). We calculated all data with SmartPLS 3.0 software (Ringle et al. 2015). Hence, we ran the PLS algorithm, followed by the bootstrapping procedure using 5000 samples.

The results of the simple mediation model are depicted in Table 10. As already shown in the previous analysis, a sharing offer compared to a sharewashing offer not only showed a significant effect on consumer skepticism ($\beta = -0.321$, $p < 0.001$) and on usage intention ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$), but also revealed a significant indirect

Fig. 5 Mean plot of investigated variables—Study 3

effect via consumer skepticism on usage intention ($\beta = 0.123$, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting H1a, H6a and H7a. Hence, consumer skepticism partially mediates the impact of a sharing offer (versus sharewashing) on usage intention. The results for a traditional car rental offer compared to a sharewashing offer showed a significant effect only on usage intention ($\beta = 0.216$, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting H1b. Surprisingly, the direct effect of a traditional car rental offer (versus sharewashing) on consumer skepticism was not significant ($\beta = -0.046$, $p = 0.567$), as was the indirect effect ($\beta = 0.017$, $p = 0.576$), hence H6b and H7b were not supported.

To not only test the simple mechanism of consumer skepticism on usage intention we also included perceived attractiveness of the offer and information seeking as second level mediators. Additionally, we ran the PLS algorithm for the complete model. We found significant direct effects of a car-sharing offer compared to a sharewashing offer on consumer skepticism ($\beta = -0.320$, $p < 0.001$), perceived offer attractiveness ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < 0.01$), and information seeking behavior ($\beta = 0.212$, $p < 0.05$), which support hypotheses H2a, H3a, and H6a. The direct effect on usage intention ($\beta = 0.113$, $p = 0.069$) was significant on a ten percent probability level only, thus showing weak support for H1a. Beyond these direct effects, the specific indirect effect via consumer skepticism on usage intention ($\beta = 0.053$, $p < 0.05$) was significant, thus supporting H7a. Additionally, the specific indirect effect via attractiveness of the offer ($\beta = 0.107$, $p < 0.05$) was significant. However, the indirect effect via information seeking ($\beta = 0.061$, $p = 0.123$) was not significant. Concerning the serial mediation, results revealed a significant indirect effect via consumer skepticism and attractiveness ($\beta = 0.042$, $p < 0.05$) of car-sharing (versus sharewashing) on usage intention, whereas the indirect effect via consumer skepticism and information seeking intention ($\beta = 0.025$, $p = 0.113$) was not significant. The specific indirect and total indirect effects as well as the total effects are depicted in Table 11.

While we also suggested a positive effect of a car rental offer compared to a sharewashing offer, the results did not show significant direct effects on consumer skepticism ($\beta = -0.046$, $p = 0.565$), attractiveness of the offer ($\beta = -0.058$, $p = 0.397$), and information seeking ($\beta = 0.110$, $p = 0.175$), thus providing no support for H2b, H3b, and H6b. Hence, the specific indirect effects via consumer skepticism, attractiveness of the offer, and information seeking were not significant. However, the direct

Table 10 Results of the simple mediation model—Study 3

<i>Direct Effects</i>	β	<i>t values</i>	<i>p values</i>
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism	−0.321	4.153	0.000
Sharing ^a → Usage Intention	0.285	3.654	0.000
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism	−0.046	0.573	0.567
Renting ^a → Usage Intention	0.216	2.837	0.005
Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	−0.382	5.074	0.000
<i>Specific Indirect Effects</i>			
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	0.123	3.027	0.002
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	0.017	0.559	0.576
<i>Total Effects</i>			
Sharing ^a → Usage Intention	0.408	5.413	0.000
Renting ^a → Usage Intention	0.233	2.839	0.005
<i>Covariates (Direct Effects)</i>			
Gender ^b → Consumer Skepticism	−0.011	0.162	0.871
Gender ^b → Usage Intention	0.065	0.958	0.338
Brand Attitude → Consumer Skepticism	−0.251	3.350	0.001
Brand Attitude → Usage Intention	0.111	1.470	0.142
Age → Consumer Skepticism	0.071	1.044	0.296
Age → Usage Intention	−0.178	2.535	0.011
—	<i>R square adjusted</i>		
Consumer Skepticism	0.135		
Usage Intention	0.313		

β = standardized path coefficient

^a compared to sharewashing (0)

^b gender: male = 0, female = 1

effect of a car rental offer (versus sharewashing) on usage intention was significant ($\beta = 0.209$, $p < 0.01$), which supports H1b. We give a comprehensive overview of the main results in Table 11.

4 General Discussion

This research has investigated sharewashing, which is a concept we introduce to describe the behavior of various firms laying claim to a position in the sharing economy without developing an innovative service; rather, they misleadingly frame a traditional service as sharing. Drawing on attribution theory and consumer skepticism research, we predict negative consequences of such behavior, and provide empirical evidence of consumers' diminished intentions to use such a deceptively communicated service.

4.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our findings across three studies contribute to research and theory in several ways. First, we contribute to the research streams of access-based services and deceptive

Table 11 Results of the complete model evaluation—Study 3

<i>Direct Effects</i>	β	t values	p values
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism	−0.320	4.206	0.000
Sharing ^a → Attractiveness	0.250	2.944	0.003
Sharing ^a → Information Seeking	0.212	2.53	0.011
Sharing ^a → Usage Intention	0.113	1.821	0.069
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism	−0.046	0.576	0.565
Renting ^a → Attractiveness	−0.058	0.847	0.397
Renting ^a → Information Seeking	0.110	1.357	0.175
Renting ^a → Usage Intention	0.209	3.026	0.002
Consumer Skepticism → Attractiveness	−0.303	3.488	0.000
Consumer Skepticism → Information Seeking	−0.269	3.239	0.001
Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	−0.166	2.677	0.007
Attractiveness → Usage Intention	0.429	3.021	0.003
Information Seeking → Usage Intention	0.289	2.283	0.022
<i>Specific Indirect Effects</i>			
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	0.053	2.179	0.029
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	0.008	0.513	0.608
<i>Specific Indirect Effects via Consumer Skepticism and Attractiveness</i>			
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Attractiveness	0.097	2.457	0.014
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Attractiveness → Usage Intention	0.042	1.990	0.047
Sharing ^a → Attractiveness → Usage Intention	0.107	2.135	0.033
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Attractiveness	0.014	0.553	0.580
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Attractiveness → Usage Intention	0.006	0.543	0.587
Renting ^a → Attractiveness → Usage Intention	−0.025	0.786	0.432
<i>Specific Indirect Effects via Consumer Skepticism and Information Seeking</i>			
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Information Seeking	0.086	2.329	0.020
Sharing ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Information Seeking → Usage Intention	0.025	1.585	0.113
Sharing ^a → Information Seeking → Usage Intention	0.061	1.544	0.123
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Information Seeking	0.012	0.539	0.590
Renting ^a → Consumer Skepticism → Information Seeking → Usage Intention	0.004	0.488	0.625
Renting ^a → Information Seeking → Usage Intention	0.032	1.057	0.290
<i>Total Indirect Effects</i>			
Sharing ^a → Attractiveness	0.097	2.457	0.014
Sharing ^a → Information Seeking	0.086	2.329	0.020
Sharing ^a → Usage Intention	0.288	4.926	0.000
Renting ^a → Attractiveness	0.014	0.553	0.580
Renting ^a → Information Seeking	0.012	0.539	0.590
Renting ^a → Usage Intention	0.024	0.395	0.693
Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	−0.208	3.461	0.001
<i>Total Effects</i>			

Table 11 (Continued)

Sharing ^a → Attractiveness	0.347	4.436	0.000
Sharing ^a → Information Seeking	0.298	3.885	0.000
Sharing ^a → Usage Intention	0.401	5.438	0.000
Renting ^a → Attractiveness	−0.044	0.605	0.545
Renting ^a → Information Seeking	0.123	1.489	0.136
Renting ^a → Usage Intention	0.233	2.858	0.004
Consumer Skepticism → Usage Intention	−0.373	4.810	0.000
<i>Covariates (Direct Effects)</i>			
Gender ^b → Consumer Skepticism	−0.012	0.168	0.866
Gender ^b → Attractiveness	−0.019	0.267	0.790
Gender ^b → Information Seeking	0.095	1.332	0.183
Gender ^b → Usage Intention	0.044	0.763	0.446
Brand Attitude → Consumer Skepticism	−0.252	3.355	0.001
Brand Attitude → Attractiveness	0.122	1.833	0.067
Brand Attitude → Information Seeking	0.171	2.353	0.019
Brand Attitude → Usage Intention	0.012	0.205	0.837
Age → Consumer Skepticism	0.072	1.056	0.291
Age → Attractiveness	−0.128	1.695	0.090
Age → Information Seeking	−0.091	1.074	0.283
Age → Usage Intention	−0.095	1.895	0.058
–	<i>R square adjusted</i>		
Consumer Skepticism	0.135		
Attractiveness	0.261		
Information Seeking	0.183		
Usage Intention	0.641		

β = standardized path coefficient

^a compared to sharewashing (0)

^b gender: male = 0, female = 1

communication by introducing and empirically testing the recent phenomenon that companies try to exploit the emerging trend of the sharing economy and collaborative consumption by making deceptive offers, i.e., sharewashing. While extant research on access-based services predominantly focuses on positive aspects of the sharing economy we document a negative outcome of this emerging consumption trend. Hereby, we go further than studies praising access-based services as a new business paradigm (Belk 2014b; Botsman and Rogers 2010) often used to enhance a company's image (Baumeister et al. 2015). By identifying and classifying misleading communication of alleged sharing offers as deceptive communication and revealing its negative consequences in three related studies, we provide initial empirical evidence of a sharewashing effect. The latter is similar to the greenwashing effect established largely in CSR research (Leonidou and Skarmas 2017; Nyilasy et al. 2014; Skarmas and Leonidou 2013). We thereby broaden the research field beyond sustainability (“green”) and CSR communication (e.g., Romani et al. 2016) and provide evidence for the generalizability of this deceptive communication concept. We show its negative consequences for companies that try to exploit a new

market by misleadingly labeling their business model as sharing without delivering a real sharing service.

Second, regarding the literature streams of consumer skepticism and deceptive communication, we contribute to extant research by identifying partially different and inconsistent mechanisms that affect consumer attitudes and behaviors in a sharing context. Previous research on green advertising and CSR shows higher levels of skepticism toward dishonest communication or activities, which have a negative effect on consumers' behavioral intentions (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013; Nyilasy et al. 2014). However, results are not as clear regarding deceptive communication of companies entering the market of access-based mobility services. In line with previous research, we confirm the expected mediating mechanism of consumer skepticism between the communicated type of service and usage intention, showing that sharewashing causes more consumer skepticism and thus lower usage intention than a real car-sharing offer. Surprisingly, this mechanism does not hold true in comparing a traditional car rental offer and a sharewashing offer. Although both offers caused similarly high levels of consumer skepticism, usage intentions were higher for a traditional rental offer than for a sharewashing offer. To better understand these results, we need to consider the rapidly changing mobility services market. While the global car rental market is confronted with decreasing growth rates (Statista 2019), car-sharing has been disproportionately expanding with new players entering the market. In fact, the car-sharing market grew from 3 million car-sharing platform members worldwide in 2013 to 27 million in 2018 (Kearney 2019). Thus, consumers have gained more experience and knowledge about actors and state-of-the-art offers in this disrupted market. Hence, we assume that consumers do not credit companies that enter the mobility market with a traditional service concept such as car rental; quite the contrary, consumers seem to be similarly skeptical toward these types of offers, particularly when they are newly introduced to the market. Consequently, we believe that the reasons for consumer skepticism toward the sharewashing and renting offers, are different. Whereas we presume consumer skepticism in the sharewashing condition is caused by consumers' feeling of being deceived or dishonestly treated by the service provider, their skepticism toward the rental service rather displays a state of irritation and confusion. Nevertheless, consumers' usage intentions are higher for rental offers than for sharewashing offers. These results indicate that a different, simultaneous mechanism exists in the case of rental offers and mitigates the negative effect of consumer skepticism on usage intention. This parallel mechanism seems to be based on the mere-exposure effect (Zajonc 1968) because in the past consumers have had regular exposure to such traditional rental offers, and therefore might be more familiar with a rental offer than a newly introduced sharewashing offer with renting characteristics, but framed as sharing. Accordingly, a familiar rental offer might increase positive affect, and thus cause a direct positive effect on usage intentions. These findings are consistent with Ward et al.'s (2014) research that, in another context, confirmed the power of familiarity to predict consumer choice. However, to fully understand the specific interplay between the competing mechanisms of skepticism and familiarity further research is required.

Third, we apply attribution theory to explain the new phenomenon of sharewashing and its negative effects. Based on attribution theory, we demonstrate an inner process, captured by mediating variables that indicate passive and active interest. More precisely, we reveal a downstream process in which consumers, on careful consideration, might begin to form negative attributions about the company's motives. We presume they suspect companies of having ulterior motives, which leads them to turn away from such companies and their offers. Thereby, our findings agree with previous research on greenwashing (Nyilasy et al. 2014), showing similar effects on how skepticism that results from consumers' attributions triggered by deceptive communications, leads to predominantly negative psychological and behavioral responses.

4.2 Managerial Implications

Our research findings hold important implications for businesses, of which managers should be aware. Evidence of the negative consequences of sharewashing emphasizes how important honest communication is.

Our findings show that companies should be aware of sharewashing's negative effects and need to distinguish themselves from competitors that try to jump on the bandwagon. Besides the possibility that the emerging market of sharing services could suffer in the long run, such sharewashing practices could backfire on a single service provider as well. Hence, we suggest that firms should either pursue a real sharing option or embrace a traditional renting approach and promote it accordingly. Whereas sharewashing prompts negative perceptions and intentions, sharing as well as renting offers do not evoke significantly different usage intentions among consumers. Therefore, even if a company is unable to adopt the new consumption trend of sharing, it should still prioritize communicating what it offers instead of misleadingly framing the offer as sharing. This highlights the need for a clear business concept and honest communication.

Further, our investigation of the mediating effects in Study 2 suggests that consumers need to understand the value proposition of a service. Companies entering a highly dynamic market with a deceptively communicated service will trigger neither active nor passive consumer interest. For this reason, it is particularly important to know and communicate the consumers' perceived value of the offered service in order to spark active interest and trigger additional information seeking, both of which are highly relevant for subsequent usage or buying intentions.

However, companies entering the market with a traditional renting service could encounter more challenges to trigger active and passive interest. Although consumers' usage intentions between a traditional renting and a real car-sharing offer did not differ significantly, Study 3 revealed that consumers are more skeptical of a market entry with a traditional rental business model than of one with a sharing model. Hence, entering a highly disrupted market, such as the mobility sector, with a traditional rental service can cause skepticism among consumers. Although consumers are familiar with traditional rental services and still intend to use such a service, they might question why a company does not offer a modern car-sharing service when newly entering the market, since even traditional rental car companies

such as Sixt are transforming their business model by establishing a “mobility as a service” platform and offering rental, sharing, and ride hailing services in one mobile application (FleetEurope 2019; Market Insider 2019). This case demonstrates that even traditional rental companies can rethink their business model and innovate, offering both rental and sharing services to increase car utilization, thus staying competitive as the market in which they are operating is changing radically. However, (additionally) offering true car-sharing can be costly. Recent developments indicate that flexible product usage through access-based services is not suitable in all business environments and could in practice be too expensive in some contexts (Dahlmann 2016; Hahn et al. 2020; Lagadic et al. 2019; Löhle 2017). For this reason, some firms may still find traditional renting services an appealing and profitable option. Still, companies that pursue a market entry with a traditional rental service might need to invest more effort and financial resources in marketing communication to spark consumers’ passive and active interest. In the long run this is particularly relevant for companies to differentiate themselves from other entrants or existing competitors.

4.3 Limitations and Further Research

Our results should also be interpreted in the light of certain limitations. First, to achieve a high degree of internal validity, we used experiments which could be limited in their external validity. We developed realistic experimental stimulus materials (i.e., based on real-world communications), but external validity remains a concern. Therefore, further research could gather field data or conduct field experiments to ensure cross-validation.

Second, although we found evidence for a negative sharewashing effect on usage intentions in different mobility contexts (i.e., scooters and cars) and for different brands (i.e., Deutsche Bahn and Audi), future research could investigate whether sharewashing has the same negative effects for a strong versus a weak brand, or a well-known versus a new, lesser known brand.

Finally, our work represents one of the first steps taking a more critical perspective on the trend of access-based services and collaborative consumption. Research on the dark side of the sharing economy remains scarce in these domains, so we outline several potential avenues for further studies. In particular, we call for projects that investigate social impact. On a macro level, novel sharing services can produce concentrations of ownership, in that a majority of potential consumers would eventually only be able to access these products by paying higher prices. In various industries, companies have entered into vicious competition with new providers in the sharing economy. Uber drivers, for instance, challenge taxi drivers in many cities, and Airbnb makes business in the hospitality industry more competitive. Authorities have already responded, for example by banning Uber in London (Wilkinson 2018). This development follows the trend to the hub or platform economy (Perren and Kozinets 2018), which intensifies concentration of supply. Further studies should investigate possible dark sides, such as negative effects on consumers, on competitive structures in industries, and on society as a whole. On a micro level, we need research on the negative consequences of access-based consumption for both customers and for

peer service providers. For example, consumers could face inconvenience and higher quality risks when they adopt unstandardized collaborative services. Emerging risks also relate to data protection and privacy, due to the expanded means of tracking consumers' access to and use of various services. Service providers harvest vast amounts of user data, which certainly create risks of data misuse or loss, as well as evoke consumers' skepticism about how companies handle their personal data. This topic is of great public interest, and not only since Facebook's data privacy scandal (BBC News 2018). The use of blockchain technology for managing access-based services and peer-to-peer networks might be a promising approach to handle data protection and privacy concerns (Büttgen et al. 2021). Summarizing, future research should focus on these dark side aspects and keep a critical eye on this consumption trend.


Appendix


Appendix 1: Study 1—Experimental Stimuli

E-Scooter-Sharing from DB

Deutsche Bahn starts a sharing offer for electro-scooters

In future, the sharing offer will be available in many German cities. Available scooters can be searched and reserved in the browser or via the app in advance. After the ride, the e-scooters can easily be parked in the operation area or, for a credit advice for the next trip, by a charging station. The offer is available to everyone after a one-time registration. Because the scooters are regularly maintained, they are always in a good condition and fully functional. Billing is based on the duration of usage, with a flexible tariff. Detailed information about the offer is summarized in the table.

Die Bahn 



Details about the sharing offer for electro scooters	
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E-scooter with maximum speed of 45 km/h Check the availability of e-scooters via web-browser or the app in advance
Usage and return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spontaneous use or reservation of e-scooters Flexible use with no pre-determined period of use Pick up and return anywhere in the operation area
Provider contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online, by phone, or e-mail Smartphone app
Service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendly and easy to reach customer service E-scooters are provided in clean, fully functional condition
Settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible, minute-by-minute billing

Fig. 6 Sharing

E-Scooter-Sharing from DB

Deutsche Bahn starts a sharing offer for electro-scooters

Die Bahn 

In future, the sharing offer will be available at e-scooter stations in many German cities. The e-scooters can be reserved at a desired station for any period of use in advance. Afterward, the e-scooters can be picked up and returned. The offer is available to everyone after a one-time registration. Because the scooters are regularly maintained, they are always in good condition and fully functional. Billing is based on the duration of usage, as a flexible tariff. Detailed information about the offer is summarized in the table.



Details of the sharing offer for electro scooters	
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E-scooter with maximum speed of 45 km/h Check the availability of e-scooters in the web-browser or via App in advance
Usage and return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reservation of e-scooters by latest 30 minutes before usage Predetermined period of use Pick up and return at selected stations
Provider contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online, by phone or e-Mail Smartphone app
Service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendly and easy to reach customer service E-scooters are provided in clean and fully functional condition
Settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible, 4h, daily, weekend, or weekly rate

Fig. 7 Sharewashing

E-Scooter-Renting from DB

Deutsche Bahn starts a renting offer for electro-scooters

Die Bahn 

In future, the renting offer will be available at e-scooter stations in many German cities. The e-scooters can be reserved at a desired station for any period of use in advance. Afterward, the e-scooters can be picked up and returned. The offer is available to everyone after a one-time registration. Because the scooters are regularly maintained, they are always in good condition and fully functional. Billing is based on the duration of usage, as a flexible tariff. Detailed information about the offer is summarized in the table.



Details of the renting offer for electro scooters	
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> E-scooter with maximum speed of 45 km/h Check the availability of e-scooters in the web-browser or via App in advance
Usage and return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reservation of e-scooters by latest 30 minutes before usage Predetermined period of use Pick up and return at selected stations
Provider contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online, by phone or e-Mail Smartphone app
Service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendly and easy to reach customer service E-scooters are provided in clean and fully functional condition
Settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible, 4h, daily, weekend, or weekly rate

Fig. 8 Renting


Appendix 2: Study 2 and Study 3—Experimental Stimuli

Carsharing by Audi

Audi is introducing its own carsharing offer

At the beginning of 2017, Audi will introduce a flexible, free-floating, carsharing service in cities with more than 400,000 residents. The offer is available to everyone after a one-time registration. Audi will supply the model A3* for this service. Cars are painted the same way, clearly visible as part of the carsharing fleet. Cars can be reserved via mobile phone and RFID modules. Payment takes place after usage, via direct debit.

Details of the carsharing* offer	
Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 95% of times, a car is available within a walking distance of 10 minutes
Usage and return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spontaneous use or reservation up to 20 minutes before usage is possible Flexible use with no pre-determined period of use Return of the car at a free parking lot anywhere in the city
Provider contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online, by phone, or e-mail Smartphone app
Service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendly and easy to reach customer service Cars are provided in a clean and good condition
Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Third-party insurance and all-risk insurance are inclusive



Audi Carsharing

* In the e-car version we added "e-" or "electro-" as appropriate.

Fig. 9 Sharing

Carsharing by Audi



Audi is introducing its own carsharing offer

Audi Carsharing

At the beginning of 2017, Audi will introduce a carsharing service in cities with more than 400,000 residents. The offer is available to everyone, after a one-time registration. Audi will supply the model A3* for this service. Cars are painted the same way, clearly visible as part of the sharing fleet. At sharing stations, cars and keys can be picked up and returned. Payment is made after usage, via direct debit.

Details of the carsharing* offer

Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing stations are at railway stations and large traffic hubs
Usage and return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reservation at least 30 minutes before usage Predetermined period of use Return of the car at selected carsharing stations
Provider contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online, by phone, or e-mail Smartphone app
Service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendly and easy to reach customer service Cars are provided in a clean and good condition
Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Third-party insurance and all-risk insurance are inclusive

* In the e-car version we added "e-" or "electro-" as appropriate.

Fig. 10 Sharewashing

Renting by Audi

Audi is introducing its own renting offer



At the beginning of 2017, Audi will introduce a car rental service in cities with more than 400,000 residents. The offer is available to everyone, after a one-time registration. Audi will supply the model A3* for the service. Cars are painted the same way, clearly visible as part of the rental fleet. At car rental stations, cars and keys can be picked and returned. Payment is made after usage, via direct debit.

Details of the car* rental offer

Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rental stations are at railway stations and large traffic hubs
Usage and return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reservation at least 30 minutes before usage Predetermined period of use Return of the car at selected carsharing stations
Provider contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online, by phone, or e-mail Smartphone app
Service quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendly and easy to reach customer service Cars are provided in a clean and good condition
Insurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Third-party insurance and all-risk insurance are inclusive

* In the e-car version we added "e-" or "electro-" as appropriate.

Fig. 11 Renting

Appendix 3

Table 12 Measurement constructs and items

Construct	Items	Source
Perceived Attraction	Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statement: The presented offer fills a real need for me The presented offer can give me real value	Adapted from Grewal et al. (1998)
Information Seeking	Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements: I would like to obtain information extensively about the presented offer I would directly search for more information about the presented offer I need more information about the presented offer I would like to have more information about the presented offer	Adapted from van Ittersum and Feinberg (2010)
Usage Intention	Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements: The probability that I would consider using this offer is very high My willingness to use this offer is very high I would use this offer If I would need such a product, I would consider this offer ^a /If I would need a car, I would consider this offer If I would need such a product, this offer is a worthwhile offer to me. ^a /For being mobile in future, this offer is a worthwhile offer to me	Adapted from Grewal et al. (1998)
Brand Attitude (Control)	Please indicate how strong you agree with the following statements. I evaluate the brand Audi as ... Bad/good Unpleasant/pleasant Unreliable/reliable Unlikeable/likable Negative/positive	Adapted from Bergkvist and Rossiter (2007)
Attitude to help others (Marker)	Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements: People should be willing to help others who are less fortunate Helping troubled people with their problems is very important to me People should be more charitable toward others in society People in need should receive support from others	Adapted from Webb et al. (2000)
Consumer Skepticism	Concerning the offer, I am ... Skeptical Suspicious Distrustful	Adapted from Babin et al. (1995)

^a Item in Study 1

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Conflict of interest A. Lehr, M. Büttgen and S. Bartsch declare that they have no competing interests.

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