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ORIGINAL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Platform cooperatives in the sharing economy: How market challengers bring change from the margins

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Abstract

The now-mature sharing economy has not delivered on its original utopian promises. Instead of providing prosocial benefits for consumers and society, incumbent platforms dominate monopolistic markets. In this article, we study a novel business model in the sharing economy—the platform cooperative—to ask how can a responsible marketing strategy can be viable and effective for market challengers. We draw on a qualitative, ethnographic study of the lived experiences of consumers and managers in leading platform cooperatives Fairbnb and Drivers Cooperative, and find that while challengers cannot overhaul the system, they can engender *change from the margins*. We identify three dimensions of a change from the margins strategy in *decentralizing the marketplace*, *shaping authentic narratives*, and *building institutional partnerships*. We discuss implications of a responsible marketing strategy for market incumbents and challengers within the sharing economy and beyond, and for theorizing new frameworks in the marketing strategy literature.

Keywords Marketing strategy · Social marketing · Platform economy · Sharing economy · Platform cooperative

Introduction

The digital revolution has brought fundamental changes to market exchange dynamics, transforming how, where and what we consume. One of the most significant resulting transformations has been the advent of the sharing economy (Eckhardt et al., 2019). Utopian visions began to emerge of a technologically mediated digital economy that would be driven by access, flexibility and better utilization of resources, fostering economic, social, and environmental benefits (Belk, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Defined as "a scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources that may be crowdsourced" (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p.7), the sharing economy's focus on access, rather than acquisition, positioned it as the sustainable alternative to traditional business models (Hellwig et al., 2018). Specifically, a distinct emphasis on social responsibility that accounts for multi-stakeholders' interests was seen as the strategic approach of many sharing economy actors and anticipated to push capitalism toward a more prosocial future. Similar concerns have been at the heart of marketing's reflection on its social impact and its interest in the role of varying marketplace actors in driving social change (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Saunders et al., 2015; White et al., 2019).

Yet, while flagship sharing economy platforms such as Airbnb and Uber have indeed fundamentally changed the marketplace, revolutionizing how goods and services are provisioned and consumed (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Belk et al., 2019), they have also exacerbated materialism, worsened pay inequality, destabilized neighborhoods, and

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increased leverage for multinational corporations to bypass state and local governments (Laamanen et al., 2018; Schor, 2020; Slee, 2015). Instead of promoting more democratic market exchange and redistributing power, a few dominant actors have taken over (Srnicek, 2017) and sharing economy business models have largely failed to deliver the predicted prosocial outcomes (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Belk et al., 2019: Laamanen et al., 2018; Schor, 2020). Given this, the value of these (un)responsible marketing strategies is unclear. In this article, we respond to recent calls (de Ruyter et al., 2022; see also Chandy et al., 2021) for forward-looking intellectual frameworks that can promote responsible marketing strategies to benefit the firm *and* society. Considering the sharing economy's original ambitions to balance personal and collective interest related to responsibility as well as its shortcomings in transforming the marketplace, responsible marketing strategies in the sharing economy can provide valuable insights into how firms, within and beyond the sharing economy, can evolve to deliver more equitable value for consumers, various other stakeholder groups and society at large.

To that end, we focus on a challenger platform business model—platform cooperatives— that seeks to disrupt the marketplace with multi-stakeholder inclusion and participation as part of their business model and marketing strategy[1]. Platform cooperatives replicate technology developed by incumbent platforms, but have ownership models which include employees, consumers, or other stakeholders (Muldoon, 2022; Schor, 2020). This places stakeholder responsibility, via democratic decision-making and redistribution of profit, at the business model's core (Scholtz, 2016; Scholz & Schneider, 2016; Schor, 2020). Despite being lauded for their potential to realize the sharing economy's original utopian vision (Foramitti et al., 2020; Schor, 2020; Scholz, 2016; Schneider, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020), the viability of their responsibility orientation and transformational impact are less well-documented (Bunders et al., 2022; Curtis, 2021; Papadimitropoulos, 2021; Philipp et al., 2021; Sandoval, 2020; Woodcock, 2021). Notably, empirical investigations with particular focus on marketing strategy are absent. Yet, given their aims to revolutionize the marketplace through focus on responsibility, platform cooperatives provide a fruitful empirical context to explore how marketing strategy can transform, revise dominant models and "conceive solutions that are both resilient and sustainable to collective interests across time" (de Ruyter et al., 2022, p.14). In studying platform cooperatives, we thus ask, *how can a responsible marketing strategy be viable and effective for market challengers?*

Based on ethnographic examination (Bonetti et al., 2023) of two platform cooperatives—Fairbnb operating in several EU countries and the Drivers Cooperative operating in New York City and Denver (USA)—we show how these market challengers' responsibility-centered marketing strategy can deliver disruption in the market that we label *change from the margins*. We identify three responsibility-centered dimensions that sustain it: (1) Decentralizing the marketplace; (2) Shaping authentic narratives, and (3) Building institutional partnerships. Based on three distinct stakeholder perspectives—service providers (drivers/hosts), current and prospective consumers, and platform cooperative managers—these dimensions foreground the interests of a plurality of stakeholders, not just shareholders (de Ruyter et al., 2022). We find that more equitable business models have fewer resources to directly compete with established brands (e.g., Uber and Airbnb) with large market shares (Scholz, 2023). However, our findings show how a responsible marketing strategy can be viable for marketplace challengers if strategic goals are formulated with a view to change marketplace dynamics from the margins. We thus demonstrate that challengers, at the periphery rather than the center of the market, are well positioned to drive change by leveraging a responsible marketing strategy.

We offer theoretical contributions to the nascent literature on formulating and implementing a responsible marketing strategy (de Ruyter et al., 2022), focusing on the active engagement of a variety of stakeholders across different levels of impact—individual consumer, organization and society (Chandy et al., 2021; Saunders et al., 2015; Singh, 2022). Our conceptualization of change from the margins outlines marketing strategy dimensions that can provide value for both society as well as the organization itself. Our work sheds particular light on the viability of marketing strategies aiming to distribute power and benefits across multiple stakeholders. Drawing from the context of the sharing economy, we further contribute to marketing strategy research by developing new theorization based on insight from the consumer and manager lived experiences of implementing responsible marketing strategies (Morgan et al., 2019). Finally, we put forward recommendations to how marketers can encourage sustainable behaviors and foster change through leveraging the roles that different stakeholders can play in achieving positive social outcomes (Saunders et al., 2015; White et al., 2019).

This work also extends the literature on platform cooperatives (Bunders et al., 2022; Sandoval, 2020; Schneider, 2018; Scholz, 2016; Woodcock, 2021) by adding empirical insight to a growing corpus of conceptual research. In contrast to the prevailing optimistic vision of platform

[1] Prominent platform cooperatives exist in sectors where platformization has become common, such as delivery services (Radish as challenger to Deliveroo), stock photography (Stocksy as challenger to ShutterStock), tourism (Fairbnb as challenger to Airbnb) and ride sharing (The Drivers Cooperative as challenger to Uber and Lyft).

cooperatives' potential to revolutionize the sharing economy, our findings demonstrate the obstacles these platform challengers face. However, the change from the margins approach we identify offers guidance on how an effective marketing strategy can be formulated. Beyond challengers, we further outline potential for market incumbents to implement responsible approaches by responsibilizing their strategy formulation and implementation. This allows for innovative solutions that can help to reimagine business models in the sharing economy (e.g., Beverland et al., 2022) and beyond, and to reimagine responsible marketing strategy in general (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2019).

Theoretical foundations

Responsible marketing strategy

Beyond the needs and expectations of customers, investors or channel members, a responsible marketing strategy accounts for a variety of stakeholder impacts: it considers the greater good of marketing action beyond profitable needs satisfaction (Chandy et al., 2021; de Ruyter et al., 2022). Responsible strategy formulation thus encompasses organizational structures and goals towards a myriad of internal and external stakeholders (see Morgan et al., 2019), going beyond the tactical behavior-change interventions at the core of dominant social marketing approaches (Saunders et al., 2015). Following de Ruyter et al. (2022), we define responsible marketing strategy as careful balancing assumptions and commitments toward the greater good to guide marketing action. Drawing on the concept of stewardship, de Ruyter et al. (2022) refer to a collective focus in business practices whereby marketing strategy formulation and implementations exhibit a long-term orientation towards resilient and sustainable solutions; ideological and relational commitment to the collective good, and an equal distribution of rewards. In turn, a responsible marketing strategy gives voice to all marketing stakeholders, promotes social and economic benefits, and as a result, challenges conventional thinking on short-term rewards.

The common good focus is reminiscent of social marketing, a tactical marketing toolkit focused on promoting social ideas (Kotler & Zaldman, 1971) toward a positive impact on society (Lazer & Kelley, 1973). Social marketing is defined as tactical marketing programs and interventions (Andreasen, 1994) for voluntary behavior change in target audiences reflecting societal preferences and social good (e.g., anti-smoking, responsible drinking / driving, immunization etc.). Yet, examinations of how marketing tools (e.g. STP and 4P strategies) are mobilized for social benefit show limited success and in practice, many such attempts have led to unintended consequences. For example, Eckhardt and Dobscha (2019) chronicle how Panera Bread, a major US casual dining chain, implemented a program called Panera Cares, designed to cater to food insecure consumers, at specific cafes, where both food secure and food insecure customers could dine via a pay what you want system. The program was ultimately shut down, as its design led to paying consumers feeling discomfort toward dining with homeless people, and as a result, not donating enough to keep the cafes in business. Similarly, Avery et al. (2020) describe how the new luxury brand Shinola based itself in Detroit to draw from an available labor pool (unemployed former car industry workers) and thereby contribute to the rebirth of the city. Shinola used the ideological 'regional renaissance through employment' narrative extensively in their brand storytelling, which ended up being criticized by the black community, representing most of the factory workers. Their view on the company's narrative was that of 'white saviors' making a profit from 'saving Detroit.' Finally, Labroo and Goldsmith (2021) chronicle a variety of unintended consequences of responsible-by-design strategy. A prominent case here is Tom's Shoes whose responsible product and promotion strategy sent one pair of shoes to developing countries for every pair of shoes purchased in the developed world. In the developing world, however, this approach led to local shoemakers going out of business, a glut of unwanted shoes, and pleas from locals that they much more urgently needed other things besides shoes. Tom's Shoes has since shifted to a corporate community investment program that donates a percentage of profits to various social programs in the form of impact investment.

These examples demonstrate the limitations of social marketing tactics aimed at nudging consumers toward consuming responsibly. This highlights how social marketing has neglected the underlying organizational and structural causes that may hinder individuals and collectivities to act for the greater good (e.g., Saunders et al., 2015).The Panera case illustrates how social marketing program design can lead to alienation between the shareholders (customers and beneficiaries) whereas Shinola's brand's stewardship—ideological narratives of economic and social renaissance of a dying city—offended those who were posited as the main beneficiaries (i.e., workers). Finally, while Tom's Shoes responsible marketing strategy may have provided positive affirmation of Western consumer's virtue signaling, it led to unintended consequences in the developing world (i.e., false identification of needs and creation of waste). In sum, there is evidence of limited success of tactical social marketing approaches in advancing change.

Taking a broader perspective, in their work, de Ruyter et al. (2022) identify the existing research in consumer preference of ethical and environmentally friendly products,

customers' corporate social responsibility (CSR) associations, and the contributions of CSR associations to corporate reputation. From this, the authors suggest future research on how marketing strategy should encourage sustainable behaviors from wider groups of stakeholders. Thus, de Ruyter et al. (2022) position the responsibility strategy at the business model level, particularly related to equity of participation and inclusion in democratic processes. A processual (rather than purely outcome) focus avoids the typical pitfalls of paternalism, unidirectional communication, and unintended consequences in social marketing (as discussed above; see also Crawshaw, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). While de Ruyter et al. (2022) do not identify the sharing economy as a market where discussions on the responsibility principle are taking place, they are needed in this space (Beverland et al., 2022; Eckhardt et al., 2019). Beverland et al. (2022) have noted that many sharing economy platforms claim to be responsible but are not and call for research into how these platforms can become so. Similarly, Eckhardt et al. (2019) posit that the value of the sharing economy to society is unclear. Finally, while consideration of social and environmental responsibility has been embedded with the foundations of the sharing economy since its inception and Scholz (2023) calls for a 'radical reimagining of our economic system that prioritizes equity, justice, and sustainability as a matter of urgency' (p. 29), there is no literature at present examining the intersection of responsible marketing and the sharing economy. Our work responds to these calls by engaging in an empirical study of platform alternatives in the sharing economy to which we turn next.

Strategizing responsibility and sharing in the sharing economy

The sharing economy literature has highlighted access over ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) and the use of idle resources collaboratively (Wahlen & Laamanen, 2017). The defining characteristic of digitalized and globalized sharing economy is the platform technology used for matching needs with resources and facilitating their exchange (Perren & Kozinets, 2018).

At their inception, sharing economy platforms drew on a distinct prosocial ideology, advocating for humanizing market exchange by connecting those with unused resources to those who may need them (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Central to the rise of these arguments were the limits of the market to supply for needs equally, particularly in the wake of the 2008 recession (Schor, 2020) as well as with the realization of community power in "various newer, older and revived forms of living, producing and consuming" (Wahlen & Laamanen, 2017, p. 94). Originally, sharing economy platforms illustrated a rejection of dominant market logics and positioned themselves as humane alternatives to large and uncaring corporations (Schor & Vallas, 2021). They created new ways to work and earn money, were more inclusive by design, with lower barriers to entry and much desired flexibility for workers, offered consumers access to services and goods that might have been out of reach before, and promoted ways to make use of underutilized resources, such as spare tools, rooms or vehicles (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Schor & Vallas, 2021). Sharing economy platforms aimed for growth and revenue but were also focused on building better futures (Slee, 2015).

As the sharing economy matured, however, scholars began to draw attention to its departure from its prosocial ideological foundations. While socially motivated and altruistic sharing exist in sharing economy niches (e.g., Laamanen & Wahlen, 2019; Papadimitropoulos, 2021), recent research indicates that commercial platforms tend to be characterized by market monopolization. Platforms started permeating previously non-monetized domains of social life (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Scholz, 2016). Social and environmental welfare was left out of focus (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Beverland et al., 2022; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Laamanen et al., 2018) and was replaced with profit orientations by dominant platforms (Muldoon, 2022; Shapiro, 2023; Srnicek, 2017). These business models have been criticized for boosting profitability by removing labor and consumer protections, creating riskier forms of consumption and precarious employment (Slee, 2015; Vallas & Schor, 2020), sidestepping local regulations, avoiding taxation, driving traditional (regulated) businesses out of business (e.g., in both hotel and taxi industries), destabilizing pricing equilibriums (e.g., for rental housing) and amplifying racial and ethnic prejudices (Edelman et al., 2017; Nieuwland & van Melik 2020; Schor, 2020).

In response to the sharing economy underdelivering on its original ideology and value proposition, a cooperative approach to platforms has experienced a reinvigoration. As typically worker and consumer-owned and worker-governed forms of business, cooperatives hold promise to reimagine the mainstream economy by boosting social and economic development, reducing poverty, and fostering social integration through focus on common good beyond the business itself (Cheney et al., 2014). A cooperative is a member-owned and -operated business; cooperatives pool resources, share profit and coordinate collective decision-making within a homogeneous set of stakeholders, such as consumers, users or workers (Forno, 2013). All economic and non-economic activities should be in the member's and community's best interest (Mannan & Pek, 2021). To join, members of the cooperative contribute a fee, and transact with the cooperative in the form of consumption (purchasing

goods or services) or labor (working for the cooperative). In terms of governance, each cooperative member has one vote irrespective of their contributions (in contrast to share capital determining weight of voice as in the corporate practice; Mannan & Pek, 2021).

A novel form of cooperativism—the platform cooperative—emerged in response to the growth of the sharing economy and the concentration of power within a select few providers. Platform cooperatives blend the traditional cooperative approach and digital platform affordances in three ways: they (1) Replicate the existing technology from commercial platforms in a different ownership model; (2) Embed solidarity between users and owners in multiple cooperative forms, and (3) Redistribute innovation and platform efficiencies towards benefits for all (Scholz, 2016, p. 14). Platform cooperatives are acknowledged as an egalitarian, communal, and sustainable alternative to dominant platforms and a way to reimagine the sharing economy (Schor, 2020; Scholz, 2016; Scholz & Schneider, 2016; Schneider, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020). However, despite their sustainable and responsible image, in a market of abundant consumer choice and aggressive competitive pricing, platform cooperatives struggle: they fail to build momentum with consumers, have difficulties in raising capital, incur high operational costs, show limited ability to take collective decisions, and lack institutional support (Bunders et al., 2022; Curtis, 2021; Philipp et al., 2021; Srnicek, 2017; Woodcock, 2021). Moreover, the heterogeneity introduced by diverse stakeholders (and their motivations, experiences, and expectations of co-creation; Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022) complicate co-operative governance and organization across socio-economic profiles and geographies (Bunders et al., 2022).

Thus, these "democratic business forms are unable to deal with the magnitude of challenges facing peoples, nations, and markets" (Cheney et al., 2014, p.598). Consequently, platform cooperatives offer an opportunity to critically analyze the viability of leveraging responsible marketing strategy to challenge existing models. In this study, we focus on the lived experience of different participants in platform cooperatives in the sharing economy to illuminate how a responsible marketing strategy can be viable and effective for market challengers.

Method

Research context

We study Fairbnb (www.fairbnb.coop) and the Drivers Cooperative (www.drivers.coop), which are challengers to Airbnb and Uber, respectively. Following Schor et al. (2020), we chose to explore platform cooperatives in different fields to be able to account for the unique challenges that different domains may carry.

Fairbnb was established in 2016 as a "movement seeking to create a just alternative to existing home-sharing platforms" (www.fairbnb.coop). The platform operates in Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, Belgium, and the UK. Fairbnb positions itself as the ethical alternative to Airbnb, which has been criticized for adverse effects on local economies (Cocola-Gant et al., 2021). As part of its community-oriented business model, Fairbnb donates half of the platform's 15% customer booking fee to local community projects and initiatives. Structurally, the administrative personnel, including founders and board members, are owner-members. In addition, the platform recruits coordinators, called ambassadors, to activate local nodes and grow its geographic presence. For a commission for every booking, ambassadors help the platform understand local needs and regulations, bring social projects on board, and recruit hosts (https://fairbnb.coop/local-node-activation/).

The Drivers Cooperative is a driver-owned ride hailing cooperative that launched in New York City in 2020 and has recently expanded operations to Denver (www.drivers.coop). The platform's mission is "to end exploitative conditions in the for-hire vehicle industry through system change—putting drivers in the driver's seat" (https://drivers.coop/about-us). At the end of each financial year, if the platform is profitable, the cooperative distributes patronage benefits (the cooperative's term for dividends) to its members (https://drivers.coop/patronage). Patronage benefits are based on patronage points, which drivers can earn by driving riders, recruiting riders and drivers, and attending meetings. The percentage of the profit paid out to the driver depends on the amount of patronage points they have earned. The Drivers Cooperative currently takes 15% commission from drivers, which is lower than Uber's 25% rate (www.uber.com).

Both Fairbnb and the Drivers Cooperative aim to be on par with the leading platforms in terms of what they offer to consumers and how their platforms operate but seek to differentiate through their cooperative governance structure and ambition to treat workers and communities more fairly.

Data sources

We take an ethnographic approach (Godfrey & Price, 2023), using netnography, participant observations and depth interviews for our data sources (see Table 1).

Table 1 Data sources

Description	Purpose	Sampling	Dataset
Platform cooperative communities	Understanding platform cooperativism as an emerging platform philosophy and business model.	Discussion groups and social media; keywords: "platform cooperative," "Fairbnb," & "Drivers Cooperative"	Netnography across Twitter, Reddit, YouTube and Facebook; follow-through links to other online discussions, comment threads on blogs and podcasts, and other forums, tracing within-social media group interactions
Platform managers (incl. industry experts)	In-depth understanding of emic perspectives on the future of platform cooperatives and their impact on the sharing economy more broadly.	Purposive sampling (managerial experience in connection to the selected platform cooperatives) Snowball sampling	7 depth interviews (Drivers Cooperative & Fairbnb); 427 min
Service providers (drivers & home owners)	Assessing what attracts different stakeholders to these platforms and what their expectations and experiences have been. For platform managers and industry experts, what the main strategic visions and practices in this space are.	Purposive sampling (provider status on the platform) Convenience sample (informal interviews with drivers in service delivery situations)	8 depth interviews (Drivers Cooperative & Fairbnb); 334 min 6 informal participatory interviews & 5 days participant observation (Drivers Cooperative)
Consumers of platform cooperatives & sharing economy platforms	Understanding the functionality of the service exchange from the consumer perspective.	Purposive sampling (users of platform services)	2 depth interviews (Drivers Cooperative); 122 min 3 months participant observation (Fairbnb)

Netnography

All three authors engaged in netnography (Kozinets, 2019), where we sought to understand platform cooperativism as an emerging platform philosophy, and to trace the discourses, conversations and interactions that run through different online communities concerned with this new business model. This initial research focus was broad and inclusive of ideas and models beyond Fairbnb and the Drivers Cooperative. We collected non-participant investigative data (Kozinets, 2019) from four online spaces—Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, and Facebook—where for three months we followed social interactions and conversation threads among members, read messages, comments, and replies to videos and posts, and followed links, which led us to other online discussions, comment threads on blogs, and other forums. We gathered non-participatory netnographic field data (Kozients, 2019) —screenshots, transcripts, comment threads—to build familiarity with the ideological and practical discourses, values and issues shared by the participants in these online spaces. We used this to trace prevalent cultural discourses, to note emergent meanings and dispositions, and to inform our sampling strategy and interview guides.

Participant observation

We studied Fairbnb and the Drivers Cooperative ethnographically (Geertz, 1973). For the Drivers Cooperative, the first author used the platform as a customer in New York City, hailing rides across the city, and interviewing drivers during the trips, while they were working. This process resulted in an opportunistic selection of informants (Peticca-Harris et al., 2020) where access to participants was dictated by availability of drivers. Once in the vehicle, the first author introduced themselves as an academic researcher studying platform cooperatives and asked for consent for conducting an informal participatory interview (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) that was not audio recorded but captured in detail in extensive field notes taken after the ride. Informal interviews have a long tradition in ethnographic research (Swain & King, 2022) and were chosen as an approach suited to capture the non-performative, naturalistic, and inherently time constrained exchange between driver and rider. Our five-day immersion resulted in seven rides and six informal interviews (two rides were with the same driver). The dataset also includes field notes and screenshots from engaging with the platforms, capturing the experience of using the service.

The third author engaged in a three-month participant-observation of Fairbnb across France, Austria, and Italy, where they used the platform, trying to book flats and rooms in different cities on multiple occasions. While no bookings were secured due to lack of availability, field notes capture the researcher's experiences in trying to use the service as a customer. These experiences were later used as prompts while interviewing various Fairbnb stakeholders.

Depth interviews

All three authors carried out semi-structured depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) with three key stakeholder groups. These include hosts and drivers of Fairbnb and the Drivers Cooperative respectively; managers and industry experts working or having worked directly with the two platforms, and customers of the platform cooperatives. We

sought to include these different perspectives to construct a comprehensive map of the dynamics that underpin different stakeholders' engagement with platform cooperatives. Our sample was purposive (Patton, 2002), where we selectively approached informants from each of the stakeholder groups identified during the netnography and participant observation; we also used a snowball sampling strategy to gain access to additional interviewees. We conducted 17 semi-structured interviews (see participant details in Table 2), carried out via Zoom and in person, which lasted between 45 and 90 min and were transcribed verbatim.

The interviews sought to gain an in-depth understanding of different stakeholders' expectations and experiences with platform cooperatives, and specifically for service providers, managers, and industry experts, what the main strategic visions and practices in this space are. Data collection terminated when both theoretical and data saturation (Patton, 2002) were reached.

Data analysis

We employed a grounded theory research approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where data collection, coding and analysis were carried out simultaneously and informed each other. Each of the authors first engaged in this process independently, interpreting and analyzing the multiple sources of data and then repeatedly came together to discuss emergent themes and insights. Our research approach thus integrates data (field notes, netnographic data, interview transcripts), methodological (netnography, participant observation, interviews) and investigator triangulation to ensure reliability and trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). Following this approach resulted in the progressive

Table 2 Participant details

Informant	Space	Role(s)	Summary of experience
Kevin	Ridesharing	Consumer	Ridesharing apps user
Carol	Ridesharing	Consumer	Ridesharing and Drivers Cooperative user; boycotts mainstream apps
Richard	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver for Lyft & Uber; hopes for Drivers Cooperative to expand
Henry	Flatsharing	Host	Flatsharing host on Booking, Airbnb and has a listing on Fairbnb
Samantha	Flatsharing	Host	Flatsharing host on Airbnb and listing on Fairbnb
Kim	Flatsharing	Host	Flatsharing host on Airbnb and listing on Fairbnb
Kylie	Ridesharing	Platform accelerator	Runs a platform cooperative accelerator with focus on financing and policy development; worked with Drivers Cooperative
Grace	Flatsharing	Platform manager	Faibnb marketing manager in charge of global marketing strategy including communications and budget
Moira	Flatsharing	Platform manager & ambassador	Fairbnb country coordinator affiliate with responsibility of operational marketing and ambassador network
Peter	Flatsharing	Platform manager	Fairbnb community manager and coordination of community project and marketing strategy
Brigitte	Flatsharing	Host & industry expert	Flatsharing host on Airbnb & Fairbnb; industry expert on host advisory policy
Bert	Flatsharing	Platform manager & host	Board member and user interface manager; local ambassador; flatsharing host on Fairbnb
Rachel	Flatsharing	Host & ambassador	Flatsharing host on Booking, Airbnb & Fairbnb; Regional ambassador; regional marketing manager
Rose	Flatsharing	Host	Flatsharing host on Booking, Airbnb & Fairbnb
Sal	Flatsharing	Platform manager	Fairbnb onboarding and community platform manager
Pierre	Flatsharing	Host	Flatsharing host on Booking, Airbnb & Fairbnb
Holly	Ridesharing	Platform manager	Industry expert and former Drivers Cooperative manager
Steve	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver on Uber & Drivers Cooperative
Frank	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver on Uber & Drivers Cooperative
John	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver on Drivers Cooperative; former Lyft & Uber driver
Tom	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver on Uber & Drivers Cooperative
Albert	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver on Uber & Drivers Cooperative
Walt	Ridesharing	Driver	Ridesharing driver on Uber & Drivers Cooperative

deepening of our analytical focus from stakeholders' experiences with the platform cooperatives into how their responsible marketing strategies drove change in the marketplace.

To analyze the data, interviews, field notes, and online comments were compared, grouped/re-grouped and scrutinized within and across data sources, establishing links between them based on emergent meanings. These meanings were coded in a first round of open coding, relating to individual experiences with platform cooperatives, the strategic visions of managers and workers, and ideological narratives underpinning our respondent's orientation as consumers, workers, owners, or market strategists. Following the constant comparative method, we then moved to axial coding, comparing data with data, data with code, and code with code, to find similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focusing on attributes of platform cooperatives' strategic approach to driving change in the marketplace. We then moved beyond analytical focus on the sharing economy, and continuing with intertextual comparison across sources and data points, a well-established analytic procedure as described by Godfrey and Price (2023) and Mars et al. (2023), in a final theoretical coding stage, we further refined themes to identify three core analytical categories (see web appendix for a summary of our coding framework). These inform our conceptualization of how a responsible marketing strategy can be viable and effective for market challengers, which we describe next.

Findings

> *It's always surprised me that we haven't seen more attempts at co-op-like models in [the sharing economy], and I'm happy to see it. Uber/Lyft strike me as thin businesses in the value that they actually provide both to riders and drivers. Yes, they were responsible for some initial innovation, but now the cat is out of the bag, and the concept could absolutely be applied in a business structure that is more profitable and friendly to the people actually delivering the services. Getting initial traction with riders, and adequately investing in trust and safety strike me as the two hardest parts up front [for platform cooperatives]. On the flip-side, they should benefit from less regulatory scrutiny, and less pressure from investors vs. the heavily funded players like Uber & Lyft. I'm rooting for them and hope to see this go somewhere. (atrop, Reddit / HN chat)*

This social media post reflects the enthusiasm shared by our informants about platform cooperatives in a marketplace where many are disillusioned with responsibility claims from the big players in the sharing economy, yet it also foreshadows the challenges that alternative platforms face. While previous literature asserts how platform cooperatives can reimagine the marketplace by replicating the technological capabilities of dominant platforms and put them to use within an ownership and governance model grounded in fairness, solidarity and sharing (Scholz, 2016; Schor, 2020), we find that replication is not enough for platform cooperatives to disrupt the market. Their competitive leverage to destabilize the current market practices is hindered by: (1) Significant bootstrapping; (2) Limited functional and consumer experience parity, and (3) Lack of financial resources limiting the ability to scale.

First, though technically for-profit business, platform cooperative's strategic focus on responsibility translates to a non-profit orientation (Foramitti et al., 2020; Paranque & Willmott, 2014), which makes it a challenge for attracting financing and investment (Bunders et al., 2022). By virtue of their structure and ethos, platform cooperatives are not aligned with the capital logics that drive the market, as Kylie's reflection below highlights:

> *[Venture capital investment] isn't aligned with the sort of growth focused approach within a cooperative [model]. ... Platform co-ops tend to be playing in this venture capital heavy space. ... [access to venture capital] changes their ability to do all of the things that you need to do early on in a startup to thrive. So, whether that's hiring the right people and attracting the best talent or whether it's really driving revenue growth, really being able to invest in sales and marketing to drive revenue growth. (Kylie)*

Lack of investment ultimately translates to limited marketing power and inadequate budgets for customer acquisition, platform and interface development and advertising. These resource gaps do not allow platform cooperatives to implement a disruptive strategy against unsustainable leaders, such as the literature (e.g., Beverland et al., 2022) would expect. As Holly, a sharing economy strategist who works for a platform cooperatives incubator, reflects,

> *Platform coops are not competing with the real economy. You're competing against all venture backed businesses, which is just so hard. Because they are using fake capital basically, right? It's like bringing a knife to a gunfight. (Holly)*

Second, despite stakeholders' desire to support a responsibility-centered platform alternative, service adoption is hindered by lack of functional and consumer experience

parity. Platform functions often remain underdeveloped due to limited resources. To be a viable challenger, platform cooperatives need, at the very least, to deliver comparable user advantages to the mainstream platforms. However, in line with informants' testimonies, the platforms we used had limited functionalities, often not operating properly, which is a significant impediment at a crucial (often first) moment of truth. Carol, a frequent consumer of ride sharing services in NYC, recalls her first experience with the Drivers Cooperative:

> *First, I thought, this is great, I'm going to break the back of Uber, you know, solidarity for the sake of supporting the Drivers Coop. But [their] system was really glitchy. There was a lot of confusion, were they going to send a driver or what. Then he blipped out and they were sending another driver. it was a pain in the neck. (Carol)*

Lack or failure of service compromises the consumer experience, creates tension between customers and service providers, and pushes consumers to abandon the platform. Even though prosocial alternatives resonate with consumers, not being able to use these alternatives reinforces the conflict between consumers' unfulfilled desires for prosocial options and the system of consumerism they are locked into (Schmitt et al., 2021).

Third, despite arguments that platform cooperatives can outperform commercial platforms due to their scalability, agility and regionality (Philipp et al., 2021), we find scaling via head-to-head competition challenging. While regionally anchored, the growth of the cooperative model is often challenged by complex governance and decision-making processes. Moira, a community ambassador, shares how there are various challenges for the Fairbnb platform administration to coordinate across dispersed regional nodes:

> *The real problem is that the people who are governing Fairbnb have a different strategy. And as long as they do not agree on the objectives and priorities of Fairbnb [in general], it cannot move forward. ... Things are not moving. It's so slow. ... I have this feeling that Fairbnb is not really a coop, but more a company with people deciding for everyone else and not taking into account the reality of the daily work. (Moira)*

Moira's point raises a question on the differences between governance of mainstream platforms and platform cooperatives, and the challenges for implementing cooperative governance with heterogeneous stakeholders which for Fairbnb include hosts, renters, city councils, neighbors, and the larger hospitality industry (Scholz et al., 2021).

Moreover, the motivations for the stakeholders to participate were highly divergent. Across both platforms, some participants were giving the service a try as it "sounds interesting," while others supplemented their income from other platforms. Some drivers commented how they had embraced the cooperative as an act of rejection of Uber to protest their policies and treatment of drivers whereas Fairbnb participants wanted to do good in their neighborhoods by bringing responsible tourists and tourism to their local area. However, none of the drivers from the Drivers Cooperative we interacted with were members of the cooperative as they had not yet achieved the relevant threshold of activity. On Fairbnb, with one exception, none of our informants were cooperative members. At present, only the administrative staff are eligible to be members, and even for them, the cost of membership is high. Thus, though democratic governance was considered a good model in principle, in practice the participants were not sufficiently motivated to get involved with the governance of the business.

Many drivers did not attend the quarterly Zoom meetings with management and each other but had a "let's wait and see" disposition when asked if they would be willing to get more involved in the future. For instance, John was a driver we interviewed, who shared that while he very much enjoys the Drivers Cooperative, he didn't want to be a part of the cooperative's ownership system. He wanted to work for them without having any of the administrative or ownership responsibilities which he associated with membership: he doesn't want the pressure and viewed the ownership element of the cooperative as unnecessary stress (Fieldnotes, NYC, 2022). Non-members on Fairbnb consider the centralized decision-making slow and logistically complex: ultimately, decisions made by the board were experienced as far removed from their local beneficiaries and the Fairbnb brand of responsible tourism.

Together, our data illuminates three non-viable strategy domains rendering platform cooperatives' approach of direct competition through replication of existing technology limited in its impact. As such, platform cooperatives appear not to be the silver bullet solution that can revolutionize the marketplace as they are often touted to be in the literature (Scholz & Schneider, 2016). Rather, they face limitations which hinder their ability to both keep up and catch up with leading platforms and to challenge the 'hypercapitalist' models of the sharing economy (Cheney et al., 2014; Paranque & Willmott, 2014; Sandoval, 2020).

However, our data suggests that when strategy formulation within this space focuses on setting alternative differentiation goals that move beyond replication with an equitable sharing orientation (Scholtz 2016), strategic advantages

emerge that can be leveraged to achieve a different type of responsibility-centered impact in the sharing economy—we call this change from the margins. Fostering change from the margins requires parting with normative expectations of growth and looking into effects which are better positioned to responsibilize the market. Kylie, who works on amplifying platform cooperatives in an accelerator, captures this orientation:

> *You look at one of the ways we think about scale, we only work with co-ops that have ambitions of scale. And we started off thinking about scale in terms of like literally kind of number of members or like, was it going to go national? And we realized that that definition of scale is really not appropriate for the kind of work we wanted to be doing. And we've moved much more towards a vision of scale which embraces the idea that scale is achieved when the cooperative unlocks something that alters key characteristics or defining points of the market. So I'll give you the Drivers Coop example. They proved that there is a different way of doing gig work. There's a different way of doing rideshare. The fact that they provided this kind of national proof point is great. And in addition, they are likely to have follow-on impacts on wages for rideshare drivers. (Kylie)*

Table 3 Three dimensions of a change from the margins responsible marketing strategy

Dimensions	Characteristics	Implementation
Decentralizing the marketplace	Disrupting the marketplace through diversifying offerings to better cater to niche needs and promoting localized, networked collaborations between smaller service providers.	• Appealing to consumer's desire for alternatives • Aligning preferred customer types with platform providers • Connecting complementing offerings across the platform space • Large volume customer accounts (one-to-many) preferred over large number of customers
Shaping authentic narratives	Shaping resonant value narratives within the marketplace to influence wider social interest toward responsible offerings and reshaping demand dynamics in turn.	• Narrative stewardship in aligning and accentuating connections between communication and action • Highlighting wider social challenges and creating expectations to address them
Building institutional partnerships	Creating value through working with governments and local authorities to forge relationships, grounded in stewardship and shared interest.	• Establishing spaces for regulatory co-creation • Integrating interest-representing organizations into strategy formulation and implementation

The version of scale which Kylie describes above captures the impact, not size, that platform cooperatives can have on the market by altering key inflection points in the market where the potential for impact is the strongest. Understanding strategy viability and growth in this way is key to our conceptualization of change from the margins. Taking this approach points to several marketing strategy choices that can incrementally, but consequentially, influence sharing economy dynamics more broadly toward more prosocial outcomes. We identify three responsible marketing strategy dimensions that can sustain change from the margins. These are (1) Decentralizing the marketplace; (2) Shaping authentic narratives, and (3) Building institutional partnerships. We summarize these in Table 3 and outline them in turn.

Decentralizing the marketplace

The sharing economy is a space where market power tends to be centralized (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Shapiro, 2023; Schor, 2020). Marketplace decentralization that can disrupt monopolistic tendencies thus emerges as a key dimension of a responsible marketing strategy. We find that challengers, such as platform cooperatives, can drive marketplace decentralization, both by diversifying the market offerings to better cater to niche needs, and by changing the very structure of the market by promoting localized, networked collaborations between smaller service providers.

First, decentralization can be leveraged to diversify and expand the range of available offerings, which allows for better targeting and serving the interests of various stakeholders in the market, a basis of stewardship (de Ruyter et al., 2022). The mainstream sharing economy consumers and service providers and those attracted to platform cooperative models are not one and the same and a strategic focus on decentralizing the marketplace caters to underserved segments. In contrast to traditional strategic goals to scale up and capture market share through growing in size, this can be seen as a form of scaling deep, that is, seeking to create consumer commitment and loyalty by tapping into beliefs, habits, and practices for meaningful identification with offerings (see Laamanen et al., 2023, p. 10). Platform cooperatives are harbingers for how decentralization can take place in the marketplace. Our data shows that different stakeholders extract value from marketing strategy formulated to cater to market niches that privilege a different approach to stewardship than that upon which the mainstream platforms sustain their growth. As Sal elaborates:

> *I think the niche that Fairbnb is focused on is a growing niche. They want this when they see it. That's why, whenever you talk about Fairbnb, everyone is so,*

wow, I like it. I want to be part of it. … For me, the niche aspect is not an issue. That's the business. (Sal)

Platform cooperatives appeal to consumers who are sustainability-oriented but have thus far been lacking such offerings within the market. As Grace highlights, platform cooperatives offer a *"step into a new niche market, which brings you a new kind of traveler […] with [the] niche of responsible travel. You've got people that really try to buy sustainable goods. [It]'s a new way to position yourself."* These challenger platforms create value with selective targeting of underserved, and potentially highly loyal, consumers, rather than with trying to compete to the mass consumer for maximum market share.

Workers also benefit from the diversification of options on the market. For instance, drivers at the Drivers Cooperative reflected that cooperatives afford access to a different type of customers. This directly extends the value which drivers capture from the cooperative beyond better pay or fairer treatment:

John said that it was too stressful and not profitable enough to drive for Uber. Now, with the Cooperative, it is a different story. The customers at Uber were different: impatient, stressed. Rushing him, telling him how and where to drive. Now, he said, his life is much better and customers are very different – they are older people or from places the Coop has contracts with, such as hospitals and facilities for people with disabilities. A different customer all together. An Uber is expected to come in minutes, or even seconds. And people that ride Uber are more demanding. The customers at the coop, in contrast, are not in a rush. They are not business people only thinking about money. (Fieldnotes, NYC)

The presence of alternative business models in the market, such as platform cooperatives, improves the matchmaking process (Perren & Kozinets, 2018) that facilitates the sharing economy market exchange. Most service providers we interviewed were not cooperative members and didn't know if they would take that step towards attachment. However, they saw value in these platforms, beyond their prosocial ethos, as an opportunity to supplement their income and thus gain more control over their livelihoods.

Second, platform cooperatives bring change from the margins by decentralizing the very structure of the market, by promoting localized, networked collaborations between smaller service providers: yet another alternative approach to scaling—scaling out—where the business model can be replicated across different locations to form partnerships with organizations with a similar ethos (Laamanen et al., 2023). This can shift the market power dynamics. Kevin, a consumer of ridesharing services who also closely follows the developments in the platform space, sees how decentralization through cooperation rather than competition can bring about meaningful change:

It's kind of like David versus Goliath. … It's nearly impossible to compete [directly] with [the big platforms], so to expand, they should find smaller companies that have a similar idea, or at least they have some overlapping ideas and values. And then, instead of just competing with them too, they would actually cooperate, growing the co-op through a means of partnership with the smaller competitors, because that's the way they can actually get to a size to be able to compete with Uber or Lyft. (Kevin)

Bert, who is a senior technology expert and an active ambassador of Fairbnb, similarly reflects on the opportunities building market power by networking: *"I'm hoping to join forces with other cooperatives. Then we can indeed create a new ecosystem where we can find each other [and] we can really build a new ecosystem where the world would look different and not dominated by a few men."* Across our data, informants were enthusiastic about this approach. Consider this online comment in a forum on the Drivers Cooperative:

[If] this NY based cooperative becomes profitable, it could expand to other cities not by getting bigger, but by forking off the operational aspects into a cooperative-of-cooperatives, then, a Chicago driver's cooperative could be a member of this shared operational entity. (georgethompson)

Beyond networks, our findings indicate that platform cooperatives could be more disruptive if they take alternative approaches to sales and service provision:

Coops are just never going to be able to compete and win [in the venture capital financed competitive] field. … So how do we change the field? Start the revenue flywheel by having the cooperatives chase higher value contracts that are not selling one-to-one but selling one-to-many. (Kylie)

What Kylie refers to is a contractual approach to sales, where the platform cooperative does not compete with established platforms directly for individual consumers, but rather focuses on larger accounts. In that way, a customer base can be developed with contracts found in the government and public sectors. Our conversations with drivers at the Drivers Cooperative illustrate that having their rides be

part of a large contract with an organization is a preferred way of working: large contracts bring structure, guaranteed income and stability to the drivers' work as well as nicer rides, as John described before. As our fieldnote below captures, our informants shared that they would like to embed this model more deeply within the Drivers Cooperative so that they could stop driving for other platforms.

> *Booked a ride with Tom. He's been with the cooperative since the beginning. He usually makes 10–20 rides per day. The minimum he needs to make is $250/day. He said that to make ends meet he needs to work 14 h./day, every day. Can't afford not to. Best money he's ever made is $600 per day driving for the NYC Election Board – the Coop has a service contract with them. A 16-hr. shift but worth it. He'd love to see the company do more of that. (Fieldnotes, NYC)*

The Drivers Cooperative relationship with the NYC Election Board is an example of a successful one-to-many approach in decentralization. It allows for creating competitive advantages within distinct niches in the market, which can offer increased revenue predictability for workers, and price advantages for customers. The viability of this strategy is evidenced by The Drivers Cooperative recent pivot toward "specializing in paratransit and Non-Emergency Medical Transportation" (drivers.coop.com): a new positioning which was adopted after our data collection completed and several years after the launch of the platform that initially started as a generalist ride-sharing service provider. As reflected in their 2023 annual report (Drivers Cooperative, 2023), this repositioning has led to a twelve-fold annual growth.

In sum, platform cooperatives demonstrate that decentralization is a key component of change from the margins within the marketplace. Papadimitropoulos (2021, p.250) argues that while "platform capitalism might have helped decentralize economic activity, by no means does this point to a truly decentralized economy" due to the control exerted within the built infrastructure, algorithmic management and centralized hierarchical decision-making (Shapiro, 2023). We suggest that responsible marketing strategy can look beyond disrupting the concentration of capital and power and instead tap into previously underserved niches in a mature markets, not only in relation to diversifying and aligning offerings to consumers and service providers but also fostering collaborative opportunities among smaller business entities in the market and pursuing a one-to-many strategy via large contracts.

Shaping authentic narratives

Despite their smaller market share, our data shows that platform cooperatives can shape the ideological discourse within the marketplace in important ways. As leading platforms continue to fall under scrutiny (Slee, 2015), platform cooperatives have been attracting attention from mainstream media, with leading outlets frequently and enthusiastically increasing their visibility. Such dissemination, through media or word-of-mouth, of platform cooperatives' alternative approach to responsibility has substantial influence on marketplace dynamics.

Richard, an Uber and Lyft driver from Utah, has read about the cooperative and follows them devotedly on social media. In his interview, he shared that he is *"chomping at the bit for something like that [in Utah], because I believe in [the need for] structures, even corporate structures, that are going to have incentives that don't screw over workers"*. Having heard of the Drivers Cooperative, he began thinking of starting his own cooperative in his hometown. Across our data, consumers, workers, and managers spoke passionately about the transformative role of platform cooperatives, even if they are not going to be able to hold a significant share of the market. As Sal notes:

> *We are an alternative. ... We can demonstrate that we can do the same thing and the same product that you offer, but just adding a little bit that changes the whole perspective of your business. And we have stopped focusing on just money. The whole aim of our product is to create a positive impact. (Sal)*

These insights suggest that, however imperfect, the presence of challengers that draw attention to alternative prosocial models can be a catalyst for change from the margins as they can inform the narratives that inform various stakeholders' perceptions of the market. Narratives of value are essential: Mars et al. (2023) illustrate how a market challenger narrative needs to draw on narrative stewardship–from the logic of the market–and compliment this through clear signals of benefit and legitimacy. Building on this, a key characteristic of responsible marketing strategy is the ability to reframe the dominant discourse in defense of wider social interest that can reshape perspectives on the sharing economy and its impact.

Platform cooperatives leverage authentic values narration as part of their strategic practice. Centrally, platform cooperatives overhaul the neglected original sharing economy value narrative of prosociality and shape it towards an authentic model of sustainable economic and social change. In their value narratives, platform cooperatives foreground conflicts in stakeholders' lived experiences and advocate

for a shift in orientation from conformity to consumerism towards resistance against mainstream consumerist ideology (Schmitt et al., 2021). Schmitt et al. (2021) suggest that this dialectic progression from thesis to antithesis to synthesis can occur when consumers begin to resist dominant ideologies, calling for an antithesis to fulfill their desires, thus pushing the market to co-opt the alternative ideology that substantiates such desires. Building on this, we propose that cooperatives' prosocial ideological orientation has the potential to be co-opted by the mainstream players, not as much because of demand for platform cooperatives' services per se, but because of raising expectations about prosocial claims and engagements in general and how they should manifest in the sharing economy.

Yet, in line with evidence in the marketing literature that sustainability attributes do not drive consumer choice (Devinney et al., 2010), we find that most consumers continue to use leading sharing economy platforms despite their negative consequences. They offer valued convenience, efficiency, and price advantages. A Reddit user illustrates this as he reflects on his experience with the Drivers Cooperative: the sustainable alternative is welcomed if other attributes, like price, are not compromised:

> *I used them like 2 months ago on an airport trip. Price was great. Turned out exactly as you would hope. Afterwards, prices rocketed to 2x Uber. If their pricing is fixed, I'd use again. (Erynsen)*

This illustrates that focus on responsibility in the business' value proposition can garner consumer interest but may not be sufficient to sustain it if the business underdelivers on other metrics. Nonetheless, across our data, we observe that change from the margins can be sustained because, even if stakeholders would often be disappointed with platform cooperatives in the face of frustrating inefficiencies, they adopt hybrid engagement practices where they use both the mainstream platforms and the cooperatives but in different times and for different purposes. The authenticity of the challenger's value proposition even motivates some consumers to recruit other users and thus support service expansion and adoption. Samantha, one of the early adopters of the Fairbnb platform in France, shares:

> *I worry about Fairbnb.… I would like to help them try to take some people from Airbnb and bring them to Fairbnb. I wanted to write to all the people that came to me and promote for Fairbnb. … My idea was to invite them to book with Fairbnb. (Samantha)*

When the narrative of the marketing strategy is authentic (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) and suggests long-term benefits for participants, engagement can take on the kind of proactive, co-creative ownership by stakeholders that Samantha articulates. Our work thus extends recent research on how effective value narratives that align with alternative versus mainstream market settings are created (Mars et al., 2023) by demonstrating how such narratives are maintained and reignited by platform cooperatives within the sharing economy, imbuing them with authenticity. While perceiving numerous limitations, the consumers, users, and managers we interviewed never truly questioned the platform cooperative's commitment to responsibility. Thus, authentic narratives can challenge the hegemony in the marketplace and start to serve as a placeholder for responsibility and a benchmark against which the authenticity and sincerity of social marketing campaigns and actions taken by leading platforms can be measured and evaluated.

Considering this, change from the margins can happen via motivating assimilation of marginal interests and concerns into the mainstream. Indeed, Airbnb has recently advertised that it is contributing to the preservation of heritage and revitalizing tourism in rural areas (Parveen, 2022) whereas Uber highlights its contributions to accessibility and community building for caregivers (e.g., Able at Uber, https://www.uber.com/us/en/about/diversity/able-at-uber/). The caveat lies in the perceptions of authenticity. When Carol reflects on mainstream platforms' community projects, her account illustrates the kind of 'ideological smoke screens' built into CSR projects and corporate reputation management (Hanlon & Fleming, 2009):

> *It's better than not doing it, but it's bulls***! … High people [in Uber] are making huge salaries. … In the meantime, some of their drivers are like really poor, probably eligible for public services, like food stamps. … Instead of like saying, oh, we're going to do these community projects for poor people. … Why don't you just pay your drivers more. (Carol)*

Carol's reflection further illustrates how engaging in discourse in defense of social interests, as platform cooperatives do, can reverberate through the market broadly and animate institutions, consumers, and service providers alike. Platform cooperatives are particularly successful at starting conversations using value propositions that engage people; hypothetically, this can lead to expectations and demands for more of the same from leading players. Peter, who works in the platform cooperative-community interface, summarizes the ethos and ambitions of platform cooperative as follows:

> *I wouldn't say changing how the mainstream platforms do business is the reason for platform cooperatives to*

exist. I think we should definitely be more ambitious than that. We should show that a different model can work. In the case of Fairbnb maybe at the beginning, it will be to build a niche where this model works and then slowly, hopefully more and more people realize that there are also other aspects they should take into account when they take a trip. (Peter)

In sum, platform cooperatives change the narrative around the sharing economy story, bringing it back to the original prosocial roots. Due to this, they are easily featured in mainstream media, such as on the front page of the New York Times, as exemplars of businesses with social virtues and local impact (see Conger, 2021). This changes the narrative around the sharing economy, and over time, it has significant effects on awareness about the alternatives, motivating consumers to put dominant players under higher scrutiny. Ideological alignment may also enable partnerships with institutions to amplify the power of a change from the margins. We turn to these next.

Building institutional partnerships

Relational market strategies foreground interdependency between actors and focus on long- and short-term interactions among different stakeholders to promote mutual benefits and shared value (Palmatier, 2008). A responsible marketing strategy is inherently aligned with this relational orientation that spans beyond consumers, workers and into other market actors such as community, municipality, and the state. The ability to integrate prosocial and desirable relational interactions beyond immediate stakeholders is key to a responsible marketing strategy (de Ruyter et al., 2022); within the mainstream sharing economy, however, institutional relations are strained.

Historically, sharing economy platforms have had a difficult relationship with governing institutions. Since their early days, platforms such as Airbnb and Uber have been scrutinized for bypassing national and local regulations and lobbying communities and governments to avoid regulation (Slee, 2015), a way of operating that has become the norm rather than the exception (Pentzien, 2020). In turn, mainstream platforms face significant market penetration limitations, often forced to find ways to overcome varying levels of local regulation and legislation. While sharing economy platforms work with regulators in a reactive manner and tend to enact change only after negative communal or societal impacts have already taken place (Nieuwland & van Melik, 2020), platform cooperatives proactively seek collaboration with governments and other institutional partners. As such, platform cooperatives integrate working with, rather than against, authorities to their repertoire of action (Foramitti et al., 2020) and the platform cooperatives we studied utilize such institutional partnerships in a highly coordinated and strategic manner. Consider Grace, who worked closely in developing Fairbnb together with city governments:

We [Fairbnb] already have discussions going on with local authorities. ... It's important to tailor our product to the needs of the local community. We've reached out in Italy; we've got good connections with the local authorities in Belgium; we've been discussing with Barcelona; with Paris.... (Grace)

Grace further elaborates that often the platform's code of conduct is more prosocially-oriented than regulations require. While leading platforms seek to influence policy to work for them as they enter new markets, platform cooperatives' expansion strategy entails responsiveness to the local conditions and tailoring the offering accordingly. Consider Moira discussing Fairbnb:

We know the needs of the local authorities and we build our offer [accordingly]. Our offer is not the same in big cities and in the countryside because [our] ambassadors in the countryside and in big cities communicate directly with the hosts, with the guest and with the local authorities. And from that we build a customized offer. (Moira)

Moira's insight demonstrates how a responsible marketing strategy grounded in relationship building can enable sharing economy platforms to extend economic and social benefits from the platform outwards while taking into consideration specific local needs. This drives growth as an outcome of another alternative scaling strategy—a scaling through strategy (Laamanen et al., 2023) – where business embed themselves into institutional frameworks and see municipalities as partners in fostering privileged spaces for creation of social provision and communal participation. This approach to scaling is grounded in a shift in firms' disposition towards authorities and regulators, which platform cooperatives are well positioned to pioneer. With their questionable track record, mainstream platforms are unlikely candidates for collaboration with communities and governments. Grace continues:

We [FairBnB] can work together with local authorities and the tourist office. ... We can be really an ally, a partner that can be sure that we have the best in mind for the local community. And I would not say this for Airbnb or Booking.com. ... Working together with local authorities is a great opportunity because they have way more marketing power behind them. (Grace)

A scaling through strategy is based here on shared value: aligning strategic goals with strategic action (Morgan et al., 2019) that account for a variety of local needs through bespoke local offerings, and in return amplifying both resources and legitimacy. Local governments are seen as the site to stimulate inclusive participatory and localized economy in partnership between public, local and private entities. Platform cooperatives demonstrate that a relational orientation within a responsible marketing strategy opens paths for garnering political and financial support by institutions and governing bodies where controversial practices of the main players, such as dynamic pricing and legislative avoidance, are most pronounced (Bunders et al., 2022).

This increases platform cooperatives' competitive leverage, putting pressure on the mainstream platforms to seek greater legitimacy with regulators, workers, and consumers. Platform cooperatives have institutional and legislative access to defining what the future of their industry, for instance tourism, will be, which many of the main players may not be able to achieve. Peter explains a kind of a scaling through process in Bologna:

> *In Bologna rental prices have gone up a lot due to short-term rentals. And it's mainly because Bologna is placed in the center of Italy. there's an airport that is basically run by Ryanair. So low-cost flights and many people just fly to Bologna, stay there for one night and then go somewhere else. … Bologna is actually taking more costs than benefits from this type of tourism. … At the end of the day, probably the deal is not so good for the city. Bologna is one of those places where the city was telling us they're really interested in promoting a different type of tourism, tourism that's a bit slower. That really promotes the local heritage. … In that sense, I think they would be more aligned with the hosts we have on the platform. … We try to build better practices than the rest of the industry. (Peter).*

Platform relationships, grounded in stewardship and shared interest, are not typical in the sharing economy and platform cooperatives outperform mainstream platforms in this regard, a fact that further demonstrates the value of innovative collaborative network effects (de Ruyter et al., 2022) as a key characteristic of responsible marketing strategy. As Holly, a platform cooperative expert, reflects, change comes from platform cooperative's changing industry practices through disrupting established relational patterns:

> *What the Drivers Coop has done well is on the advocacy front, right, like advocating for municipal and state policies. In that way it's punching above its weight on that in terms of like actual size of the market. (Holly)*

Platform cooperatives demonstrate how placing strategic focus on relational development can enable change from the margins not only at the national and but also supranational level which holds strong potential to shift the dynamics within the marketplace. For example, Bert discusses how the close relationship between Fairbnb and the European Commission will ideally result in the sharing economy platforms having to change:

> *We are planting the seeds for a different way of looking at tourists and the tourist industry. It can be, and I think that should be, our goal that others are changing in that direction. But they will be forced because we were also talking with the European commission and authorities, and we have quite a good influence. Business will be forced to change due to that. So we are also more than only a platform but also a movement trying to make the change. (Bert)*

In sum, the third dimension of platform cooperatives responsible marketing strategy that drives system change in the marketplace is via the facilitation of relationships with key stakeholders such as governments and institutions in the sharing economy.

Discussion

In this article we map out how a responsible marketing strategy can be viable and effective for marketplace challengers. Our exploration of platform cooperatives—challengers in the sharing economy space—illustrates an ambition to disrupt incumbent platforms and their dominant business models by replicating existing platform technology with a more responsible and prosocial marketing strategy. We examine the experiences of three distinct stakeholder groups (service providers, current and prospective consumers, and platform cooperative managers) in leading platform cooperatives Fairbnb and Drivers Cooperative and find that while platform cooperatives cannot compete on market share, these challengers deliver peripheral but consequential strategic influence that we label change from the margins. We identify three responsibility-centered dimensions that sustain it: (1) Decentralizing the marketplace; (2) Shaping authentic narratives, and (3) Building institutional partnerships. Our findings offer theoretical contributions for responsible marketing strategy, within and beyond the sharing economy, as well as managerial implications for marketers.

Theoretical implications

Responsible marketing strategy This research contributes to de Ruyter et al. (2022), who urge scholars to reimagine marketing strategy by developing sustainable solutions that consider the interplay between consumers, firms, governmental policies, and society. We contribute to the responsible principle–giving voice to all stakeholders for a shared vision of what constitutes a sustainable offering–and demonstrate how a responsible marketing strategy can be leveraged to deliver meaningful impact.

Our theorization highlights the value of attending to incremental change, re-assessing how markers of success and scale can be used to indicate a shift in the market toward more prosocial outcomes. In doing so, we provide actionable direction (formulation and implementation) for a responsible marketing strategy which can disrupt dominant market dynamics from the periphery. This contributes to our understanding of how impactful outcomes (de Ruyter et al., 2022) can be arrived at in ways different from head-to-head competition, which is difficult to achieve in monopolized markets. Further, whereas the responsible principle in marketing strategy has primarily been connected to green consumption and environmental responsibility formulations, we foreground social responsibility as an essential direction for theory and practice (de Ruyter et al., 2022). Social responsibility that integrates multiple stakeholders is a key dimension of responsible marketing (Chandy et al., 2021) and, as such, needs to be integrated closely in the theoretical development of marketing for good.

Additionally, the literature has demonstrated that despite best intentions, many marketing interventions (strategic or tactical) designed to promote a common good do not work as intended and often have unintended consequences (e.g., Avery et al., 2020; Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019; Labroo & Goldsmith, 2021). Our analysis shows this is true for platform cooperatives as well. Yet, we have identified that responsible marketing strategy can be effective if strategic goals are formulated with a view to change marketplace dynamics from the margins. This moves forward the nascent literature on what reinvented marketing strategies can look like in practice (Morgan et al., 2019) and suggests that despite a business model not being viable in terms of market share (scaled up), it may still achieve prosocial outcomes (alternative scale) through our dimensions of decentralization, authentic narratives, and institutional partnerships.

Responsible marketing strategy in the sharing economy This work advances the intersection of marketing strategy, responsible marketing and the sharing economy literatures. With this we respond to calls to better understand the sharing economy's maturation, expanding perspectives of the dynamic interplay of different stakeholders that participate in its evolving system (Eckhardt et al., 2019). As the sharing economy matures, we illustrate how focusing on decentralization–fragmenting the value proposition and distributing economic and social value to niche segments–can offer valuable positional advantages for disrupting competitive dynamics. Platform cooperatives represent a specific type of "matchmaking" lateral exchange market that mediates flow between service providers and beneficiary actors. The core value proposition of a matchmaker comes from providing a pairing of exchange actors (Perren & Kozinets, 2018); yet platform cooperatives place the focus on strong, ideologically grounded brand community bonds (Schau et al., 2009), also beyond the focal platform to complementary, collaborative offerings. Thus, the differential nature and quality of exchange pairing can bring valuable strategic advantage. Future research can examine how brand and collaborative communities evolve in the platform cooperative space and what unique ideological dynamics and marketplace tensions shape them.

Further, this work demonstrates how competition within this space can indirectly influence the leading platforms to adapt their practices in response to platform cooperatives' stronger value propositions: as our data shows, these propositions are highly resonant with consumers. Marketing literature has established how consumption ideologies originate from conflicts between consumer desires and the system of consumerism (Schmitt et al., 2021). While there is ample evidence that consumers at large are critical of dominant practices and incumbent platforms of the sharing economy, the affordances and convenience currently provided by the incumbent platforms continue to meet their needs sufficiently well, rendering switching costs high. However, as we show, a responsible marketing strategy can highlight wider social interests and create expectation to their fulfilment; regardless of whether their origins are from the margins, main players can be pushed to seek to co-opt (Schmitt et al., 2021) and integrate values *and* practices advanced by cooperatives. We have already seen evidence of that as Uber and Airbnb have both dialed up their prosocial initiatives (e.g., Parveen 2022) in response to alternative narratives and building societal expectations. As leading platforms amplify their prosocial efforts, customers may remain skeptical, but the responsible discourse is nonetheless amplified and, in the best circumstance, adopted widely. Here, we build on Mars et al.'s (2022) insight on 'activist' marketers leveraging corporate intrusion to markets in strategic narratives and demonstrate similar narrative stewardship at work in the sharing economy. Market co-optation can have an important influence in reshaping the ideological landscape around the sharing economy.

In addition, Beverland et al. (2022) call for research on alternative systems within the sharing economy and their

ability to be scaled up to enable system-wide sustainability benefits. We demonstrate that platform cooperatives are one such system to highlight how building a responsible marketing strategy with a focus on change from the margins can bring about valuable shifts. We thus propose a different way of thinking about strategy viability and effectiveness.

We also offer insight on innovative collaborative network effects (de Ruyter et al., 2022), or scaling via networks and partnerships. Impact in the mature sharing economy require broader alliances (Sandoval, 2020), which can be built through public-private partnering (Muldoon, 2022) and creating institutional processes (Laamanen et al., 2023). These strategies draw on the strengths of challengers to work with, rather than against or despite, national and local regulation. This results in the emergence of new types of relationships and collaborative networks which incumbent platforms have thus far not been able to leverage.

Managerial implications in the sharing economy

Implications for incumbent platforms Our findings point to several avenues towards more responsible marketing in the sharing economy. The success of platform cooperatives in working with legislators, rather than against them (Foramitti et al., 2020), suggests that there might be paths of lesser resistance worth exploring for incumbent platforms. Sharing economy platforms tend to be in opposition to each other and especially regulators (Slee, 2015). Our work suggests that making decisions and sharing profits on a more local level, accounting for local needs and conditions, can have strategic advantages. Incumbent platforms can also adopt decentralized networked structures, where developed technological and operational know-how are preserved and leveraged to deliver a customer-centric offering but adapted to local conditions and respectful of regulation. Further, platform cooperatives have demonstrated that there are underserved niches in the market. Sustainability oriented offerings, such as Uber Green, or prosocial campaigns like Airbnb donating to English Heritage (Parveen, 2022), are insufficient in garnering and sustaining interest from these groups of stakeholders: these social marketing tactics appear as greenwashing. A much deeper level commitment and aligning of communication and action is needed to remedy the problems that have created the conditions for platform cooperatives to emerge in the first place. What might the outcomes be if platform cooperatives and mainstream platforms seek to develop synergies and network effects at the structural level of the market, working together, and filling need gaps accordingly? This type of decentralizing collaboration would offer service providers and consumers options. Our data suggests that platform exclusivity is uncommon and platform business could envision, given strategic alignment, finding common access platforms that create availability to larger customer segments. Many of our respondents saw this type of collaboration as the future.

Woodcock (2021) suggests that perhaps the future of the sharing economy is not in platform cooperatives but platform "expropriation," where reorganization lies in the decommodification of the platform through its integration into systemic solutions, such as the state's programs of universal basic service. Instead of being owned by the workers, platforms would be owned by cities as publicly owned and run utilities, much like energy suppliers and public transportation services. This establishes a civic monopoly over the platform through which it could ensure that decent work is the starting point for any services offered (Muldoon, 2022). We see some potential in this line of reasoning where platform logics are brought in close dialogue with governance institutions, and our analysis offers indications as to how this dialogue could be shaped.

Implications for challenger platforms Our findings challenge the notion that platform cooperatives can easily overhaul incumbent platforms and bring the sharing economy back to its utopian roots. However, we outline how they can be influential in ways that propel change from the margins. In extending nascent and predominantly conceptual interdisciplinary work on platform cooperatives, we demonstrate empirically how focusing on three specific dimensions of responsible marketing strategy can support its viability and allow platform cooperatives to amplify their influence in the sharing economy.

First, scalability in the traditional sense is problematic. Platform cooperatives are largely unattractive to traditional investors as they do not provide sufficient returns on investment, due to their profit-sharing model. This is limiting their access to sufficient capital that would allow them to match the scale, scope and quality that incumbent platforms deliver. Yet, as we illustrate above, this view maintains normative understandings of scale as equal to market growth and domination. We show that scale can be found in deep ideological alignment with underserved market segments. Platform cooperatives may create success and scale by shining light on the conflicts within stakeholders' lived experiences at the juncture of their desires and the dominant consumerist system within the sharing economy (Schmitt et al., 2021). External disruptions may accelerate consumer practice toward more sustainable options but require well-functioning technological solutions and institutional support (Forno et al., 2022). Platform cooperatives can play a significant role in systematic adaption and co-optation of more prosocial orientations.

Second, we show that while unable to revolutionize the service landscape, platform cooperatives are successful at fragmenting it. With market decentralization, scale can

come as network power: challengers are particularly well suited to develop and seek decentralization of the market via a one-to-many market growth approach. This means a focus on attracting contracts with companies and institutions rather than head-to-head pursuit of individual customers who may be locked-in on existing platforms. Platform cooperatives can focus on establishing competitive dominance in such contract services with larger entities and organizations rather than seeking to compete for individual customers with the leading platforms. This allows for creating competitive advantages within distinct pockets of the market, which in turn offers operational and revenue stability, income predictability for workers, and price advantages for customers. An example of this niche approach to market decentralization can be seen in Sojo, an app that facilitates consumers and fashion brands to be able to repair clothes rather than replace them (https://www.sojo.uk/). Sojo has built partnerships with leading fashion brands, such as Ganni, to provide repairs to their customers. Repairs are paid for by Ganni, rather than individuals, thus deresponsibilizing the consumer. Sojo has also shaped their narrative authentically by featuring the founder, Josephine Philips, who founded the brand to reduce emissions in the fashion industry. These strategies have paid off both in terms of financing and marketplace buzz as a hot start-up (https://www.wired.co.uk/article/hottest-startups-london-2023).

Finally, our findings suggest that challenger platforms have positional leverage to shift the legislative and policy climate within which incumbent platforms operate. Building scale in these ways attracts key resources and regulatory support that is not available for incumbent platforms. We thus extend previous theorizations of institutional avenues for alternative paths to growth for the public good (Laamanen et al., 2023; Muldoon, 2022; Srnick, 2017). Platform scaling strategies that focus on the use of institutional avenues for rerouting power and wealth to the local citizenry provide a path to returning the sharing economy to its original prosocial ideals. Such a view on collaboration with non-extractive platforms extends work on the sharing economy (Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022) steering away from aggressive market expansion at the cost of workers, urban space, citizens, or the environment. Over time, these affordances of platform cooperatives can transfer to mainstream sharing economy platforms, demonstrating change from the margins.

Future research

Our work points to several avenues for future research. First, what are the boundary conditions for a successful change from the margins strategy for market challengers? Future research can focus on what types of organizations, in which industries, and for which stakeholders a responsible marketing strategy approached can be leveraged most effectively. Platform cooperatives utilize strategic practices that aim to balance competing stakeholder priorities in an optimal set of marketing strategies and tactics (Morgan et al., 2019). Bringing marketplace dynamics to bear on marketing strategy scholarship is important to advance marketing strategy literature in general and a responsible, multistakeholder focused and responsibility-oriented strategizing, in particular (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Chandy et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2019).

Second, our work highlights how responsible marketing strategy adopted by challengers can lead to spillover effects that implicate incumbent players. More research is needed to examine the nature and extent of these spillover effects for incumbent platforms as well as for other private or public firms who provision services in the same industries (e.g., transport, hospitality etc.). We outline the potential for collaborative networks and diverse alliances within the marketplace. Scholars can explore the enabling and inhibiting factors to forming such partnerships and outline whether alliances between marketplace service providers and other actors are strategically and operationally viable. In addition, research is needed on feedback loops in relation to strategies aiming at disrupting market leaders and established consumption patterns. Platform cooperatives are not immune to reproducing unintended consequences typical in the sharing economy (e.g. displacing more sustainable alternatives, or increasing consumption; Beverland et al., 2022) as they scale up. Future research is well positioned to investigate the shape these contradictions take for both mainstream platforms and platform cooperatives.

Third, inclusive participation and direct collaboration in platform governance allows policy makers as partners to guide the platform cooperative's influence on the local community. Using joint public-private ownership (Muldoon, 2022) is a complementary inverse of an institutional scaling strategy (Laamanen et al., 2023) in which public bodies become central for positive regulation (Pentzien, 2020). Future research can examine partnership policy options that amplify challengers' impact and foster alternative paths towards prosocial marketplaces.

Overall, we demonstrate how responsible marketing strategy within the sharing economy influences market dynamics from the margins. When it comes to understanding emerging market dynamics, marketing scholars are well positioned to offer valuable insight as to how meaningful change can be achieved to deliver against sustainability goals. We demonstrate several ways in which responsible marketing strategy can be leveraged effectively by challengers seeking to change dominant dynamics and shift the

marketplace towards prosocial impact within and beyond the sharing economy.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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