

## **The Sharing Economy: Is ‘Sharing’ a social or an economic occurrence?**

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In the current discussion about sustainable development, the concept of sharing emerges as part of the solution in order to consume alternatively and to slow down resources depletion. More than a quarter of a century ago, an economist, Wagner (1991), already proposed sharing as a solution to avoid the depreciation of common (-pool) goods. More recently, there is a particular notion that emerged: the Sharing Economy (also referred as ‘collaborative consumption’; Botsman & Rodgers, 2010), a Web 2.0 phenomena that allows users to connect to each other and to engage in various sharing activities. Whereas sharing, on a broad perspective, occurs on a more intimate level (family and friends), the Sharing Economy permits a sharing interaction between complete strangers (Belk, 2014). In order to have a better understanding of it, the two famous companies Airbnb and Uber can be cited as examples; the first one allows its users to rent their room, apartment, or house to each other, whereas the second one is a mobile application enabling car drivers to share their ride with other users. The question is: What drives complete strangers to engage with each other in such a way? To answer this question, a look at the core concept of this phenomenon, sharing per se, will be given.

Motivations to engage in the Sharing Economy are multiple, and can be framed within three broad categories: economic, social, and, as mentioned above, environmental (Böcker & Meelen, 2016). Analysing the broader concept of just sharing, Belk (2007) focuses on the two first categories and draws a continuum between two types of exchanges: the market relations (purely economic) and true sharing (socially driven). The Sharing Economy phenomena is so wide that it occurs at different points of this continuum, varying from situation to situation. In order to disentangle the phenomena and to assess whether it is more socially or economically driven, three different features of a Sharing Economy relationship have been identified: the users, the asset being shared, and the mediator between the users (taking the form of a website, or a mobile application).

The framework of the Sharing Economy is very wide. It can include physical goods (such as cars, tools, books, toys, etc.), services (such as mobility, housing, workforce), or even intangible data (for instance, Wikipedia, open source software, pictures, or music). Getting a clearer idea of its core idea, sharing, could be relevant in order to disentangle issues revolving around that concept. For example, whether it can be seen as an

alternative, more sustainable mode of consumption. Another possible way to look at the Sharing Economy is the current issue faced by policy-makers in charge of regulating Sharing Economy businesses; defining whether a company is on the economic or the social side of the framework could provide a clue whether to regulate a company like regular mainstream businesses, or not.

This thesis aims at understanding the Sharing Economy under two different perspectives: economic and social. In other words, it tries to discern whether the motivations to engage in sharing are more economic or social. Of course, situations can vary depending upon the individuals, the shared goods, the geographical and historical context, etc. This is why the methodological aspect of this thesis will be separated into two parts.

Firstly, on a more theoretical level, a critical assessment of the continuum drawn by Belk (2007) will be made in order to reach a better understanding of the notion of ‘sharing’ through the conclusions of other researchers and the theoretical frameworks of the *homo oeconomicus* (on the economic side of the frame) and the *homo socialis* (on the social side of the frame).

Secondly, on a more practical level, this continuum will be put into perspective through a review of case studies, reported by scholars in peer-reviewed literature, by the media, and by Sharing Economy platforms themselves. The focus will be put on two specific types of good or service: housing/accommodation and mobility/transportation. Two case studies per type of good will then be thoroughly analysed: Airbnb and Couchsurfing in the case of housing; and for mobility, Uber and another ridesharing company (to be defined).

## **Research questions**

- What is Sharing Economy, and can ‘sharing’ be assessed as a clear dichotomy between regular market relations and social relations?
- What are the attributes of the sharers and the kind of asset exchanged that situates a Sharing Economy relation on the economic or the social side of the frame?
- What are the attributes of Airbnb, Couchsurfing, Uber, and ridesharing that tend to situate these companies on the economic or the social side of the continuum?

Study program	Bioeconomy
Lifetime	1 <sup>st</sup> of June 2017 – 1 <sup>st</sup> of December 2017
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First examiner	Prof. Dr. Claudia Bieling
Second examiner	N.A.

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