Sustainability framings of accommodation sharing

Yuliya Voytenko Palgan*, Lucie Zvolska, Oksana Mont

International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE) at Lund University, P.O. Box 196, 22100 Lund, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The existing research often overlooks the fact that accommodation sharing is not a homogeneous sector but comprises rental, reciprocal and free platforms. This paper aims to compare sustainability narratives held by operators and users of the three platform types with the narratives identified in the literature. First, drawing on framing theory, environmental, economic and social framings of accommodation sharing are mapped based on the extant literature and expert interviews. Second, sustainability framings of operators and users from the three types of accommodation sharing platforms are presented. The data is collected via 10 in-depth interviews and 86 responses to a qualitative structured online questionnaire. We find that current framings of sustainability implications of accommodation sharing vary among those who formulate them as well as among the three platform types. This has implications for the role of these platforms in advancing different types of sustainability.

© 2017 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

1. Introduction

Sharing is an old phenomenon in a new disguise. It has recently moved from traditional sharing among family members and friends (Belk, 2010) to sharing, swapping, giving away, lending renting, and exchanging products and services among strangers (Schor, 2014). The latter kind of sharing is enabled by digital platforms that create new opportunities for providers and users to find each other (Schor, 2014; Belk, 2014; Botsman and Rogers, 2011; PwC, 2015; Demailly and Novel, 2014).

The sharing economy has been praised for being a sustainable alternative to the currently unsustainable economy (Stokes et al., 2014; Wosskow, 2014; Heinrichs, 2013; Martin, 2016). It is framed and advocated by its proponents as a transformative force that drives the shift from the ownership-based economy to the economy that celebrates the ideas of shared access, higher levels of utilisation of already produced but underutilised goods and exchange of services that otherwise are hard to find on the formal market (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). It is portrayed as being much more open, inclusive and democratic than the traditional economy haunted by cut-throat competition, market-driven distribution of wealth and social positioning based on material possessions (Gansky, 2012). The sharing economy is advocated as a more sustainable way of living and running business because it often extends products' life span through second-hand markets, thereby theoretically reducing the need for production of new goods and thus for using virgin resources (Novel, 2014). On the other hand, it has been framed as a phenomenon that stimulates consumption and provides access to consuming goods to people who could not afford them before (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2014; Hill, 2016; Cohen, 2016). Being judged by its vanguards, such as Airbnb

---

and Uber, it is framed as an economy that creates unregulated marketplaces and unfair competition, enables tax avoidance and transfers risks to consumers (Martin, 2016). These different framings of the sharing economy demonstrate that it is a contested phenomenon.

Incumbent actors, the traditional industries that are being challenged by the sharing organisations, and newcomers, the sharing platforms themselves, employ different framings (Martin, 2016). Under "framing" we mean a process by which people devise a specific conceptualisation of an issue by consciously phrasing or presenting information in a way that activates particular values of individuals (Snow et al., 1988). An unexplored question is whether environmental, economic and social implications of the sharing economy are being framed similarly or differently by various types of sharing platforms and why, and how these framings affect its overall prospects. This paper sets out to explore these questions using accommodation sharing as an example.

Accommodation sector is an important consumption domain responsible for 25% of aggregated environmental impacts from households in Europe (EEA, 2013). Additional pressures are generated by the hotel industry. Alternative ways of providing housing are now emerging, in which accommodation is offered to, or shared with, travellers by private people organised by business-driven or non-profit on-line platforms. We define accommodation sharing as peer-to-peer, ICT-enabled, short-term renting, swapping, borrowing or lending of existing privately-owned idling lodging facilities. Accommodation sharing offers a solid empirical base for studying a diversity of sustainability[1] related framings used by sharing organisations that range from emerging local non-profit schemes to established global businesses that disrupt incumbent hotel industry.

This paper aims to compare sustainability framings held by operators and users of accommodation sharing platforms with the framings identified in the literature. This is achieved by 1) mapping environmental, economic and social framings of accommodation sharing based on the extant literature and guided by expert interviews; 2) investigating empirically how sustainability is framed and understood by the operators and users of accommodation sharing platforms.

In the next section 2 literature review of accommodation sharing is provided and a conceptual framework on framings is developed. Section 3 describes methodology and Section 4 presents findings and analysis. Discussion and conclusions are developed in Section 5.

2. Literature review of accommodation sharing and development of conceptual framework

2.1. Sharing economy and accommodation sharing

The sharing economy is a contested phenomenon that lacks a common definition. It includes a wide range of monetary or non-monetary exchanges, as well as business to consumer (B2C), business to business (B2B) and peer to peer (P2P) models (c.f. Schor, 2014; PwC, 2015; Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Belk, 2010; Frenken, 2016). The term "sharing economy" is used interchangeably with shareconomy, collaborative consumption, the collaborative economy, the gig economy and the mesh (Martin, 2016; Richter et al., 2015; Botsman and Rogers, 2011). However, central to the existing definitions is the utilisation of underused assets facilitated by ICT. In this research the sharing economy is defined as a variety of bottom-up initiatives, public-private-people partnerships, business start-ups and local government schemes, all of which utilise the idling capacity of our material world.

The idling capacity that can be utilised in sharing is often found in five sectors – automotive; technology; retail and consumer goods; hospitality; and entertainment, media and communications (PwC, 2015). So far, research has focused on large sharing organisations, especially in the automotive sector (Mont, 2004; Shaheen and Cohen, 2008; Martin et al., 2010). Academic studies of accommodation sharing have mainly analysed large organisations, such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing, neglecting many other platforms, which are rather distinct in their business models and sustainability potentials (Zvolska, 2015). Research exists on socio-economic profiles and user motivations to participate in accommodation sharing platforms (c.f. Tussyadiah, 2016; Forno and Garibaldi, 2015; Rosen et al., 2011), on institutional and business model aspects of Airbnb (c.f. Pelzer 2015; Grinevich and Huber, 2015), on issues of upscaling (c.f. Grinevich and Huber, 2015; Querbes, 2015; Isaak 2015) and the impact on the incumbent hotel industry (c.f. Zervas et al., 2015; Guttentag, 2015; Koblar and Kovac, 2015). Also issues of trust (c.f. Hendrickson et al., 2016; Mora, 2016) and regulation (c.f. Aloisi, 2015; Interian, 2016; Lines, 2015; Mattson-Teig, 2015; Dyal-Chand, 2015) are being studied. A holistic analysis of socio-economic and environmental implications of different types of accommodation sharing platforms is, however, missing in the current discourse. At the same time, the need for research on sustainability of the sharing economy has been highlight ed by scholars (c.f. Martin, 2016; Cohen, 2016). Thus, this paper seeks to contribute to this gap by focusing on how sustainability of the most populous type of accommodation sharing organisations – P2P platforms – is framed.

2.2. Sharing economy taxonomies

As there is no commonly accepted definition of the sharing economy, there is no single all-encompassing taxonomy of sharing organisations. For example, Cohen (2016) distinguishes sharing organisations based on ownership motivation

---

[1] Sustainability is defined here as part of the concept of sustainable development with three interrelated goals: economic and social development, and environmental protection (WCED, 1987).