



Is sharing the solution? Exploring public acceptability of the sharing economy

C.E. Cherry^{*}, N.F. Pidgeon

Cardiff University, 70 Park Place, Cardiff, CF10 3AT, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2018

Received in revised form

23 May 2018

Accepted 31 May 2018

Available online 31 May 2018

Keywords:

Sharing economy

Sustainable consumption

Public perceptions

Discourses

Deliberative research

ABSTRACT

Advocated as a solution to a range of economic, environmental and social problems, the sharing economy has grown rapidly in recent years. However, despite rising up the political agenda, the concept has been increasingly critiqued in relation to unintended economic and social consequences. Whilst existing research has explored the motivations of existing participants in sharing-based practices and business models, little is yet known about wider public perceptions of the sharing economy. Investigating public discourses, this paper explores how citizens may respond to attempts to mainstream the sharing economy, discussing wider desires and concerns surrounding the concept. In a series of four two-day workshops ($n = 51$), we utilised deliberative research methods to engage participants in discussion surrounding the sharing economy and its role within a more sustainable, resource efficient future. Overall, positive perceptions dominated discussions, with participants independently highlighting reduced waste and resource use, increased access to unaffordable goods, and increased community cohesion as key benefits of sharing. However, echoing existing critiques, a number of concerns were also raised. Our findings suggest that, in addition to personal interests (such as affordability, convenience, and hygiene), public acceptability of the sharing economy was contingent on it meeting a number of broader social values. These include desire to: foster social equality, in relation to both the opportunity and benefits promised by the sharing economy; encourage and support the development of strong and independent local communities; and ensure that business practices operate fairly in the shared interest of business, consumers and the environment. Given the implications for everyday life and consumption practices, we argue public perspectives need to be given consideration within the debate surrounding which aspects of the sharing economy should, and should not, be fostered.

© 2018 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Emerging over the past decade, the sharing economy has seen significant growth in recent years, following an upsurge of interest in online platforms that encourage peer-to-peer sharing of resources such as accommodation, transport and products. However, the concept both solves and creates environmental, economic and social issues, and has been increasingly critiqued in relation to the unintended consequences of implementation. In addition, efforts to mainstream the sharing economy are likely to reshape everyday life in profound and unexpected ways, and as such there is a growing need for public debate considering which aspects of a sharing economy should (or should not) be fostered. Although existing

research has explored the motivations of existing participants in sharing-based initiatives, little is yet known about wider public perceptions of the sharing economy. Beginning with a discussion of the debates surrounding the definition of the sharing economy, this paper investigates public desires and concerns surrounding attempts to mainstream the sharing economy and its role within a more sustainable, resource efficient future.

Whilst sharing itself is nothing new, the sharing of products and services between strangers is seen as a defining feature of the developing sharing economy (Belk, 2014). Reflecting both the impacts of the 2008 economic crash and a wider cultural shift surrounding consumption and lack of trust in corporations (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Heinrichs, 2013), the popularity of the sharing economy has grown rapidly in recent years, leading to the success of platforms such as Airbnb and Uber (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015). At the heart of the concept is a focus on the need for the distribution and utilisation of idle

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: cherryce@cardiff.ac.uk (C.E. Cherry).

capacity; by individuals granting each other access to existing assets, society as a whole can make more efficient use of products, as well as skills and time. However, often used interchangeably with terms such as collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011), access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) and the mesh (Gansky, 2010), defining the concept has been controversial, in part due to vast range of different sharing based practices and business models that could be classified within the sharing economy. Four interrelated divides have dominated the debate surrounding the definition of the sharing economy: as peer-to-peer vs. business-to-consumer; as profit vs. non-profit; as access-based rather than exchange-based; and as online (platform-based) vs. offline sharing.

The first two of these disagreements are now largely resolved. With the peer-to-peer nature of the sharing economy relatively firmly agreed, business-to-consumer sharing, such as renting, leasing and service provision, are instead usually united under wider terms such as product-service systems (Tukker, 2004) or access-based services (Schaefer et al., 2016), whilst peer-to-peer sharing via mediated online platforms (regardless of profit motive) such as Airbnb are still included. Whilst the literature on the concept of sharing itself often focuses on the family or community based 'act of distributing what is ours to others for their use' (Belk, 2009: 717), the growth of the sharing economy via (often for profit) online platforms means that this form of for-profit sharing is also usually included in contemporary definitions. Whether exchange-based sharing can be considered part of the sharing economy is contested: Belk (2014) and Frenken (2017) contend that non-transference of ownership should remain a key feature of the sharing economy (thus excluding 2nd hand market exchange), whilst Ertz et al. (2016) argue that as long as it occurs on a peer-to-peer basis (whether mediated or not), trading and swapping of products (with inherent transfer of ownership) should also be included within the definition. Cited as a key factor in the development of the sharing economy, the use of online platforms is often argued to be a central tenet of the sharing economy (Hamari et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2014). Contrasting this, Ertz et al. (2016) argue that online-platforms are a tool to allow easier connection between individuals, a thus that offline sharing initiatives that follow the same basic processes should not be excluded from understandings of the sharing economy.

Despite these ontological debates, and recent media controversy (primarily due to regulatory and social disputes following the rapid upscaling of such platforms - Frenken, 2017; Martin, 2016), the concept of the sharing economy has rapidly risen up the political and policy agenda (Woskko, 2014), advocated by many as a solution to a range of economic, environmental and social problems. By encouraging the distribution and use of underutilised assets, the sharing economy is promoted as a promising shift towards more sustainable consumption. In addition to promoting new forms of economic growth, the sharing economy is seen by some as a positive force, empowering citizens through the provision of new opportunities for profit, employment and social interaction. For example, Hamari et al. (2016), argue that although the majority of consumers are rarely enthusiastically predisposed towards the notion of ethical consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2006), the sharing economy provides a potential solution, encouraging more sustainable consumption practices, whilst also providing a more affordable and social alternative to conventional consumption patterns. However, whilst such a reorganisation of the economy could be hugely empowering for citizens (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), given the vast range of different sharing practices and business models included with the concept, it is also clear that efforts to mainstream the sharing economy will reshape everyday life in profound and unexpected ways.

There is thus a growing empirical literature investigating consumer motivations and concerns surrounding participation in the sharing economy, identifying a range of factors that are influential in determining both attitudes to, and participation in, a range of community schemes and businesses models. Explored in relation to product rental (Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010), car sharing (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012), and accommodation sharing (Tussyadiah, 2015), a key driver for participation concerns economic incentives for sharing, which have been found to be based on personal utility maximisation that encompasses aspects of cost, value and convenience (Belk, 2009; Bellotti et al., 2015; Hamari et al., 2016; Lambertson and Rose, 2012). There are mixed findings surrounding the importance of environmental motivations for participating in the sharing economy; Piscicelli et al. (2015) and Lawson et al. (2016) find that concern for the environmental and sustainability issues are an important motivation for many consumers, whilst other studies find little or no relationship between environmental values and attitudes towards sharing practices surrounding transport, accommodation or products (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010; Möhlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah, 2015). Social benefits and a sense of community have also been identified as important to participation in certain sharing situations, such as toy libraries (Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010), accommodation sharing platforms (Tussyadiah, 2015) and use of wider online sharing and gifting platforms (Albinsson and Perera, 2012). The relative importance of these motivations has been found to vary significantly across different product categories. Böcker and Meelen (2016) found economic motivations dominated product based sharing e.g., car, tool and accommodation sharing, whilst meal sharing, and to a lesser extent ride sharing, were motivated more by social incentives for participation, with environmental motivations generally subordinate to both economic and social motivations.

However, whilst this literature exploring the drivers of consumer participation in the sharing economy is growing, leading to the identification of a vast range of factors that influence consumer attitudes and participation in sharing-based initiatives, little is really known about wider public acceptance of the sharing economy as a whole. To date studies have primarily focused on the motivations and concerns of individuals already taking part in specific schemes (and in particular those focused on the sharing of transport and accommodation), and as such, these findings are usually case study specific, sometimes leading to limited or conflicting findings and conclusions. In addition, this focus on individuals already participating in sharing schemes, has generally led to the conceptualisation of people primarily as consumers or users. Previous research exploring public participation and engagement around a diverse range of science and technology issues has emphasised how members of the public are not just consumers of products and services, but also citizens, both interested in and capable of engaging with complex debate (Pidgeon et al., 2014). We argue that whilst case study evidence is extremely effective at exploring in detail the motivations, concerns and benefits that participants identify in relation to specific sharing practices or sharing of particular product types, it does not do justice to the wider understandings and meanings that the concept may evoke within a wider public. Given the calls for a diverse range of sharing practices and business models to be more widely adopted, shifting mainstream consumption towards a sharing based economy, there is thus a need for a wider public debate considering which aspects of a sharing economy should (or should not) be fostered.

In this paper, we aim to address this gap, using deliberative methods to explore the concept of the sharing economy with members of the public. Adopting a more conceptual notion of the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/8094333>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/8094333>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)