8 The Sharing Economy and Peer-to-Peer Accommodation: From new consumers to new business models

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Introduction

Despite its dissemination in several areas, opinions about the sharing economy and collaborative consumption (CC) vary among researchers. Some believe that this is a 'disruptive business model' that will threaten current companies and their business (Guttentag, 2015: 1199). Others argue that it has emerged from the contemporary economy and will tend to grow as an alternative method of doing business (Botsman, 2010). These two concepts are discussed in this chapter. As an alternative form of tourism, following the tradition of bed and breakfast accommodation, the peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing practice is one of the most notable forms of CC (Belk, 2014a). The phenomenon reached such dimensions that it was considered one of the main disruptive forces in the tourism sector (Buhalis et al., 2020), calling into question the sovereignty of traditional accommodation chains (Pizam, 2014; Fang et al., 2016). This new type of accommodation, as well as the most popular platform that gives it life, Airbnb, will be the target of detail in this chapter. The chapter is structured in four sections. The introduction presents the relevance of the contents covered in the chapter. The second section adresses the new phenomenon of sharing and the different designations for it. In the third section, a discussion and an explanation of the P2P accommodation and its impacts are presented. Finally, the last section adresses the general conclusions of the chapter.

The new phenomenon of sharing

Sharing is a process which has been practised since the beginning of humanity and has been the most basic form of economic distribution in primate societies for hundreds of thousands of years (Price, 1975). According to Belk (2007: 127), sharing is "*the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use, as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use*". Although there are exceptions, most people tend not to share with strangers or people outside of their social networks (Frenken & Schor, 2017). In this way, sharing has always been restricted to trusted people, such as family members, neighbours or friends, since relations mediated by both parties were conditioned by mutual trust, intimacy or other type of closeness (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015).

It was about two decades ago that sharing economy models emerged (Dolnicar, 2021), and since then they have attracted the attention of both researchers and professionals in the field (Smolka & Hienerth, 2014). The difference between 'traditional' sharing and the sharing economy is the use of information technologies, since they allow the act of sharing between unknown people (Frenken & Schor, 2017) transcending a geographically defined community (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015), and facilitating the success of this new phenomenon. Thus, sharing has expanded from a circle that essentially involved intimate relationships to a more public and community circle, facilitated by the Internet (Belk, 2007, 2010).

The term 'sharing economy' was used for the first time to indicate the social well-being that the participants share among themselves to increase their common purpose, suggesting an alternative to traditional purchasing (Weitzman, 1986). The alternative term, 'collaborative consumption', was evoked for the first time by Felson and Spaeth (1978) as individuals or groups interacting in activities of consumption of goods or services with interests in joint activities. Although this is an ever-greater reality in contemporary society, sociologists, economists, and environmental researchers have shared different perspectives on the phenomenon (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015), and offer several related terminologies. Among them, one can find: 'online volunteering' (Postigo, 2003); 'co-creation' (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004); 'collaborative consumption' (Belk, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Botsman, 2013); 'the mesh' (Gansky, 2010); 'prosumption' (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010); 'access-based consumption' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012); 'sharing economy' (Botsman, 2013; Frenken & Schor, 2017) and 'connected consumption' (Dubois et al., 2014).

Given the variety of terms, it is thus difficult to define the sharing economy in a clear and homogeneous way. According to Frenken and Schor (2017) this confusion around the phenomenon is due to the fact that it is recent, with no clear distinction between the different designations (Gansky, 2010; Belk, 2014b; Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015), hindering a consensual definition. Despite the diversity of terms, the sharing economy and CC appear to be the most widely cited terms in the literature and in fact, while most authors believe they are synonymous (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015; Benoit et al., 2017), there are authors who argue that these are two distinct concepts (Belk, 2014b; Frenken, 2017). In this chapter, the concept of CC put forward by Belk (2014b: 1597) was adopted: "*people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation*". Thus, activities of organizations such as Airbnb, Uber, ZipCar, among others, are included in this concept. Sharing activities where there is no monetary compensation (e.g. Couchsurfing), as well as activities that refer to the permanent transfer of property (e.g. eBay), such as donations, are excluded.

Collaborative consumption

Contextualization and relevance

CC encompasses both B2C (business-to-consumer) and peer-to-peer (P2P) services (Möhlmann, 2015) and can be understood as a part of the sharing economy (Belk, 2014b; Petrini et al., 2017), considering that its focus is strictly related to the issue of consumption. Although this phenomenon can occur without the mediation of technology, it is technology that drives the spread of the phenomenon on a large scale (Petrini et al., 2017).

Nowadays, the attention given to CC has increased considerably, with one in five people actively using collaborative platforms (EC, 2016b). In the European market, the transactions related to this phenomenon practically tripled in four years (Bravo, 2018), with a large part of this revenue coming from sectors related to tourism, particularly the accommodation and transport sectors (Juul, 2017). The rise of this phenomenon since 2010 led *Time* magazine to claim it as one of the ten ideas capable of changing the world (Walsh, 2011) highlighting its vast social, economic, and environmental potential. Also, Botsman and Rogers (2010) report that sharing and collaboration are taking place on a scale never seen before, thus creating a culture and economy of "what's mine is yours". Botsman (2010) assumes that this will not be a passing phenomenon, but a cultural and economic power that is here to stay, reinventing what we consume as well as the way we consume, showing an effective change from a culture of 'me' to a culture of 'us'. Therefore, there is no doubt that CC will continue to have a colossal impact on society and that the companies involved in this market will continue to grow (Perren and Grauerholz, 2015).

Main driving forces of collaborative consumption

Although sharing is not a new phenomenon, the current social, economic, and technological sharing context has changed dramatically in recent years (Owyang et al., 2014). Thus, for Botsman (2013), the four main driving forces that transformed sharing from an intimate and local behaviour into a transformational and global movement, namely CC, were technological innovation, environmental pressure, the economic context and changing values.

Regarding the driver of technology, current technologies play a pivotal role in building large-scale sharing communities (Buhalis et al., 2020).They are the main driver of growth in the sharing economy (Belk, 2010). Unlike Web 1.0, where the Internet was just a platform for transmitting information, on Web 2.0 (sites that make it possible to share content, such as the virtual encyclopaedia Wikipedia), users can produce and consume online content according to their interests and opinions, being accessible to anyone anywhere in the world (Labrecque et al., 2013). Thus, to address the different needs efficiently, the CC seeks to operate through robust platforms (Smolka & Hienerth, 2014) that help meet demand and supply, resulting in extremely low transaction costs (Munkøe, 2017). The information made available through social networks, where users share their experiences and information with each other, can be influenced via the opinions of other users at the time of purchase decision, contributing to the popularity of P2P sharing platforms and, thus, for the appearance of CC practices (John, 2013).

Concerning the environmental driver, this is an omnipresent theme in the 21st century market. Since the planet's finite resources are being consumed quickly and humanity is facing problems of overpopulation, climate change and environmental degradation, new ways of doing business in a more sustainable environment have emerged (Albinsson & Perera, 2012). According to Selloni (2017), sharing and sustainability are two interconnected concepts, since many people who decide to adopt sharing practices consider their choices to be beneficial to the environment. In times of scarcity, sharing resources means collaborating in more sustainable ways of life (Selloni, 2017). The fact that we are moving from hyper-consumption systems to innovative systems based on shared consumption, adopting anti-consumer practices (Black & Cherrier, 2010), allows us to obtain significant environmental benefits, namely an increase in the efficiency of use, a reduction in waste and encouraging the development of better products (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Participation in CC involves a reduction in excessive consumption, allowing individuals to acquire and use their resources in a way that positively influences the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic, and social (Huang & Rust, 2011).