Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw
Institute of Philosophy
Center for Ecology and Ecophilosophy

STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE

23/3 (2025)

STUDIA ECOLOGIAE ET BIOETHICAE

2025, 23, 3: 79-88
p-ISSN 1733-1218; e-ISSN 2719-826X
DOI: http://doi.org/10.21697/seb.5855

Is Sharing Economy Contributing to Sustainable Development?

Czy gospodarka współdzielenia przyczynia się do zrównoważonego rozwoju?

Paulína Mihaľová, Peter Laktiš*
Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia
ORCID PM https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9954-7203; PL https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0218-3889 • peter.laktis@fm.uniba.sk
Received: 04 Feb, 2025; Revised: 23 May, 2025; Accepted: 28 May, 2025

Abstract: This paper deals with the concept of the sharing economy, which has been extended to a lot of different areas, increasing its influence on our lives in recent years. New forms of business models have enabled greater demand by providing easier access to the use of products and services, and at the same time opened the potential to higher supply and created possibility to share unused assets to more providers. The term "sharing economy" covers a broad universe of products and services encompassing different motives for sharing. The presented paper divides sharing economy platforms based on their contribution towards environmental sustainability. This distinction between different forms of sharing economy platforms is important as sustainable aspect of the sharing economy is often advertised. The existing research conducted in this field is insufficient and calls for further attention.

Keywords: sharing economy, gig economy, environment, regulation, sustainability

Streszczenie: Artykuł dotyczy koncepcji gospodarki współdzielenia, która w ostatnim czasie rozszerzyła się na wiele różnych obszarów, wywierając coraz większy wpływ na nasze życie. Nowe modele biznesowe umożliwiają zwiększenie popytu dzięki łatwiejszemu dostępowi do produktów i usług, a jednocześnie stwarzają potencjał do zwiększenie podaży poprzez umożliwienie dzielenia się niewykorzystanymi zasobami przez większą liczbę dostawców. Termin "gospodarka współdzielenia" obejmuje szeroki zakres produktów i usług, oraz różne motywacje związane z dzieleniem się. Prezentowany artykuł dokonuje kategoryzacji platform gospodarki współdzielenia pod względem ich wkładu w zrównoważony rozwój. Ponieważ aspekt zrównoważonego rozwoju jest często podkreślany w przekazach promocyjnych tych platform, dlatego został on tu przyjęty jako kryterium ich oceny Zdaniem autora, badania w tym obszarze są wciąż niewystarczające i wymagają dalszej analizy.

Słowa kluczowe: gospodarka współdzielenia, środowisko, regulacja, zrównoważony rozwój

Introduction

The sharing economy is growing in importance for people, governments, economies, and the international community. The act of sharing is not new as various systems of bartering and borrowing have long existed and been utilised. The increasing importance of the sharing economy phenomena nowadays is based on the technological progress and development of platforms enabling people to share their underutilized inventory or offer their free-time through fee-based sharing. In other words, to rent their possessions for someone else for a limited time. The emergence of various forms of "sharing" raises new questions about the motives and purposes behind such practices, as well as sustainability issues surrounding the participation of both providers and consumers on sharing economy platforms. The sharing economy is often promoted as a more sustainable alternative to traditional economic models. However, the universe of sharing economy is so broad that this might not be true for all of its components. This seeks to draw attention to the main aspects of the above-mentioned concepts, thereby opening the door for further research in this field.

1. Sharing Economy

The growing popularity of the sharing economy growing popularity can be attributed initially to the success of Airbnb and Uber, which have become global entities (Martin 2016). European Commission states in its document "A European agenda for the collaborative economy" that the collaborative economy creates new opportunities for consumers and entrepreneurs, making a significant impact on job creation and growth within the European Union. Moreover, EU sees in the development of the sharing economy as encouraging greater asset-sharing and more efficient use of resources, which could contribute to sustainability goals and support the transition to a circular economy (European Commission 2016).

With the increasing size and impacts of the sharing economy, the amount of work that has been performed through online platforms has also grown exponentially. Study from 2022 predicts that sharing economy market size was valued at USD 113 billion in 2021 and this number should increase dramatically up to USD 600 billion in 2027, growing at 32.08% yearly, with major sectors including transportation, accommodation, tourism, education and others (Insights 2022).

The very name "sharing economy", even though it is most used, is not the only name for this economic system. Many other terms used in this context can be found in literature. In addition to the term "sharing economy", terms such as gig economy (Mukhopadhyay 2020), collaborative economy (Möhlmann 2015), access economy, platform economy or community economy (Acquier, Daudigeos, and Pinkse 2017) are also used. However, the economic systems defined by these terms are not the same. Despite certain specifics, we consider the terms sharing economy, collaborative economy, access economy, platform economy or community economy to be to some extent synonymous, when they all refer to a certain form of goods sharing. Well-adjusted definition of sharing economy concept is given by authors Munoz and Cohen "a socio-economic system enabling an intermediated set of exchanges of goods and services between individuals and organizations which aim to increase efficiency and optimization of under-utilized resources in society" (Munoz and Cohen 2017). Especially terms "sharing economy" and "collaborative economy" are often used interchangeably. In a European agenda for the collaborative economy, the term "collaborative economy" refers to business models where activities between service providers (often private individuals) and users "are facilitated by collaborative platforms that create an open marketplace for the temporary usage of provided goods or services. Collaborative economy transactions generally do not involve a change of ownership

and can be carried out for profit or not-for-profit" (European Commission 2016).

However, in some cases the "sharing economy" cannot be considered as true sharing, having in mind sharing as an act of generosity and partaking. Some authors call for distinguishing between "sharing", and so called "pseudo-sharing", while the first one is associated with lending driven by social concerns and second one with renting out mainly for economic gains (Hojnik 2018).

To explore the success of sharing economy platforms, it is crucial to identify motivation of both providers and users. In literature review, looking for this issue in the sharing economy, articles often provide a wide range of unrelated motivational factors and some of them are even contradictory.

Barnes and Mattsson clarify that the key drivers behind the sharing economy are fiscal, financial, political, social, and technological factors. Service providers are motivated mainly to earn money, enjoy life, help others, and contribute to sustainability through sharing economy platforms (Acquier, Daudigeos, and Pinkse 2017; Mao and Lu 2017; Wilhelms, Henkel, and Falk 2017; Barnes and Mattsson 2016).

The financial motive, however, may not be the main reason for engaging in sharing the economy in some cases (Bucher, Fieseler, and Lutz 2016; Guttentag et al. 2018). The common reasons for renting accommodation are those such as enjoyment, social belongingness, and perceived usefulness (Barnes and Mattsson 2016). The key motivation for Airbnb hosts is to earn cash, while hosts on the Couchsurfing platform are driven more by intrinsic motivations (Camilleri and Neuhofer 2017; Germann Molz 2013).

After studying the literature dealing with the issue of motivation in the field of "sharing economy", we can conclude that the motivations vary greatly from one study to another. This phenomenon, in our opinion, could be at least partially explained by the fact that businesses that are commonly identified under the term "sharing economy" differ greatly.

Furthermore, if we narrow our view and compare only intrinsic and extrinsic motives, we find that both are present, however, extrinsic motives are predominant in both service providers and users (Hossain 2020). This can indicate that the main driver for people to participate in "sharing economy" marketplaces is material, i.e. participants engage in this trade to earn something in return. However, on the contrary, accommodation providers on the Coachsurfing platform hardly have any extrinsic motivations since they provide accommodation for free.

2. Environmental Sustainability of the Sharing Economy Platforms

Mravcová emphasises that environmental sustainability is the highest priority of the society as the state of the environment is degrading regardless of the efforts of the global community (Mravcová 2024). The sharing economy is often viewed as a more environmentally friendly way of consuming goods and services. As the sharing economy might be an approach to contribute towards several UN Sustainable Development Goals (Pérez-Pérez et al. 2021) we can argue that the main idea of sharing is associated with increased sustainability.

Many studies already viewed the sharing economy through the lens of environmental sustainability. It is believed that the sharing economy possess the ability to contribute toward more sustainable environment by more effective usage of resources, while at the same time it may decrease the amount of greenhouse gas emissions (Mi and Coffman 2019). For example, thanks to a platform set up to share the tools in Finland, more than 5.7 tonnes of CO2eq were avoided in the first 14 months of operation (Claudelin, Tuominen, and Vanhamäki 2022). In Shanghai China, bike sharing contributed to an estimated savings of greenhouse gas emissions of approximately 25 tonnes of CO_2 only in 2016 (Zhang and Mi 2018). Yin et al also concluded that

the sharing economy has a positive impact on environmental sustainability. Authors found positive relationship of the sharing economy with overall environmental performance and at the same time negative effect to a greenhouse gas emission. Effects were noticed specially in urban areas (Yin, Kirkulak-Uludag, and Chen 2021).

There is a concern however, that some enterprises may be using the name of the sharing economy as a way to promote its services and only pretend to be a contributor towards a more sustainable environment, while maintaining the sole motivation to maximise profit (Mi and Coffman 2019). Some authors define this behaviour as sharewashing, an act where companies state that they belong to the universe of the sharing economy while they do not contribute towards its ecological or social aspects (Tu 2017). Also, research done by Meshulam et al. found that the sharing economy is not always a more environmentally friendly option of consumption. Especially for ride sharing and accommodation, while sharing goods tend to have a more positive effect (Meshulam et al. 2024).

Environmental impact of the sharing economy is not a simple relationship and differs based on an individual business model. In essence, the sharing economy allows to utilise under-used asset which tends to lower environmental impact compared to traditional alternatives. However, since users are able to spend less money on a service via the sharing economy compared to traditional way of consumption, these savings can be used to buy additional goods or services, which may offset this reduced environmental impact (European Commission 2018).

As these studies might have shown, effects of the sharing economy on the environment are not straightforward positive or negative. They are often contradictory. In our view, one of the reasons why studies might come with a different result is that the sharing economy covers a very broad universe of platforms and business models.

The main goal if this study is to help to distinguish, which categories of sharing economy platforms might have a positive impact on environmental sustainability.

For that purpose, we use Four Sharing Economy Models created by Constantiou et al. (Constantiou, Marton, and Tuunainen 2017). Model divides sharing economy platforms based on two key dimensions (Table 1). The first is control exerted by platform owners. This dimension shows the intensity of control among service providers nurtured by platform owners. It can achieve loose or tight values. Platforms reaching tight control among participants tend to exert control over prices (Uber, Handy). They usually analyse changes in supply and demand in real time and react accordingly. That means providers cannot set prices for services they deliver. On the opposite end of the spectrum, platforms with lose control over participants tend to leave price making decisions upon providers and in general, allow them to operate more freely (Airbnb, BlaBlaCar). The second dimension is rivalry between platform participants. Rivalry can be low or high and it describes how intensely service providers must compete to earn profit. Platforms, where prices are strictly set (Handy) or financial motivation is not the primary factor to participate (BlaBlaCar or Couchsurfing) tend to have significantly lower rivalry among service providers as opposed to platforms where providers set their own prices (Airbnb) or prices are calculated by platforms algorithm based on demand for service (Uber) (Constantiou, Marton, and Tuunainen 2017).

Based on these dimensions, Constantiou et al. have created a 2x2 model for platforms of sharing economy constituting four types of platforms called *Franchiser, Principal, Chaperone* and *Gardener*.

To assess sustainability aspect of the abovementioned models, we use five criterions to define sharing economy for sustainability set by Curtis and Lehner. These five criterions are as follows. Sharing economy should be "ICT-Mediated", which means

Table 1. Four business models under terms sharing economy

		Control Exerted by Platform Owner	
Rivalry Between Platform Participants	**High**	***Chaperones*** (Airbnb)	***Franchisers*** (Uber)
	Low	***Gardeners*** (BlaBlaCar)	**Principals** (Task Rabbit)
		Loose	**Tight**

Source: (Constantiou et al. 2017).

that the platforms aggregate users and providers virtually, via information technology. The second criterion is "Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership", where assets used in the sharing economy should be mainly acquired for private use and not for income generation. The third criterion, "Temporary access", discusses the ability of users to get access to goods without acquiring ownership. Fourth point, "Rivalrous", indicates inability of simultaneous use of one concrete asset by multiple users at the same time. The last criterion examines physical properties of shared assets, where the authors argue that these asset should be "Tangible good" in order for sharing economy to unlock its idling capacity (Curtis and Lehner 2019).

To evaluate sustainability of the sharing economy platforms, we decided to synthesise Constantiou et al. 2017 typology presented in Table 1 with criterions laid down by Curtis and Lehner 2019 and discussed above. We evaluated each model, whether it fulfilled individual criterions and granted score 1, if a given criterion was met and 0 if it was not. When the line was blurry and it was not straightforward to decide whether a given criterion was met, we granted score 0.5. The results are presented in Table 2.

For the criterions "ICT-mediated", "Rivalrous" and "Temporary access", in our view all four models of sharing economy fulfil these criterions. All models contain platforms connecting via technology, all goods or services shared via these platforms are rivalrous, as they cannot be simultaneously used by multiple users at the same time, and there is no transfer of ownership. Important criterions to differentiate these four models are "Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership" and, to a certain extent, "Tangible good".

In the franchiser model, the platform owners exhibit absolute control over the entire service and exert tight control and focus on standardizing the service to increase efficiency by reducing transaction costs. An example can be Uber, which reacts to changes in demand for service by increasing price and therefore motivating providers to operate in times with high demand. However, in general, the main areas in this category are ride sharing or food delivery services (Constantiou, Marton, and Tuunainen 2017). The first three criterions were fulfilled. An arguable point is whether the model can fulfil the criterion of non-pecuniary motivation of ownership. It is questionable whether the main motivation of car ownership is for private use or for providing transportation services, therefore we attributed this criterion 0.5. The last point to decide was the "Tangible good" criterion. As the main motivation is to provide transportation services, and car is not fully shared with the consumer without the presence of the owner, we could not classify this criterion as fulfilled. In our opinion, models in this category should be classified as providing services rather than sharing goods. Therefore, positive effect of the Franchiser model on environmental sustainability

Table 2. Four business models in context of sustainability

	Franchisers	Principals	Chaperones	Gardeners
ICT-mediated	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rivalrous	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Temporary access	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership	Probably not	No	No	Yes
Tangible good	No	No	Yes	Yes
Score	3,5/5	3/5	4/5	5/5

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on (Constantiou et al. 2017; Curtis and Lehner 2019).

compared to traditional services is rather limited as only 3.5 out of 5 points were attributed.

In the principal model, platform owners are supervisors with tight control. Service providers do not possess power to set prices. However, contrary to the franchiser model, rivalry is low among participants. Prices are based on the type of service and do not fluctuate based on the current demand. The most notable example of this business model is Handy, a platform that aggregates professionals who can provide household services e.g. plumbing, cleaning or furniture assembling (Constantiou, Marton, and Tuunainen 2017). This model, in our view, does not fulfil two criterions of sustainability, namely the "Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership" and the "Tangible good". Since this model consists in gathering service providers, no tangible goods are shared. It also makes the point of "Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership" not applicable, given that no physical items are shared. As a result, we attributed to the principal model only 3 out of 5 criterions and it might not be viewed as sustainable alternative to traditional service.

In the chaperone model, the platform owners act as a watchdog overseeing activities rather than exercising full control. Service providers have an opportunity to freely decide their prices. The platform can provide real time data about the current demand; however, providers can freely decide about price levels for their services. Rivalry though remains high. The most noteworthy example of this business model is Airbnb (Constantiou, Marton, and Tuunainen 2017). Unlike in the case of previous categories, this model fulfils the criterion of tangible good, as no major action from the owner is required and shared assets can be used without the owner's active presence. However, the "Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership" is not fulfilled. The main motivation to buy a property to rent is to generate profit. It was found that owners of short-term rental units are mostly investors (Cocola-Gant and Gago 2021). Therefore, we attributed this model 4 out of 5 in terms of sustainability.

Finally, in the gardener business model, the platforms mainly focus on creating communities and support them to self-organize themselves. In this model, prices are not dynamic. Some of these platforms even operate on volunteering principles. Couchsurfing is the main example of this model. People can share their spare rooms for travellers to stay a night without a need to pay. BlaBlaCar, a ridesharing platform, leaves the decision about the price of a ride upon service provider (Constantiou, Marton, and Tuunainen 2017). In our opinion, this model fulfils all five criterions laid down by Curtis and Lehner. Apart from the three jointly met criterions, "Gardeners" also allow share of tangible goods, and since the monetary benefit under this model is not the primary motivation to share, we might conclude that also the "Non-Pecuniary Motivation of Ownership" is fulfilled. Therefore, we granted this model 5 out of 5 points.

Platforms in this category are closest to what we understand under the term "sharing economy" by allowing usage of "truly" underutilised assets among people. Providers are allowed to utilise their asset,

which they would use even without explicit demand for its service from users, unlike in the previous categories. For example, BlaBlaCar user would most probably still drive its car for the trip even without any demand, unlike Uber driver. The main motivation for sharing a ride is to decrease individual costs, the provider would incur, by travelling alone, rather than generating profit in taxi-like services. Moreover, the driver must aim for a similar destination (Chan and Shaheen 2012). A given asset is then used by more people, which inherently decreases ecological footprint per person.

In our view, the Gardeners model category most closely fulfils all criterions of sustainability set by Curtis and Lehner, while the Franchisers and the Principals models are for-profit services offered via internet platforms. The Chaperones model, in our view, is more aligned with for-profit motivation, but may not entirely fit into that category. The main distinction could be, whether the host also lives in the apartment, and shares a spare room, rather that offers the whole property for short-term rental purposes. In our view, the remaining two models do not fulfil the non-fiscal motivation criterion and are least compliant with the outlined criterions of sustainability.

3. Need of Regulation as a Reaction to The Development of the Sharing Economy

Increasing popularity and constant development of digital technologies along with changes in consumer habits, prove that a sharing economy will affect almost all areas of business in the near future. The recent industrial revolution, Industry 4.0, brings new forms of economy and extends the existing forms of flexible work (Bednaříková and Kostalova 2021). In order to make the best use of its potential, it seems necessary to find a way to benefit most from its development and influence it as needed (Blažek 2020).

Currently, most discussions regarding regulations of the sharing economy in the EU revolve around the working conditions of providers. These are crucial for the development of new working-platforms, which are, on the other hand, needed for the increase of the EU competitiveness. In general, an independent, self-employed person works under the conditions that are similar to employment, but they do not enjoy the same rights and protection as employees and do not benefit from the possibilities of personal career development etc. These persons have only limited access to social protection, or they have guaranteed only minimal working condition standards (working overtime, rest periods at work, or determination of a minimum salary). The problem connected to the work within the sharing economy platforms is also partly based on the fact, that an offered service is more affordable for the end user, but it is often offered at a price below its real value, not reflecting the fact that freelancing is comparable to ordinary job. These workers are not being paid for the time that relates to the job but that is not a part of paid orders (Bednaříková and Kostalova 2021). To mitigate this, the European Commission presented a proposal for a directive intended to enhance the working environment of gig economy workers, mostly by setting their employment situation, and creating the first European Union rules for the use of algorithmic management in the workplace (Pape 2024). In order to improve working conditions for providers in the platform work sector, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union published directive 2024/2831 of 23 October 2024, which Member States shall bring into force by 2 December 2026 (Directive (EU) 2024/2831).

However, we see the opportunity to take into account the impact, individual platforms have on environmental sustainability. Platforms that contribute toward more environmentally friendly way of consumption might now face a unique opportunity to reshape the way of consumption. New

regulations should take this into account and further foster this development.

4. Recommendations, Limitations and Future Research Directions

Based on the abovementioned, we recommend that the new regulation of the sharing economy should consider its impact on environmental sustainability. So far, in the context of sharing economy regulations, it is mostly working conditions that are discussed. As this new business model is in early to medium stages of development, it is much easier to form this sector to accommodate environmental sustainability goals then it is with already established robust industries. Lawmakers, but also active companies in the field, therefore, face an interesting opportunity to form this sector into pioneering a more sustainable way of consumption.

Our paper, though, is not without limitations. Firstly, not full spectrum of sharing economy platforms aggregated under four sharing economy models have been analysed as only the key ones have been taken into account. Secondly, we have only synthesised Constantiou et al. 2017 typology presented in Table 1 with criterions laid down by Curtis and Lehner 2019. To fully grasp the sharing economy through the lens of environmental sustainability, a more rigorous approach might be used in order to take into account the whole spectrum of business models. Lastly, our review of the current regulatory attempts is narrowed to the European Union only and the paper has not explored the global situation.

Since this paper provides only basic categorisation of sharing economy platforms, further research is vital to fully categorise all platforms that are currently under the umbrella of this term. Also, to make an informed decision, further research might support the lawmakers in actually proposing concrete solutions that apply regulations based on the impact each individual platform has on environmental sustainability, so it would be easier to distinguish between true sharing and "sharewashing".

Conclusion(s)

Sharing economy is a recent phenomenon increasing in importance and economic influence. Its development goes hand in hand with technological and digital progress, as it is based mostly on online platforms connecting consumers with providers. New evolving forms of sharing are raising questions of distinguishing between fundamental sharing of unused assets and sharing as business making. This new form of consumption is usually advertised as more environmentally friendly compared to traditional industries. There is a difference, however, in understanding of the term "sharing", as it leads to different business models which have a varied impact on the environment. As research in this area is still in its infancy, the same terms are used for different, often unrelated models. We hope that the present paper will contribute to professional discussion and help to distinguish which sharing economy platforms truly benefit environmental sustainability.

Authors' Contributions: Conceptualization, P.L. and P.M.; Methodology, P.L. and P.M.; Formal Analysis, P.L.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, P.L. and P.M.; Writing – Review & Editing, P.L. and P.M.; Visualization, P.L.; Supervision, P.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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