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**The rise of the sharing economy and its relationship with
sustainable development. A critical literature review**

MARTINA NANNELLI, STEFANIA OLIVA

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DISEI, Università degli Studi di Firenze
Via delle Pandette 9, 50127 Firenze (Italia) www.disei.unifi.it

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The rise of the sharing economy and its relationship with sustainable development. A critical literature review

Martina Nannelli¹, Stefania Oliva²

Abstract

The article aims to critically review the concept of Sharing Economy (SE) questioning its relationship with sustainability. Originated by different institutional cultures based on the principles of solidarity between the groups of a community, SE has risen as a new paradigm after the 2008' financial and economic crisis and the advent of the digital transformation. In particular, by digital platforms, SE has evolved from an economic-social phenomenon to an economic-technological one, influencing and affecting the competitiveness of several sectors. Through a critical literature review of SE concepts, the article explores how the theoretical debate evolved over time. It identifies the main definitions and features of the phenomenon and discusses its relationship with the topic of sustainability. In the conclusions, it develops reflections on further research devoted to understanding the most controversial under-researched topics.

Keywords: sharing economy; digital platforms; sustainability; sustainable development

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¹ Post-doc Fellow at the University of Florence (Department of Economics and Management, via delle pandette 9, 50127, Firenze, martina.nannelli@unifi.it)

² Post-doc Fellow at the University of Florence (Department of Economics and Management, via delle pandette 9, 50127, Firenze, stefania.oliva@unifi.it)

1. INTRODUCTION

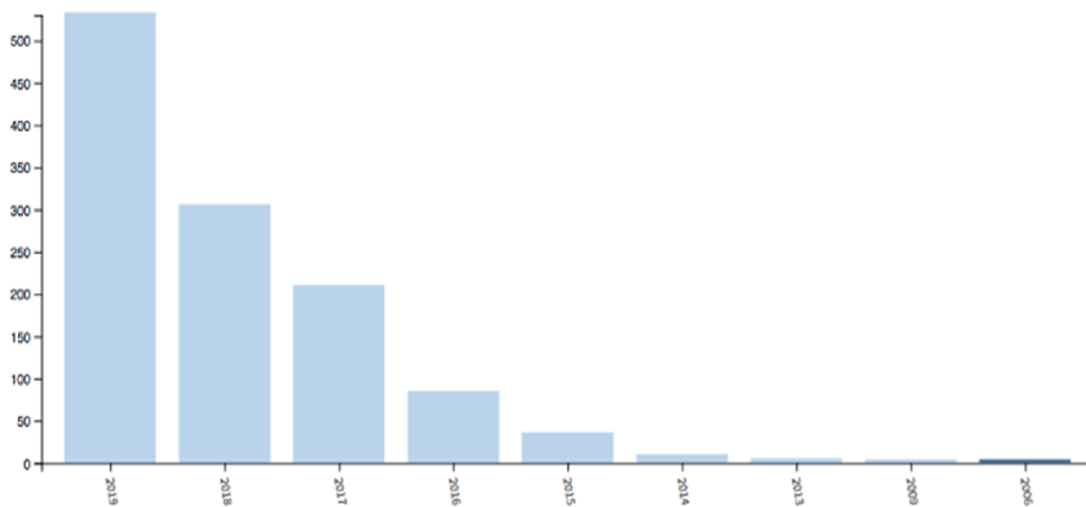
Over the last few years, the Sharing Economy (SE) paradigm (Belk, 2007; Hamari et al., 2015; Katrini, 2018) has emerged among scholars of different disciplines and policymakers. Following a wave of enthusiasm, the SE paradigm has gained popularity shaping production and consumption patterns by renovating, disrupting and even by creating new business models. The intrinsic features of the new SE paradigm, such as the use of goods' and services' idle capacity, flexibility, non-ownership, access to resources, have favored its application making it a particularly flourishing topic and fostering its conceptual link with economic and environmental sustainability (Martin, 2016; Ertz, 2018). This has driven it to become the base for promoting policies devoted to affecting the competitiveness of several sectors (Muñoz and Choen, 2017).

In Europe, the total value of transactions carried out by businesses that fall under the SE umbrella is estimated at around € 28 billion in 2015 and is expected to reach € 335 billion by 2025 (PwC, 2016). This estimate of growth which is much higher than the respective commercial activities that do not fall into the SE category (e.g. car rentals compared to sharing car rentals) (Trabucchi et al., 2019), provides us with two interesting insights: on the one hand, it shows us the size of the phenomenon; on the other hand, this growth causes uncertainties as to what exactly should be included under the SE umbrella concept, since it has become a complex and ambiguous phenomenon from many points of view.

In order to analyse the root of the SE paradigm, a first reflection concerns its strict relationship with the term *sharing*. It is possible to observe at least two different connotations of it. On the one hand, the word *sharing* refers to an altruistic/social behavior (sharing something with other people). On the other, once *sharing* is grouped with the term economy, the meaning changes by shifting the perspective of the phenomenon, opening the doors to a purely economic connotation. This distinction has been strengthened over years, supported by the birth of new terminology that is expressed in a corollary of new or regenerated terms, similar in meaning but with different nuances (e.g. Sharing Economy, Gig Economy, Collaborative Consumption, Collaborative Economy, Peer-to-peer Economy).

An indication of how the SE phenomenon has grown in the social sciences is evident from the number of articles published on the main search engines over several years. For example, Web of Science (WoS) reveals that articles published within the categories of the social sciences using the terminology "Sharing Economy", have shifted from 7 in 2014 to 530 articles in 2019 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The rise of the term “Sharing Economy” in literature, 2019-2006



Source: Web of Science, 2019

The new SE paradigm was born from the social narrative of *sharing* as a paradigm for exchanging and distributing goods and services. The path that has allowed for the shift from a phenomenon having purely social aims to a mainly economic paradigm, is to be considered in relation to political and economic factors that have occurred in the last two decades. The 2008 financial-economic crisis has hallowed the rise of the SE as a different production and consumption model to help people and businesses to monetize their (idle) capacity and assets and to contain and defeat the lowering of wages, the loss of jobs, and the loss of monetary value (Kotz, 2009). So, what has been a social mechanism in the local communities has risen to other levels thanks to Information Technology (IT) tools, thereby allowing people to face the crisis. Cohen and Muñoz (2015) confirmed that the “*new forms of the sharing economy*” (p. 88) are driven by a convergence of numerous factors including the 2008 global economic downturn which played a significant role alongside the technology race.

According to Katrini (2018), the transition from a more traditional social concept of the sharing to the economic conceptualization of the SE, occurred on three different vectors: the stakeholders’ intentions, the presence of monetary exchange and the scale of operation.

The intention is the reason why the stakeholders participate in the SE and one of the main elements of distinction between the past and the current conceptualization that lead the various stakeholders to take part in the phenomenon. In the SE system, there are three types of stakeholders: the owners, the intermediaries (virtual or online such as platform and offline) and the users of the shareable. While traditionally all the actors involved had an equal share in ownership and management, the new orientation is that whoever manages the sharing process is often different from who actually uses and owns the assets. When these external (profit-oriented) stakeholders manage a sharing system, the

evolution of the system and the stakeholders' intentions can be significantly influenced based on a cost-benefit analysis.

Strictly connected to the stakeholders' intentions, there is the question of the monetary exchange. Belk (2007) has argued that sharing by definition should not include financial remuneration, the use of the word renting would be the most accurate wording. However, another part of the literature suggests that the common tendency is to use the term sharing whenever the money transaction is part of the agreement, for example sharing an apartment or sharing the cost of a meal (Frenken and Schor, 2017).

The third element, the operational scale, is based on the unit of analysis that passes from family exchanges for the act of sharing (local scale) to exchanges between strangers in the SE (global scale). This transition has been supported also by technology. Many scholars, in fact, have identified Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the Internet both as the engines and the tools which have favored this transition (Belk, 2013; Barnes and Mattsson, 2016). ICTs have rapidly changed the concept and practices of sharing on the global scene particularly through the support of peer-to-peer (p2p) platforms and online marketplaces, encouraging the use of different terms such as the platforms economy (Weber, 2014; Parente et al., 2018) or on-demand economy (Cockayne, 2016). This quick overview shows us a complex and fragmented environment. Different but similar definitions, terminologies and studies with different focuses coming from both the academic and the real world, inhabit this kaleidoscopic phenomenon in a complex way. This variety shows that there is widespread confusion regarding the scope and central characteristics of the SE: "*a fog is blanketing the SE concept*" (Trabucchi et al., 2019; p. 997).

Based on these considerations, the article develops a critical literature review to explore the concept of SE and its relationship with sustainability. The article is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the methodology applied for the critical literature review. Section 3 describes the results of the analysis identifying the main definitions, features and dimensions of the phenomenon. Section 4 discusses the critical relationship between SE and sustainability issues. It focuses on the concept of sustainability, underlying how the "sharing" paradigm changed over time from being considered a sustainable consumption and production model toward an increasing unsustainable model. Finally, Conclusions enlarge this debate of sustainability of SE summarizing positive and negative connotations and giving insight for further research.

2. METHODOLOGY

SE literature shows a wide internal diversity, complexity, and even contradiction (Acquier et al., 2017). Reviewing this literature through a critical literature review is essential to ground the existing knowledge and, given the sudden evolution and fragmentation, to explore the competitiveness factors for discovering future trends and possible issues.

In recent years, some literature reviews on the SE were carried out using different literature review methodologies. Cheng (2016) reviewed sixty-six articles in EBSCOHost, Science Direct, and Google Scholar, using the word “Sharing Economy” to build the co-citation analysis and content analysis between 2010-2015. The co-citation analysis results have indicated that the whole network is not influenced by any particular study and it has identified five clusters: (1) Lifestyle and Social Movement; (2) Consumption Practice; (3) Sharing paradigm; (4) Trust; (5) Innovation. Thus, the content analysis resulted in three broad areas of focus: (1) SE’s business models and their impacts; (2) nature of SE; (3) sustainability development in the general SE literature.

Ertz (2018) looked for the main authors’ contributions, publications and emergent clusters through a bibliometric and network analysis which combined “sharing economy”, “collaborative consumption” and “collaborative economy” keywords from 729 publications in two databases (WoS and Scopus) between 2010-2017. He particularly focused on the link between sharing and sustainability in literature. The result was the identification of four clusters that represent the key research topics focusing on development theory, mutualization or sharing systems and sustainability.

Trabucchi et al. (2019) studied the SE through a systematic literature review on 114 articles resulting in the Scopus database up until the end of 2017 and focusing on the keyword “sharing economy”. The result was a conceptual framework that considers two main dimensions: the kind of asset involved in the sharing (existing and new) and the kind of transaction enabled by the company (permanent and temporary).

Hossain (2020) explores the existing SE using a systematic literature review on 219 articles carried out from two scientific databases (WoS and Scopus) during the period 2016-2018. The review has considered three keywords for searching the articles: “sharing economy”, “collaborative consumption” and “collaborative economy”. The study analyses the stakeholders and their motivations for participating in SE in the accommodation and transportation sectors and it discusses their different faces.

The critical literature review proposed by this article mainly differs from the previous because it examines the evolution of the SE literature over time based on a postmodernist approach.

2.1 Research approach: the postmodernism perspective

Before discussing the criteria and development of the critical literature review, this paragraph wants to clarify research paradigms and their relevant ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches and it explains the choice of the strategy and method adopted in this study. Gage (1989) speaks of the paradigm wars, which assesses the ongoing debate between proponents of positivism and their opponents who are grounded in ideas of postmodernism (constructivism or interpretivism). Whereas positivists or post-positivism see the social world as a closed system wherein cause-effect relations can be readily observed or experienced, postmodernists' diametrical viewpoint is that the social world is fully socially constructed by humankind and the reality is inherent in the perception of individuals and therefore embraces subjectivity. For critical realists, the social world is an open system whose existence is largely independent of any knowledge one may have or develop, and social science should be critical concerning the social world that aims to tentatively describe and explain. This research bases its approach on the philosophical thought that definitions, stereotypes and models can change according to time and place, ideals and convictions, as well as consumption and production patterns which are typical of a given era: *"Every knowledge is contextualized by its historical and cultural nature. Universal social science is judged impossible because people's and groups' different subject positions cannot be measured against each other"* (Agger, 1991; p. 117). For this reason, the study adopts a postmodernism perspective as a new way of alternative thinking which attempts to understand while deconstructing. A common mistake is to think that postmodernism goes in the direction of nihilism rejecting and denying reality. Otherwise, it must be thought of as a new way of alternative thinking which attempts to understand while deconstructing (Chia, 2003).

The choice of the critical literature review, which is a qualitative methodology in nature, is appropriately suited with the philosophy of the research based on *postmodernism philosophy* (Creswell, 1998; Saunders et al., 2016). Postmodernism is an intellectual tradition most familiar in philosophic, aesthetic and literary criticism studies, and just recently applied to social studies.

Postmodernist philosophical thought rejects the absolute objectivism and the totalizing perspective – the so-called *grand narratives* - typical of positivism and realism philosophies. Indeed, it considers the facts and events in their fluid progress. Postmodernists believe that the order of things is provisional and subject to change and, for these reasons, postmodern social theory - which is antireductionist and pluralist - must examine the world and its phenomena from various perspectives and through multiple lenses and disciplines.

Ergo, the research wishes to explore and discuss the dominant thoughts and frameworks of the paradigm that supports the SE reality without marginalizing different ways of thinking which instead can be a starting point for in-depth reflections. The data are used to explore the phenomenon by identifying the different factors, themes and patterns. The ongoing theories and main streams of literature on the SE are challenged thanks to its deconstruction.

Both the philosophy and the methodology of the research, and the exploratory purpose for which the data are collected, require that the study be conducted in a longitudinal time horizon because of its capacity to look at the changes and at the evolution over time. A longitudinal study is an observational research method in which data is gathered for the same subjects repeatedly over a period of time.

2.2 Research design

Based on the postmodernist philosophy, the critical literature review on the paradigm of SE has been developed following two main stages of research.

The first stage involves the conceptualization, planning and implementation of research that are built with the support of a rational *systematic literature review*. This methodology allows us to identify and quantitatively explore a very large number of sources on the topic through the development of specific search strings (keywords, subjects, timeframes) and algorithms (see ahead) that identify the articles based on the characteristics of the research. The articles that are used to debate the topic are found through the use of two scientific databases (WoS and Scopus); in addition, some articles have been added as they are considered relevant for the debate after analyzing the references of the articles resulting from the databases. Although this quantitative methodology is innovative and scientifically based, it has the limitation of not investigating the topic but of stopping at the results elaborated by research systems such as WoS, Scopus or others. In the literature, the systematic literature review is usually discussed through more quantitative mechanisms that list the research found rather than deeply discussing it.

Intending to explore the SE through a critical debate, it seems necessary that the second stage of the research leave out the more quantitative analysis of the data and move towards a qualitative analysis on the emerging themes. Therefore, the second stage is addressed through the *critical literature review*, which allows us to discuss in a narrative style the results of the systematic literature review. The goal of having a broad historical-economic-sociological framework is in line with postmodernist thinking that such a multidisciplinary phenomenon needs to clarify the link between its past and the new conceptualization to discover the new trends.

The two stages of the research have been driven by the following research questions: 1) how has the concept of sharing evolved over the years? 2) how is the SE defined in the social sciences? 3) what are the SE's main factors? 4) how does the SE paradigm promote economic, social and environmental sustainability?

Moreover, several parameters of research have been followed to include or exclude research contributions to the final sample. The parameters, described in the following section, have been selected in order to be as inclusive as possible to fulfill the postmodernist philosophy which also investigates the thought's minorities. This need for inclusion must find a scientific basis and exclude unscientific research. The parameters identified for the research are now discussed.

2.3 Research parameters and the final dataset

The search for keywords is a delicate and challenging step because it is the main filter through which documents are identified and selected. The keywords are selected through an initial reading conducted with dictionaries and encyclopedias and through a first immersion of the topic with the use of newspaper and academic articles, Internet researches, books and the discussion with experts (Saunders et al., 2016). The screening reveals that those terms that reoccur in the literature are: "Sharing Economy", "Collaborative Consumption", "Collaborative Economy", "Peer-to-peer economy" or "Platform Economy". However, in their literature reviews, Cheng (2016) and Trabucchi et al. (2019) suggest that using only the term "Sharing Economy" is enough since it is the most recurrent in academic literature as well as in the practitioners' world. Instead, Hossain (2020) used "Sharing Economy", "Collaborative Consumption" and "Collaborative Economy" in his literature review. Following an inclusive approach, the keywords selected have been the following: "Sharing Economy", "Collaborative Consumption", "Collaborative Economy", "Peer-to-peer economy" or "Platform Economy". These keywords have been searched in Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases that represent two of the most important databases for academic research. The use of WoS created a consistent and representative sample (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018; Harzing Satu, 2016) and it provides access to a broad range of quality publications and research venues (Falagas et al., 2008). Moreover, the Scopus database is considered the largest citation database of peer-reviewed literature (Trabucchi et al., 2019). Tables 1 and 2 show the number of scientific contributions found for each keyword and its combination with "Sharing Economy" in the two databases in the period from 1980 to 2018.

Table 2: Number of scientific contributions for each keyword in Web of Science, 1985-2018

	“Keyword”	“Keyword” and “Sharing Economy”
“Sharing Economy”	620	---
“Collaborative Consumption”	169	119
“Collaborative economy”	39	23
“Peer-to-peer economy”	5	5
“Platform Economy”	48	14

Source: Web of Science, 2019

Table 3: Number of scientific contributions for different keywords in Scopus, 1985-2018

	“Keyword”	“Keyword” and “Sharing Economy”
“Sharing Economy”	506	---
“Collaborative Consumption”	136	77
“Collaborative economy”	62	24
“Peer-to-peer economy”	6	3
“Platform Economy”	40	7

Source: Scopus, 2019

The first column shows the recurrence of the keywords considering the criteria. It is evident that the term SE acts as the core term and is the most used in the academic field. Following Cheng (2016) and Trabucchi et al. (2019), where “Sharing Economy” is evaluated as the most common term and considering the results of this first run of research, we decide to include only the “Sharing Economy” term as the final keyword for the critical literature review, searching it among the title, keywords and abstract of the contributions of Wos and Scopus databases.

To be updated and comprehensive as possible, this analysis considers the scientific contributions that are published from 1985 to 2018. The selected contributions are in the English language, in line with the previous-mentioned existing literature review. This choice was made because it is the most-used language among academics and also because the identified keywords are commonly used without translation in other languages. Concerning the typology of contribution, only scientific articles have been considered. As underlined in literature, *“these are usually the most useful for research projects as they will contain detailed reviews of relevant earlier research”* (Saunders et al., 2016; p. 86).

Finally, as the subject area of the study focus is on the economic aspects of SE, the research is conducted by including the disciplines that pertain to economics, business and management in the two selected databases.

Following these parameters, the initial number of selected articles was 620 in WoS and 506 in Scopus. After matching the two databases and having deleted the duplicate the total number of articles was 907. A first screening of the selected articles involved an analysis of the abstracts in order to understand if they pertained to the topic of SE. A second screening of the articles has been conducted on the full texts of the article and the number of citations. The final dataset counted 110 articles.

3. RESULTS OF THE CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Definitions of Sharing Economy

One of the first results of the SE critical literature review deals with the issue of defining it. As with other recent global and innovative concepts, also SE lacks clarity in its definition. With the growth in the use of the concept related to the imagination of the SE, many efforts have been made to try to link them to one or more definitions.

A first reflection can be related to two different ways of dealing with the definitional issue. On the one hand, a part of scholars and policymakers uses a broader definition or inclusive definition of SE. On the other hand, others prefer to apply a stricter definition of SE. The wide perspective is based on the recognized impossibility of detaching the terms without fracturing and impoverishing them of their meanings. At the other end of the spectrum, scholars complain about the blurry size because it includes too many elements to allow correct empirical theorizations. In response to this need, they adopt narrow definitions based on an *ex ante* normative characterization of sharing, defining it as a more limited and practicable empirical object (Frenken and Schor, 2017).

Considering a broad approach, Botsman and Rogers (2010) provide a broad definition that has found favor among many scholars. They define the SE as “*an economic model based on sharing underutilized assets for monetary or non-monetary benefits*”. Many authors have adhered to this broad vision. For example, Botsman (2013) similarly defines SE as “*An economic model based on sharing underutilized assets from spaces to skills to stuff for monetary or non-monetary benefits*”. Cohen and Muñoz (2015) in their analysis of Uber BM comply with Botsman and Rogers’s (2010) definition. Both Martin et al. (2015) framing the socio-digital innovations and the online platforms and Tussyadiah (2016) exploring the Airbnb p2p BM for costumers’ satisfaction, used Botsman and Rogers’s (2010) in support of their studies.

It seems evident that this broad definition of the SE concept is particularly accepted and used by the promoters of umbrella constructs who need to include different exchange mechanisms within the paradigm. In particular, this definition is accepted by those who include and discuss p2p and business-

to-peer (b2p) initiatives, which include market and non-market mechanisms, as well as centralized and flat p2p systems.

Kennedy (2015; p. 6) conceptualizes the SE as a socio-technical system for the exchange of goods and services among private and commercial owners that “*emphasizes collaborative consumption, non-ownership models of temporary access to resources, and reliance of internet technologies to coordinate access*”. Also in the conceptualization proposed by Kennedy (2015), the social matrix is at the center of the discussion: “*the sharing economy [...] describe practices of consumption to imply community-fostering practices and altruistic ‘neighbourly’ values*” (p. 6).

John (2013) explores the different meanings of sharing within different spheres. He broadly defines SE as those markets that promote exchanges in which money is not the main motivational reason. While the social factors are still at the core of the exchanges among participants, he did not exclude from the definition the for-profit activities and any different types of exchange mechanisms (business-to-business, business-to-customer, for-profit and non-profit, reselling, gifting).

Richardson (2015), exploring the paradox of the SE both as an alternative production and consumption model and a capitalistic economy mechanism, conceptualizes the SE as a form of exchange brokered by digital platforms, which includes a variety of activities both for-profit and not, with the aim of opening up access to underutilized resources through what is called "sharing".

Muñoz and Cohen (2017) and Mair and Reischauer (2017) underline the diversity and pluralism of facets of this economic paradigm. In the first case, their qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA), derives ideal types of sharing which include business-to-business and business-to-customer, for-profit and non-profit initiatives, reselling, and gifting. Muñoz and Choen (2017), building on Martin et al. (2015), recognizes such a necessity of a broad definition for the SE that they define it as “*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 sub-utilized resources in society*” (p. 21). In the second case, they use the logic of institutional complexity. Authors define the SE as “*a web of markets in which individuals use various forms of compensation to transact the redistribution of and access to resources, mediated by a digital platform operated by an organization*”.

Building on Belk’s (2014) distinction between true-sharing and pseudo-sharing, Habibi et al., (2017) opened up the conceptualization of the SE as hybrid forms that fall along a continuum between the two far ends of the spectrum. They “*suggest a sharing-exchange continuum that helps distinguish the degree to which actual sharing is being offered*” (p. 115). Different exchange mechanisms, as well as different prototypes of business models, coexist within the two extremes of the continuum.

These attempts to define the SE result in tracing very blurred boundaries. The most easily recognizable trend is the need to include different exchange mechanisms within the definitory construct of SE. This need is even stronger when we consider the recent role played by digital platforms supporting exchange mechanisms that take different forms than traditional market transactions.

On the side of the narrow definition, a first reflection raised by Benkler (2004) that recall the Social Sharing. It is narrowly conceptualized as a “*nonreciprocal pro-social behavior*” of sharing goods or resources that are “*amenable to being shared within social sharing systems rather than allocated through markets*” (p. 356). He considers the sharing as an “*alternative modality of production [...] based on gifting and free participation among weakly connected participants*” (pp. 330 and 332) and the use of the excess capacity of goods and services. The market logic in this first phase is cut off, in favor of a specific conceptualization that turns towards social behaviors. The author excludes from social sharing the transactions and production mechanisms that involve the traditional market mechanisms and also the secondary markets.

Starting from Benkler’s definition, Belk in his several studies provided the defining background of SE that was most successful. Starting with the analysis on possession and extended self (Belk, 1988), up to producing a sociological analysis of the reasons for sharing in our times, he has come to propose a definition of SE which is currently the most used both by the academy and practitioners. In 2007, he defines sharing as “*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*” (p. 127). Belk’s (2014) seminal paper on SE exploring its several facets discerned between true-sharing and pseudo-sharing. He defines true-sharing as “*an alternative to the private ownership that is emphasized in both marketplace exchange and gift-giving*” (p. 10). While pseudo-sharing is defined as a “*phenomenon whereby commodity exchange and potential exploitation of consumer co-creators present themselves in the guise of sharing*” (p. 7), or “*business relationship masquerading as communal sharing*” (p. 11). In this definition, the weight of the exclusion of some categories from the phenomenon of true sharing emerges. For example, he excluded commercial exchanges, self-interest or transfer of individual property. He also excluded gift giving which is considered a different form of exchange mechanism. He continues in the distinction between true- and pseudo-sharing by catalyzing attention “*not so much on the characteristics of the thing to be shared as it does on the intentions of those participating in the sharing*”. Moreover, true-sharing implies a sense of collective property/belonging excluding all the other selfish reasons. Behind this distinction is evident a re-conceptualization of sharing around a more inclusive concept of mutuality.

Moving forward, Cockayne (2016) defines SE (or on-demand economy) as digital platforms connecting costumers through the use of a mobile application or website (p. 73). This definition restricts the SE to the p2p, digital-oriented and profit-driven activities describing it both as a “*form of digital production and inclusion in an online ‘community’*” (p. 75). Even Cockayne’s definition is semantically linked with the altruistic and pro-social idea of Benkler’s (2004) vision, adding the digital discourse.

Consistent with the technological centrality discourse of Cockayne, Eckhardt and Bardhi (2016) define the SE as “*temporary access to consumption resources for a fee or for free without a transfer of ownership*” (p. 210). The two scholars introduced the temporary discourse in their definition excluding change of ownership in favor of access. Consequently, they also exclude from the discourse gift-giving and bartering which implies a change of ownership.

Prosepio et al. (2018), developing a framework for the p2p business model in the SE, defines the boundaries of its activities through a technology-oriented vision. Indeed, they consider the SE’s activities as those businesses which distribute the value of underutilized assets to consumers who pay for temporary access using an internet-based platform. Moreover, they consider the strength of the network effects and social interactions fostered by technologies between users/suppliers.

The access-based rather than ownership vision proposed by Eckhardt and Bardhi (2016), leads the way to another relevant definition presented by Frenken and Schor (2017). Their definition has found such favor from many scholars that their paper is one of the most cited among the academia (173 times in WoS). They define SE as “*consumers granting each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets (idle capacity), possibly for money*” (pp. 4–5). In addition to the exclusion of any type of exchange including the transfer of ownership (reselling platforms, on-demand services, bartering, gift-giving), the novelty of this vision lies in the exclusion also of the centralized systems. The idea is that the SE paradigm fosters equality between participants and shared interests so much so that, we talk about p2p. Several authors have joined this narrow criterion which excludes many activities that today are commonly considered to be part of the SE paradigm like Uber or Airbnb. For example, Meelen and Frenken (2015) using Frenken and Schor’s definition, exclude from the SE all the market-oriented activities.

3.2 The Sharing Economy competitive factors

As underlined in the introductory paragraph, the emergence of the SE paradigm has contributed to transforming several different sectors according to several aspects. Its emotional power and economic strength have made exploring the SE necessary to understand the factors and features which have

made it such a thriving phenomenon and one of the major production and consumption trends of the last decades. In specific sectors, such as the tourism industry, the SE paradigm has shown high competitiveness as to have altered the competition within the sector.

From the literature emerges that the SE has several factors that result in intrinsic and extrinsic competitive features. The importance of exploring these factors is not only a rhetorical exercise but becomes fundamental in order to understand how many business models and profit and non-profit activities under this phenomenon have reached high levels of competitiveness in a few years. Since some of the factors related to SE are recurrent elements in the literature, it seems necessary to explore their characteristics. We can summarize the SE competitive factors in the following features: temporary non-ownership, access and short-term; flexibility and adaptability; value co-creation and co-destruction; trust and transaction costs decreasing; idle capacity. Although there is no univocal view of these factors, it is equally true that they are considered by many to be the competitiveness pillars of the paradigm and they needed further exploration.

The SE paradigm owes its strength and its global recognition to the concept of access, which, thanks to its technological declination, has helped to increase the competitiveness of the SE compared to other economic paradigms during recent decades. The access feature rises to the most current discourse about the short-term which is characterizing the world economy of SE digital platforms: access-based consumption platforms (Breibach and Brodie, 2017). This concept is recognized by many as the element characterizing the exchanges of the sharing activities and therefore is one of the most debated and tricky issues. One of the first examples of SE activities that sparked the discussion around access to assets is AutoShare, a Toronto-based car-sharing organization. This pioneering activity converted the classic pro-ownership question "Why rent when you can buy?", into the most updated sharing form "Why own when you can rent by the hour?". Therefore, we have witnessed in the last decade the radical change of perspective between being able to access a good or service and having ownership of it. Belk (2014) hypothesizes that the infinite possibilities dictated by this change of perspective are due to the "*creative destruction of old business models and the adoption of new creative ways of participating*" (p. 1598) which is a new strategy. There are different degrees of access and therefore two strategies: free or paid access. In the first case, the contents are provided for free to customers while businesses have other sources of revenue such as through advertisements (e.g. Spotify). In the second strategy, the contents are made available for money in two different ways: through one-shot transactions such as Uber where you pay anytime you access the service, or through a subscription such as Netflix where you pay a fee as per scheduled time.

The critical literature review shows that flexibility is another of the most debated and explored features of the SE. Particularly, talking about flexibility in the field of sharing, the higher emphasis

is always placed on its connection with ICTs and digital platforms (Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2018). What emerges most strongly from the critical analysis of the literature is that in talking about flexibility and the digital discourse, we should address the topic from two different points of view: on one side, by debating the flexibility for the digital platforms (i.e. the owners); on the other, by debating the flexibility for the users of the platform (i.e. the sellers and the buyers). Firstly, in the last decades, the rigid vertical corporate structures are being dismantled moving towards more streamlined structures (Ocicka and Wieteska, 2017). Digital platforms show a high degree of flexibility, especially in relation to the fact that they usually do not directly own the shared goods but only triangulate the services, with a consequent reduction in fixed costs and lower economic risks. Secondly, flexibility concerns the users of goods and services who, instead of having to buy their goods on the market, can rent them only for the period of use.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the literature review refers to the value co-creation (and co-destruction) mechanism. Ramaswamy (2011) defines co-creation as “*the process by which mutual value is expanded together*” (p. 195). Although the co-creation and co-destruction theory in the sharing context is still in its infancy as it is either case-specific or contextual (Breidbach and Brodie, 2017), the scientific debate is growing. Vargo and Lusch (2017) have developed a comprehensive foundation for the service-dominant (S-D) logic for explaining value co-creation. S-D logic highlights the value-creation process that occurs when users consume products or services, rather than when the output is manufactured. The value co-creation is considered a business strategy focusing on customer experience and interactive relationships which see the customer as the co-creator of value. Co-creation allows and encourages a more active involvement to create a value-rich experience. Indeed, today customers can engage in dialogue with suppliers during each stage of production, design and product delivery. This form of dialogue should be seen as an interactive process of learning together (Altinay and Taheri, 2019). Following Zhang et al. (2018), to apply this co-creation logic to the SE, the role of value co-creation is discussed during three different stages of the consumption pattern: pre-consumption, mid-consumption and post-consumption. In the pre-consumption stage, SE has emerged with the development of online p2p platforms that greatly facilitate communications, interactions, and transactions among service stakeholders (Zervas et al., 2016). A pleasant, kind and friendly communication fosters the value experience. In the mid-consumption stage, emerges the social and emotional online interaction between the buyers and sellers. Many scholars involved in platform system studies have found that emotional interaction between stakeholders is one of the main factors determining the success of the experience. During the post-consumption stage, the value is co-created through the buyers’ subjective feedback of the perceived value of the experience. In this case, the feedback will help to co-create value both for the stakeholders directly involved in the co-

creation cycle and for future stakeholders. These new forms of value co-creation also reveal dark sides and it's the case of co-destruction. Indeed, the complex network's interaction among the different stakeholders amplifies the negative rebound effects that the sharing activities may have on the local context. Failure to correctly model interactions can thus destroy the value that acts on multiple sides. For example, the excessive use of p2p platforms in the tourism industry such as Airbnb is producing long-term destruction of value: for user-travelers who visit increasingly crowded places; for users-renters who expect greater competition; for citizens who see house prices rise; for the platform itself which is becoming increasingly regulated.

Another factor is related to trust and transaction costs decreasing. Although the decreasing transaction costs in p2p transactions are recognized by many to be one of the main features that make the SE paradigm grow (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015; Barnes and Mattsson, 2016), only a few papers have studied this aspect practically and theoretically within the SE framework. Henten and Windekilde (2016) argue that transaction cost theory is a central theoretical tool to understand the SE since the lowering of transaction costs is facilitated by the Internet-based platforms which allow for the exchange of goods and services between people that would not otherwise have been possible – simply because of the very high costs of searching, contacting and contracting that this would require. Internet-based platforms facilitate drastic reductions in the transaction costs between users and providers. This creates whole new markets, which were previously only possible to a very limited extent. One of the first appearances of the transaction costs theory applied to the sharing p2p platforms is Benkler (2004) who defines a particular class of physical goods as “shareable goods” that systematically have excess capacity, and to combine comparative transaction cost and motivation analysis to suggest that this excess capacity may better be harnessed through sharing relations than through secondary markets explains the creation of larger companies. He pointed out that the primary systematic differences between the transaction costs of markets and sharing are related to information and enforcement costs. The transaction costs decreasing in SE internet-based activities is connected with another factor that is trust. Several studies assess trust – and reputation – as a factor that plays a vital role in access-based service experiences (Ert et. al., 2016). In the SE and particularly in the tourism accommodation sector, the decreasing transaction cost is an important factor that determines the competitiveness of the market. The tourism accommodation industry has always been linearly structured: suppliers-intermediaries-consumers. To facilitate online trust, SE marketplaces incorporate online reviews. As mentioned above, the main method p2p marketplaces use to facilitate trust is the formation of reputation mechanisms through online reviews. Thus, although reputation is only one element of trust-building, most empirical research has focused on reputation mechanisms.

The last factor is the use of the idle capacity of goods and services. The idle capacity is the underused capacity of an asset and therefore is unexpressed value in economic terms. This element represents also the key that links the SE paradigm to the issue of sustainability that nowadays is experiencing an evolution. In the non-profit oriented, local- and community-based conceptualization, the goods or services exchanged were those that were underused (e.g. renting an apartment or a car that is not used in a certain period) that thus find a new form of application. The current forms of SE, especially in relation to the use of digital platforms, have reversed this trend towards a new production of goods. For example, some of the most famous carpooling platforms such as Enjoy and Share&Go, have bought new vehicles for the market. This element is the reason for a heated debate among scholars who, as we have seen above, draws the line between including and not including such activities within the umbrella term SE (Belk, 2014; Acquier et al., 2017).

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHARING ECONOMY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The debate concerning the SE can be drastically divided into two different narratives. On one hand, the focus is on the economic, social and environmental features which have legitimized this paradigm. Advocates of this narrative argue that the sharing paradigm has the potential to channel more virtuous production and consumption processes based on social and economic justice and the equality of market economies, and to foster “*a potential pathway to sustainability*” (Heinrichs, 2013 p. 228). They look at the opportunity that the flexible access to goods and services can provide thanks to the more efficient allocation and utilization of resources (Frenken and Schor, 2017; Parente et al., 2018; Proserpio et al., 2018). “*Such labelling [Sharing Economy] operates as an opportunity in the promise of the sharing economy as an antidote. It performs a narrative of collaboration and community in order to reject stories of the economy as engendering isolation and separation*” (Richardson, 2015; p. 122). On the other hand, the more strictly economic and managerial perspective is mainly focused on the economic results of the sharing paradigm which has the potential to favor economic benefits by modeling more competitive business models. This narrative has been mostly criticized for its greater propensity to stimulate hyper-consumption, inequality and moral-hazard behaviors typical of neoliberal economies (Weber, 2014; Martin, 2016; Frenken and Schor, 2017). Reviewing the literature, several authors point out a tricky relationship between SE and three dimensions of sustainability (social, economic and environmental).

The first theoretical hook referring to social sustainability stems from the semantic of the term *share* which expresses the concept of dividing into parts and sharing between people. The dimension of sharing opens the doors to a more social conceptualization of the SE which is based on dividing and

guaranteeing access to both tangible and intangible goods and services to a growing number of people worldwide (Belk, 2014). In particular, p2p interactions are based on horizontal rather than vertical relationships and this evidence theoretically links the sharing with social sustainability. In fact, these mechanisms allow those who do not have the economic opportunity to purchase a product or service, to access it for a short time. The SE was therefore seen by some authors as the possibility of leveling inequalities between people and different income classes (Benkler, 2004). However, if theoretically, the SE seems promising in terms of social sustainability, empirical results show more complex and contrasting scenarios from many points of view. Schor et al. (2016) point out that digital sharing platforms could recreate the inequalities of capitalist markets. The authors underline in particular how the advent of digital platforms in the context of sharing has favored the departure from the values inspired by the social sustainability of this production and consumption mechanism. Murillo et al. (2017) stress that the economic promise is drawing attention to social closure and disparities in the initiatives generated within the SE. Indeed, from their study emerges that in the US context price and convenience are the drivers for users engaging in SE which is losing any social connotation.

The second point on social sustainability is linked to the fact that the SE creates and is created by the desire to establish social relationships within local communities (Tussyadiah and Pesonen, 2018). On the one side, the phenomenon properly arises as a need to create communities of people linked by the need to share and exchange efficiently goods or services (Belk, 2014). On the other side, a part of scholars argues that social motivations play today a limited role in SE (Molz, 2013). In fact, if on one hand, the community dimension emerges, on the other, empirical studies show that in practice other factors push people to participate, often driven by economic purposes. An example is the case of the Airbnb platform, where the main motivation for hosts to rent their flats is to earn money (Tussyadiah, 2016). Karlsson and Dolnicar (2016) suggest that the first motivation, which covers 80% of the data, to participate in p2p accommodation is gaining new income, while social interaction covers only 31%. Möhlmann (2015) identified cost-savings as one of the most significant factors of satisfaction in p2p accommodation marketplaces.

Concerning the economic sustainability of SE, three main issues may be underlined. The first economic effects within the SE, as well as one of the factors that define the competitive advantage of this paradigm, are linked to the collective transaction costs decreasing (Dredge and Gyimothy, 2015; Barnes and Mattsson, 2016). This refers especially to the costs related to the search and arranging a contract. As a result of Internet platforms, the costs of the search and the contract have become much lower (Henten and Windekilde, 2016; Frenken and Schor, 2017). However, the full economic effects – or second or rebound effects – are far more complex. The rise of p2p sharing markets will have indirect effects on other markets. For example, legacy businesses and their workers in related markets

are likely to experience lower earnings. One study found that hotel earnings in Texas declined significantly in places where Airbnb grew (Zervas et al., 2016). Further analysis also showed that the impacts were uneven across the industry, with lower-end hotels and hotels not catering to business travelers being the most affected. This indicates that Airbnb is a partial substitute for hotel nights, especially in the cheaper segments of the hotel market. The same effect may be expected in the market for car rentals which now face increased competition due to the rise of p2p carsharing platforms. There are also potential effects on the supply and price of housing if home sharing becomes more widespread. This would mean that residents see their rents go up in neighborhoods where home-sharing is popular. Moreover, there are externalities as third parties may experience losses as the two parties transact. This is especially a problem within some sectors such as house sharing with neighbors experiencing nuisance and feelings of danger from strangers. Increasingly, neighborhoods have attempted to stop the further growth of home-sharing in tourist cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, New York and Paris. In response, municipalities are tightening their regulations towards home-sharing platforms. Finally, the distribution of increased income and welfare are likely to be uneven. SE websites are two-sided platforms characterized by strong network externalities, creating the tendency towards natural monopoly and allowing for high margins to be charged by the platform. Even though the ratings are the products of platform users, the value generated is appropriated by the platform itself. The second group of people profiting most are owners of valuable assets. However, how the profits are distributed between peers, platforms and service providers is limitedly known. Most SE markets are dominated by a single company, or a handful of players, due to their early entrance or novel business models (Murillo et al., 2017), and many firms, therefore, find it difficult to scale up (Schor et al., 2016). The unfair distribution of revenue excessively favors the platforms.

A final remark concerns the environmental dimension of the sustainability of SE. In the beginning, the SE's paradigm had the purpose to foster environmental protection and facilitates sustainable consumption (Bucher et al., 2016). This because SE was born with the intent to use under-utilized assets instead of producing new ones. In several sectors, the use of idle capacity is fundamental where the exchange takes place between peers. P2p carpooling, for example, encourages people to optimize the use of vehicles; p2p home-sharing encourages owners to make their home or portion of the home available. Sustainability may also be important for consumers who are already ecologically conscious who decide to use, rent or exchange existing resources instead of buying new ones (Hamari et al., 2015). In this perspective, the SE is said to be a sustainable business model with a positive environmental impact (Piscicelli et al., 2018). Despite these widespread beliefs, there is not yet empirical evidence on these claims, apart from car-sharing where substantial reductions in CO₂

emissions are realized (Chen and Kockelman, 2016). The standard argument on eco-impacts addresses substitutions among types of goods or services that have different technologies. This type of reasoning is what economists call partial-equilibrium analysis, which only looks at first-round effects. To determine full carbon and eco-impacts it is also necessary to analyze all the changes that are set in motion in the system as a result of a new sharing practice (Schor, 2014; Frenken and Schor, 2017). Finally, from the literature emerges that SE is favoring hyper-consumption. The first order of problems is linked to the excessive use of irreproducible resources and the issues that arise from the concepts of carrying capacity and scarcity of resources. Although the original meaning of sharing was “dividing” and “make available the idle capacity”, today these values are replaced by the creation of new shared resources because this fashionable act of consumption is a new source of profit. The SE allows greater access to expensive goods, thereby offering environmental promise (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2016). Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2018) argue that increased travel due to more affordable SE accommodation and transport can cause more environmental pressure and resource exploitation. These first reflections show that more evidence and studies are required in order to investigate the positive and negative impact of SE on social, economic and environmental sustainability.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The article aimed at exploring the concept of SE and its relationship with sustainability. After having clarified how the concept of SE was established and discussed the growth of interest by scholars and policymakers over time, the article proposed an analysis of the literature through the methodology of critical literature review in order to understand: how literature defines the concept of SE; what are its main characteristics, identifying the competitiveness factors of the SE; what is the relationship with the concept of sustainable development.

What emerges from the literature review is a wide debate of the definitions of SE, distinguishing between inclusive and exclusive definitions. In particular, although some definitions are more shared than others, the meaning that the SE concept assumes, and has assumed over time, is subject to changes depending on the place, time and as a result of fast technological advancement. However, the two approaches (inclusive and exclusive) are not antithetical but coexistent.

A second result is that a number of features that characterize the competitive advantage that allow SE to become a global phenomenon in a very short time. From the analysis of the literature, it emerges that the activities of SE have some peculiar characteristics that translate into intrinsic and extrinsic competitive factors. The importance of exploring these factors is not just a rhetorical exercise but it becomes fundamental to understand how SE business models and activities have reached high levels

of competitiveness in a few years compared to more traditional models. These factors are temporary non-ownership, access and short-term; flexibility and adaptability; value co-creation (or co-destruction); trust and transaction costs decreasing; idle capacity.

What remains not fully explored is the trade-off existing between the negative and positive impact that SE can have on sustainability. Concerning this last point, the review of the literature reveals how the issue is complex and that there is still no clear evidence of what the SE's contributions to sustainable development can be. At first, the new paradigm of the SE should have been considered as an alternative paradigm to capitalist development to sustain new forms of development based on the three dimensions of sustainability. However, a more in-depth study reveals that there is a lack of empirical evidence to confirm that this relationship is positive but indeed, as highlighted in numerous empirical studies, SE is often characterized by an orientation towards profit and hyper-consumerism that goes against the tide of sustainable practices.

Considering such aspects, the relationship between sustainability and SE should be explored in deep. Moreover, an interesting line of future research is the relationship between SE and the local context. A topic that should increase its centrality, in fact, refers to the issue of the social, economic and environmental effects that the SE should have on the physical places where the activities developed by digital platforms produce their impact. In Europe, with the emergence of SE, several cities started to promoting campaigns based on sharing and collaborative consumption, as the case of Amsterdam that received the label of Sharing City in 2014, underling the existing relationship between the urban dimension and SE (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015).

Such discussion is strictly related to the transformation that occurred by some specific industries by the advent of SE. Some studies observe that one of the most significant examples of the impact that SE may have on cities regards the tourism industry and that p2p platforms for hospitality are emblematic (Richards et al., 2019). Tourism is one of those industries that has undergone profound changes and has been renewed thanks to the adoption of different business models linked to the sharing paradigm. In particular, the accommodation service in the tourism industry has experimented with a huge transformation, moving from the old hospitality services traditionally linked to the Hotels, Bed & Breakfasts and Resorts offers to a more flexible model of hospitality brokered by the online platforms linked to the SE paradigm. On the one hand, this transformation has affected the travel experience of users but some of the effects have spread also along with the local context. The case of the sustainability of SE tourism practices in high-tourism places seems to assume particular importance. As observed by some authors, the effect of SE on the local context is related to how the initial ethical principles of the SE have evolved over time (Moreno Gil and Coca-Stefaniak, 2020).

The debate of SE is largely far to be concluded and many unsolved questions raise also with the technological transformation that has become more pervasive after the Covid-19 emergency. This article represents the first attempt to review the wide and complex literature of SE's new paradigm, identifying some issues that need further investigation in relation to other global macro trends such as the question of sustainable development.

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