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**Doctoral Thesis**

## Exploring the Sharing Economy

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**EXPLORING THE SHARING ECONOMY**

**Sarah Netter**

# **EXPLORING THE SHARING ECONOMY**

PhD School in Organisation and Management Studies

**PhD Series 52.2016**

**CBS**  **COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL**  
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

PhD Series 52-2016

# **Exploring the Sharing Economy**

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## Foreword

When I started working on my PhD thesis, a former colleague and accomplished scholar kindly pointed out that by the time that I finished, I wouldn't be able to refer to it as *my* PhD. Instead, he suggested, writing articles in close collaboration with a team of researchers, it would be more appropriate to refer to it as *our* PhD. Being an agreeable person, I ignored the sarcasm and agreed with him. *This is not my PhD, this is our PhD.*

Each and every person that has followed me on my journey to complete my PhD has been critically important to my work. Without their support, none of the work I have created would have been possible. Without naming each and every person that helped me along the way, I would in particular like to express my gratitude to my supervisors Associate Professor Wencke Gwozdz and Professor Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen at the Department of Intercultural Communication and Management at the Copenhagen Business School. Their knowledge, guidance and support (and often hilarious supervision sessions), were invaluable to me. Throughout, their unorthodox methods and encouragement kept me focused and motivated. I would also like to thank Professor Lucia Reisch for her invaluable guidance and insightful advice over the last few years.

My gratitude goes out to all my colleagues and friends at the Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility and the Department of Intercultural Communication and Management. You created a wonderful environment and made me look forward to coming to work every day. I would especially like to thank Ana Alacovska, Kirsti Reitan Andersen, Sameer Azizi, Sarah Bly, Christina Frydensbjerg, Frederik Larsen, Tina Müller, Janni Thusgaard Pedersen, Else Skjold, Robert Strand, Lise Søstrøm, Lisbeth de Thurah, Steen Vallentin, Majbritt Vendelbo, and Anne Vestergaard. Your camaraderie means so much to me.

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whisky, coffee & cigarettes, pancakes, and couches to crash on. Lastly, and most importantly, I thank my family. My parents Franz-Josef and Agnes, I thank for their enduring love and support, for being patient, believing in me, and for telling me to get my act together whenever I needed to hear it. My sister Gesa, your sisterly challenge, love and support means the world to me. I look up to you in many ways. Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to my late grandmothers Margaretha & Johanna, two incredibly strong and inspirational women.

## English Abstract

Despite the growing interest on the part of proponents and opponents - ranging from business, civil society, media, to policy-makers alike - there is still limited knowledge about the working mechanisms of the sharing economy. The thesis is dedicated to explore this understudied phenomenon and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the micro- and macro-level tensions that characterize the sharing economy.

This thesis consists of four research papers, each using different literature, methodology, and data sets. The first paper investigates how the sharing economy is diffused and is ~~talked~~ <sup>talked</sup> into existence by the communicative acts of a number of different actors. The second paper looks at how the reality of these narratives is actually experienced by the representatives of one type of sharing platform, i.e., fashion libraries. The third paper further expands the understanding of micro-level tensions experience by sharing platforms by looking at the case of mobile fashion reselling and swapping markets. The final paper combines the perspectives of different sharing economy stakeholders and outlines some of the micro and macro tensions arising in and influencing the organization of these multi-sided markets.

Presently, the future of the sharing economy is rather uncertain, in part due to its conceptual ambiguity and lack of independent empirical research. This thesis concludes that the fate of the sharing economy primarily depends on two factors. Firstly, it depends on the ability of stakeholders to resolve tensions and arrive at a more nuanced and less normative discourse - one that will largely inform the ways in which sharing initiatives can be supported and regulated. Secondly, it depends on the ability of policy-makers and sharing initiatives to shift consumer mindsets from ownership to access in order to increase the adoption of these new consumption practices, while simultaneously reducing overall consumption levels and contributing to sustainable development.

## Danish Abstract

På trods af den stigende interesse fra både tilhængere og modstandere i erhvervslivet, civilsamfundet, medierne og de politiske beslutningstagere omkring deleøkonomien er der stadig begrænset viden mekanismerne bag dette fænomen. Derfor er det overordnede formål med denne afhandling at udforske dette underbelyste fænomen og bidrage med en mere nuanceret forståelse af de spændinger på mikro- og makroniveau som kendetegner deleøkonomien.

Afhandlingen består af fire forskningsartikler baseret på forskellig litteratur, metoder og datasæt. Den første artikel undersøger, hvordan deleøkonomien blev udbredt og italesat med kommunikative handlinger foretaget af en række forskellige aktører. Den anden artikel ser på hvordan disse fortællinger opleves af repræsentanter af fænomenet med konkret udgangspunkt i tøjbiblioteker. Den tredje artikel udvider yderligere forståelsen af spændinger på mikroniveau som de opleves af dele-platforme ved at undersøge mobile tøjsalg og byttemarkeder. Den sidste artikel kombinerer en række perspektiver fra forskellige interessenter i deleøkonomi, og skitserer nogle af de mikro- og makrospændinger som opstår i og øver indflydelse på organiseringen af disse flersidede markeder.

På nuværende tidspunkt er deleøkonomiens fremtid usikker, ikke mindst på grund af konceptets flertydighed og mangel på uafhængig empirisk forskning. Afhandlingen konkluderer, at deleøkonomiens skæbne primært afhænger to faktorer. Først og fremmest afhænger det af interessenternes evne til at løse de førnævnte spændinger og nå frem til en mere nuanceret og mindre normativ diskurs. Det vil også have stor betydning hvorledes deleøkonomien støttes og reguleres. For det andet afhænger deleøkonomiens fremtid af at de politiske beslutningstagere samt deleøkonomiens initiativtagere kan flytte forbrugernes tankegang væk fra individuelt ejerskab henimod kollektiv adgang for at øge vedtægelsen af disse nye forbrugsmønstre.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	3
List of Figures	8
List of Tables	9
Glossary of Sharing Economy Terms	10
Chapter I <i>Exploring the sharing economy: An introduction</i>	12
Chapter II <i>Availability cascades &amp; the sharing economy . A critical outlook at sharing economy narratives</i>	67
Chapter III <i>Collaborative consumption: Business model opportunities and barriers for fashion libraries</i>	92
Chapter IV <i>User satisfaction &amp; dissatisfaction in the app sharing economy: An investigation into two-sided mobile fashion reselling &amp; swapping markets</i>	116
Chapter V <i>Blurred lines: Stakeholder tensions and balancing strategies in partially-organized markets</i>	140
Chapter VI <i>Conclusion</i>	162
References	180

## LIST OF FIGURES

### Chapter I

Figure 1      *Sharing Taxonomy*      25

Figure 2      *Sharing Continuum*      28

Figure 3      *Sharing Platform Continuum*      35

Figure 4      *Organization Continuum*      40

### Chapter III

Figure 1      *Business Model Canvas*      100

### Chapter IV

Figure 1      *Conceptual Model*      123

### Chapter V

Figure 1      *Sharing Taxonomy*      146

## LIST OF TABLES

### Chapter I

Table 1	<i>Overview of Research Questions and Research Papers</i>	15
Table 2	<i>Overview Sharing Economy Interviews</i>	46
Table 3	<i>Overall Case Selection Criteria</i>	49
Table 4	<i>Overview of Research Papers</i>	64

### Chapter III

Table 1	<i>Fashion Libraries Profiled</i>	101
---------	-----------------------------------	-----

### Chapter IV

Table 1	<i>Overview SERVQUAL Dimensions</i>	121
Table 2	<i>Overview of Sampled Reselling &amp; Swapping Peer-To-Peer Apps in iTunes</i>	124
Table 3	<i>Overview Coding Scheme</i>	127
Table 4	<i>Descriptive Statistics Aggregated Level</i>	129

### Chapter V

Table 1	<i>Overview of Organizational Elements and Examples of Tensions</i>	149
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## GLOSSARY OF SHARING ECONOMY TERMS

<b>Access over ownership</b>	A transaction style where individuals have access to goods, products and services via on-demand models instead of ownership.
<b>Blurred-role markets</b>	In blurred-role markets, users might switch back and forth between acting in the role of user or provider (or acting in both roles simultaneously), but might also switch roles with those formally facilitating these marketplaces. Similarly, formal facilitators might vacate their role as representatives of the formal organization and act as users and providers within these marketplaces.
<b>Business-to-consumer</b>	A transaction model where businesses own assets and facilitate transactions among users who share the asset.
<b>Fashion library</b>	A fashion library constitutes a membership-based service (free-of-charge or fee-based) that allows people to share wardrobes. Mostly non-profit, small-scale, offline initiatives.
<b>Micro-entrepreneurship</b>	Ownership is held by one individual and products and services are made available and reciprocated by remuneration (monetary and alternative currencies).
<b>Multi-homing</b>	While single-homing describes the exclusive affiliation of users or providers with only one platform, multi-homing describes the affiliation with more than one platform.
<b>Multi-sided markets</b>	Two-sided or multi-sided markets are situations where a platform enables two or more groups of users to transact or at least interact and where at least one group and usually all groups benefit directly or indirectly from having a growing number of users on the other side(s), i.e. network effects.
<b>Multi-sided platforms</b>	Multi-sided platforms describe services and products that enable transactions between distinct user groups in multi-sided networks.
<b>Network effects</b>	There are two types of network effects in multi-sided markets, which can be either negative or positive. A same-side effect, in which increasing the number of users on one side of the network makes it either more or less valuable to users on the same side; and a cross-side effect, in which increasing the number of users on one side of the network makes it either more or less valuable to the users on the other side.

<b>Online and mobile redistribution platforms</b>	For-profit oriented large-scale commercial sharing platforms that enable the redistribution of products via online- and smartphone-enabled multi-sided markets.
<b>Partial organization</b>	It is common in organizational research to restrict the concept of organization to formal organizations, based on the availability of certain organizational elements (e.g., membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctioning), and to describe the world outside of such entities by other concepts, such as institutions or networks. A broader concept of organization includes not only complete, formal organization, but also partial organization, which is defined as the presence of some elements of organization but not all.
<b>Peer-to-peer</b>	A transaction model that connects buyers and sellers facilitating the exchange of assets directly between individuals.
<b>Rebound effects</b>	Rebound effects occur when efficiency gains are overcompensated by higher consumption.
<b>Sharewashing</b>	Sharewashing describes a situation where commercial venture utilize the largely positively connoted sharing rhetoric of communal sharing to masquerade their intentions.
<b>Sharing economy</b>	Multi-sided for-profit and non-profit business-to-consumer and peer-to-peer platforms, which enable the compartmentalization of ownership and usership of goods, skills, and services by bringing together distinct groups of consumers through partly-organized multi-sided markets. Compartmentalization of ownership and usership pertains not only to separating ownership from usership, i.e., who makes use of a product does not have to own it and vice versa, but it also entails a temporal dimension in the sense that ownership and usership can be traded, passed on, and occur sequentially.
<b>Sharing initiative facilitators</b>	Sharing initiative facilitators or formal facilitators are understood as formal sharing organizations that create and serve a variety of different sharing markets.
<b>Users and providers</b>	Users and providers are individuals who currently make use of the services facilitated by sharing initiatives. While users are on the demand side, providers are on the supply side of the marketplaces providing goods and services.

## Chapter I

### *Exploring the sharing economy: An introduction*

#### 1. THEME & OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

##### 1.1. Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed the growth of a phenomenon known as the sharing economy. While celebrated by some as one of the 10 ideas that will change the world+ (Walsh, 2011), others fear that the sharing economy contributes to the erosion of full-time employment, the disappearance of healthcare and insurance benefits, the assault on unions and the transformation of workers into always-on self-employed entrepreneurs who must think like brands+ (Morozov, 2013). In the words of Morozov (ibid.), the sharing economy amplifies the worst excesses of the dominant economic model: it is neoliberalism on steroids+. As Codagnone *et al.* (2016, p. 6) suggest, since 2014, the phenomenal growth of a few large commercial sharing platforms, the increasing number of economic sectors affected, and conflicting interests among the stakeholders involved have made the sharing economy a domain of conflictual rhetoric and public controversies, legal disputes, and even violent protests+.

Despite the growing interest on the part of proponents and opponents - ranging from business, civil society, media, to policy-makers alike - there is still limited knowledge about the working mechanisms of the sharing economy. The thesis is therefore dedicated to explore this understudied phenomenon and to provide a more nuanced understanding of the micro- and macro-level tensions that characterize the sharing economy based on qualitative research. As Codagnone *et al.* (2016, p. 6) put forth, terms and concepts are used in such confused and

confusing ways that it is at times difficult to ascertain whether advocates, opponents, regulators, and policy-makers are discussing the same phenomenon.+Conceptual ambiguity, lack of empirical evidence, and normative rhetorical conflicts appear to inhibit the policy discourse on how to regulate the sharing economy (Codagnone et al., 2016). The primary aim of this thesis is to improve the empirical evidence base with unbiased research on some of the tensions caused and experienced by sharing initiatives.

At its core, the sharing economy can still be considered a rather ill-defined concept, lacking a clear definition or a common understanding (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016). This thesis proposes that a clearer understanding of tensions will support business leaders and policy-makers alike to more efficiently promote the mainstreaming process of the sharing economy and find adequate ways to regulate new business models affiliated with the sharing economy.

In absence of a generally-accepted definition, this thesis tentatively operationalizes the sharing economy as comprised of multi-sided, for-profit and not-for profit, business-to-consumer and peer-to-peer platforms. Said platforms enable the compartmentalization of ownership and usership of goods, skills, and services by bringing together distinct groups of consumers through partly-organized, multi-sided markets. Compartmentalization is accomplished by means of bartering, gifting, lending, renting, reselling, sharing, and swapping. The setups through which compartmentalization is accomplished can further be defined as innovative *multi-sided platform businesses*, which create and serve *multi-sided markets* (e.g., Demary, 2015; Grinevich et al., 2015; Hagiu and Wright, 2015; Henten and Windekilde, 2016). These *multi-sided markets* are best understood as markets with two or more distinct groups of consumers who can transact underutilized skills and assets and benefit from network effects (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016; Li et al., 2015; Rauch and Schleicher, 2015; Zervas et al., 2015). These markets exhibit different degrees of organization, ranging from *partial* to nearly *complete organization* (in terms of the organizational elements of *membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring* and *sanctioning*) which gives rise to a number of tensions between the different

stakeholders involved in or affected by the market activities (Netter and Pedersen, forthcoming).

It is not the objective of this thesis to generalize to the entire sharing initiative population on the basis of the study contained herein. Much of the conceptual ambiguity and stakeholder tensions witnessed in the sharing economy can in fact be attributed to over-inclusive generalizations (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016), in which different approaches and business models are lumped together. This exploratory study instead intends to arrive at a more diverse and nuanced understanding of the sharing economy and to highlight areas of the field meriting further inquiry.

## **1.2. Research Questions**

While the concept of sharing is nothing new, so far, little is known about the working mechanisms of sharing in its updated form in online and mobile multi-sided platforms, and the factors hindering its development. Hence, the ambition of this PhD thesis is to provide a better understanding of the sharing economy phenomenon, notably concerning the tensions faced by sharing initiatives and tensions characterizing the field, i.e., tensions occurring on a macro- and micro-level.

The research undertaken in the four distinct research papers can be summarized by the overall research question:

***What are the micro- and macro-level tensions that characterize the sharing economy?***

Although this overall, rather broad research question summarizes the content of the research papers herein, it is necessary to further specify the research aims and questions of the individual papers, as summarized in Table 1.



Table 1: Overview of Research Questions and Research Papers

	<b>Chapter II</b>	<b>Chapter III</b>	<b>Chapter IV</b>	<b>Chapter V</b>
<i>Title (co-authors)</i>	%Availability cascades & the sharing economy . A critical outlook at sharing economy narratives+(single-authored).	%Collaborative consumption: Business model opportunities and barriers for fashion libraries+(with Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen).	%User satisfaction & dissatisfaction in the app sharing economy: An investigation into two-sided mobile fashion reselling & swapping markets+(single-authored).	%Blurred lines: Stakeholder tensions and balancing strategies in partially-organized markets+(with Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen).
<i>Research question(s)</i>	Which narratives are used to construct the sharing economy phenomenon?  How is the sharing economy phenomenon diffused?	What are the drivers, supporting a positive market development of fashion libraries in the Nordics?  Which barriers are preventing fashion libraries in the Nordics from gaining a foothold within the fashion industry?	What are the factors causing user dis/satisfaction with mobile clothing reselling & swapping platforms?	How are sharing markets organized?  What are the tensions in these partially-organized markets?
<i>Focus</i>	Macro-level tensions in the construction & diffusion of the phenomenon	Micro-level tensions experienced by fashion-sharing initiatives  (facilitator perspective)	Micro-level tensions experienced by fashion-sharing initiatives  (user/provider perspective)	Macro- and micro-level tensions in the organization of sharing markets

While micro-level tensions pertain to the tensions experienced on the level of individual organizations (or types of business models), macro-level tensions refers to the tensions created and experienced by a wider set of stakeholders, spanning beyond the individual organization. Consequently, the different research papers presented in *chapters II-V* aim to explore different

layers of tensions observed in the sharing economy. *Chapter II* contributes to our understanding of macro-level tensions by studying sharing narratives. *Chapter III* and IV empirically investigate some of the micro-level tensions by studying the case of fashion libraries in Nordic countries and Internet- and mobile-enabled fashion redistribution platforms, respectively. *Chapter V* brings different perspectives together and aims at highlighting the interplay between micro- and macro-level tensions.

While the research questions posed in *chapters III* and IV are answered by qualitatively investigating the case of fashion-sharing initiatives, the research questions in *chapters II* and V are answered by drawing on a wider set of illustrative examples from secondary data.

### **1.3. Contribution of the Thesis**

As highlighted in the introduction of this thesis, there appears to be a conceptual and empirical fog surrounding the sharing economy with a lack of independent, empirical studies and an abundance of overly critical or overly positive, normative conceptual papers (Codagnone and Martens, 2016). By introducing the notions of *availability cascades* (Kuran and Sunstein, 1999) and *partial organization* (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010) for studying the tensions arising from the institutionalization of the phenomenon and organization of sharing markets, this thesis contributes conceptually to the emergent field of research on the sharing economy. By empirically investigating the micro-level tensions experienced by two different types of fashion-sharing platforms, this thesis further expands the growing body of literature on the sharing economy, which, so far, only covers a limited amount of empirical work.

Adding to the emergent body of knowledge on the sharing economy, this thesis makes a further contribution to the bodies of literature on *multi-sided platforms* (Evans, 2003) and *partial organization* (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). These research fields provide the theoretical backbone of this otherwise interdisciplinary thesis, which is reflected in the individual research papers.

So far, the research on *multi-sided platforms* and *partial organization* has mostly been of a conceptual-theoretical nature, with references to anecdotal evidence. The research on *partial organization* in particular can be considered to be in its infancy, with little research published at present (e.g., Ahrne et al., 2014; Brunsson et al., 2012; Rasche et al., 2013; Schoeneborn et al., 2011; Haug, 2013; den Hond et al., 2015; Frenzel, 2014; Laamanen and den Hond, 2015).

In recent years, scholars have started to apply the notion of *multi-sided platforms* to the sharing economy context (e.g., Demary, 2015; Grinevich et al., 2015; Hagiu and Wright, 2015; Henten and Windekilde, 2016) . although such applications have been largely conceptual. Similarly, to the authors knowledge, the study at hand constitutes the first attempt at applying the notion of *partial organization* to the sharing economy context.

Beyond extending the existing bodies of knowledge with an empirical study from the sharing context, the thesis contributes to both streams of literature by focusing on tensions, which has so far largely been disregarded. The thesis stresses the importance of tensions for understanding the organization of markets. As Ahrne *et al.* (2014) suggest, so far, we have limited knowledge about the tensions arising between different stakeholders in the organization of markets. Gaining a better understanding of these dynamics and tensions will not only provide answers as to how organization manifests but also how it changes and develops over time. It can be assumed that this will provide valuable insights into the development of the wider sharing phenomenon.

#### **1.4. Delimitation**

While the sharing economy consists of a wide variety of actors, the main focus of this thesis is on its two main actors, the sharing initiative facilitators and their users/providers. This has been a deliberate choice, as these two groups of actors create the marketplaces, which provide the basis for the sharing economy. In this thesis, sharing initiative facilitators are understood as formal sharing organizations that create and serve a variety of different sharing markets. The

terms users and users/providers will be used to refer to individuals who currently make use of the services facilitated by sharing initiatives. When referring to consumers, this thesis refers to the wider stakeholder group of consumers who might make use of sharing initiatives in the future and to make sense of general consumer behavior (such as changing consumer mindsets, etc.).

The notion of *partial organization* as introduced by Ahrne and Brunssons (2010), was applied for understanding the sharing economy's organization and its challenges. This theory has been highly valuable for shedding light on how the sharing economy phenomenon is constructed and how it is organized by the wider spectrum of stakeholders, i.e., on micro and macro levels. As Ahrne and Brunsson (ibid., p. 10) suggest, 'the question of whether or not something is organized becomes crucial for understanding how it comes into being and how it functions and changes.' The concepts of institutions, markets, networks, or social movements might provide valuable alternative perspectives for making sense of this emergent phenomenon.

So far, however, most work has been conceptual and limited to the most renowned examples from the transportation and hospitality sectors, i.e., *Uber* and *Airbnb*. The field of fashion has been selected for study as this field has seen rather rapid development in the sharing economy with a number of different business models associated with it. The context of the fashion industry provides an interesting case, not only from a sustainability perspective but also due to fact that fashion is unique when compared to other product groups. Critical observers believe that fashion constitutes the epitome of a throwaway, consumerist society and holds vast potential for a sustainable transformation (e.g., Fletcher, 2008; Birtwistle and Moore, 2007; McAfee et al., 2004). The consumption of fashion is part of one's identity-making process and provides symbolic, immaterial and hedonistic value to the consumer beyond utilitarian need (e.g., Belk, 1988; Dobers and Strannegård, 2005; Meyer, 2001; Peattie, 2001). It can thus be assumed that if sharing works in the rather complex case of fashion - despite the nature of

fashion and clothing consumption - sharing constitutes a viable option in the case of most goods.

### 1.5. Structure of the Thesis

In order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the sharing economy and the tensions caused and experienced by different sharing initiatives, this PhD thesis consists of four distinct research papers which explore the complex phenomenon from different angles. Each of these papers is built on a specific research question and informed by a different body of literature. This introduction addresses the links between the different papers and sets the stage for the chapters that follow. The remainder of this *umbrella chapter* is structured as follows:

*Section two* provides the necessary contextual background information on the sharing economy and the case of fashion. In addition to a general introduction to the phenomenon and its development, this section presents a sharing taxonomy, which provides a transition to the fashion context. *Section three* introduces the theoretical foundations, i.e., *multi-sided platforms* (Evans, 2003), *two-sided markets* (Rochet and Tirole, 2003; 2006), and *partial organization* (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). *Section four* consists of the methodological considerations, followed by *section five*, providing a summary of the four research papers. The *umbrella chapter* is concluded with final remarks in *section six*.

*Chapters II-V* of this thesis constitute the four research papers. The order of the papers is chosen deliberately. *Chapter II* aims to conceptually identify the discursive macro tensions arising from the institutionalization process of the sharing economy, by identifying the narratives used for constructing the phenomenon, how it is framed, how it is perceived, and how it is diffused. This paper gives voice to sharing economy proponents and opponents by utilizing a communication approach in the construction and diffusion of the sharing economy phenomenon and by providing a critical look at the sharing economy's narratives and working mechanisms. *Chapter III* empirically investigates some of the micro-level tensions facing

fashion libraries in the Nordic countries by identifying the drivers and barriers to the successful development of this new business model. *Chapter III* adopts the perspective of one of the primary actors in the sharing economy: the *formal facilitators* of the sharing markets. *Chapter IV* zooms in on the second group of primary actors, *users and providers*. The chapter aims at empirically identifying micro-level tensions between users and facilitators of Internet- and mobile-enabled fashion redistribution platforms by detecting the factors causing user satisfaction and dissatisfaction in these markets, i.e., the prerequisite for the successful adoption of these new sharing practices by users. *Chapter V* elaborates on how sharing markets are organized. This fourth and final research paper combines not only the perspectives of different stakeholders but also addresses the different levels of tension experienced. Understanding the degree of organization and the tensions arising from this social order will enable foreseeing avenues of future change and development, in order to sustain the operations. *Chapter V* contributes to further conceptualizing sharing economy marketplaces and to mapping the tensions that arise from different degrees of organization.

In *chapter VI*, this thesis concludes by taking a view beyond the individual papers contained herein and by discussing and linking the findings presented. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the limitations of the study at hand and presents propositions for future research.

## 2. BACKGROUND: THE SHARING ECONOMY INTRODUCED

This section provides the necessary contextual background information on the sharing economy and the case of fashion. After this general introduction to definitions and conceptual challenges, a sharing economy taxonomy is introduced, which provides a transition to the fashion study context.

### 2.1. Conceptual Issues

Over the course of the last few years, the advances of the Internet and mobile technology have given rise to a phenomenon, which we have come to know as the sharing economy. At its core, this phenomenon encompasses a variety of different products and services, which are distributed or accessed by, sharing or collaborative practices. Broadly speaking, the sharing economy can be defined as one that shares excess resources, expands product life expectancies, and makes use of underutilized capacities and assets (e.g., Belk, 2010; Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Popular examples range from platforms facilitating short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb), ridesharing (e.g., *BlaBlaCar*), to tool sharing or fashion swapping. Historically speaking, sharing practices have been always been part of everyday life, such as the circulation of maternity and children wear (e.g., Gregson and Beale, 2004), furniture, or tools (e.g., Benson, 2007). Most of these practices have been performed on an informal level, i.e., within families or among neighbors or groups of friends. Fueled by technological development and digital literacy, many of these social practices are undergoing a transformation, transcending the informal realm of personal networks and facilitating sharing among strangers online and offline.

The sharing economy can still be considered a rather ill-defined concept, lacking a clear definition or common understanding (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016). When referring to the sharing economy, a number of related, sometimes overlapping labels are utilized. Frequently, these concepts are used interchangeably, such as *collaborative consumption*

(Botsman and Rogers, 2010), *market mediated access-based consumption* (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014a), *the mesh* (Gansky, 2012), *connected consumption* (Dubois et al., 2014; Schor, 2014; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015), *peer-to-peer economy* (Stalnaker, 2008; Bauwens, 2010), *platform economy* or *gig economy* (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Stokes et al., 2014). Based on the review of 430 secondary and primary sources (literature review, media accounts, analysis of sharing platforms), Codagnone *et al.* (2016) suggests that for the sharing economy (a) there is no consensual definition and (b) the overwhelming majority of available definitions are *ostensive* rather than *intentional* (Codagnone and Martens, 2016, p. 7). More specifically, there appears to be a lack of connotative, clear-cut definitions (i.e., intentional definitions) that clearly delineate what the sharing economy is. Most definitions have tended to frame the sharing economy phenomenon *pragmatically* through the deployment of examples, specific cases, or common features (i.e., ostensive definitions).

While some definitions are overly inclusive and broad, others are far too narrow to cover what in practice is labeled the sharing economy. The most frequently-used concept *collaborative consumption* popularized by Botsman and Rogers (2010), can be considered a rather all-encompassing approach, defining collaborative consumption as *systems that reinvent traditional market behaviors – renting, lending, swapping, sharing, bartering, gifting – in ways and on a scale not possible before the Internet+* (Botsman, 2015). This pop-literature definition has received a fair amount of critique from the well-established consumer behavior and marketing scholar Russell Belk (see his work on sharing: Belk, 2007, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Belk and Llamas, 2011, 2012). In his work from 2014(a), Belk criticizes the definition put forth by Botsman and Rogers (2010, p. xv), encompassing *traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping,* as too broad, mixing marketplace exchanges with gift giving and sharing. Instead, Belk (2014a, p. 1597) suggests defining collaborative consumption as involving *people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other*



compensation. By including other compensation, the definition also encompasses bartering, trading, and swapping, which involve giving and receiving non-monetary compensation. Belk (2014a) hence positions collaborative consumption at the intersection between sharing transactions and traditional marketplace exchanges, seeing commonalities with both approaches.

This definition, however, excludes any form of non-reciprocal transaction or gift giving, when compensation is not involved. According to Belk (2014b), these acts and processes of providing temporary access instead of ownership without a fee or any form of instantaneous or future compensation can be labeled true sharing. True sharing stands in vast contrast to the commercial ventures, utilizing the largely positively connoted sharing rhetoric, which Belk (ibid.) labels pseudo sharing i.e., a business relationship masquerading as communal sharing. It may not be altogether unwelcome and it may be beneficial to all parties as well as friendly to the environment. But it is not sharing, despite promoters often employing a sharing vocabulary (Belk, 2014b, p. 11). These narrower definitions offered by Belk (2014a, 2014b) expose where sharing opponents and proponents are divided, as both camps argue intensely for what sharing can or cannot do (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016; Netter, 2016). As Wittel (2011, p. 4) suggests, sharing is used for different social practices with different functions and different motivations. It is used for a multitude of social and ethical realities. There is a danger of conflating different social qualities of sharing which in turn may produce distortions, illusions, and delusions. The risk of ambiguous definitions, along with sharewashing efforts rendering distinctions between sharing marketplaces and traditional marketplaces as merely impossible (e.g., Price and Belk, 2016), is fueling the call for more nuanced, clear-cut definitions of what sharing actually is.

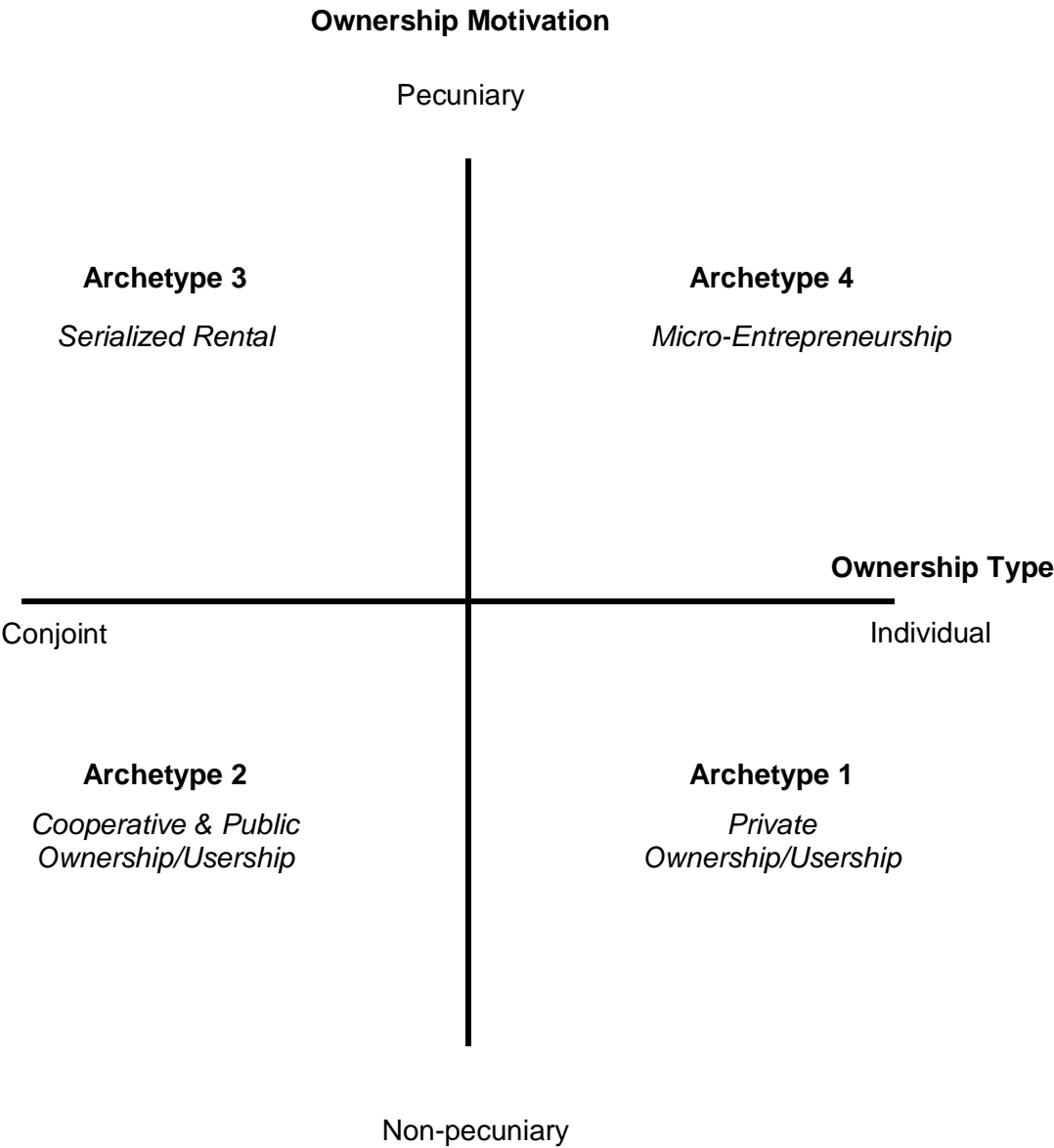
One way of deciding on a label for business-model innovations and non-profit setups may be to adopt labels used in practices by platforms, policy-makers and regulatory bodies. For example, the label most frequently used by the European Commission (European Commission, 2015a,

2015b), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC, 2014), the European Parliament (European Parliament, 2014), the OECD (OECD, 2015a, 2015b), and the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c) is ~~sh~~aring economy. Although this thesis does not necessarily agree with every activity and process labeled as ~~sh~~aring for practical reasons, adopting the discourse of policy-makers and regulating bodies seems reasonable. This thesis tentatively operationalizes the sharing economy umbrella term for for-profit and non-profit, business-to-consumer and peer-to-peer setups that enable the compartmentalization of ownership and the usership of goods, skills, and services. Compartmentalization of ownership and usership pertains not only to separating ownership from usership, i.e., who makes use of a product does not have to own it and vice versa, but it also entails a temporal dimension in the sense that ownership and usership can be traded, passed on, and occur sequentially.

## **2.2. A Sharing Economy Taxonomy Introduced**

Today, different forms of the sharing economy exist, varying not only in purpose, such as with regard to profit orientation or sustainability agenda, but also with regard to maturity and scale. In an early attempt, Cohen (2014b) advocated a sharing taxonomy based on ownership motivation as well as ownership structure. In his taxonomy, Cohen suggests that items up for sharing can be individually or conjointly owned, with the act of sharing being driven by either pecuniary or non-pecuniary motives. This taxonomy yields four archetypes of sharing initiatives, which can be seen in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Sharing Taxonomy



Source: Cohen (2014b)

The two archetypes of sharing initiatives presented on the left of the vertical axis are based on conjoint or multi-group ownership while the two on the right of the vertical axis represent individual ownership forms. The types above the horizontal axis are driven by profit-seeking motives, whereas the motivations for ownership in the archetypes below the horizontal axis are driven by non-pecuniary or less financially instrumental objectives.

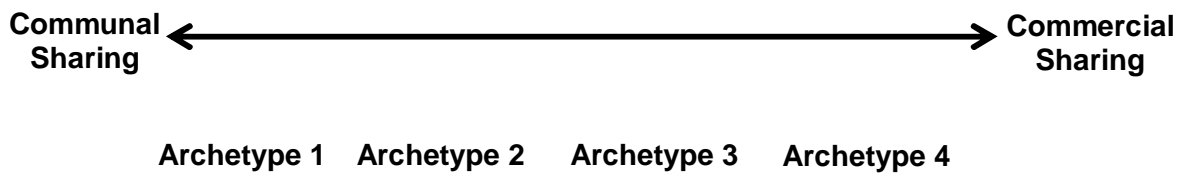
In *archetype one*, goods are owned by a single person, allowing temporary non-commercial lending to family members and friends. *Archetype two* comprises cases enabling collective ownership and usership, such as car-sharing clubs or non-commercial hospitality exchange (e.g., *Couchsurfing*) or free-of-charge fashion libraries (e.g., *Klädoteket*). Cases belonging to *archetype three* range from short-term rentals, such as in the case of car sharing schemes (e.g., *Car2Go*, *DriveNow*), fee-based clothing and accessories rental (e.g., *Kleiderlei*), to subscription-based product service systems (e.g., *Mud Jeans*, *Le Tote*). In these cases, people pay for the benefit of using a product, without having to own the product themselves, thereby optimizing the utility of infrequently used products. Products can be owned privately or by companies. In the popular discourse, spearheaded by Botsman and Rogers (2010), business models belonging to this archetype are assumed to decrease the total number of underutilized products thereby contributing to sustainable development (ibid.). Micro-entrepreneurship cases in *archetype four* span from classical flea markets and swap meets to Internet (e.g., *eBay*, *Yerdle*) or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms (e.g., *Poshmark*, *Vinted*) to private commercial hospitality exchanges (e.g., *Airbnb*). In these redistribution markets, pre-owned goods are distributed to new owners. By promoting the reuse and reselling of unwanted items (instead of disposal), it is assumed that these marketplaces contribute to greater sustainable development through the reduction of waste and the increased use of resources . resources that would otherwise be involved in producing new products (Botsman and Rogers, 2010).

While this taxonomy provides a useful heuristic tool, it contains a number of flaws. First of all, this taxonomy enables the grouping together of platforms, which only have two dimensions in

common but are quite dissimilar in other respects. For example, *Uber* and *Poshmark* both constitute examples of *micro-entrepreneurship*. While in both cases ownership is held by one individual and products and services are made available and reciprocated by remuneration (monetary and alternative currencies), their setups are rather distinct. While *Poshmark* compartmentalizes ownership through the trading of goods, *Uber* compartmentalizes usership by enabling individuals who own cars to offer transportation services to other users. Second of all, this taxonomy leaves a lot of space for overlaps between archetypes. In the case of *Airbnb*, it could both be argued that this hospitality exchange platform constitutes an example of *archetype four* as well as *archetype three*, depending on the degree of tenant utilization. If an apartment is listed on *Airbnb* for rental only in cases where its usual tenants are on vacation themselves, *Airbnb* constitutes a case of *micro-entrepreneurship*. If, on the other hand, a living unit is not inhabited by a permanent tenant but is listed for sequential short-term renting, *Airbnb* could be considered a *serialized rental*. Last but not least, this overview of examples of sharing economy archetypes is by no means exhaustive, but instead comprises some of the most renowned cases. While, the sharing economy is typified by serialized rental and micro-entrepreneurship in the transportation and hospitality sectors (with *Uber* and *Airbnb* leading the way, respectively), these business models are increasingly taking hold in other sectors, where it is possible to share excess resources and expand product life expectancy.

Linking the taxonomy with the conceptual discussion in the foregoing section, the sharing economy archetypes as outlined by Cohen (2014b) can also be positioned along a continuum based on Belk's (2014b) distinction between *true sharing* and *pseudo sharing*. However, in the following, this thesis will refer to *true sharing* as *communal sharing*, and *pseudo sharing* as *commercial sharing*, in order to avoid value-laden terminology. The continuum is outlined below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Sharing Continuum



*Archetype one*, defined as the temporary, non-monetary lending of goods to family and friends, comes closest to what Belk (2014b) considers true sharing. It can, however, be argued whether this form of sharing is in fact non-reciprocal and non-exclusive. While sharing activities in this context are not mediated by fees used to exclude potential participants, it is still up to the individual to decide who can borrow items. In short, fees are not needed to deny access. Reciprocity may also be delayed in this scenario. For instance, I might lend a friend a piece of clothing today without asking for something specific in return. In the future, however, I might refer to this past act of lending as leverage in convincing this friend to lend me something that I want to borrow. *Archetype two* can also be considered a kind of communal sharing differing from archetype one since items are owned conjointly, and in spite of the fact that temporary access might entail a form of compensation. Looking at the case of fashion libraries, for instance, small membership fees are placed in order to secure the survival of these otherwise non-profit setups. Both *archetype one* and *archetype two* constitute cases of usership compartmentalization.

*Archetypes three* and *four* constitute commercialized sharing formats - more specifically, product-service systems and redistribution markets, which in sharing vocabulary may be labeled pseudo sharing platforms (Belk, 2014b). *Archetype three* (serialized rental) can also be labeled access-based consumption following the definition offered by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012, p. 881) as transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership

takes place. While usership is compartmentalized, ownership in these cases is situated with businesses. *Archetype four* however encompasses for-profit *peer-to-peer* marketplaces, mostly facilitated by a formal organization, which enable compartmentalization of ownership (i.e., redistribution markets) as well setups enabling the compartmentalization of usership (i.e., hospitality or transportation services). A great deal of the controversy around the sharing economy and its conceptual shortcomings can be explained by these ~~non~~commercial sharing cases dominating the discourse about the phenomenon (e.g., Netter, 2016).

## Introducing the Case of Fashion

One area, which is deemed to have vast potential to be transformed in a more sustainable direction by means of sharing, is the fashion context. Looking at current clothing consumption levels, extensive water use, the release of hazardous chemicals, and its social, environmental, and economic trade-offs (e.g., Fletcher, 2008; Giesen, 2008; Banerjee, 2011), the fashion system as such has to be regarded as highly unsustainable. With a growing global population, the rise of the middle class, and increased pressure on natural resources, the traditional business logic appears to be unfit for resolving the challenges we are faced with (Jackson, 2009). Despite efforts on the part of the industry over the past few decades to improve the efficiency and productivity of the current system, efficiency gains have frequently lead to more consumption instead of curbing it, i.e., through rebound effects (Bocken et al., 2014; Bocken and Short, 2015).

Sharing initiatives are frequently assumed to provide an alternative to the dominant business logic. Building on Cohen's (2014b) sharing taxonomy, there are a number of fashion cases: *Archetype one* constitutes the case of clothing ownership and use as well as the temporary private lending of clothing without remuneration, e.g., between friends. *Archetype two* represents the case of collectively-owned clothing. Examples range from fashion libraries, operating on the basis of free-of-charge memberships (e.g., *Klädoteket*), to family and friends collectively owning and sharing rarely used clothes (e.g., outdoor wear). *Archetype three* bundles a variety of business models, all of which offer the short-term rental of clothing. Cases range from the leasing of clothing (e.g., *Mud Jeans*) to high-end clothing or designer handbags (e.g., *Rent the Runway*) to subscription-based services (e.g., *Le Tote*). *Archetype four* represents micro-entrepreneurship, facilitated by Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms (e.g., *Vinted*, *Poshmark*, *99 dresses*) as well as classic flea markets or swap meets. Some of these redistribution platforms are facilitated by monetary exchanges (e.g., *eBay*), whereas others are based on alternative currencies (e.g., *99 dresses*, *Yerdle*).



### 3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

One way to make sense of both ~~true~~ and ~~pseudo~~ sharing economy business models is to conceptualize them as *multi-sided platforms*, facilitating the sharing of underutilized inventory between distinct consumer groups, i.e., creating and serving *two-sided* or *multi-sided markets* (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016; Hagiu and Wright, 2015), which exhibit different degrees of organization (Netter and Pedersen, forthcoming). In the following, an introduction into the theoretical foundations and methodological considerations of this thesis will be provided. As a first step, the notion of *multi-sided platforms* (Evans, 2003), an extension of the *two-sided market* concept introduced by Rochet and Tirole (e.g., 2003; 2006), will be introduced, following which, the concept of partial organization (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010) will be presented. The combination of both approaches appears useful in order to further develop the theoretical conceptualization and understanding of the features and challenges of these new business models.

#### 3.1. Multi-Sided Platforms Introduced

According to Eisenmann *et al.* (2006), *multi-sided platforms (MSP)* can be defined as services and products that enable transactions between distinct user groups in multi-sided networks. These platforms, characterized by a specific infrastructure and by specific rules, can take many forms. While some rely on physical products (e.g., credit cards and authorized terminals), others provide a service (e.g., *eBay*). In contrast to traditional product and service industries, the markets enabled by *MSPs* differ with regards to the location of costs and revenue. While value traditionally moves from left to right with costs incurring to the left of the company and revenues on the right, in the case of platforms, both costs and revenues are generated on each side, due to its distinct user groups.

As Codagnone and Martens (2016, p. 8) suggest, ~~two~~ two-sided or multi-sided markets are situations where a platform enables two or more groups of users to transact or at least interact

and where at least one group  $\neq \emptyset$  and usually all groups benefit directly or indirectly from having a growing number of users on the other side(s), i.e., network effects. There are two types of network effects, which can be either negative or positive (Eisenmann et al., 2006). A same-side effect, in which increasing the number of users on one side of the network makes it either more or less valuable to users on the same side; and a cross-side effect, in which increasing the number of users on one side of the network makes it either more or less valuable to the users on the other side (ibid., p. 5). While cross-side network effects are usually positive, e.g., buyers preferring a large group of sellers and vice versa, same-side network effects are more frequently negative, such as sellers preferring fewer rivals (ibid.).

As Hagiu (2009, p. 5) suggests, at the most fundamental level there are two types of basic functions that *MSPs* can perform: reducing search costs, incurred by the *MSPs* multiple constituents before transacting, and reducing shared costs, incurred during the transactions themselves. Search costs are the costs that occur before potential trading partners actually interact. Reducing these costs essentially means reducing the information asymmetry that exists between two or more parties, i.e., reducing the costs of identifying the optimal trading partner. According to Hagiu (ibid.), these costs can be further distinguished, depending on whether all sides engage in the search or whether only one side searches for the best trading partner. In addition to reducing the costs that occur prior to transactions, *MSPs* also reduce the costs that occur during or upon the transaction. A classic example of this function is payment card systems, which provide an infrastructure which significantly eases transactions between buyers and sellers by eliminating the need for barter (ibid, p. 7).

While successful *MSPs* can benefit from increasing returns to scale due to network effects (Eisenmann et al., 2006), Eisenmann *et al.* (ibid.) suggest that competition in industries served by *MSPs* can be severe, hence require careful considerations with regards to pricing, winner-take-all competition, and risks of envelopment. The key challenge in *multi-sided markets* is pricing, as the platform providers have to choose a price for each side, factoring in the impact

on the other side of growth and willingness to pay+(ibid., p. 3). Usually, one side is subsidized, i.e., prices are set lower in order to further the development of this group of users, to create strong network effects and to attract users on the other side (Rochet and Tirole, 2003). These cross-side network effects also work the other way, with a large number of money-side users making it more attractive for subsidy users to join the platform (Eisenmann et al., 2006). The challenge is to determine which side should be subsidized and at which price, especially in environments with more than one platform serving a *multi-sided market*, enabling users to multi-home and transact with subsidy-side users and money-side users from competing platforms. In cases where multi-homing costs - i.e., the expenses network users incur including adoption, operation, and the opportunity cost of time - in order to establish and maintain platform affiliation+(ibid., p. 7) are high, users are less likely to affiliate themselves with more than one platform. Usually, platforms with strong and positive network effects will be more attractive for users except for cases where users have unique needs or where a small platform provides the only opportunity to get in touch with a specific user group. Regardless of how successful a platform is in pricing its users and handling the competition, they still face the risk of being enveloped by a rival platform provider, which combines the functionalities of multiple *MSPs*. Instead of selling out or exiting the market, *MSPs* can respond to this threat by changing their business model or by finding strategic allies to help make their platform stickier.

### **Multi-Sided Sharing Platforms**

Examples of *MSPs* that have already been studied range from real estate, media, dating clubs, video game consoles, operating system software, to payment cards (e.g., Evans, 2003; Parker and Van Alstyne, 2005; Rochet and Tirole, 2002; Rochet and Tirole, 2003). Recently, scholars have been increasingly adopting the notion in the sharing economy context (e.g., Demary, 2015; Grinevich et al., 2015; Hagiu and Wright, 2015; Henten and Windekilde, 2016; Li et al., 2015; Rauch and Schleicher, 2015; Zervas et al., 2015). Looking at the sharing context, there

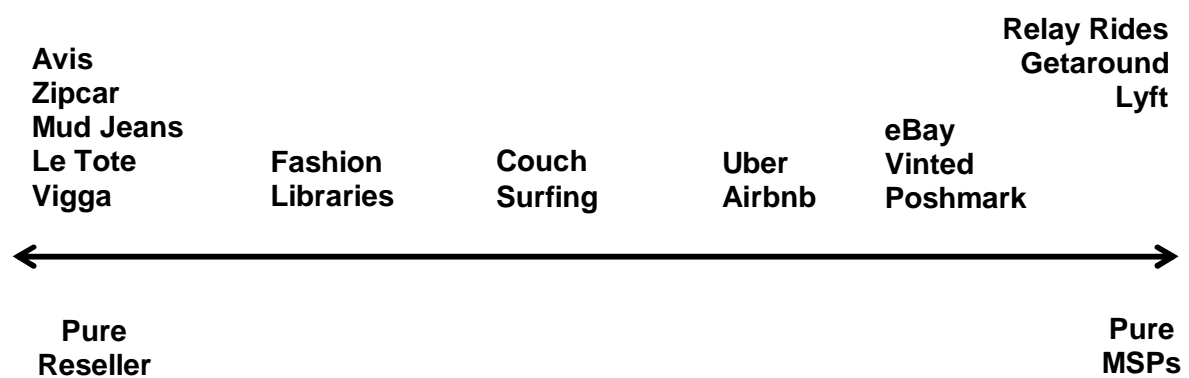
are a variety of different platforms and facilitated marketplaces. Some are two- or multi-sided, such as *eBay*, *Poshmark*, or *Airbnb*, while others are one-sided, such as *Avis*, *Mud Jeans*, or *Le Tote*, and resemble pure resellers (e.g., Grinevich et al., 2015). While *two-sided platforms* and *MSPs* facilitate direct transactions between two or more distinct user groups, one-sided platforms constitute a setup in which users only interact with the intermediary.

According to Hagiu and Wright (2014; 2015), the key features setting marketplaces facilitated by *MSPs* and pure resellers apart are network effects, direct interaction, and affiliation. In two- and *multi-sided platforms*, users tend to benefit from indirect network effects, whereas in the case of one-side platforms, the willingness of users to join the platform increases regardless which group of users increases (Grinevich et al., 2015). Direct interaction pertains not only to the actual direct interaction between two or more distinct groups of users but also the degree of control retained by each side regarding the terms of transaction, such as pricing, terms and conditions, and marketing and delivery of the transaction subjects (Hagiu and Wright, 2015). In the case of markets facilitated by *two-* and *multi-sided platforms*, the residual control rests with the suppliers, whereas in the case of markets facilitated by one-sided platforms, i.e., resellers, the control rests with the intermediary (Hagiu and Wright, 2014). As Hagiu and Wright (2015, p. 163) suggest, platform affiliation means that users on each side consciously make platform-specific investments that are necessary in order for them to be able to directly interact with each other. The costs associated with this affiliation will most likely determine users' decision-making whether to single-home, i.e., affiliate with only one platform, or to multi-home, i.e., affiliate with more than one platform (Hagiu and Lee, 2011). The search costs of identifying a suitable platform, as well as training and learning costs associated with familiarizing oneself with any given platform will further contribute to determining the switching costs associated with finding another marketplace (Demary, 2015).

As visualized in Figure 3, most sharing economy platforms can be considered to facilitate *two-sided markets*. Few examples constitute pure *MSPs*, others again are better conceptualized as

resellers. In contrast to Figure 2, which differentiates sharing archetypes along a communal-commercial sharing continuum, Figure 3 positions examples of sharing platforms along a multisided continuum, i.e., based on the number of distinct user groups and degree of direct interaction between them.

Figure 3: Sharing Platform Continuum



Source: Adapted from Hagiu and Wright (2013)

While transportation and hospitality services enabled by sharing economy *MSPs* have recently been addressed by some scholars (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016; Fradkin, 2015; Hagiu and Wright, 2013; Li et al., 2015; Rauch and Schleicher, 2015; Zervas et al., 2015), the context of fashion-sharing platforms has not, to the authors' knowledge, received attention from scholars studying *MSPs*. In the following, select features of fashion-sharing platforms will be presented against the backdrop of the *reseller-MSP* continuum.

In the fashion sharing context, *Mud Jeans*, *Le Tote*, and *Vigga* (all *archetype three* platforms) can be considered one-sided platforms or resellers. These product-service platforms, which facilitate the short-term rental of clothing (offering jeans, women's clothing and accessories,

and baby and children's clothes, respectively), are characterized by direct network effects. With growing numbers of users, these platforms are able to scale their efforts and expand their inventory, which is otherwise a costly endeavor (e.g., Grinevich et al., 2015). Users interact exclusively with the platform provider and have no control over the terms of the transaction. Affiliation costs can be high, in the case of business models operating on a subscription basis.

Free-of-charge fashion libraries (*archetype two*) and fee-based fashion libraries (*archetype three*) are positioned between *one-sided* and *two-sided platforms*. They are one-sided in the sense that the interaction of users is limited to the intermediary. There is no direct interaction in terms of the transaction between users contributing clothing and fashion items and those renting or borrowing those items on a short-term basis or taking them out of the common wardrobe permanently. In a similar vein, users have little or no control over the terms of the transaction and affiliation costs, which are established by the platform provider. However, there are one-sided indirect network effects in the sense that the markets facilitated by these platforms become more attractive for the demand-side users of the fashion library if the supply side group of users grows and increases the available inventory. As there is usually no economic incentive for supplying the libraries with new items, growth in the demand side does not necessarily lead to growth in the supply side of users. While affiliation costs with these fashion libraries might not be high, switching costs can be considered high, as there is usually no direct competition in the immediate vicinity of these rather local, small-scale operations, which makes multi-homing difficult. In some cases, where designers or retailers are involved in creating the inventory, it might even make sense to position these business models between *two-sided* and *multi-sided platforms*.

Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms (*archetype four*), such as *eBay*, *Vinted*, or *Poshmark*, come closest to an *MSP* in the fashion context. More supply-side users will make the facilitated markets more attractive for demand-side users and vice versa. Supply-side users and demand-side users are usually charged different transaction fees, depending on

the platform. Both supply-side and demand-side users have to make investments when affiliating themselves with a given platform. Multi-homing is however widely practiced in the context of these sharing platforms for both supply and demand sides. While these platforms enable direct interaction between two or more user groups (in some cases advertisers or professional retailers also operate in these markets), there is only a certain degree of control retained by the supply side. While they can decide which items to upload for transaction and at which price, the intermediary usually controls the transaction with regards to the terms and conditions, delivery, and payment systems. It is therefore reasonable to refer to these environments as *two-sided markets*, which exhibit commonalities with *MSPs*.

### 3.2. Partial Organization Introduced

As organizational research has tended to limit the description of the contemporary global order to formal organizations, networks, and institutions, there is a risk that important aspects of the studied phenomena have been overlooked (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010, p. 10). The concept of partial organization was first introduced by Ahrne and Brunsson (2010) in an attempt to broaden the concept of organization to include some aspects of the order that exists outside and among organizations (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2009, p. 1). This broader definition of organization as a special form of social order recognizes that organization does not just take place within but also outside and between formal organizations, thus voiding the distinction between organization and environment, which is usually not assumed to be an organized order. Ahrne and Brunsson (2010) suggest the distinction between organized and non-organized forms of decided order in which people use elements that are constitutive for formal organizations (p. 3), thus acknowledging that organization entails various forms of partial as well as complete organization.

With decision being at the core of organization (ibid.; Luhmann, 2000), the elements constitutive of formal organizations pertain to decisions concerning *membership*, *hierarchy*,

*rules, monitoring, and sanction.* While formal organizations have access - and need to have access to - all five elements of organizing to legitimize their existence as complete organization, partial organization requires only one or few of these elements, which allows for an endless variety of constellations of organization.

*Membership* pertains to the question of who can become a member and who cannot (Ahrne et al., 2014). While in some cases there might be *formal rules* for who can obtain *membership status* in other cases this is more informally regulated (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010).

*Membership status* creates an identity, which is different from those of non-members and provides members with the perks of being treated differently as non-members. Membership however also brings with it certain expectations in terms of behavior by members and can be revoked (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010).

*Hierarchy* pertains to those who have the initiative and power, i.e., those whose decisions are binding for current and future members (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). These decisions are usually binding as long as members wish to continue as members (Ahrne et al., 2014).

Organization decisions on *rules* are concerned with the common notions about what they are doing and how to do it (Ahrne et al., 2014, p. 5). Besides *formal rules* of participation, there can also be *informal rules* or recommendations, such as standards, for which compliance is voluntary (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). *Rules* can concern any aspect, such as product design or prices, as well as any kind of behavior or action (Ahrne et al., 2014).

Closely connected with the organizational element of *rules* are decisions concerning *monitoring*. More specifically, it concerns how to monitor what members do, feel, and think (ibid.). Besides more *top-down monitoring* strategies, where one stakeholder group holding the power monitors another stakeholder group, *mutual monitoring* enables the deliberation of experiences and the evaluation of all members' actions. *Sanctions* can be both a positive and negative approach to coercing members to do what they are expected (ibid.). While *positive sanctions* provide incentives, such as prizes, awards, or diplomas, to reinforce preferable



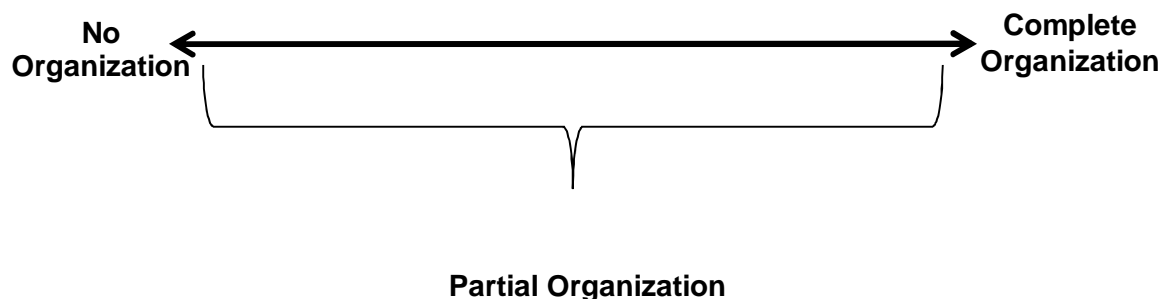
behavior, *negative sanctions* such as penalties, tickets, or boycotts, deny or impede access and further membership and participation in the market (e.g., Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). Both types of *sanctions* impact the member status, identity, and resources.

Since the introduction of the notion by Ahrne and Brunsson in 2010, the concept of partial organization has been applied in a number of contexts, ranging from standardization (Brunsson et al., 2012) to corporate social responsibility (e.g., Rasche et al., 2013; Schoeneborn et al., 2011), social movements (e.g., Haug, 2013; den Hond et al., 2015; Frenzel, 2014; Laamanen and den Hond, 2015) market organization (Ahrne et al., 2014), organization as communication (Schoeneborn, 2011; Schoeneborn and Scherer, 2012; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015), and meta-organizations (Berkowitz and Dumez, 2014).

### **Organization of Sharing Markets**

In the context of the sharing economy, the notion of partial organization is particularly valuable in terms of the organization of markets facilitated by multi-sided sharing platforms. Typically, markets are considered an environment outside formal organizations and assumed to be not organized in the sense of complete organization. While markets and organizations are usually described as two completely different sets of social order, Ahrne *et al.* (2014) suggest that markets and organizations are rather similar, in the sense that they are both based on decision and an actively decided order. Markets can therefore be considered partially-organized, if they have access to one or more of the five organizational elements constituting formal organizations. Depending on the degree of organization, sharing markets can be positioned along a continuum ranging from no organization to complete organization, with partial organization occupying the space between those extremes, with a sheer endless variety of possible combinations of the five organizing elements (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Organization Continuum



Linking the notion of partial organization to the sharing taxonomy presented in the foregoing chapter, it can be hypothesized that the non-commercial - or rather, *communal sharing* - *archetypes one* and *two* display higher levels of partial organization compared to the profit-oriented *commercial sharing* *archetypes three* and *four*, which are closer positioned towards the complete organization end of the spectrum. As Ahrne *et al.* (2014, p. 13) suggest, *an organized order always involves a fair degree of instability; it may change and change quickly.* Consequently, the degree of organization can change over time, with markets moving toward more or less organization. Different factors are assumed to influence the degree of organization, such as resources (i.e., financial and human resources), maturity of the platform, as well as push/pull from other stakeholders, such as established competitors (Netter and Pedersen, forthcoming).

In the context of markets, Ahrne *et al.* (2014) distinguish between three groups of stakeholders, or *market organizers*, operating on these partially-organized markets, namely *profiteers*, *others* *sellers and buyers*. *Profiteers* are defined as *individuals and organizations that participate in market organization in order to further their own economic interests. They do not operate as traders [...], rather they are able to earn money through the organization of the primary market* (ibid., p. 8). Linked to the literature on *multi-sided platforms*, *profiteers* are the

*intermediaries* or *platforms*, creating and serving *multi-sided markets*. ~~Others~~ on the other hand are conceptualized as persons and organizations that try to influence the organization of markets, claiming that they act not in their own interest, but in the interest of other specific persons or organizations, or even in the interests of everyone. They have little or no interest in making profit, and they try to help sellers, buyers or whoever is affected by what sellers or buyers do (Ahrne et al., 2014, p. 9-10). This group of stakeholders is usually not regarded in the literature on *multi-sided platforms*, which exclusively focuses on *intermediaries*, *market-sellers* and *market-buyers*. The latter are called *sellers and buyers* in the context of partial organization. These market organizers act on markets that are largely organized by others and profiteers, with whom they may not share interests. The reactions of buyers and sellers to market organizing influence the way markets function (ibid., p. 10).

This definition of stakeholders operating on partially-organized markets put forth by Ahrne et al. (ibid.) has to be regarded as a weak or oversimplified stakeholder distinction for two main reasons: (1) the assumption of altruistic behavior on the part of ~~others~~ and (2) the assumption that only *profiteers* are interested in generating a profit on those markets.

Concerning the label and agenda of ~~others~~ Ahrne et al. (ibid.) suggest that ~~others~~ do not act out of self-interest or wish to make a profit but instead help those acting in those markets. This thesis proposes to broaden and adjust this definition. Instead of this narrow and rather uncritical view, this thesis proposes to broaden the definition to encompass all those stakeholders, who are or consider themselves to be affected by the actions in those markets and consequently try to shape the overall phenomenon. In the context of the sharing economy *other* stakeholders range from sharing initiatives, sharing lobby organizations, investors, media, communities, consumers, governments, trade and labor unions, to established competing industries and their employees, to name a few. As outlined with regard to the sharing taxonomy, encompassing a wide variety of business models, there is a high level of diversity within each stakeholder group, rarely consisting of one actor, but rather bringing together a number of actors. While some of

these actors might be more in favor of promoting the sharing economy, others might be interested in higher degrees of regulation, controlling or preventing the advance of the phenomenon. While some might be interested in generating a direct monetary benefit from promoting or preventing the mainstreaming of the sharing economy and its associated marketplaces, others might primarily be interested in gaining influence that at some point might translate into economic gain.

Closely connected to the label and agenda misconception of *others* is the misconception of *profiteers* as the sole stakeholder group interested in furthering their own economic interest. As *buyers and sellers* are also interested in making a profit, it might be more suitable to instead refer to this stakeholder group as *facilitators*, who are formally facilitating and initiating the creation and organizing of these marketplaces. This is very much in line with the literature on *multi-sided platforms*, conceptualizing the formal economic operator as intermediary or platform, bringing together two or more groups of users (e.g., Codagnone and Martens, 2016). In a similar vein, it appears more suitable to refer to *users and providers* in the context of the sharing economy than to *buyers and sellers*, as this distinction is broader. Not all sharing marketplaces are based on monetary transactions but rather constitute an example of one consumer providing a service, which is embraced by another. In summary, this thesis proposes to label stakeholders in sharing markets as *facilitators*, *users and providers*, and *others*.

While *facilitators* and *users/providers* constitute the two primary stakeholder groups of the sharing economy in terms of facilitating, initiating, and maintaining the sharing marketplaces, *others* influence these marketplaces at different life stages, directly or indirectly. Examples range from funding or facilitating the physical location of the marketplaces, providing the financial means to establish a virtual marketplace, or by shaping the wider environment of the sharing economy in the form of protests, calls for more regulation, or the introduction of legislation. The inclusion of this stakeholder group, which is usually not regarded in the

literature on *multi-sided platforms*, is very beneficial as it enables a more holistic picture of the environments *multi-sided platforms* are operating in.

What's interesting about the markets facilitated by *multi-sided sharing platforms* is that the boundaries between stakeholders are not always clear, with stakeholder roles frequently blurred or broken up and with platform business models frequently in flux. While it is not uncommon to find *switch-role markets* instead of the usual *fix-role markets* (e.g., Aspers, 2009), i.e., users and providers switching roles within their groups of market organizers, in the context of the sharing economy, it appears more suitable to conceptualize these *multi-sided markets* as *blurred-role markets* (Netter and Pedersen, forthcoming). In these *blurred-role markets*, users might switch back and forth between acting in the role of user or provider (or acting in both roles simultaneously), but might also switch roles with those formally facilitating these marketplaces. Thus, users can become more formally involved in the running and maintaining of these marketplaces by, for instance, taking on the role of online forum moderators in swapping platforms or working as voluntary staff in fashion libraries. Similarly, formal facilitators might vacate their role as representatives of the formal organization and act as users and providers within these marketplaces. It is thus possible for actors within these marketplaces to have multiple identities and roles and act as facilitators, users, and providers simultaneously. Naturally, this rather fluid arrangement may lead to conflicts and to questioning the legitimacy of decision-makers. In this way, *blurred-role markets* in the sharing economy expand the conceptualization of *multi-sided markets*, which are traditionally conceptualized to bring together and cater to two or more distinct user groups.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

In the following section, the methodological approach for answering the research question of this thesis will be introduced. As a first step, the research purpose and design will be elaborated on. Subsequently, the empirical foundation of this thesis will be introduced.

### **4.1. Research Purpose & Design**

As Codagnone and Martens (2016) point out, there appears to be a conceptual and empirical fog around the sharing economy, which makes it difficult to a) identify whether opponents and proponents are in fact disputing the same phenomenon and b) promote a less normative debate about policy and regulation issues (Codagnone et al., 2016). This is not only due to a lack of empirical studies but also due to most conceptual-theoretical papers adopting overly critical or overly positive normative rhetoric. Codagnone and Martens (2016, p. 15-16) suggest that available empirical evidence to date is very partial and inconclusive - in many cases, it is simply anecdotal and often presented by stakeholders in the current controversies. For example, Uber and Airbnb have released dozens of reports, the reliability of which could not be independently validated because the methodologies are not transparently illustrated and data are kept internal and not made accessible to researchers. [5] Most of the empirical evidence available to date pertains to the US. In the EU, the lack of evidence is more pronounced and there are few scientific articles. [6] It is crucial that this gap be filled, given that both Uber and Airbnb are hiring scholars and consultants to flood the European public debate with reports, which use non-transparent data and methods.

It is the aim of this thesis (i.e., the umbrella document and the four independent research papers) to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this little studied phenomenon, to add to improving the empirical evidence base and further the theoretical development of the sharing economy. In light of the paucity of unbiased empirical research, especially in the European context, an inductive interpretative exploratory approach was adopted, making use of

rigorous qualitative methods and data. In the second and third research papers (*chapters III* and *IV*) of this thesis, in-depth interviews and natural occurring data from app reviews are used to shed light on some of the tensions experienced by these partially-organized *multi-sided markets* in the Nordic countries and the United States. Furthermore, the first and fourth paper of this thesis, which are of a conceptual nature and based on illustrative examples from secondary data demonstrating the diffusion of this phenomenon (*chapter II*) and on the organization of *multi-sided markets* (*chapter V*), respectively, contribute to the further theoretical development of the sharing economy phenomenon.

Although it might be tempting to phrase the research design as a deliberate and rational process, the reality of this PhD dissertation is that the focus on the sharing economy phenomenon was sparked and grew out of the author's involvement in the *MISTRA Future Fashion* project, which originally called for a PhD study investigating the barriers to the consumption of sustainable fashion by young consumers in different retail environments. While trying to identify relevant alternative fashion retail spaces, sharing economy initiatives, such as the Copenhagen based fashion library Resecond, emerged as a new phenomenon. Initially, secondary research was conducted on the phenomenon to understand its framing in the media, identify its main actors, and map the different fashion-sharing initiatives.

This first stage of the PhD project provided not only the groundwork for *chapters II* and *V* of this thesis, but also for the consecutive empirical fieldwork. Following the initially exploratory study on Scandinavian fashion libraries (*chapter III*), extensive fieldwork was carried out on fashion initiatives in the sharing economy around the world, yielding a total number of 25 semi-structured interviews with representatives from fashion-sharing schemes and sharing economy experts from Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, UK, and the US, using an extended version of the interview guide developed for the fashion library research (see Table 2). So far, only a fraction of the data material collected through this fieldwork has found its way to publication, through the research papers contained within this thesis.

Table 2: Overview Sharing Economy Interviews

	<b>Name</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Length</b>
1	Resecond	Copenhagen	Denmark	In person	Feb-2013	69 minutes
2	Lånegarderoben	Stockholm	Sweden	Skype	Feb-2013	58 minutes
3	Helsinki Fashion Library	Helsinki	Finland	Skype	Feb-2013	50 minutes
4	Klädoteket	Malmö	Sweden	Skype	Feb-2013	72 minutes
5	Rendez-vous	Paris & London	England	Skype	Feb-2013	55 minutes
6	Fashion Hire	Manchester	UK	Skype	Feb-2014	25 minutes
7	Anywear	Copenhagen	Denmark	In person	Feb-2014	44 minutes
8	Kleiderkreisel/Vinted	Munich	Germany	Skype	Feb-2014	50 minutes
9	SwapAmok	Copenhagen	Denmark	In person	Mar- 2014	76 minutes
10	Twice	San Francisco	USA	In person	Mar- 2014	57 minutes
11	Poshmark	San Francisco	USA	In person	Mar- 2014	34 minutes
12	Trendsales	Copenhagen	Denmark	In person	Apr-2014	82 minutes
13	Grownies	Barcelona	Spain	Skype	Apr-2014	34 minutes
14	The Clothing Swap	San Francisco	USA	In person	Apr-2014	60 minutes
15	Le Tote	San Francisco	USA	In person	Apr-2014	40 minutes
16	Retroca	Sao Paulo	Brazil	Skype	Apr-2014	26 minutes
17	Yerdle	San Francisco	USA	In person	Apr-2014	37 minutes
18	Shareable	San Francisco	USA	In person	Apr-2014	52 minutes
19	Expert Sharing Economy	San Francisco	USA	Skype	Apr-2014	30 minutes
20	Expert Sharing Economy	San Francisco	USA	In person	Apr-2014	63 minutes
21	Expert Sharing Economy	San Francisco	USA	Skype	Apr-2014	39 minutes
22	Sharing Economy Lawyer	San Francisco	USA	In person	Apr-2014	37 minutes
23	ReFashioner	New York	USA	In person	May-2014	30 minutes
24	99dresses	New York	USA	In person	May-2014	40 minutes
25	Date My Wardrobe	Boston	USA	In person	May-2014	50 minutes

Despite a number of cases located in Europe, the majority of cases studied were clustered around San Francisco, which justified onsite fieldwork in the spring of 2014. This fieldwork provided not only the data material and illustrative examples from secondary data for *chapter V* of this thesis but also generated the idea to use natural occurring data connected to these platforms for gaining insight into how users experience the sharing economy (i.e., *chapter IV*).



A qualitative approach has been chosen to study the new sharing economy phenomenon from within, i.e., from the perspective of the actors operating within this environment (Flick et al., 2007). This approach is seen as preferential in order to generate a better understanding of the social realities experienced by its actors and explore the processes, patterns and structures inductively, instead of testing hypotheses based on well-established theories (Flick, 2015). While quantitative approaches would allow for a more objective and generalizable study of the phenomenon, the chosen qualitative approach is deemed particularly useful in the context of this underexplored phenomenon, which allows for a more open, holistic approach (ibid.). The rigor and robustness of the study - and transferability of the results - were achieved by employing data and investigator triangulation, i.e., the combination of multiple cases, and thus multiple data sources, as well as two researchers collecting, coding, and analyzing the empirical material (*chapters III and IV*). While the different steps of the research process and logic of the thesis and the individual research papers have been described in-depth (contributing to the coherence, consistency, and credibility of this thesis), the results have to be considered as somewhat dependent on the context in which the data was gathered and analyzed. Empirical material collected on tensions in the sharing economy will always reflect the status quo of the field, such as current law suits informing the public discourse or app updates informing the attitude of reviewers. While following the same procedures and reanalyzing the empirical material from this thesis might produce the same findings and conclusions, a renewed data collection of the studied cases will most likely produce additional or different findings, reflecting the developments and changes in the field.

## **4.2. Empirical Foundation**

The qualitative empirical foundation of this thesis is based on two multiple-case studies, i.e., *chapters III and IV*<sup>4</sup>, which make use of two different sets of data and methodologies. *Chapter III* is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews with founders/co-founders and

representatives from four Scandinavian fashion library initiatives. *Chapter IV* makes use of a new form of natural occurring data, i.e., textual smartphone application reviews from three mature fashion reselling and swapping apps in the U.S.

Three different purposive sampling strategies were adopted. Overall, this study applies purposive extreme or deviant case sampling. While the fashion library multiple-case study is also based on extreme or deviant case sampling, for the Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution platform study, multiple-cases were selected according to the intensity with which they display certain features. As Patton (1990, p.169) suggests, the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling.+

### **Overall Case Selection Criteria**

The decision to sample fashion libraries and Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms - in comparison rather extreme groups of cases - was rooted in the aim of the thesis to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the sharing economy field as a whole (Patton, 2002). One of the weaknesses of this rather pragmatic non-probability sampling approach is that it might lead to under-representation of certain study objects, e.g., where access is difficult (e.g., Lampard and Pole, 2015). It is however not the aim of this thesis to generalize from this sample the total population of sharing economy business models. Instead, this non-probability sampling strategy was adopted in order to explore the rather extreme ends of the sharing economy phenomenon and provide the basis for future research (ibid.). As highlighted in the foregoing sections (2., 3.1. & 3.2.), fashion libraries and Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms differ not only with regard to the nature of sharing, their profit orientation, scale, location, multisidedness (i.e., network effects, direct interaction, and

affiliation), but also with regard to the degree of organization in the facilitated markets, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Overall Case Selection Criteria

<b><i>Sampling Criteria</i></b>	<b><i>Fashion Libraries</i></b>	<b><i>Online &amp; Mobile Redistribution Platforms</i></b>
<i>Sharing Nature</i>	Communal Sharing	Commercial Sharing
<i>Profit Orientation</i>	Non-Profit	For-Profit
<i>Scale</i>	Small-Scale	Large-Scale
<i>Location</i>	Physical Predominantly Scandinavian-Based Phenomenon	Virtual Predominantly U.S.-Based Phenomenon
<i>Multisidedness</i>	(Primarily) One-/Two-Sided Market	Two-/Multi-Sided Market
<i>Degree of Organization</i>	More Partial Organization	Closer to Complete Organization

While fashion libraries - both free-of-charge (*archetype two*) and fee-based (*archetype three*) models - resemble business models which Belk (2014b) labels communal sharing Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms can be considered examples of commercial sharing making use of the positively-connoted sharing rhetoric, which is further underlined by the profit orientation of the platforms. The two studied case groups differ further with regard to scale and location, with fashion libraries constituting a Scandinavian phenomenon, operating on a small-scale level in physical store environments. Internet or smartphone enabled platforms on the other hand can rather be considered to be rooted in an American tradition, clustered

around the Silicon Valley. That said, in recent years we have witnessed a growth of EU-based online and mobile operations, such as *Trendsales* or *Vestiaire Collective*. In a similar vein, the markets facilitated by these initiatives differ in terms of network effects, direct interaction, and affiliation, with fashion libraries resembling one- or two-sided markets, whereas Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution markets can be conceptualized as two-sided markets, sharing certain commonalities with multi-sided markets. These two types of markets also differ with regards to their degree of organization, with fashion library markets displaying higher degrees of partial organization whereas Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution markets appear to move closer to complete organization. While both groups of cases constitute examples of peer-to-peer marketplaces, tensions in both groups may differ.

### **Fashion Library Study**

In the spring of 2013, data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with founders/co-founders and representatives from four Scandinavian fashion library initiatives. As in the case of the overall sampling strategy, cases for the fashion library study were also sampled with regard to the divergence of the cases. Although all four fashion library cases (two in Sweden, one in Denmark, and one in Finland) are based in Nordic countries, the four cases differ rather strongly in their approaches with some operating on a free-of-charge basis and others operating on a membership- or transaction-fee basis. Whereas some collaborate with young upcoming designers, others acquire their inventory via partnerships with established fashion brands. Others again refrain from professionals as one side of their market and simply operate on the basis of the inventory provided by their users.

The qualitative interview method was seen as a preferential alternative in the context of this exploratory study addressing a relatively new field. As Patton (1990) suggests, interviews allow the researcher to gain access to what is on the mind of the interviewee. However, there are certain limitations to this approach. Due to the presence of the interviewer and the agreed upon

time and location, the process of the interview has to be deemed a unique and artificial situation (Lampard and Pole, 2015). Each fashion library representative interviewed was briefed that the focus of the interview would be on their respective fashion library. While this can be considered a sufficiently vague framing and introduction to the interview, it should be kept in mind that the interview situation is constrained and shaped by the respective circumstances (ibid.), with interviewees highlighting those issues that are most relevant to them at that specific moment in time. A reference to the pressures of work experienced by the volunteers in one fashion library for instance might be specific to that fashion library and not reflective of the general situation in all studied environments.

In order to allow for a degree of comparability between the different cases, fact checking, as well as allowing the emergence of new issues, a semi-structured interviewing approach was chosen. According to Justesen and Mik-Meyer (2010), semi-structured interviews have the clear advantage of ensuring that a number of key issues that have been defined as relevant in advance can be covered, while at the same time allowing for the emergence of unexpected topics of interest. This method is especially preferable in studies that aim at exploring and generating new knowledge as well as stimulating reflections on pre-selected themes (Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2010). The interviews were transcribed and systematic content analysis was adopted along the lines of the applied theoretical model. To improve the internal validity of the study, an iterative coding approach was chosen by the two researchers.

#### **Introducing a Fashion Library Case: Klädoteket**

*Klädoteket*<sup>1</sup> is what is commonly referred to as a clothing library+or %a fashion library+. Established in 2010 by four students, today, *Klädoteket* is located in Malmö and Gothenburg,

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<sup>1</sup><http://kladoteket.se/>

Sweden. Today, two women run it on a voluntary basis. *Klädoteket* is a platform in which members can lease clothes and fashion accessories instead of buying them.

*Klädoteket* has a clear sustainability agenda and brands itself as an alternative to excessive consumption. In their mission statement, *Klädoteket* states that they want to inspire people with fashion and show them that it is possible to be both fashionable and at the same time environmentally friendly. [ö ] We want co-create a place where people can gather around sustainable fashion. [ö ] This is also a place for workshops and other events that focuses on sustainable fashion. [ö ] Welcome to our place. This is a Fashion Revolution!.+

Members can swap as many items as often as they like within four weeks. In the Malmö location, members can currently choose from approximately 2700 items, consisting of a mix of vintage, second-hand, and new items. Initially, clothes were mostly donated and members had the option to share their own wardrobe as a form of pop-up swap in *Klädoteket* for a limited period of time. Today, *Klädoteket* is increasingly focused on collaborating with young designers. In these collaborations, it is essential that the designers share the sustainable values that *Klädoteket* stands for.

*Klädoteket* has been experimenting with their membership and subscription system for some time. After a brief trial with membership fees, *Klädoteket* has since operated as a free service in an attempt to create a platform that is inclusive and enables widespread participation. Recently, they have reintroduced their subscription system, worth a certain amount of points, reflecting the number of items one can take out of the common wardrobe at a time.

### **Online & Mobile Redistribution Platforms Study**

The data material for this exploratory online and mobile redistribution platforms study was collected in the U.S. iTunes app store in 2015. Cases were purposively sampled according to their intensity (Patton, 2002). Upon reviewing the iTunes app store with regard to platforms offering peer-to-peer mobile and online reselling and swapping of fashion items, three English-

speaking platforms that can be considered mature or top+apps were selected, i.e., apps that have received an average of 144 reviews or more. The cut-off level for selection was set at a minimum of 100 textual reviews. A simple random sampling approach was adopted within the three yielded platforms, with a selection of 100 reviews per app, posted between 2013 and 2014, leading to a total sample size of 300 reviews - equally distributed along the sampled apps. Systematic content analysis was adopted, with the two researchers involved in the coding and analysis of the empirical material adopting an iterative approach in order to mitigate the risk of incorrect coding.

In order to understand the tensions experienced by online and mobile redistribution platforms, this study makes use of a new form of natural occurring data, i.e., textual smartphone application reviews, in order to identify the factors causing user satisfaction and dissatisfaction in these mobile and online markets. The study adopts the qualitative netnographic approach, which applies ethnographic techniques to studying online consumer behavior (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography enables the researcher to make use of naturally occurring data, as it uses the information publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups+(ibid, 62-63). As Kozinets (ibid.) puts it, working with netnography in general and natural occurring data in particular has several advantages compared with traditional market research approaches, not only in terms of resources, i.e., time and cost efficiency. In comparison with traditional qualitative market research forms such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups, working with this natural occurring data is less obtrusive, as it does not take place in a fabricated context.

This approach has certain limitations however, primarily pertaining to the generalizing quality of this type of data collection. Not only is this method highly reliant on the interpretive skill of the researcher, it is also not possible to identify the informants. In order to be able to generalize findings from any netnographic study, careful evaluations of similarity and [...] multiple methods for triangulation+must be employed (Kozinets, 2002, p.63). By sampling three mature

reselling and swapping apps and randomly sampling 300 reviews equally distributed over the three apps, a certain level of representativeness of the sample can be assumed.

### **Introducing an Internet- and Mobile-Enabled Fashion Redistribution Platform: Poshmark**

Based in Menlo Park, California, the community-based social marketplace *Poshmark*<sup>2</sup> was founded in 2011 and has - according to its own claims - quickly become the go-to destination for anyone who wants to buy and sell fashion straight from her closet<sup>3</sup>. *Poshmark* conceptualizes itself as a crossover between *Pinterest* and *eBay*, but more lucrative than *eBay* and more social than *Pinterest*.

Smartphone enabled, users have the opportunity to communicate, negotiate and trade via the iOS and Android smartphone apps, create their own virtual closet<sup>4</sup>, which other users in the community can follow. To date, *Poshmark* more than 1 million users, with the largest single seller having an inventory of 3549 items in her virtual closet.<sup>4</sup> The majority of users are checking the platform 7-9 times a day, according to *Poshmark*'s own closet sharing economy report from 2014<sup>5</sup>. These user statistics are similar to those of *Facebook* and *Pinterest*, and indicate high levels of community engagement. *Poshmark* nurtures this community element by hosting regular posh parties<sup>5</sup>, which connect users and followers of certain virtual closets<sup>5</sup> in virtual real-time shopping parties, which encourage users to enter the app on more regular intervals.

While a number of other micro-entrepreneurship platforms in the fashion context enable both the reselling and swapping of fashion items and accessories, *Poshmark* is exclusively focusing on reselling. Users can create a listing using their smartphone, by creating a cover shoot<sup>5</sup>, i.e., the seller modelling the product, a description, and ideally additional photos. *Poshmark* does

<sup>2</sup> [https://poshmark.com/what\\_is\\_poshmark](https://poshmark.com/what_is_poshmark)

<sup>3</sup> <http://blog.poshmark.com/2014/01/15/poshmark-s-closet-sharing-economy-report/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://blog.poshmark.com/2014/01/15/poshmark-s-closet-sharing-economy-report/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://blog.poshmark.com/2014/01/15/poshmark-s-closet-sharing-economy-report/>



not have any direct interaction with the traded products. Instead, it provides the sellers with a pre-paid shipping label addressed to the buyer. The seller will have to print the label, pack the product and ship it. In 2014, *Poshmark* launched *PoshPost*<sup>6</sup>, a collaboration with *USPS*, whereby a shipping label is created at the time of purchase at a set shipping rate, making it easier for buyers and sellers to calculate the exact total price of a given product. In October 2015, *Poshmark* announced the expansion beyond resale to incorporate a wholesale portal, on which users can connect with featured brands, shop wholesale and use wholesale merchandise in their own virtual micro-shops.

*Poshmark* is focused on the experiential elements of the platform's e-commerce environment and actively cultivates its community. *Poshmark*'s value proposition has a clear economic angle, highlighting how their service adds clear economic value to those selling and buying on the platform.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.v3b.com/2014/04/how-poshmark-and-the-usps-are-shaking-up-e-commerce/>

## 5. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH PAPERS

This section presents the applied theories and methodologies as well as summarizes the main findings of the four research papers.

The first paper investigates how the sharing economy phenomenon is diffused and talked into existence by the communicative acts of a number of different availability entrepreneurs, invested in the success of the phenomenon. It also provides a critical outlook at these narratives, which are largely constructed by opponents to the phenomenon. The second paper looks at how these narratives actually translate into doing by identifying the barriers and opportunities for developing business models based on the ideas of sharing in the fashion industry from the perspective of the sharing initiative facilitators. The third paper extends the understanding of the challenges faced by mobile sharing platform providers, by studying user satisfaction and dissatisfaction expressed in smartphone application reviews. The fourth and final paper combines the perspective of the different actors in these sharing marketplaces and highlights some of the potential tensions arising in the organization of these markets. The applied theories, methodologies and main findings of the four papers are summarized in Table 4 at the end of this section and are elaborated in the following.

### *Chapter II: Availability Cascades & the Sharing Economy . A Critical Outlook at Sharing Economy Narratives<sup>7</sup>*

The first paper of this thesis (single-authored) provides a critical outlook at the overall sharing economy phenomenon. By looking at the working mechanisms and narratives used for promoting this new yet old way of producing and consuming, this paper aims to shed light on the questions of (1) how the sharing economy phenomenon is diffused, (2) which narratives are

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<sup>7</sup> This paper has been published in *Sustainable Consumption: Design, Innovation and Practice+*, SpringerBriefs in Environment, Security, Development and Peace, vol. 29 (Audley Genus (ed.)), 2016.)

used to construct the phenomenon, and (3) why sustainability claims about the sharing economy are implicitly accepted.

As scholars search for a new concept that will provide answers on how modern societies should make sense of and resolve the economic, social and environmental problems linked to our modes of production and consumption, the sharing economy is attracting increased attention. So far however, little is known about the sharing economy's actual impact in terms of alleviating sustainability problems. On the contrary, indications point towards tremendous rebound effects, which might offset the sharing economy's potential and actually worsen its environmental and social impact.

To better understand the emergent focus on the sharing economy and associated business and consumption models, this conceptual paper applies cascade theory to some of the most pronounced narratives, suggesting a win-win scenario, especially as they relate to the claim of sustainability. More specifically, this paper applies the concept of availability cascades, first developed by Kuran and Sunstein (1999), which helps understand why novel ideas gain rapid prominence in popular discourse.

After introducing and dissecting the dominant narratives used for marketing the sharing economy, indications are identified which point to the sharing economy as constituting an availability cascade or bubble rather than a substantial phenomenon. The availability entrepreneurs behind this cascade (i.e., startup founders, VCs, lobbyists, mass media, etc.) make use of a number of factors in convincing their receptive audience (i.e., policy-makers, consumers, and other parties interested in promoting sustainable development) of the potential and substance of the sharing economy phenomenon. Based on the analysis of the narratives, four factors were found to be especially beneficial for the diffusion and institutionalization of the sharing economy phenomenon, namely (1) the familiarity of the associated practices (for example, the long standing practice of sharing, swapping, or lending of clothes), (2) the familiarity of the main target group (i.e., digital natives) with the enabling media (i.e.,

smartphone-enabled platforms), (3) salience and vividness of powerful narratives and anecdotes in popular media, as well as (4) high levels of visibility by means of enabling media, such as the use of social media for transparency and as a reference system for trust, visibility, and reputation management.

The findings suggest that although the sharing economy appears to have potential to resolve sustainability challenges, most indications point towards an availability cascade/ bubble, bearing the risk of rebound effects such as increasing consumption levels, which might worsen the situation. Given the propensity of academics, practitioners, and civil society to rush to embrace new concepts that enable both business opportunities and a clear conscience, this paper proposes that the implications of the sharing economy should be critically explored before it is actively promoted as the latest cure-all.

*Chapter III: Collaborative Consumption: Business Model Opportunities and Barriers for Fashion Libraries (co-authored with Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen)<sup>8</sup>*

In the second paper of this thesis, the authors provide initial insight into the barriers and opportunities for developing business models based on the ideas of sharing in the fashion industry and identify relevant points for future studies. By looking at the case of Nordic fashion libraries, i.e., subscription-based services that allow people to share wardrobes, facilitated by a single operator, the authors aim at identifying (1) which barriers are preventing fashion libraries in the Nordic countries from gaining a foothold within the fashion industry, and (2) what the drivers are, supporting a positive market development of fashion libraries in the Nordics.

In recent years, we have witnessed a mushrooming of initiatives based on the ideas for sharing and community in the fashion context. In the Nordic countries, the concept of fashion libraries is

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<sup>8</sup> The paper has been published in the Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, Vol. 19 No. 3, 2015, pp. 258-273)

at the forefront. Within the last few years, fashion libraries have popped up in a number of Nordic cities - in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Malmö, Umeå, Gothenburg, Lund, and Helsinki to name a few. These new fashion-sharing business models are perceived to not only have significant business potential but also to reduce overconsumption and alleviate the therewith-associated sustainability challenges. However, little is known thus far. This paper is the first attempt to shed light on the fashion library concept from a business model perspective by moving scholarly attention beyond its traditional focus on the individual participants in these practices.

Theoretically, this paper adopts a business model perspective, ~~the~~ the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value+ (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). More specifically, this paper applies the business model canvas, developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010), an analytical framework consisting of nine elements, which aids understanding of how a company creates, delivers, and captures value. By going through each business model component ( customer segments, value proposition, channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key resources, key activities, key partnerships, cost structure, etc.), the business architecture of the fashion libraries is described and barriers and drivers are identified. Empirically, this paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory, multiple-case study approach, based on four semi-structured interviews.

The findings suggest that fashion libraries, despite receiving widespread media attention, still constitute small-scale activity, with relatively few members. As most operations are run on a voluntary basis, it is crucial for these initiatives to improve their customer relationships and develop partnerships. By targeting additional customer groups, expanding membership-based services towards additional, reseller-oriented activities, and broadening revenue channels by means of partnership development, these initiatives might be able to transition from non-profit niche activity towards a more sustainable business model that is less dependent on voluntary staff. While the studied fashion libraries have the potential to redefine the way we consume

fashion and provide significant business and sustainability benefits, they are currently lagging behind due to structural challenges (i.e., limited financial, technical, and human resources) as well as the resistance by consumers to part with the dominant ownership culture, which makes the current business model of these fashion-sharing initiatives rather vulnerable.

*Chapter IV: User Satisfaction & Dissatisfaction in the App Sharing Economy: An Investigation into Two-Sided Mobile Fashion Reselling & Swapping Markets*<sup>9</sup>

This third paper of this thesis (single-authored) provides initial insight into mobile fashion reselling and swapping platforms. By means of adopting a new form of data, i.e., smartphone application reviews, this paper aims to answer the question as to which factors are causing user satisfaction and dissatisfaction in these mobile marketplaces, which are currently witnessing a high failure rate. Understanding these factors is paramount to promoting the successful adoption and diffusion of these practices.

By applying the SERVQUAL measurement to mobile word-of-mouth user evaluations in app stores, this paper provides insight into factors that might prevent interested consumers from adopting these new practices. Furthermore, this paper expands our understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls of working with this new form of naturally occurring data. Theoretically, this paper adopts the SERVQUAL model, a measurement developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) to study service quality evaluations. While this model has been developed and extensively applied in the offline context, as well as adjusted for the online context, this paper is, to the author's knowledge, the first of its kind to appropriate the measurement for the mobile context. Empirically, this study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study, based on 300 textual app reviews from three U.S. iTunes apps.

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<sup>9</sup> Forthcoming in: Henninger, C.E., Alevizou, P.J., Goworek, H., and Ryding, D. (eds.). Sustainability in Fashion: A cradle to upcycle approach. Springer: London.

The findings suggest that the majority of users generally appreciate the sharing of clothing via mobile apps, an attitude that constitutes the necessary precondition for changing consumer mindsets and behavior. The app design and product portfolio constitute the major sources of satisfaction. These factors can be assumed to play a crucial role in attracting potential users in the first place to select one facilitator over another. The positive scoring of these factors suggest that the developers and facilitators behind the studied platforms have a rather good understanding of how users wish the app to look and function, and they seem to know how to attract the right crowd in terms of pricing and products offered.

Reliability, responsiveness and structure on the other hand constitute major sources of dissatisfaction. These factors can be assumed to constitute hygiene factors, i.e., the pure presence or positive performance of these factors do not attract potential users to a platform in the first place but might ultimately lead to users switching to another facilitator in the case of negative performance. These findings suggest that the developers and facilitators of the studied application-based *multi-sided platforms* do not listen or respond well to customer complaints after the initial app development stages. Reliability concerns pertain to technical glitches, which indicate that developers are struggling to move these platforms from their beta stages towards more mature stages. Responsiveness concerns pertain to users feeling and fearing that one consumer group of the *multi-sided market* is being favored over another, with customer service not responding well to concerns and problems. While *multi-sided platforms* are assumed to reduce the search costs by bringing together distinct consumer groups, dissatisfaction in terms of structure indicate that facilitators and developers are not doing a good job in reducing search costs in marketplaces otherwise valued for their inventory.

*Chapter V: Blurred Lines: Stakeholder Tensions and Balancing Strategies in Partially-Organized Markets (co-authored with Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen)*<sup>10</sup>

In this fourth and final paper of the thesis (co-authored), the authors aim to identify (1) how sharing marketplaces are organized, and (2) which tensions arise in situations of blurred stakeholder relationships and organizational boundaries. In addition to mapping tensions that might arise between different stakeholder groups, the authors provide suggestions on how to balance these conflicting interests. By drawing upon a wider range of illustrative examples from secondary data from the sharing economy, such as on private commercial hospitality exchange (i.e., *Airbnb*), livery-owner drivers (i.e., *Uber*), fashion libraries, as well as Internet- and mobile-enabled fashion redistribution platforms, the authors aim to provide a more nuanced and holistic picture of the current sharing landscape in this conceptual paper.

In recent years, a variety of new sharing marketplaces have emerged, which diverge from the conventional setup, not only with regard to their profit orientation (e.g., non-profit, for-profit, membership based, transaction based, free-of-charge services), temporality (e.g., temporary leases vs. permanent swaps, temporary pop-up stores vs. permanent setups), form (e.g., physical, non-physical, (online and mobile), hybrid (offline activities coupled with online and mobile platforms or vice versa), formalization (e.g., free, unregulated, informal vs. formalized with fees, regulation, sanctions) as well as with regards to the different types of services, ownerships, and userships traded.

What is quite particular about these markets is that stakeholder roles are not necessarily fixed, but are frequently blurred, which leads to the emergence of a more fluid organizational form, in which stakeholders can occupy multiple roles and functions. This constellation can give rise to a number of challenges, such as which rules to apply and where to place responsibility. The authors conceptualize this setup as a *blurred-roles market* that requires a new way of thinking,

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<sup>10</sup> Forthcoming in: A. Lindgreen, A., Maon, F., Vanhammen, J., Palacios Florencio, B., Strong, C., and Vallaster, C. (eds.). *A Relational Approach to Stakeholder Engagement: A research anthology*. Gower Publishing.



which moves beyond the traditional stakeholder focus on harmony, and instead adds a layer of complexity. This is accomplished by outlining some of the tensions emerging from blurred lines between sharing economy stakeholders.

Theoretically, this conceptual paper adopts the notion of partial organization, popularized by Ahrne and Brunsson (2010), which broadens the understanding of organization beyond formal organizations to other environments such as markets (Ahrne et al., 2014). The insight gained by studying how the markets facilitated by multi-sided sharing platforms are organized was deemed crucial for understanding how they function and change. More specifically, this research paper analyzes tensions emerging among stakeholders in sharing markets along the five domains of organization, i.e., *membership*, *rules*, *monitoring*, *sanctions*, and *hierarchy*, which constitute formal organization.

The findings suggest that the future of the sharing economy will depend on the ability of sharing initiatives to not only navigate oppositional stakeholder expectations and institutional demands, but also to conform to existing norms and rules in order to mitigate and avoid negative stakeholder sanctions. Furthermore, this paper highlights the benefit of breaking with the dominant logic that is focused on harmony, and advocates focusing on conflict, dilemmas, and paradoxes in order to gain a more realistic view of the lived reality of sharing initiatives and to provide balancing strategies that can aid sharing companies in addressing challenges.

Table 4: Overview of Research Papers

	<i>Chapter II</i>	<i>Chapter III</i>	<i>Chapter IV</i>	<i>Chapter V</i>
<i>Title (co-authors)</i>	%Availability cascades & the sharing economy . A critical outlook at sharing economy narratives+(single-authored).	%Collaborative consumption: Business model opportunities and barriers for fashion libraries+(with Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen).	%User satisfaction & dissatisfaction in the app sharing economy: An investigation into two-sided mobile fashion reselling & swapping markets+(single-authored).	%Blurred lines: Stakeholder tensions and balancing strategies in partially-organized markets+(with Esben Rahbek Gjerdrum Pedersen).
<i>Research question(s)</i>	Which narratives are used to construct the sharing economy phenomenon?  How is the sharing economy phenomenon diffused?	What are the drivers, supporting a positive market development of fashion libraries in the Nordic countries?  Which barriers are preventing fashion libraries in the Nordic countries from gaining a foothold within the fashion industry?	What are the factors causing user dis/satisfaction with mobile clothing reselling & swapping platforms?	How are sharing markets organized?  What are the tensions in these partially-organized markets?
<i>Methods</i>	Conceptual paper	Empirical paper using data from the fashion library study	Empirical paper using data from the online & mobile redistribution platforms study	Conceptual paper
<i>Findings</i>	The diffusion of the sharing economy can be considered an availability cascade.  Through the careful construction of narratives, pertaining to the sustainable potential of the sharing economy, a number of different availability entrepreneurs actively initiate and manage the diffusion of the phenomenon.	Fashion libraries have the potential to redefine fashion consumption and provide significant business and sustainability benefits.  However, they are challenged by structural factors (limited financial and human resources) as well as by resistance to change consumer mindsets.	The majority of users like the sharing of clothing via mobile apps.  App facilitators appear to have a good understanding of how the app should look and function, and attract the right audience.  However, app facilitators appear not to listen or respond well to customers after the initial app development stages.	Sharing economy markets exhibit different degrees of organization along the partial-complete organization continuum.  Depending on the degree of organization and the involved stakeholders, different tensions arise with regards to membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions.

## **6. FINAL REMARKS**

This thesis investigates micro- and macro-level tensions in the sharing economy. By arguing that a more nuanced understanding of this emergent phenomenon is needed, this thesis seeks to improve the empirical evidence base on some of the micro- and macro-level tensions caused and experienced by sharing initiatives and aims to contribute to the conceptual-theoretical development of the sharing economy. The four independent research papers constituting this PhD thesis are presented in the following chapters. In the final chapter, the conclusion, the limitations of this thesis are addressed, findings and implications are linked and discussed, and avenues of future research are outlined.



## Chapter II

### ***Availability cascades & the sharing economy Ä A critical outlook at sharing economy narratives***

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## AVAILABILITY CASCADES & THE SHARING ECONOMY: A CRITIQUE OF SHARING ECONOMY NARRATIVES

### **Abstract**

*As scholars search for answers on how modern societies should resolve the social and environmental problems linked to modes of production and consumption, the sharing economy is attracting increased attention. To better understand the emergent focus on the sharing economy and associated business and consumption models, this conceptual chapter applies cascade theory to some of the most pronounced narratives, suggesting a win-win scenario, especially as they relate to the claim of sustainability. Given the tendency among academics, practitioners, and civil society of rapidly embracing new concepts that enable business opportunities and a clear conscience, this chapter proposes that the implications of the sharing economy should be critically explored before they are endorsed and actively promoted.*

Keywords: availability cascades; availability entrepreneurs; cascade theory; sharing economy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Whether regional currencies in Bavaria, couch surfing in San Francisco, fashion libraries in Copenhagen, or car sharing in Berlin, all signs point to a paradigm shift toward a sharing economy. Ownership was yesterday; today, it's all about access (Rifkin, 2000). The sharing economy ultimately involves sharing and collaborating to meet certain needs, encompassing practically all types of products and services. Specifically, people come together to share excess resources, expand product life expectancies, and utilize capacities through access to use rather than ownership (Belk, 2010; Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Hence, what started out as action by a few grassroots organizations critical of our current growth-oriented economic system and our current modes of production and consumption now looks poised to gain a foothold with the average citizen (Grimm and Kunze, 2011; Seidl and Zahrnt, 2012). As a result, the concept of a sharing economy is attracting increased attention. For example, in 2010, *Time Magazine* listed it as one of the 10 ideas that will change the world (Walsh, 2011), with sustainability not always being the driver but frequently considered a positive side effect of sharing products and services (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Such statements, together with anecdotal evidence from different industries, have significantly contributed to the hype surrounding the sharing economy, with media, academia, the business world, and civil society singing the praises of organizations whose business models are built around the idea of sharing.

There are good reasons to pay attention to the recent mushrooming of initiatives based on the ideas of sharing and community, a proliferation that suggests the sharing economy may be more than a simple fad. In fact, the idea might turn out to be a disruptive - even transformative - force that will fundamentally challenge and change the way business systems work today. As modern societies search for ways to remedy the social and environmental problems linked with our present modes of production and consumption, the sharing economy is increasingly being treated as a solution. In fact, since Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers (2010) popularized the

term in *What's Mine Is Yours*, the concept has gained particularly widespread media attention. The majority of these media stories issue narratives suggesting a win-win scenario for all parties involved. Especially pronounced are claims of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. While the sharing concept might add to the solution to the problems with our current systems of production and consumption, unquestioningly adopting and actively promoting the sharing economy without understanding its pitfalls and downsides might come at a price. Transitioning towards a sharing economy could have significant negative implications, consequences that modern societies may not want to acknowledge. We may, for example, not only overestimate the sharing economy's current market size and potential (, creating a 'sharing bubble'), but more profoundly underestimate rebound effects, such as a worsening of the job and housing crises, increasing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, which may hinder sustainable development. Therefore, society needs to critically assess the dominant narratives in order to understand (a) the actual substance (, market potential) of a sharing economy and (b) the sustainability implications of producing and consuming through sharing.

Based on interviews with leading experts, a thorough study of the available literature, and illustrative examples, this conceptual chapter aims to shed light on some of the dominant narratives surrounding this rediscovery of an old phenomenon. By applying cascade theory to some of the most pronounced narratives, this chapter seeks to provide a better understanding of the emergent focus on a sharing economy, especially in its commercialized form, and the rapid adoption of win-win scenarios. To date, however, despite a range of examples from popular literature, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the sharing economy. Hence, the major contribution of this chapter lies in being (to the author's best knowledge) the first attempt to apply cascade theories to the emergence of the sharing economy phenomenon. This cascade framework has proven especially helpful in making sense of why certain ideas and approaches have . sometimes misleadingly . risen to popularity in society and academia while others were deemed a fad from the start (Sunstein, 2001; Lemieux, 2003/2004). In this way,



this chapter advances our limited knowledge of the potential and risks associated with this alternative mode of consumption.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows: After introducing a sharing economy taxonomy, there is an outline of several prominent justifications for the emergence of the sharing economy. Following this the chapter takes a closer look at some of the arguably win-win narratives. Subsequently, an alternative approach is proposed which helps to explain the emergence of the sharing economy and these narratives by introducing and applying the underlying theoretical framework, i.e., availability cascades. The chapter concludes with some remarks regarding future work.

## **II. A SHARING ECONOMY TAXONOMY**

In recent years, the sharing economy and affiliated concepts collaborative consumption, *peer-to-peer economy*, *mesh*, *gift economy*, and the *solidarity economy* have increasingly received attention in practice and public discourse. However, as Heinrichs (2013) notes the majority of the academic discourse still lags behind. Some streams of research have more and more begun to study sharing economy practices, especially with regard to the eco-efficiency of product-service systems for investment goods, such as cars (Hockerts, 2008; Mont, 2000). Such interest is not surprising considering the potential resource reductions and financial savings from, for example, decreasing the number of cars and optimizing usage. With the car-sharing services provided by *Citroën*, *Mercedes*, and similar companies, the automotive industry is living proof that the sharing economy not only constitutes a social movement with disruptive potential but provides opportunities for developing business models that go beyond traditional forms and traditional relationships between producers and consumers (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Botsman and Rogers, 2010).

At its core, the sharing economy can be defined as people sharing underutilized assets and skills to meet certain needs, whether related to transportation, accommodation, land, skills, or

other elements of everyday life. With one of the early forms of collaborative consumption relating to collaborative housing (first introduced in Denmark in the 1960s), today, different forms of collaborative consumption exist, varying not only in purpose but also in scale and maturity. According to Botsman and Rogers (2010), these different forms can be roughly organized into three subsystems: (1) product-service systems, (2) redistribution markets, and (3) collaborative lifestyles.

In a product-service system, people pay for the benefit of using a product, without having to own the product themselves. Classic examples of product-service systems are car rentals, car or tool sharing services. Products in these systems can be privately owned or owned by companies. Sustainability aspects of product-service systems pertain primarily to decreasing the number of underutilized products. That is, through sharing, the utility of often infrequently used individually-owned products gets optimized. Besides the obvious benefit of not having to pay the full price for owning the product, individuals are also relieved of the burdens associated with ownership, i.e., costs associated with maintenance, repair, and insurance, which can be shared among all users (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Redistribution markets, on the other hand, refer to a system in which pre-owned goods are distributed to new owners. Sustainability aspects of redistribution markets evolve around the reduction of waste and use of resources (which would otherwise be involved in the making of new products) by reusing and reselling instead of discarding unwanted items (*ibid.*). While product-service systems and redistribution markets are primarily concerned with the sharing and exchanging of physical goods, collaborative lifestyles are concerned with the exchanging and sharing of less tangible assets, such as skills, space, or time (*ibid.*).

These three subsystems can be further systematized. In an early attempt, Cohen (2014b) suggests taxonomy of sharing activities, based on ownership motivation as well as ownership structure. In his taxonomy, he suggests that items up for sharing can be individually owned or conjointly owned, with the act of sharing being driven by either pecuniary or non-pecuniary

motives. Although the sharing economy is typified by serialized rental of durable investment goods such as cars (e.g., *Zipcar*) as well as micro-entrepreneurship (e.g., *Lyft* or *Uber*), the idea is increasingly expanding to other archetypes, as well as non-durable types of products and services that offer opportunities to share excess resources and expand product life expectancy - for example, in fashion items and accessories (Pedersen and Netter, 2015).

Plausible popular explanations for the growth of the sharing economy phenomenon range from technological advancements, to economic necessity, and subjective well-being (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Plausible alternative explanations for wider public acceptance of alternative forms of production and consumption stress a rising discontent with our throwaway economy's wastefulness (Albinsson and Perera, 2012), disenchantment with the green growth agenda, and distrust of prevailing market structures (Seidl and Zahrt, 2012).

### **III. A CLOSER LOOK AT NARRATIVES**

In order to contribute to slowing down the formation of a sharing bubble and preventing the implosion of what could be a positive force in the transformation of today's growth-oriented society, we need to take a closer look at the working mechanisms of the sharing economy phenomenon, its narratives. In this regard, there are two major possibilities for overestimating the phenomenon and creating a sharing bubble: (a) methodological flaws, which lead to overestimating its current market size and potential and (b) overestimating the sharing economy's potential to contribute to sustainable development. This pertains especially to the more commercialized, for-profit archetypes of the sharing economy, as highlighted in Section 2. In the following paragraphs, some of the different win-win narratives, or rather elements of the sharing economy narrative will be discussed. What all of these narratives have in common are their sustainability claims, whether on an environmental, social, or economical level, or, as is frequently the case, a combination of all three elements.

## Overestimation of Current Market Size and Potential

In terms of statistical information, our knowledge of the sharing economy is to date rather limited. To the authors knowledge, no representative statistical information is available on the total available market size of the sharing economy, much less by product or service category or country. That is not only due to most of the recently emerged mobile-enabled sharing websites and platforms being in their infancy but also due to sharing activities historically being part of an informal system, which was not relevant to grasp statistically. Yet despite this fundamental lack of information, the sharing economy is praised by entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, consumers, and mass media alike and expected to revolutionize the economy.

A commonly used parameter for assessing the market size of the sharing economy is financial revenues. Based on this parameter, that is financial benefits, Geron (2013) predicted that the sharing economy would generate 2013 revenues worth USD 350 billion. However, this number must be assessed as a rough estimate, not only as it is based on self-reporting by large organizations, but also because so far, no clear definition of the sharing economy exists. This opacity makes it rather problematic to define and delineate what kind of organizations are contributing to this economic development (Parsons, 2014). For example, classic short-term rentals, such as car rentals (e.g., *Sixt*, *Hertz*, or *Avis*) are conceptualized as part of the sharing economy rather than as part of the traditional economy.

Another frequently used parameter for evaluating the potential of the sharing economy are the investments made by venture capitalists, which can be quite problematic. In the case of *Airbnb* for instance, the company has never disclosed any information on its revenues or profitability. Nonetheless, its valuation has risen from 2.5 to 10 billion dollars within a span of two years (Bradshaw, 2014). Furthermore, as in the case of seed funding, investment and valuation decisions by venture capitalists are made pre-revenue, that is before the start-up has even earned a single dime and managed to accomplish a positive cash flow. With approximately 75 percent of start-ups failing (Gage, 2012), venture capitalists need to consider how to

compensate for their likely investment losses in their investment portfolio. Hence, valuations by venture capitalists viewed as indicators for the potential of the sharing economy need to be treated with great caution. Such valuations are, especially in the early investment rounds, based on both the speculative future value of these corporations as well as a buffer to compensate for failing start-ups in the portfolios of investors.

Even today, a wide variety of sharing economy activities do not involve any sort of remuneration or financial transaction. While these activities might not directly contribute to economic sustainability, indirect effects can be observed. In the case of fashion libraries for instance, some of these organizations are operating on a free-of-charge membership base, i.e., members can borrow or take clothing out of the system without having to pay a fee (Pedersen and Netter, 2015). Membership of such initiatives might thus provide individuals with the opportunity to participate in elements of the social life that are otherwise difficult to obtain. Unemployed might for instance be able to attend a job interview in appropriate attire, by renting suitable outfits. Besides these social and indirect economic effects, such forms of redistribution have the potential to reduce the amount of clothing and textiles finding their way to landfills and incineration facilities, thus having a positive environmental impact. Overall, when talking about the potential of the sharing economy, we need to be careful about reducing it to only those activities that can be monetized or involve some sort of remuneration.

### **Overestimation of Sustainability Potential**

In general, society has been rather quick to accept the concept of sustainable development as central to our understanding of the relationship between humans and nature without actually developing a clear definition (Bebbington, 2001). This failure has created a situation in which different definitions are accepted, depending on the academic discourse and discipline. In the public discourse where business, policy-makers, civil society, and consumers meet, the business community appears only too willing to act as an availability entrepreneur . to fill the

empty shell of sustainable development with content, promote the concept, and drive the discussion. As Springett (2003) emphasizes, it is smart to own the language of the debate and to fill the void with one's own definitions, terms, and concepts so as to actively silence those who might favor a stronger approach to sustainability that decouples sustainable development from economic growth.

The question, however, remains, whether we can grow into sustainability (Goodland, 1995). As Daly (1977) argued, continuously pursuing economic growth can only hinder chances for achieving sustainable development and the survival of humankind, suggesting that growth as the motor and goal for everything is not compatible with protecting the environment and bringing about social improvement. Instead, economic growth must be seen as a major cause of today's problems and eco-efficient business-as-usual approaches as insufficient to solving them when resource-efficient product solutions lead to increased demand or usage of those products and services (Schrader, 2001). Thus, what are needed if environmental and social problems are to be resolved are radical structural changes in the current business and market system (Gray, 2002).

While there is widespread agreement on the sharing economy's potential to revolutionize production and consumption, public and academic discourse remains more or less silent regarding incidental negative side effects, i.e., rebound effects, which could offset environmental, social and economic benefits. This might be especially true for those forms of sharing which follow the same financial and commercial logic as traditional business models and market structures, and less so for those oriented towards solidarity, aiming to disrupt the existing system towards less materialism (Stevenson, 2014).

Different win-win narratives about the sharing economy exist, which frequently utilize arguments pertaining to the phenomenon's potential to benefit economies, societies and the environment (Parsons, 2014). In the following, some of the most prominent win-win narrative will be highlighted that persist in discussions about the sharing economy.

## The Environmental Win-Win Narrative

One of the most pronounced claims of sharing economy proponents pertains to its sustainability potential. Sustainability is in these claims most frequently conceptualized as, or rather reduced to, its environmental dimensions. Almost all forms of sharing activities claim to contribute to resource efficiency by optimizing the use of underutilized assets (Cohen, 2014a; Botsman and Rogers, 2010). By providing access instead of relying on ownership of goods, overall consumption levels are assumed to be reduced, as the need to buy and own products is assumed to be lessened when the relevant items can be accessed elsewhere, for instance via tool-libraries or fashion libraries (Pedersen and Netter, 2015). Other specialized services, such as car-sharing or bike-sharing programs in the mobility sector, are championed for enabling energy savings, a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and a general reduction of overall traffic (Wogan, 2013). Besides reducing resource throughput, redistribution of unwanted goods is also assumed to contribute to the reduction of the amounts of products finding their way to landfills or incineration facilities. Examples of redistribution range from generalist platforms, offering a wide variety of products - such as *eBay* or *Yerdle* - to specialized platforms - such as *Vinted*, or *Trendsales* - in the case of fashion and accessories.

In terms of the positive environmental impact of sharing activities, it is important to bear in mind that we cannot simply generalize from one sharing economy archetype to another. In a similar vein, we cannot generalize from one product group or service to another. Whereas certain products inherently have long lifespans but are rarely used to their full potential during their owner's lifetime (e.g., tool kits), the lifespan of other products, such as fashion items, is influenced by trends and styles rather than the potential utility of the garments. Hence, despite its potential, a sharing economy may be unable to improve the sustainability profile of such industries as fashion. Even worse, claims at sustainability might actually aggravate the situation by incentivizing consumers to shop guilt free, thereby increasing throwaway fashion and negating any real sustainability. In addition to possibly worsening consumption through clothing

acquisition and disposal, consumption by means of a sharing economy, especially in its online form, might also have negative effects by requiring increased levels of transportation for delivery and a more intense use of water, energy, and chemicals for garment maintenance.

For many products, the major environmental hot spots exist in the use phase of their lifespan (BSR, 2009). A reduction of new products entering the system, as a consequence of sharing existing ones, might reduce the amount of resources used in the production. However, these positive effects might very well be cancelled out by intensifications in the use phase. In the case of clothing for instance, the impact portfolio tips strongly in favor of the use phase (if for example a T-shirt is worn and washed 200 times more than what is common nowadays before being discarded), but shows an increase in the overall environmental impact as well. Similar assumptions can be made for other contexts that are facilitating the sharing of existing products with a heavy use phase impact, such as cars. Hence, while car-sharing schemes might decrease the amount of people owning an automobile, the number of people making use of an automobile might actually increase (Martin and Shaheen, 2011). Thus, the environmental impact of this intensified use might invalidate the reduction of emissions accomplished by the decrease in privately owned cars. This is especially the case when alternative mobility schemes are affordable for former car owners and made available to populations otherwise reliant on public transportation - for instance, students (ibid.).

Furthermore, increasing sharing activities might also undermine and cancel out regulations, which were actually put in place in order to reduce the environmental pollution of certain regions or cities. In the case of the city of San Francisco for instance, 85% of the city's taxi fleet consists of hybrid or CNG fueled cars. The therewith-connected reduction of carbon emissions benefits not only the health of the city residents but also the environment. These efforts are undermined by unregulated ride sharing companies, such as *Lyft* or *Uber* (Bond-Graham, 2013), which might not only have severe environmental but also social impacts, i.e., regarding the health of citizens.



## The Employment and Empowerment Narrative

In terms of economic and social benefits, the sharing economy is said to offer employment opportunities, i.e., the ability to empower citizens economically by enabling them to capitalize on their skills and resources. By means of the creation of jobs and business opportunities, with citizens being frequently conceptualized as nano- or micro-entrepreneurs, the sharing economy has the potential to contribute to the alleviation of poverty (Troncoso, 2014). Popular examples range from renting out one's spare room on *Airbnb*, using one's car as a quasi-taxi on *Lyft*, or offering one's skills and services on *Taskrabbit*. Besides empowering citizens to make use of their skills and resources, the sharing economy is frequently presented as a democratizing and inclusive force in the economy, contributing to equity and social justice (Parsons, 2014).

Democratizing and inclusive, as it allows for citizens to participate in otherwise unobtainable parts of social life, whether by means of creating one's own job potpourri or finally accessing otherwise unaffordable objects. Sharing might also have a positive impact on an individual's subjective well-being, as sharing can contribute to rebuilding the social ties lost or degraded in the age of hyper-consumption (ibid.).

Empowering citizens to create their own jobs and monetize their skills and assets might enable financially challenged individuals to pay bills and earn a livelihood for themselves and their families. In the long-term, however, this brand of self-employment might actually have a detrimental effect on basic working conditions such as healthcare, insurance, or pensions. While employment in the sharing economy might help an individual make ends meet in the short term, participation may come at the cost of foregoing basic employment protections. Besides direct effects on those employed in the sharing economy, the system as such might also have severe effects on those employed in competing traditional industries. The hotel and taxi industries for instance are heavily regulated sectors with many, living-wage union jobs. The majority of this workforce is of immigrant origin, people of color (Burns, 2014), or other particularly vulnerable socio-demographic subgroups whose livelihood and well-being may be

significantly impaired by regulated industries such as the hotel or taxi industry losing their business to sharing economy organizations (Byers et al., 2013).

While one could argue that vulnerable socio-demographic sub groups could improve their situation by capitalizing on the sharing economy themselves, Edelman and Luca (2014) suggest that certain ethnic, aesthetic, as well as socio-demographic factors might pose a challenge to participating in the sharing economy. In their study (ibid.) of *Airbnb* landlords in New York City, they found that black hosts face racial discrimination, with non-black hosts being able to charge approximately 12% more for an equivalent property, highlighting the rebound effects of seemingly routine trust-building mechanisms such as personal profiles, pictures and links to social media accounts. In a similar vein, it is questionable whether participation in the sharing economy is as appealing for the poorest parts of society as is advertised. Even though sharing is known to be a long-standing practice among impecunious groups of society, it is not necessarily a welcomed practice within such communities but rather stigmatized. For instance, in the case of clothing, reliance on hand-me-downs or redistribution markets for the acquisition of new clothing is perceived as a sign of poverty (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006). The question needs to be raised as to whether the sharing economy is merely catering to itself, the urban, middle class and fashionably Left-leaning hipsters with a lot of western guilt (Kaushik, 2014), or if the sharing economy has broader appeal and can positively impact all strata of society.

Other issues, which are infrequently discussed, are aspects of the sharing economy that may undermine democracy by circumventing regulations and taxation (Parsons, 2014; Burns, 2014). While *Airbnb* and other examples of the sharing economy may empower citizens to create their own jobs and monetize underutilized assets, the rise of the sharing economy might very well contribute to the exacerbation of a city's job or housing crisis, none the least undermining democratic governance (Parsons, 2014).

Undermining democratic systems by encouraging deregulated and precarious employment schemes might have severe consequences not only for those so-called micro- or nano-entrepreneurs, but also for the broader public. In the words of author Evgeny Morozov (2013), the sharing economy contributes to ~~the~~ the erosion of full-time employment, the disappearance of healthcare and insurance benefits, the assault on unions and the transformation of workers into always-on self-employed entrepreneurs who must think like brands. The sharing economy amplifies the worst excesses of the dominant economic model: it is neoliberalism on steroids.+ It can be argued that these forms of employment constitute a form of illicit labor, since they happen outside the documented, taxed economy. When public budgets are strained by losses in tax revenue (Stevenson, 2014; Burns, 2014), welfare services stand to be reduced as a consequence while at the same time the numbers of those in need may rise. This is not only relevant with regard to the hotel industry and its sharing competition in the form of *Airbnb* and others, but also with regard to other highly-regulated business sectors that are based on collective bargaining agreements and unionized labor, such as the taxi industry.

### **The Community Narrative**

Closely linked to the creation of jobs and the empowerment of individuals by means of the sharing economy is the revitalization of communities, i.e., community development, as well as community resilience. As the San Francisco Sharing Economy Working Group (2012) highlights, greater economic empowerment of citizens and the creation of local jobs will in turn produce more local economic benefits and contribute to the community's development. Looking at the case of *Airbnb*, for instance, money generated through these transactions will predominantly flow back into the very neighborhood where the short-term rental is located. With the majority of short-term rentals being located in residential areas, i.e., outside classical touristic areas, the local economies of these neighborhoods are assumed to profit greatly.

Besides economic vitalization, the sharing economy and especially its technological platforms are said to have vast potential of contributing to community resilience, especially in light of man-made or natural disasters (Cohen, 2014a). The city of San Francisco for instance has initiated a partnership with a local sharing economy association in order to prepare the city to be more resilient in times of crisis. The city of Boston experienced the fast organization of citizens offering their homes to strangers in the response to the 2013 Boston marathon bombing (ibid.). In a similar vein, *Airbnb* partnered with the city's mayor in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy to provide free housing for those citizens affected by the disaster (Smith, 2012).

However, besides potentially exacerbating the job crisis and straining the public budget, the sharing economy might also worsen the housing crisis. While short-term rentals have always existed as part of the informal economy, this becomes problematic when individuals start operating de facto hotels, which are neither subject to rental laws and the therewith-connected obligations, nor subject to hotel regulations, for instance pertaining to the safety of the property. Instead of a government-mandated price control, prices for properties in the sharing economy are dictated by demand. In cities such as San Francisco or New York, which are geographically strictly delineated by natural boundaries, rents are climbing while the housing supply diminishes. One of the reasons why these two cities constitute two of the most expensive housing markets in the U.S. might very well be the development of the housing market in favor of short-term rentals, which are more lucrative for landlords than yearlong leases at rent controlled prices (Monroe, 2014). Propelling prices of property as a consequence of many short-term rental arrangements could further contribute to urban gentrification, where long-term tenants do not have a say or influence on the blueprint of their neighborhoods and communities (Burns, 2014).

#### **IV. THE SHARING ECONOMY, AN AVAILABILITY CASCADE**

In the following, an alternative explanation for the emergence of the sharing economy and its powerful win-win narratives will be presented. After providing a theoretical introduction to the underlying framework, cascade theory will be applied to the sharing economy phenomenon.

##### **Introduction to Availability Cascades**

Availability cascades are a variation on information cascades (Bikhchandani et al., 1992; Lemieux, 2003/2004). Availability cascades were developed by Kuran and Sunstein (1999) to explain why novel ideas gain rapid prominence in popular discourse. In these cascades, information is mediated by a number of heuristics, rules of thumb, or mental shortcuts, which individuals employ in their everyday decision-making. These enable individuals to make sense of their environment and make judgments by replacing complex decisions with simpler ones. Yet, as a series of experiments have shown, the ways in which individuals receive, store, retrieve, and process information are subject to a number of systematic problems (Kuran and Sunstein, 1999, p. 705). The most critical factor is the availability heuristic, which involves estimating the probability of an event on the basis of how easily instances of it can be brought to mind (Tversky and Kahneman, as cited in Kuran and Sunstein, 1999, p. 706). Thus, in an availability cascade, individuals not only follow the lead of others thought to possess reliable information but also take the mere availability of information or examples as an indication of probability and reliability, which further reinforces the cycle. In Lemieux's (2003/2004, p. 20) words, "the availability of information influences individual perceptions, which in turn adds more of the same to available information, thereby reinforcing individual responses. Availability cascades, therefore, through their rising popularity in public discourse, can create social errors and mistaken beliefs that can produce mass delusion and detrimental market bubbles, as well as harmful policies and laws (Kuran and Sunstein, 1999).

Another key social mechanism contributing to the development of availability cascades are reputational factors, although reputational cascades differ from informational cascades in the underlying personal motives. That is, whereas in an informational cascade, individuals subject themselves to social influence by ascribing greater knowledgeability to others, in reputational cascades, they seek social approval and avoid disapproval regardless of their own knowledge. As Kuran and Sunstein put it, "In seeking to achieve their reputational objectives, people take to speaking and acting as if they share, or at least do not reject, what they view as the dominant belief" (1999, p. 686, 687). Additionally, "If a particular perception of an event somehow appears to have become the social norm, people seeking to build or protect their reputations will begin endorsing it through their words and deeds, regardless of their actual thoughts" (ibid., p. 687). Because of this reputational element, availability cascades tend to be more stable than pure informational cascades because "once an availability cascade has started, few will dare to question the underlying self-righteous and apparently obvious conventional wisdom. [ ] New information is much less forthcoming because nobody wants to risk his [or her] reputation by going against the trend" (Lemieux, 2003/2004, p. 20).

This active management of availability cascades . by not only silencing deviant opinions and actions in public discourse but also creating availability campaigns aimed at triggering cascades likely to advance one's own agenda . is very much in the sphere of the social agent action that Kuran and Sunstein (1999) label "availability entrepreneurs." These availability activists are willing to invest resources in advancing a certain agenda in a market of competing beliefs at the risk of economic and reputational damage. Thus, while convincing enough individuals to be receptive to a given availability cascade constitutes an important precondition for successful diffusion, the impact of information salience and vividness cannot be overestimated (ibid., p. 706).

## Application of Cascading Theory to the Sharing Economy

As noted earlier in this chapter, plausible explanations for the emergence of the sharing economy phenomenon range from technological advancements, economic necessity, well-being, disenchantment and distrust, to resistance against the wastefulness of our throwaway society. Yet there are other possible explanations that point to a potential availability cascade rather than an actual substantive phenomenon. The cited work on informational and reputational cascades, particularly by Sunstein (2001), provides a useful theoretical framework and factors for examining the emergence and popularity of certain approaches to sustainable development in civil society, the business community, and among academics.

One such factor is the appealing familiarity of the underlying phenomena . sharing, swapping, lending, bartering, renting. As emphasized earlier, despite some novelties such as leasing jeans or subscribing to weekly clothing deliveries, most sharing approaches are anything but new. Likewise, the acquisition and disposal of second hand clothing and the handing down, borrowing, or swapping of clothes within families or groups of friends are very familiar concepts. Therefore, when information on sharing fashion is readily available and instances easy to find, individuals see them as an indication of the behavior's reliability and plausibility.

Familiarity, however, pertains not only to the practices of swapping, lending, bartering, and renting but also to the media, including the mobile technologies that facilitate most of these practices. Hence, the driving socio-demographic force behind the development of a sharing economy (Thompson and Weissmann, 2012) is a subset of the millennial generation or *generation Y* born in the 1980s and 1990, the so-called *digital natives* (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Palfrey et al., 2009). This group, having grown up immersed in a networked world, with access to ubiquitous digital technologies and the ability to learn and use them in fluent and sophisticated ways (Vodanovich et al., 2010, p. 711. 712), tends to trust enabling technologies and strives to push these quasi-primordial practices out of their niche existence.

Two major contributory factors to the availability cascade are salience and vividness. Powerful win-win narratives and anecdotes, such as *Airbnb* CEO Brian Chesky's account of not owning an apartment but travelling the world staying at *Airbnb* homes in beautiful locations, which make this system of production and consumption seem very appealing to those longing to free themselves of all dead weight (e.g., ownership of material goods). Similarly, when trendsetting character Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* chats with her assistant about renting an expensive handbag from Bag Borrow or Steal, formerly out-of-reach fashion items suddenly become affordable for the average citizen.

It is also significant that the majority of sharing initiatives build on social media to provide transparency by means of reference systems and instill trust between strangers, which greatly increases their visibility . and thus the availability of related information and examples. Given the importance of social approval during times of increased social media exposure and the need to actively manage online selves, reputational factors may also play their part. For instance, Cheng *et al.* (2002) suggest that the sharing economy dominates digital natives at a stage in their lives when finding individual identities through experimentation and play is crucial. Social media aids them in their attempts to find the identity that will provide them with the most approval while not risking their membership in social groups (McKenna and Bargh, 1999).

Another crucial factor in availability cascade formation around the sharing economy phenomenon is the presence of availability entrepreneurs, who in this context are primarily founders of sharing initiatives, venture capitalists, sharing lobby organizations, or mass media proprietors. The first two, especially, are highly invested in development of this type of cascade in hopes of striking it rich with the next *Airbnb*-like business idea (Brincat, 2013). Not only would failure mean major financial losses, but their reputations are also on the line, which could be even more costly in the long run. They thus have an interest in sustaining the cascade and making the market development happen by a) silencing critical voices via the work of their affiliated sharing lobby organizations such as the case of *Peers* and *Airbnb* in the Los Angeles



neighborhood Silverlake (Leonard, 2013) and b) striving to create appealing narratives in the mass media.

Such public exposure increases the availability of information on the sharing economy and ultimately adds (often false) credibility and authority to the phenomenon through market assessment. Yet because the mass media's objective, rather than educating, is to reach the largest possible number of print runs, i.e., public attention, this latter can come at a cost for society. As Kuran and Sunstein (1999) point out, media outlets have diverse and complex objectives, but it is clear that most newspapers, magazines, and television stations seek to enlarge their audience. It is also clear that this goal generally causes them to emphasize dangers over security, give some risks more exposure than others, and treat certain risks as particularly serious. The media exercise these influences by controlling the prominence with which stories are pursued, by selecting, soliciting, and shaping the quotations used in developing storylines, and by selecting the facts reported to advance editorial purposes, among other mechanisms (ibid., p. 719).

Without a doubt, the efforts by availability entrepreneurs are taking root in fertile soil. Over the last few years, consumer awareness has been on the rise, particularly when it comes to issues around how we produce and consume. For instance in the case of fashion, the latest incident that spurred media and public interest worldwide was the signing of the *Accord on Fire and Building Safety* in the aftermath of the collapse and burning of garment factories in Bangladesh in 2012. Even though such events inspire a wish in consumers to do something good and meaningful or to alter traditional buying habits, such altruism is not always possible despite the best intentions. Hence, even the slightest indication that an alternative like the sharing economy might be a more sustainable approach to consumption without a need for complete abstinence, these consumption forms become more salient and more readily recalled. As a result, society may end up exaggerating certain benefits and underestimating risks to the actual sustainability potential.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As Sunstein (2001, p. 2) puts it, the underlying forces [of cascades] can spark creativity and give new ideas a chance to prosper. Unfortunately, these same forces can also produce error and confusion. While there is reason to believe that the sharing economy and associated business and consumption models have vast potential of alleviating some of society's economic, environmental, and social challenges, there is also a legitimate risk that the hype surrounding the sharing economy might in fact constitute a false cascade. Such a cascade is based on powerful win-win narratives surrounding commercialized archetypes, false assumptions or overestimations of the current market size and potential for the sharing economy to contribute to sustainable development.

One feature that makes the sharing economy concept so particularly attractive is its variety of forms and archetypes, which fulfills the hardened expectations on both sides of the socialist and capitalist ideological spectrum without being an ideology in itself (Botsman and Rogers, 2010, p. xxii). On one side of the spectrum, hedonistic consumers and venture capitalists searching for the next *Airbnb* see this paradigm shift as the rise of a new business model, as new opportunities for consuming even more and capitalizing on such consumption. On the other, political consumers see the sharing economy as a social movement, as an alternative to current overconsumption patterns. This appeal to different actors, which combines feel-good elements with business opportunities, helps make this availability cascade more stable, spanning otherwise local cascade boundaries.

Within this framework, the heavy business support for the win-win rationale of the sharing economy agenda is very understandable as it provides a combination of business opportunities and a clear conscience. Similar observations have been made with regard to the development of the green growth agenda, especially in terms of the rapid acceptance of certain concepts, i.e., sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR), as central to our understanding of the relationship between nature and all actors involved (Lain, 2005). However,

the very factors that may make the sharing economy successful could also lead to its downfall, with the sharing economy running the risk of washing out because of the myriad of interpretations and applications associated with the phenomenon.

While a variety of broad and fuzzy definitions might be beneficial in the early stages of the formation of a new field, there is risk around the most powerful players in the field hijacking the discourse in their favor. As Bebbington (2001) highlights in the case of sustainable development, its loose definition has positively contributed to the concept's dominant place in discourses worldwide. Its vagueness, however, has also led to a myriad of interpretations and to various parties instrumentalizing the concept for their own ends including hijacking it for green washing.

In fact, as with sustainable development and the related CSR discourse, part of the sharing economy's success lies in its very opacity and vagueness. The discourse is carefully driven by availability entrepreneurs - particularly entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and sharing lobby organizations - who author and manage powerful win-win narratives that suggest that the sharing economy is a type of cure-all - one that will not only provide solutions for environmental problems and improve social issues but also further economic growth. Hence, there is a strong need for clarification around the concept and the related sustainable development discourse.

In addition to its heavy support by availability entrepreneurs from business sectors (i.e., primarily entrepreneurs and venture capitalists) and lobbying organizations who hope to silence critical voices, this sharing economy agenda has also attracted policy-makers, academics, and large parts of the civil society. However, it is questionable whether all actors actually share this win-win thinking. Nor would it be appropriate to assume that supporters of this line of thought consist only of the easily persuaded. It may in fact be the case that promises implied by win-win scenarios make it easier to engage the public in dialogue and advance certain agendas than do threats of fundamental changes to our current thinking on production and consumption.

It must also be acknowledged that politicians and academics are subject to the same cognitive biases and reputational forces that form the rules of the game for the average citizen. It is thus quite likely that a fair number of these actors actually have different personal opinions of what sustainability should encompass, but in circumstances where deviating from the dominant discourse can mean putting one's reputation, career, or re-election at risk, towing the party line may seem a more appealing option (Sunstein, 2001). The more individuals adopt the dominant opinion and contribute to this discourse, the more the available information and the more seemingly plausible the agenda.

To date, little is known about the effectiveness and potential of sharing economy initiatives, so a clearer understanding is needed of how to proceed. In particular, more clarity is needed on which approaches deserve support, so that financing for these initiatives can be directed toward the most suitable purposes and rebound effects can be prevented or mitigated. Following the public discourse, the stories about *Airbnb*, *Taskrabbit*, *Uber*, and the like, one easily gets the idea that the sharing economy only consists of commercial, monetized approaches, which follow the traditional capitalistic market logic. More research is needed on the potentials and limitations of the different sharing economy archetypes, in order to assess the sharing economy's potential of transforming the current system of production and consumption and its potential to contributing to more sustainable development.



## Chapter III

### ***Collaborative consumption: Business model opportunities and barriers for fashion libraries***

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# COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION: BUSINESS MODEL OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS FOR FASHION LIBRARIES

## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to explore barriers and opportunities for business models based on the ideas of collaborative consumption within the fashion industry. The analysis is based on a multiple-case study of Scandinavian fashion libraries . a new, clothes-sharing concept that has emerged as a fashion niche within the last decade. It is concluded that fashion libraries offers interesting perspectives, e.g., by allowing people to experiment with styles without having to pay the full cost and becoming a meeting place for young designers and end consumers. However, at present, fashion libraries remain a small-scale phenomenon with difficulties reaching the mainstream market, not least due to limited financial and human resources as well as conventional fashion consumption patterns. The study is limited to the new phenomenon of fashion libraries and does not cover other types of collaborative consumption within the fashion industry (swap-parties, etc.). The paper is one of the first attempts to examine new business models of collaborative consumption in general and the fashion library concept in particular. The study contributes to the discussions of whether and how fashion sharing and collaboration holds promise as a viable business model and as a means to promote sustainability.*

**Keywords:** business models, collaborative consumption, sustainability, fashion library, fashion sharing, promote sustainability

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of collaborative consumption has gained widespread popularity since the Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers popularized the term in the book *What's Mine is Yours* (2010). Collaborative consumption is ultimately about people sharing and collaborating to meet certain needs, whether it concerns transportation, accommodation, land, etc. Prominent examples include *Airbnb* (space sharing) and *Zipcar* (car sharing) though the term collaborative consumption covers practically all types of products and services where people share excess resources. In 2010, *Time* listed collaborative consumption as one of 10 Ideas That Will Change the World+ (Walsh, 2011). Collaborative consumption has also been labeled %access-based consumption+ (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) and %participative consumption+ (WEF, 2013). Moreover, subparts of the collaborative consumption phenomenon have been addressed in other streams of literature, e.g., research on product-service systems (Tukker, 2004; Tukker and Tischner, 2006).

The idea of collaborative consumption has yet to take hold in the mainstream fashion industry. However, this may be about to change as we are currently seeing a mushrooming of initiatives based around ideas of sharing and community. Examples include online services like *ThredUp*, which resells childrens-wear, *Swapstyle*, which enables people to swap fashion worldwide, and local Swishing parties where people share clothes from their own wardrobes. There are good reasons to pay attention to these initiatives and explore ways to scale-up these burgeoning business models. First, collaborative consumption is expected to have significant business potential for the fashion industry. The US market value for used childrens clothes alone is said to be between USD 1-3 billion (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). What's more, collaborative consumption may be a means to reduce over-consumption, one of the root challenges facing sustainability efforts in the fashion industry (Armstrong and Lang, 2013; Kozlowski et al., 2012). Today, around 30 percent of the clothes UK households have in their wardrobe have not been worn for a year or longer, representing an estimated value of £30 billion (WRAP, 2012).



Promoting redistribution of unused garments will therefore benefit buyers and sellers as well as the environment.

The purpose of this paper is to explore barriers and opportunities for developing a business based on the ideas of collaborative consumption in the fashion industry. So far, alternative business models or marketplaces have received limited scholarly attention. Some research has been conducted on swap meets, flea markets and car boot sales by scholars of consumer culture, human geography, sociology, and anthropology. The focus of the majority of this work has been on investigating the trade and circulation of items between strangers, family, or friends, appearance management, identity construction and negotiations (e.g., Freitas et al., 1997; Srigley, 2007; Guy and Banim, 2000) as well as topics of social class (e.g., Nenga, 2003), age, or gender (e.g., Corrigan, 1989).

To limit the scope of this paper, focus is on the relatively new fashion library concept, which is a subscription-based service that allows people to share wardrobes. Contrary to the traditional second-hand industry, fashion libraries constitute a membership-based service with no direct monetary exchange for fashion items. This paper adopts a business-model perspective, which serves as a useful tool to analyze the challenges and opportunities of the fashion library phenomenon. As we will demonstrate in the next sections, a number of internal and external factors imply that these new fashion business models based on collaborative consumption often have difficulties in moving from the margins to the mainstream of the fashion industry. Adopting a business-model perspective provides a powerful set of lenses for the challenges and opportunities of this new phenomenon. To the authors' knowledge, this paper is the first attempt to examine the fashion library concept from a business-model perspective.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The paper begins with a short presentation of the business model concept that has served as the conceptual framework for analyzing the collected data. By going through each business model component, it is possible to gain insight into the business architecture of fashion libraries. The presentation of the business model

literature is followed by a description of methodology, which provides details about data selection, collection, and analysis. The subsequent analysis describes similarities and differences in the structure of fashion libraries and highlights barriers and opportunities for making this new concept a sustainable business model. The analysis is structured around business model elements outlined in the literature review. Based on the findings from the analysis, the conclusion and discussion section will reflect on potential avenues for scaling up and mainstreaming the clothes library business model.

## II. A BUSINESS MODEL PERSPECTIVE ON COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION

It is becoming increasingly popular to talk about business models. Since 1995, more than 1,000 articles in peer-reviewed academic journals have dealt with the topic (Zott et al., 2011). In the beginning, the business model concept was used particularly in relation to e-business, but has since spread to other fields and is now a popular metaphor for portraying different business architectures (Wüstenhagen and Boehnke, 2008). To give a concrete example, *Gillette* has become the epitome of the *razor-blades-and-razor* business model where a company sells a basic product cheaply but makes money on people using it (Johnson et al., 2008; Teece, 2010). Other business models include *freemium* (free standard products and premiums for advanced offerings), and the *Long Tail* (selling large quantities of multiple niche products) (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010).

Although the business model concept is widely used, it remains ill defined (George and Bock, 2011). The term *business model* is a multi-dimensional construct that has been used by researchers from different disciplines and with different interests (Zott et al., 2011). As there have been several attempts to break down the business model concept into different, interrelated sub-components, numerous definitions of the term now exist (see e.g., Zott et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2005; Johnson and Suskewicz, 2009). Despite its definitional shortcomings, there is a consensus among business-model literature that the concept indicates how a

company - alone and as partner - creates value from its activities (Zott et al., 2011; Chesbrough, 2007; Teece, 2010). In the words of Zott and Amit (2007, p. 181), "A business model elucidates how an organization is linked to external stakeholders, and how it engages in economic exchanges with them to create value for all exchange partners."

Recognizing the centrality of value creation in most business model thinking, we will define the concept in line with Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010, p. 14), who characterize business models broadly as: "[t]he rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value." Moreover, Osterwalder and Pigneur's (2010) popular business model canvas will serve as an analytical framework to examine the clothes library concept (see Figure 1). In short, the business model canvas is made up of nine different elements central to the understanding of how a company creates, delivers, and captures value. Below, we have tried to show how each component of the business model canvas is relevant for fashion companies addressing sustainability:

~ **Customer segments.** This business model component concerns the characteristics of the clients served by the company (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). For instance, a number of fashion companies now build their brand on sustainability initiatives to target the "green" and "ethical" consumer. As an example, the UK fashion company, *People Tree*, brands itself explicitly as a pioneer in sustainable/ fair trade fashion. However, realizing the niche role of sustainable fashion, some mainstream brands are instead trying to reach the green segment by building sustainability into more conventional "fast fashion" business model.

~ **Value proposition.** The term "value proposition" indicates how a customer benefits from choosing a company's products and services (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). For instance, slow fashion companies address the needs of consumers looking for alternatives to mass-produced standard goods that are manufactured in anonymous,

global supply chains with little or no consideration of their social and environmental impacts (Fletcher, 2008).

” **Channels.** Companies reach customers with their products and services through different channels (brick and mortar stores, franchise stores, online stores, etc.) (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). The online market for second-hand clothes is a notable example of a channel that extends product lifetime while also potentially lowering over-consumption. The US outdoor company, *Patagonia*, for instance, has partnered with *eBay* to promote product reuse as part of their efforts to lower the environmental footprint of its business activities.

” **Customer relationships.** Companies establish and develop relationships with customers in many different ways, e.g., depending on whether their business model is based on self-service or personal assistance (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). For example, offering repair and recycling services can be a means to establish links with customers, generate new revenue streams, and address sustainability all at the same time (WRAP, 2012). One example of this would be the Norwegian outdoor company, *Norrøna*, which has established a repair service center at their flagship store in Oslo.

” **Revenue streams.** Some companies generate revenue by selling products to customers, while others base their business on service arrangements, leasing options, subscription payments, advertising etc. (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). To give an example, *Electrolux* has tested a pay-per-wash system as an alternative to the conventional asset sale of washing machines . a system that may also hold sustainability potential by incentivizing responsible washing behavior (Black, 2012).

” **Key resources.** Companies hold different combinations of tangible and intangible resources (buildings, knowhow, brands, etc.), which help them create value for customers and strengthen their competitive position (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). For instance,

the Icelandic company, *Atlantic Leather* has specialized in transforming waste materials from the fishing industry into fashion products.

“ **Key activities.** Companies need to undertake a number of key activities in order to serve customers before, during, and after sales (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). From a sustainability perspective, instilling a sense of sustainability among designers is considered key because the environmental impact of a product is determined at least partly by its design (Kozlowski et al., 2012). Likewise, frontline sales and marketing staff need the right training and education to guide customers toward sustainable alternatives.

“ **Key partnerships.** Companies do not operate in isolation but are dependent on the contributions of various business partners (suppliers, logistics providers, etc.) (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010). From a sustainability perspective, a number of fashion take-back partnerships have recently emerged. *Patagonia* has partnered with *e-Bay* and *Marks & Spencer* has joined forces with *Oxfam*. A number of companies have also begun providing a variety of products and services to support fashion companies' sustainability efforts.

“ **Cost structure.** While companies must pay attention to the costs associated with running a business model, sustainability makes increasingly good business sense from a cost perspective. Real prices of raw materials have increased 147 percent since 2000 and can be expected to rise even further in the future (ENV, 2013). As an example of cost-saving sustainability initiatives, *Puma's Clever Little Bag* is a good example of how some companies are developing smarter packaging solutions that reduce costs and environmental effects.

# The Business Model Canvas

Designed for: \_\_\_\_\_

Designed by: \_\_\_\_\_

One: \_\_\_\_\_

Iteration: \_\_\_\_\_

<h3 style="margin: 0;">Key Partners</h3> <p>Who are our Key Partners? Who are our key suppliers? Which Key Resources are we acquiring from partners? Which Key Activities do partners perform?</p> <p><small>Partnerships can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>	<h3 style="margin: 0;">Key Activities</h3> <p>What Key Activities do our Value Propositions require? Our Distribution Channels? Customer Relationships? Revenue Streams?</p> <p><small>Key Activities can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>	<h3 style="margin: 0;">Value Propositions</h3> <p>What value do we deliver to the customer? Which one of our customer's problems are we helping to solve? What bundle of products and services are we offering to each Customer Segment? Which customer needs are we satisfying?</p> <p><small>Value Propositions can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>	<h3 style="margin: 0;">Customer Relationships</h3> <p>What type of relationship does each of our Customer Segments expect us to establish and maintain with them? Which ones have we established? How are they integrated with the rest of our business model? How costly are they?</p> <p><small>Customer Relationships can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>	<h3 style="margin: 0;">Customer Segments</h3> <p>For whom are we creating value? Who are our most important customers?</p> <p><small>Customer Segments can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>	
<h3 style="margin: 0;">Key Resources</h3> <p>What Key Resources do our Value Propositions require? Our Distribution Channels? Customer Relationships? Revenue Streams?</p> <p><small>Key Resources can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>		<h3 style="margin: 0;">Channels</h3> <p>Through which Channels do our Customer Segments want to be reached? How are we reaching them now? How are our Channels integrated? Which ones work best? Which ones are most cost-efficient? How are we integrating them with customer routines?</p> <p><small>Channels can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>			<h3 style="margin: 0;">Cost Structure</h3> <p>What are the most important costs inherent in our business model? Which Key Resources are most expensive? Which Key Activities are most expensive?</p> <p><small>Cost Structure can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>
<h3 style="margin: 0;">Revenue Streams</h3> <p>For what value are our customers really willing to pay? For what do they currently pay? How are they currently paying? How would they prefer to pay? How much does each Revenue Stream contribute to overall revenues?</p> <p><small>Revenue Streams can be used to:</small></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Reduce costs</li> <li>2. Increase sales</li> <li>3. Create new revenue streams</li> <li>4. Reduce risk</li> <li>5. Increase efficiency</li> </ul>					

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### III. METHODOLOGY

100

and a half hours. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for emergent themes and participant-guided findings. Table 1 provides a short description of the fashion libraries profiled.

Table 1: Fashion Libraries Profiled

<p><i>Resecond:</i> <a href="http://resecond.com/">http://resecond.com/</a></p>	<p>Located on Jægersborggade street in Copenhagen, Resecond was established in September 2012. Its approximately 200 members can swap their own dresses with a current inventory of some 300 pieces. Membership is issued on a half-year basis, and costs 600 DKK. When signing up to become a member, customers are required to bring dresses they would like to contribute to the communal wardrobe. For now, Resecond does not generate any profit for its owner.</p>
<p><i>Lånegarderoben:</i> <a href="http://www.lanegarderoben.se/">www.lanegarderoben.se/</a></p>	<p>Lånegarderoben was founded in 2009 during a festival in a small Swedish provincial town and today is permanently based in the Stockholm suburb Midsommarkransen. Lånegarderoben's 90 members can choose from approx. 750 items, which are sponsored from various fashion brands, young upcoming designers and a few individuals involved in the library. Becoming a member of Lånegarderoben costs 600 SEK for six months, which allows members to borrow up to three items at a time for up to four weeks. Lånegarderoben is run by a handful of volunteers.</p>
<p><i>Helsinki Fashion Library:</i> <a href="http://www.nopsatravels.com/en/nopsa-launched-a-fashionlibrary/">www.nopsatravels.com/en/nopsa-launched-a-fashionlibrary/</a></p>	<p>The Helsinki Fashion Library was established in 2011 when the two founders rented an empty office space in central Helsinki. Today, the fashion library has approximately 100 members who have access to a shared wardrobe with approx. 750 items, mostly made up of clothes from local Finnish fashion designers. The Helsinki Fashion Library offers three kinds of six-month memberships, ranging from 160 to 460 EUR. Helsinki Fashion Library is run voluntarily by its two founders and has one paid employee.</p>
<p><i>Klädoteket, Malmö:</i> <a href="http://kladoteket.se/">http://kladoteket.se/</a></p>	<p>Klädoteket was established in 2010 by four students. Today the fashion library located a little outside Malmö city center is run by two women on a voluntary basis. The fashion library has approximately 290 members who can borrow as many items as they want for three weeks with the possibility of extending rental for another three weeks. Currently, members can choose from approximately 2,700 items. The clothes are mainly donated but people also have the possibility to share their wardrobe in Klädoteket for a limited period of time. Klädoteket has recently suspended membership fees and is now free to join.</p>

The semi-structured interviews began with grand tour questions about the background of the organizations, participants' backgrounds, key events, industry knowledge, obstacles, and challenges and then became more specific, following the guidelines of Osterwalder and Pigneur's (2010) business model canvas outlined in the previous section. The interviewees were asked to describe how they approached each component of the business model and reflect on potential improvements and alternatives that could help expand the fashion library concept. The qualitative interview method is seen as a preferential alternative since the study is explorative in nature and addresses a relatively new field that has, so far, received limited scholarly attention. In addition to interviews, secondary information was obtained from the clothes libraries and other external sources. Newspaper articles and the organizations' own media platforms - ranging from their web sites and blogs to *Facebook* profiles - were utilized as secondary sources. Information gathered by means of secondary sources served three purposes. Firstly, they served as an entry point to this new phenomenon. Having gained a prefatory understanding of the fashion library concept, these data sources helped identify relevant themes and aided the development of appropriate questions. Last but not least, secondary data enabled the contextualization of the interviews and supported the analysis, i.e., complementing missing information and identifying contradictions between publicly accessible material and interview statements.

The data collection took place in 2013 and was supported by *MISTRA Future Fashion* and the *Danish Council for Independent Research*.

#### **IV. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

The customer segment of the clothes libraries is mainly females between 25 and 35 years old and most of the members live relatively close by, i.e., within ten minutes' travel. Members living further away are restricted by travel times and the limited opening hours of clothes libraries. In all cases, men only make up a small segment of clothing library users. According to



*Lånegarderoben*, possible explanations for this might be male challenges with fitting of clothes as well as the tendency for men to identify with the concept at a slower rate than females: %o think the males are slower in hooking on and getting involved in this idea. They say, that they like it, but they are not 100% sort of sure, that this is something for them.+The motives for becoming a member of the fashion libraries are varied. While for some, frequent use of the library appears to be driven by access to a variety of clothes at a relatively low cost, for others, in cases where library prices are comparatively higher, frequent use pertains to making the most of one's membership. Others appear to be especially driven by unifying their interest in fashion while simultaneously making a change, reducing consumption, and ultimately making a sustainable contribution. According to *Helsinki Fashion Library*: %think it is more about the style-thing, but also the sustainability is great. I think all members want to act sustainable and shop at the same time.+Lastly, some members also seem to buy into the concept of sharing and collaboration. According to Klädoteket:

*I think it depends on the customers. Some of them, I think, like the concept of being part of something. They don't have to put anything into it and [ö ] it's like we demand something from them. They do not have to come in and be social; they can just come in and borrow things. But, I think some of them really like the concept of sharing something with others [ö ].*

One of the key value propositions put forth by the libraries is that they give members the freedom to play with different styles and be creative without having to pay full price. The libraries provide a creative playground without the costs, risks, and burden of ownership. As the *Helsinki Fashion Library* suggests, having access to a shared wardrobe allows members to experiment with their style so they do not end up with the conventional black dress but rather move toward something more colorful:

*This is really one of the best things about borrowing clothes, that if you have like a party coming and you want to buy a new dress, it is very often that you end up buying a black*

*basic dress. But here you can borrow something totally different and also more experimental. We have these headpieces and hats, and also there are people who come and say, I mostly wear black and grey and after a while they start borrowing only very bright colors, and they are so happy about it.*

In addition to providing access to expensive designer pieces and exposing members to a wider variety of apparel, fashion libraries also offer members a break from their usual consumption routines. Fashion libraries provide an alternative to conventional fashion consumption in the sense that members get access to new clothes without having to buy more and more garments that will just pile up in their wardrobe. Moreover, the history of the clothing is also part of the value proposition and integral to the language of fashion libraries. For instance, in *Lånegarderoben* members are encouraged to take pictures of themselves in the borrowed garments and upload them to the fashion library's Facebook page. Additionally, in *Resecond* members write small stories about the history of the garments on handwritten tags:

*People are crazy about this. Totally crazy. And it's a crazy add-on that I can feel that, like, makes people become aware of, so it has a whole extra dimension to the project that all of a sudden it dawns on people that Heavens yes! the clothes that other people have worn have a history [õ]. I have not seen a single [person that] did not want to write a story about her dress. It really is something that everyone gets carried away with. They sit really carefully and write [õ].*

The main channel for members to share clothes is the physical spaces of the libraries. Besides their fixed physical stores, the majority of libraries engage in additional events, e.g., pop-up libraries in connection with festivals or, for instance, during the national clothing-swap day. *Klädoteket* has extended their activities by partnering with the branch of a local book lending library and a community activity center. So far, however, no opportunities for reserving and exchanging clothes online exist. *Resecond*, however, is in the process of developing a smartphone app, which will allow members to swap their clothes directly online. Overall,

unfavorable locations make the revenue channels a challenge for most fashion libraries. The *Helsinki Fashion Library* is located in a rented storage facility inside a big office building where the main doors close at 17.00 (5pm), which makes it difficult for members to coordinate their working hours with the library's opening hours. If the *Helsinki Fashion Library* had the choice, they would have different and longer opening hours. In the case of *Klädteket*, the fashion library is located ten minutes' biking distance from the Malmö city center and thus demands extra effort from potential members. *Klädteket* considers its less-than-optimal location as a significant barrier to further growth. An exception is *Resecond*, which is located on a popular street in Copenhagen: %It is the most brilliant place for this type of store.+

Establishing good customer relationships is a key element of the fashion library concept. These relationships are often established on site in the physical store or on social media. According to the fashion libraries, members appreciate the social factor that comes with exchanging clothes in a physical place, being able to see someone else happy in your own clothes, and partaking in the story of the clothes. Moreover, it helps the fashion libraries to differentiate themselves from conventional fashion retailing. For instance, *Helsinki Fashion Library* has one big fitting room where people can try clothes together and help each other find garments that suit their needs and style: %We have a huge fitting room where everybody fits the clothes together, so they are not queuing like when you go one by one, so it is a fun part of the thing that we are doing this together.+ *Resecond* also highlights the social aspect of the fashion libraries. Dialogue in the physical store is crucial for making members feel comfortable and for helping them to think of the library as their second wardrobe:

*So there is also a huge social aspect to it, which I have been unable to plan for [õ ].*

*There is the whole social aspect, which is very important and great fun. It is the women who do not know each other, who stand side by side and comment on what they wear.*

*This never happens at InWear or H&M. There you don't knock on the neighbor[ing fitting room] and ask: Do you think this dress is neat?qThis happens down here. And then they*

*are strutting back and forth, and [saying] 'What do you think?' 'No, I think it's a little too small for you' I may say then because I'm 100% honest, because I do not need to sell anything.*

Moreover, the fashion libraries host various events, including sewing workshops, parties, receptions, pop-up stores, and events where members can buy some of the fashion library clothes which are in low demand or swap their own clothes with those of other members. With regards to the latter, social media (mainly *Facebook*) is considered by all libraries as a powerful tool for building customer relationships. In most cases, the site is updated every time the shop is open, informing social media followers about new events, incoming garments or donations, pictures from users, and more. In the experience of *Klädoteket*, the more active they are on *Facebook*, the more that people visit the shop during opening hours:

*So I think it is there is a lot of [word of mouth] going on and also a lot of people follow us on Facebook so that has been very positive to us having a Facebook page, because it is an easy way of showing that something is happening, and we try to update our Facebook page every time we are at Klädoteket [ö]. You know, people seem to check out and we also see that the more active we've been on Facebook [ö] the more people have actually come in and sometimes we hear people say they have wanted to go to Klädoteket in a year, and now I saw this and that yesterday on Facebook, so I came in.*

The main revenue stream for most fashion libraries stems from membership fees. Only limited income is generated from other sources (e.g., penalty fees, events, sponsorships, etc.). The *Helsinki Fashion Library* has three kinds of bi-annual membership fees, ranging from 160 EUR to 460 EUR, with different privileges when it comes to how many items members can borrow and for how long. Becoming a member of *Lånegarderoben* costs 600 SEK for six months, which gives members the right to borrow up to three items at a time for up to four weeks. *Resecondo's* membership is also held on a half-year basis and costs 600 DKK. In contrast to *Lånegarderoben*, members do not have to return their swapped clothes. When signing up to

become a member, new members have to bring dresses they would like to contribute to the wardrobe. In return, they can take home an equal amount of dresses or swapping vouchers, in case they do not find anything. *Klädoteket* recently made the decision to make its service free of charge for members. Today, there is only a small penalty fee for damaging clothes or not handing them in on time. In addition to penalty fees, *Klädoteket* has received minor financial support from the municipality and an educational institution, which enables them to pay the rent and cover fixed costs. The decision to have a free service is based on the conviction that this will enable *Klädoteket* to make the service available to more people and thereby spread the message that there is no reason to constantly buy new clothing when there is already so much stock available:

*Since Klädoteket started they had [ö] a fee for loaning stuff so you have to pay a fee every three month [sic], but we got rid of that this fall to get more members basically, and also to make it available for everybody. You don't have to pay money to borrow things that already exist.*

The clothing collection a library can offer its members is obviously a key resource for clothes libraries. Building a collection of clothes sufficient to attract members is the main challenge when establishing a new fashion library. But, most libraries in this study did not report difficulties in acquiring new garments and many receive new items weekly from designers, retailers, and/or members. All libraries have the possibility to influence their collection by choosing which designers or retailers to approach directly, or by selecting specific items brought for donation by individual members and staff. In general, the composition of a library's collection is highly dependent on the style and philosophy of that fashion library. *Resecnd* only offers dresses, ranging from newer, high-end brands to vintage pieces, and the decision as to which items should enter the shared wardrobe ultimately depends on the founders' personal evaluation. The *Helsinki Fashion Library* and *Lånegarderoben* are also selective when it comes to the style and quality of the garments. In addition, *Lånegarderoben* requires that fashion

brands have a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) profile if they want to donate clothes to the library. *Klädoteket* seems to be the least restrictive fashion library when it comes to accepting new items and explicitly aims at broadening its collection to suit a wide variety of styles, people, and occasions:

*As I said, we try to be as broad as possible. Our main focus is to reach out to as many people as possible [ö]. The best thing is if we could reach out to as many people as possible like both men and children, women and everything, so we try to keep as many different sorts of garment [sic] in store, if these customers come in. Our main purpose is to try to be broad and that there is something for everyone, no matter if they have the money to pay for it or if they are older or younger, no matter what your sex is.*

Human resources are also of paramount importance for fashion libraries, which are mostly run on a voluntary basis and all highly dependent on the enthusiasm, drive, and the commitment of a few key people. Limited human resources, however, is also one of main threats to the current fashion library concept, as it puts limitations on the services offered to members. For instance, lack of staff results in limited opening hours, which may conflict with the working hours of members. The lack of human resources also limits how active a business can be, e.g., when it comes to registering new garments, improving IT-systems, planning special events, and developing communication materials (flyers, web posts, etc.). Moreover, limited human resources make the fashion libraries vulnerable to situations in which key personnel decide to leave the organization. The vulnerable character of some of the fashion libraries also makes it questionable if as to whether they will be able to scale-up operations, set up new libraries, and otherwise develop the concept to make it more sustainable long term. For example, it has been challenging for people to work voluntarily in *Lånegarderoben* in addition to holding down a normal job, meeting family obligations, and so on:

*I think that what we constantly have a battle with is time. The time we put into this and our normal jobs and life basically [ö]. It's almost like running a shop. It is obviously not open*

*as often, but there is [sic] a lot of things that you have to do anyway, and there is [sic] also a lot of people involved, and you have to communicate with these people as well, so it becomes like a second job. That has been the major issue ever since it was started - to find time and to not to have people who burn out, basically, just saying, I cannot take anymore, qI cannot do anything more, q[or] I really want to quit.q*

To cope with the human resource problem, *Klädoteket* and *Lånegarderoben* have recently entertained the idea of involving members more directly in the operations of the fashion library. Essentially, interested members would be expected to work every now and then in the library to avoid dependency on a few especially active individuals . a cooperative model well-known in the food retail industry. However, it is too early to say if this change in the fashion library concept will be successful.

The key activities of a fashion library bear similarities to a traditional retail store. In opening hours, there must be staff to arrange the clothes, clean up the library, serve clients, and handle rentals and returns. Key activities outside opening hours consist of registering new wardrobe entries, making small repairs, checking member accounts to make sure that everyone has paid, checking to ensure pieces have been returned on time, and sending notifications to members whose accounts have expired. In order to build its community character, reputation and spread the word, a key activity for fashion libraries is to engage members and promote the library on *Facebook* and other social media. Recently, there has also been a lot of public interest in the fashion library concept. Libraries are being approached by various media outlets and by individuals interested in setting up their own fashion libraries. According to *Lånegarderoben*:

*[õ ] We get a lot of interests from different people [õ ] but it takes quite some time to answer e-mails for example on the info-address. It's a big task, answering media of different kinds [õ ]. I would say that is probably the main thing except for just being [õ ] open and serving the customers.*

Members are both upstream and downstream partners for fashion libraries, since members are often also suppliers who donate part of their own wardrobes to the fashion library. However, some fashion libraries have also established partnerships with well-known fashion brands and various designers that donate part of their collections to the library either permanently or for a limited period of time. For instance, a key sponsor of *Lånegarderoben* is the Stockholm-based fashion company *Filippa K*, which has provided approximately 100 items to the library.

According to *Lånegarderoben*, *Filippa K* considers this partnership as an integrated part of their CSR work, which also includes exploring new forms of sustainable consumption: %think that they think it is a good portfolio for them to have. I mean, they have a shop, where they have second hand [ö ], and they do other business things which is about sustainability [ö ] and then they also have *Lånegarderoben* [ö ].+Another example is *Helsinki Fashion Library*, which collaborates with young, local designers, who are often eager to partner, since they have difficulties in accessing the market through mainstream fashion retailers. By donating clothes to the fashion library, designers gain market access and the opportunity to test collections among members who also have the possibility of buying garments directly from the designers:

*And also, if somebody wants, they can buy the clothes from [ö ] the designers. [ö ]. It is very good support to young designers: there are many young labels that do not have any retail [access], and they only sell in like small design markets that happen from time to time.*

Some fashion libraries also find it beneficial to collaborate with organizations that help spread the fashion library concept and solve problems associated with unfavorable geographical locations (see above). For instance, *Klädoteket* collaborates with a library and a community activity center where they gain access to a group of users who are familiar with the concept of collaboration and sharing. The library offers literature, music, films, and other media for free and the community activity center enables people to borrow tools, computers, sewing machines, and more. In the future, *Klädoteket* hopes to establish relationships with other,



similar organizations not based on buying and selling and where sharing materials is common practice among members.

The cost structure reflects the voluntary nature of most fashion libraries. The main costs of running a fashion library concern fixed costs such as rent, electricity, and insurance. In three out of the four fashion libraries surveyed, all work is performed on a voluntary basis. Only the *Helsinki Fashion Library* has the means to employ staff in addition to the voluntary work put in by the founders. However, at least three fashion libraries aim at turning the libraries into a commercial business, which would allow them to move away from reliance on volunteer work. *Klädoteket* is the only fashion library that does not perceive a significant need for external funding or for returning to a business model based on membership fees. Instead, the rent of *Klädoteket* is sponsored by an external educational organization.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

Fashion libraries and other initiatives based on the collaborative consumption model are popping up all over the world. A group in Mexico considering initiating a similar type of clothes-sharing organization, for instance, recently contacted *Klädoteket* asking for advice. However, the evidence from this study also indicates that fashion libraries still remain a niche activity, driven by enthusiastic social entrepreneurs working on a voluntary basis. Fashion libraries have received widespread media attention, which, so far, seems to exceed the actual impact of these libraries on the fashion landscape. On average, fashion libraries maintain only 100-300 members. It is therefore worth considering potential avenues for turning the fashion library concept into a more mainstream and commercially sustainable business model. Based on the findings from this study, we suggest that fashion libraries consider two interrelated issues in particular: customer relationships and partnership development.

When it comes to customer relationships, fashion libraries today are membership-based and target relatively young, private consumers open to alternatives to conventional shopping. However, there may be other, relevant customer segments open to the services provided by fashion libraries. According to *Klädoteket*, they recommend that fashion libraries target people who are open to new concepts and experience a clear need. For example, high school and university students are young, care a lot about personal appearance, have limited financial resources, and are generally aware of sustainability challenges. Therefore, this group could potentially constitute an interesting market segment for fashion libraries. Moreover, international examples such as the *Albright Fashion Library* and *Bib+Tuck* indicate that there may be other and potentially more profitable market niches than the ones presently served by the fashion libraries. Last, fashion libraries could perhaps reach out to more customers if they combine their membership-based services with a conventional, sales-based business concept, allowing customers to choose between buying and borrowing fashion products.

Partnership development could additionally enable fashion libraries to build entirely new types of customer relationships and thereby benefit from a broader palette of revenue channels. Today, the money for running fashion libraries stems mainly from membership fees, but it may be possible to generate money from other sources such as designers (see above), advertising, sponsorships, consultancy, web shops, and more. For example, the evidence from the *Helsinki Fashion Library* indicates that small, local designers often have difficulties accessing the market through mainstream retailers. Therefore, it may be possible to build an alternative fashion library concept with the active participation of suppliers (young designers and established fashion brands) who pay a small fee for promoting their work for a limited period of time to a relevant audience. Looking at the downstream supply chain, new partnerships could also help fashion libraries, which struggle with unfavorable location, and enable them to reach out to more customers. For instance, *Klädoteket* has established partnerships with libraries, cultural

institutions, and student organizations in order to spread the fashion library concept and attract members who are familiar with and/or supportive of the concept of collaboration and sharing.

Innovation is often considered a precondition for competition in today's global marketplace. The ability to rethink dominant business logic can be considered a precondition for a company to survive and prosper. However, it is not always advantageous to be a pioneer in a new market with a new product. It may well be the %fast second+company that is successful in scaling up and consolidating the new market with a dominant design or format that prospers in the end (Markides and Geroski, 2004). Fashion libraries represent a new and innovative concept that breaks with the dominant fashion business model based on buying and selling. As such, fashion libraries continue to experience a number of challenges related to limited resources and the existing ownership culture. It is still unclear whether the fashion libraries studied will be able to prosper and survive going ahead. Regardless, new start-ups and more established brands may glean important lessons from the fashion library experience, and may begin building services to consumers with the collaborative consumption model in mind. In this way, established brands may carve out a way for collaborative consumption to become common practice within the fashion industry.

## **VI. CONCLUSION: SCALING UP COLLABORATIVE FASHION CONSUMPTION?**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the new fashion library concept from a business model perspective. By examining four fashion libraries in the Nordic countries, this paper has identified some of the barriers and opportunities for developing a business based on the ideas of collaborative consumption. Evidence from the study indicates that a key benefit of fashion libraries seems to be that members get an opportunity to experiment with styles and looks without having to pay full price. Moreover, some members are also interested in exploring alternatives to conventional, ownership-based fashion consumption. However, limited human, technical, and financial resources imply that fashion libraries are forced to cut down on

membership services (limited opening hours) and rewards to staff and owners (who mostly work voluntarily). Today, the survival of most fashion libraries is dependent on the commitment of a few entrepreneurs and the loyalty of a small community of members. These factors, among others, make the current fashion library concept a vulnerable business model. It is therefore important that fashion libraries work on generating new sources of revenue to better serve existing members and attract new ones.

This paper has several limitations. The study is exploratory and based on evidence from four fashion libraries within the Nordic countries. Therefore, further empirical fieldwork from different geographical contexts is needed to back up the preliminary findings of this paper. Moreover, the paper is based solely on reflections and insights from the owners and core staff who design the business models of the fashion libraries. To better understand barriers and opportunities for collaborative consumption in the fashion industry, it would be relevant to make a broader, empirical study of how consumers in general perceive sharing and collaboration in the context of clothing. Lastly, this paper is based on a business model perspective, which has limitations in explaining the broader institutional environment that enables and constrains collaborative consumption in the fashion industry. For collaborative consumption to have a future in the fashion industry, there must to be a change in dominant consumer mindsets . from ownership to access. However, this transformation requires much more than the individual efforts of a few fashion library entrepreneurs. More research is needed on the particular macro-level conditions that influence dominant consumer values, attitudes, and behaviors with attention to how these conditions impact fashion business models based on sharing and collaboration.



## Chapter IV

### ***User satisfaction & dissatisfaction in the app sharing economy: An investigation into two-sided mobile fashion reselling & swapping markets***

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Sustainability in Fashion: A cradle to upcycle approach. Springer: London.

**USER SATISFACTION & DISSATISFACTION IN THE APP SHARING ECONOMY:  
AN INVESTIGATION INTO TWO-SIDED MOBILE FASHION  
RESELLING & SWAPPING MARKETS**

**Abstract**

*There are a growing number of two-sided platforms providing innovative approaches to consuming fashion by means of sharing. However, the high failure rate of these entrepreneurial endeavors suggests that better knowledge of the barriers faced by these platforms is paramount. This project proposes a study of user satisfaction and dissatisfaction with mobile reselling and swapping platforms, which are conceptualized as being part of the sharing economy. By adopting the SERVQUAL measurement and extending it to mobile word-of-mouth user evaluations in app stores, this paper identifies %app design+, %product portfolio+, %reliability+, and %structure+to constitute the key factors, which might promote or prevent interested users from adopting these new practices. By means of adopting content analysis on textual app reviews from the U.S. iTunes app store, this paper expands our understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls of working with this new form of naturally occurring data.*

**Keywords:** app reviews, mobile word-of-mouth, sharing economy, sustainability, two-sided markets, user satisfaction

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of a phenomenon that we have come to know as the sharing economy. At its core, the sharing economy can be defined as innovative platform businesses, which enable two groups of users to transact or share underutilized assets and skills on *two-sided markets* (e.g., Demary, 2015; Grinevich et al., 2015; Hagiu and Wright, 2015; Henten and Windekilde, 2016; Li et al., 2015; Rauch and Schleicher, 2015; Zervas et al., 2015). On these *two-sided markets* usually all groups of users benefit from direct and indirect network effects, i.e., a growing number of users on the same or opposite side (Codagnone and Martens, 2016). While in the case of some platforms, these sharing practices are carried out offline and on an infrequent basis (such as in the case of temporary swap meets), the majority of sharing platforms utilize mobile or online markets, which enables 24/7 sharing. The continual possibility of sharing unwanted goods and services beyond the circle of one's peers, family and friends, can be regarded as a key distinction, differentiating these new sharing practices from those practices that have been long-established. In the fashion context for instance, the sharing and handing-down of clothes between generations, siblings or among friends has a long-standing tradition. Docking on to that practice, a number of initiatives have been launched in the past years by start-ups around the globe, enabling the reselling and swapping of unwanted fashion items by means of smartphone enabled applications, hereafter referred to as sharing apps.

In light of the fashion system's sustainability challenges, a throwaway consumer culture, and the increasing scarcity of raw materials, it makes sense to maximize the utilization of unwanted goods by extending their lifespan through sharing (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Fletcher, 2008; Giesen, 2008). Hence, finding innovative approaches that can facilitate resource optimization on a larger scale has become an ever more pressing issue. While there is a growing number of sharing initiatives enabling consumers to part with their unwanted clothes and fashion items and acquire new ones - both on a short-term and permanent basis - so far, little is known about



consumers adopting these practices. This is not only due to the relative infancy of most of these new initiatives but also due to sharing activities being historically being part of an informal system (practiced on a small scale among families and friends). As such, these systems have traditionally been studied on a small scale by certain academic disciplines such as human geography, sociology, and anthropology (e.g., Gregson and Beale, 2004; Benson, 2007) and have not been as heavily entwined with practice-oriented business research.

In general, it can be said that verbal or written word-of-mouth testimonials given by others within a particular consumer's direct network about the quality of a product or service can have a significant impact on the formation of that consumer's attitude, i.e., the decision-making process in which this consumer adopts or rejects these novelties (Rogers, 2003). Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) suggest that word-of-mouth can provide valuable insight into the quality consumers are expecting from a service or product. This is especially the case in those situations where user evaluations address individual components and are not restricted to overall evaluations of the service quality of any given vendor. According to Song *et al.* (2015, p. 2), the primary purpose of diagnosing service quality is to obtain useful information for improving current service systems towards better customer experiences. There is thus considerable overlap between service quality, attitude formation (e.g., Gönroos, 1983), and customer satisfaction, that is the degree to which a purchased product or service meets the expectations that were formulated prior to purchase (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993).

With the rapid development of the Internet, the proliferation of smartphones and mobile applications, word-of-mouth has been catapulted from the small, personal realm to large-scale networks (e.g., Dellarocas 2003), where information can be communicated faster, easier, with less friction, and with little effort (e.g., Chatterjee, 2001; Park and Lee, 2009). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of reviews written by users for the overall success of an app (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2010). Not only do apps provide a rich source of data on customer, business and technical issues for app developers and vendors who tend to improve apps in iterative

processes (e.g., Chen et al., 2014), the number of downloads and reviews also provides useful indications for potential users regarding the popularity and quality of an app (Finkelstein et al., 2014). Useful app reviews usually contain bug reports (e.g., Pagano and Maalej, 2013), feature or enhancement requests (e.g., Iacob and Harrison, 2013), testimonials from users about their experience (e.g., Guzman and Maalej, 2014), ideas for new features (e.g., Galvis Carreño and Winbladh, 2013; Pagano and Maalej, 2013), or simply reflect their numeric rating in text form (Pagano and Maalej, 2013). With hundreds to thousands of reviews submitted daily (Hoon et al., 2013), app stores are also pervaded by a large number of rather useless reviews, containing slang, spam, insulting comments, and nonsensical information (e.g., Maalej and Nabil, 2015). In most cases, app reviews constitute a combination of multiple categories outlined above (e.g., McIlroy et al., 2015). Although the body of literature on app reviews has grown in recent years, still little is known about user satisfaction and service quality in mobile marketplaces.

To the authors' knowledge, this paper is one of the first to study service quality and user satisfaction in *two-sided mobile marketplaces*. The study at hand thus adopts one of the most prominent models for measuring service quality, SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Gaining a greater understanding of the factors causing satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the service quality delivered by these platforms is crucial - not only from the perspective of initiatives interested in scaling their activities - but also from a societal perspective, considering the assumed transformative potential of the sharing economy regarding sustainable development.

Although studied in the context of mobile apps enabling the reselling and swapping of fashion items, the factors causing satisfaction and dissatisfaction appear to be independent of the product being traded and pertain rather to the type of platform. This study contributes to the existing literature in four ways. To the authors' knowledge, it is the first of its kind to (1) explore the applicability of the SERVQUAL measurement in the context of a mobile *two-sided market*,

(2) extend its dimensions for the mobile context, (3) provide insights into which factors might prevent interested users from adopting these new mobile-sharing practices, and (4) shed light on the methodological advantages and disadvantages of making use of new forms of natural occurring data, for example app store reviews.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature and introduces the adjusted SERVQUAL framework. Section 3 describes the data and methodology and is followed by Section 4, which presents and discusses the study's findings. Section 5 summarizes the conclusion and provides an account of the study's implications and limitations.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Literature Review

There is a vast body of literature focused on the measures of customer perception of service quality in offline business-to-consumer (B2C) service environments (e.g., Gönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), constitutes one of the most prominent and widely-tested models for measuring service quality across a broad range of industries and service contexts. It is comprised of five dimensions for measuring customer perceptions of service quality, which are presented below (ibid., p. 23):

Table 1: Overview SERVQUAL Dimensions

Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy
Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service	Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence	Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers

With the growth of the Internet, research has increasingly attempted to employ SERVQUAL in e-commerce settings (e.g., Zeithaml et al., 2001, 2002; Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2002; Yang and Jun, 2002). This has proven difficult due to differences between online and offline settings (e.g., Kim and Lee, 2002), such as a shift from customer-to-employee interactions (e.g., Lohse and Spiller, 1998) to non-human interactions between customers and the web interface (e.g., Jun et al., 2004). Hence, modifications and extensions of established scales and measures of service quality with parameters focusing on information systems quality are required (e.g., Davis et al., 1989).

### **Conceptual Framework**

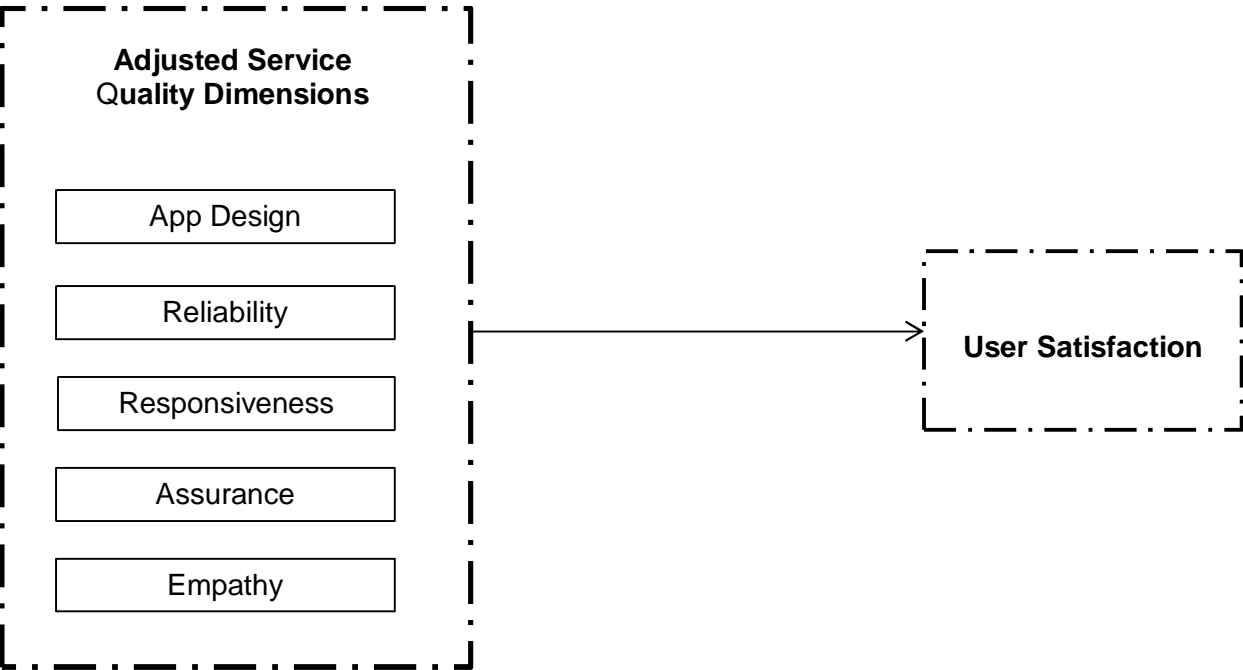
It can be assumed that mobile and online *two-sided marketplaces* share certain characteristics such as high levels of information asymmetry (e.g., Pavlou et al., 2007), the inability to touch and feel, i.e., truthfully assess a product prior to purchasing (Kim and Kim, 2004), a time lag in transactions, the transfer of money prior to delivery of the product or service (Utz et al., 2011), the phenomenon of buyers handling complaints, and finally the challenges of wrong product deliveries or delays in delivery (e.g., Utz et al., 2011). While prior experience with online marketplaces might reduce transaction costs (e.g., Teo and Yu, 2005), it can be assumed that these costs increase in cases of novel information systems, i.e., mobile marketplaces, in which facilitating technologies and communication are frequently prone to failure.

Despite similarities between online and mobile purchasing, there are significant differences between reviews given online and reviews given in a mobile app store. According to Fu *et al.* (2013), this pertains mainly to the length of review. App reviews tend to be shorter in length and version dependence, i.e., apps are frequently updated, which means that reviews are for the most part tied to a specific version. Furthermore, mobile and online reviews influence potential users at different stages of their attitude formation process. Lee and Pee (2013) suggest that consumers firstly select potential products when shopping online before reading reviews. In the

mobile context however, users encounter app reviews *before* engaging with the marketplace for the first time, i.e., before they download the app. Hence, app reviews do not only influence users in the formation of their attitude towards a certain product or service but can also potentially convince them to shy away from one marketplace in favor of another.

In line with studies suggesting that no universal set of service quality factors exist (e.g., Carman, 1999; Reeves and Bednar, 1994; Seth et al., 2005), the study at hand adopts the contextualized SERVQUAL measurement by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) to study service quality dimensions in a broker facilitated mobile consumer-to-consumer (C2C) marketplace. In order to pay regard to the special conditions of the mobile context, the first dimension (‘tangibles’ in the original scale) was rephrased as ‘app design’. The remaining four original dimensions have been retained. It is to be expected that additional contextual dimensions will emerge. Based on the aim of the paper to identify the factors contributing to user satisfaction and dissatisfaction with sharing apps, the following conceptual framework is proposed:

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



### III. DATA & METHODOLOGY

#### Data Collection

Systematic content analysis of a wide sample of written user app reviews was adopted, with a rigorous cutoff value set at a minimum of 100 textual reviews in the U.S. iTunes (i.e., iOS, the mobile operating system for Apple Inc. devices) app store. This level was set in order to include only those apps that had reached a certain level of maturity with fewer early stage technical struggles.<sup>11</sup>

Data collection took place in September 2014. In order to identify the apps that met the requirements, a two-step process was applied. In the first step, the app store was reviewed for English speaking *peer-to-peer* platforms which enabled users to buy, sell, or swap used clothing and accessories. Search terms used included combinations of the words %clothing+, %fashion+, %accessories+, %buy+, %sell+, and %swap+. As a second step, those apps that met the cutoff value of 100 reviews were identified, specifically *eBay Fashion*, *Tradesy*, and *Vinted*. While *eBay Fashion* and *Tradesy* constitute reselling apps, *Vinted* additionally allows users to swap pre-owned garments and fashion accessories. Table 2 presents an overview of the sampled apps.

Table 2: Overview of Sampled Reselling & Swapping Peer-To-Peer Apps in iTunes

Name	Category	Number of Total Reviews in iTunes	Number of Textual Reviews in iTunes
<i>eBay Fashion</i>	Reselling	2.233	206
<i>Tradesy</i>	Reselling	419	350
<i>Vinted</i>	Swapping & Reselling	2.842	631

<sup>11</sup> The decision was made in line with the assessment of appFigures, a well-respected reporting platform for mobile app developers, of what constitutes a %top+app. According to appFigures (2014), an app within the iOS U.S. app store receives 52 reviews on average, whereas so called %top+apps have an average of 144 reviews.

### **Sample Selection**

All written app store reviews were posted prior to September 5, 2014 when samples were collected for the three apps. Direct copies of all reviews were made. The sample size of reviews collected totaled 1,187 iOS reviews, of which 206 were from *eBay Fashion*, 350 from *Tradesy*, and 631 from *Vinted*. In order to ensure an equal group size for all apps, simple random sampling within SPSS was applied to the extracted reviews within each stratum, i.e., each app. In order to control for external influences, such as changes in consumer trends and further development of smartphone technologies, 100 reviews were randomly sampled per app within the last two years, i.e., 2013 and 2014. This sampling strategy yielded a final sample of 300 reviews, which were equally distributed over the different platform types. A certain level of representativeness of the studied sample can be assumed, based on the adopted sampling approach.

The average length of the textual reviews was 164 characters with the shortest review comprised of five characters and the longest review comprised of 2,137 characters. The majority of reviews were shorter than 164 characters (72%).

### **Content Analysis**

The app reviews were analyzed without the use of computer-assisted qualitative analysis software. The research team adopted an iterative coding process (Flick, 2009) in order to identify, analyze and report patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All members of the research team familiarized themselves with the data by carefully reading through all sampled reviews. As a second step, initial codes were developed, followed by a search for patterns (or categories) among these codes. As a fourth step, these categories were reviewed again, in order to make sure that they were mutually exclusive. Consequently, the categories were clearly defined and labeled (ibid.), before they were grouped along the lines of the adjusted SERVQUAL measurement outlined in Section 3, i.e., codes belonging to the categories %app design+,

reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, as well as three additional emergent dimensions, product portfolio, cost of membership, and tone.

Each dimension was coded using a dichotomous, positively-mentioned (1)/negatively mentioned (0), scale. In cases where dimensions were missing, these were coded with a 0. A coding scheme was developed for each dimension, with keywords to follow. For instance rapid rates for downloading an app, uploading pictures or text, or loading pages resulted in a coding for speed, which was characterized as part of the app design dimension. In line with the experience from previous research carried out on app reviews, it was not possible to code for single issues, due to the unstructured and informal nature of the reviews (e.g., McIlroy et al., 2015).

In addition to coding for the adjusted SERVQUAL measurement and additional dimensions, the reviews were also coded for tone, which indicated a general liking/disliking of the swapping or reselling idea or app. Positive reviews and constructive critics were coded 1, whereas negative reviews were coded 0. The dimension tone was included, as many reviews contained a purely positive or negative message, without making specific reference to what might have caused this attitude. Table 3 provides an overview of the emergent coding scheme.

In order to reach a high level of inter-coder reliability, two researchers carried out the coding. Initially, both researchers coded a test sample of app reviews. The individual reviews were compared and discussed in order to minimize future errors and ambiguity. Consequently, the two researchers coded the 300 reviews independently. Disagreement on the coding of any app reviews resulted in another coding round, in which agreement was reached after discussion.



Table 3: Overview Coding Scheme

App Design	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy	Product Portfolio	Cost of Membership	Tone
<b><u>Ease of use</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Convenient</li> <li>Easy to navigate</li> </ul>	<b><u>Stability</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Runs smooth/ no crashes</li> <li>App/functions always available</li> </ul>	<b><u>Customer service</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsive technical issues/ transaction issues</li> </ul>	<b><u>Up-to-date information</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Up-to-date pictures /item listings, etc.</li> </ul>	<b><u>Personalization</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Personalize products/service /alerts/ editing, payment, delivery, etc.</li> </ul>	<b><u>General Portfolio</u></b>	<b><u>Transaction fees</u></b>	
<b><u>Speed</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quick download of App/ upload of pictures/ text/ loading of pages</li> </ul>	<b><u>Updates</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frequent updates</li> </ul>	<b><u>Prompt response</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prompt response to inquiries</li> </ul>	<b><u>Confidence</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instilling confidence in users to solve problems</li> </ul>		<b><u>Brands</u></b>	<b><u>Shipping fees</u></b>	
<b><u>Structure</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Filter/search functions/ well organized</li> </ul>	<b><u>Trustworthiness</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep promises</li> <li>Truthful offerings</li> <li>Correct information when agreeing upon transaction</li> </ul>	<b><u>Prompt problem fixes</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prompt returns/ bug fixes</li> </ul>	<b><u>Ability</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge to solve problems</li> </ul>		<b><u>Sizes</u></b>	<b><u>Credit</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In-store credit for returns</li> </ul>	
<b><u>Visuals</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visually appealing</li> <li>Nice/clean design</li> </ul>			<b><u>Safety</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protection of privacy/ financial information</li> </ul>		<b><u>Pricing/ Deals</u></b>		
<b><u>Compatibility</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compatibility with other systems</li> <li>Payment integration</li> </ul>			<b><u>Courtesy</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friendly communication</li> </ul>		<b><u>Styles</u></b>		
					<b><u>Condition</u></b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Condition</li> <li>Age</li> </ul>		

#### IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Overall, this study found that the majority of users who engage in writing app store reviews for smartphone-enabled fashion-sharing platforms have a positive attitude towards the mobile sharing of fashion items, indicated by 76.00% of the reviews being written in a positive tone.

*+This app is quickly taking up all my time because it is so awesome I am completely addicted!!! How could you not be?+*

According to Lee and Pee (2013) the impact of review tone on consumers' decision-making should not be underestimated, as it interacts with the personal expectations consumers have formulated prior to interaction.

Looking at Table 4, which reports the mentioning frequencies and percentages by category on the aggregated level, it can be observed that mentioning frequencies are generally low.

However, in light of previous research that suggests that only 31.5% of app reviews contain useful information (Chen et al., 2014), the volume of useful information is actually quite high, with two-thirds of all reviews (69%) containing information that allowed for coding along the emergent categories and dimensions, and approximately one third of the reviews (31%) being exclusively coded for tone. One plausible explanation might be that individuals using the studied apps are rather involved in the sharing idea, invested in the app's success and are therefore eager to contribute useful feedback on their experience.

In contrast to previous research suggesting that %responsiveness+ constitutes the foremost critical factor for determining user satisfaction and dissatisfaction (e.g., Yang et al., 2004), %responsiveness+ in this study turned out to influence the overall service quality assessment to a lesser extent. The factors of %app design+, %reliability+, as well as %product portfolio+ on the other hand were found to be the major causes of user satisfaction and dissatisfaction when reselling or swapping fashion items via these mobile marketplaces. While %app design+

(70.32%) and %product portfolio+(85.71%) are overall addressed as sources of satisfaction, %reliability+(81.01%) was highlighted as a source of dissatisfaction.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics Aggregated Level

Type of feedback	N	Positive mention	Negative mention
<b>App Design</b>	<b>155 (51.67%)</b>	<b>109 (70.32%)</b>	<b>46 (29.68%)</b>
Ease of use	70 (23.33%)	65 (92.86%)	5 (7.14%)
Speed	11(3.67%)	5 (45.45%)	6 (54.55%)
Structure	36 (12.00%)	14 (38.89%)	22 (61.11%)
Visuals	29 (9.67%)	23 (79.31%)	6 (20.69%)
Compatibility	9 (3.00%)	2 (22.22%)	7 (77.78%)
<b>Reliability</b>	<b>79 (26.33%)</b>	<b>15 (18.99%)</b>	<b>64 (81.01%)</b>
Stability	60 (20.00%)	5 (8.33%)	55 (91.67%)
Update	5 (1.67%)	5 (100.00%)	
Trustworthiness	14 (4.67%)	5 (35.71%)	9 (64.29%)
<b>Responsiveness</b>	<b>27 (9.00%)</b>	<b>6 (22.22%)</b>	<b>21 (77.78%)</b>
Customer service	20 (6.67%)	5 (25.00%)	15 (75.00%)
Prompt response	3 (1.00%)	1 (33.33%)	2 (66.67%)
Prompt problem fix	4 (1.33%)		4 (100.00%)
<b>Assurance</b>	<b>26 (8.67%)</b>	<b>8 (30.77%)</b>	<b>18 (69.23%)</b>
Up-to-date information	10 (3.33%)	1 (10.00%)	9 (90.00%)
Confidence	3 (1.00%)	1 (33.33%)	2 (66.67%)
Ability	2 (0.67%)		2 (100.00%)
Safety	9 (3.00%)	4 (44.44%)	5 (55.56%)
Courtesy	2 (0.67%)	2 (100.00%)	
<b>Empathy</b>	<b>6 (2.00%)</b>	<b>3 (50.00%)</b>	<b>3 (50.00%)</b>
Personalization	6 (2.00%)	3 (50.00%)	3 (50.00%)
<b>Product Portfolio</b>	<b>70 (23.33%)</b>	<b>60 (85.71%)</b>	<b>10 (14.29%)</b>
General	19 (6.33%)	18 (94.74%)	1 (5.26%)
Brands	8 (2.67%)	8 (100.00%)	
Sizes	1 (0.33%)		1 (100.00%)
Pricing	30 (10.00%)	27 (90.00%)	3 (10.00%)
Styles	5 (1.67%)	3 (60.00%)	2 (40.00%)
Condition	7 (2.33%)	4 (57.14%)	3 (42.86%)
<b>Cost of Membership</b>	<b>21 (7.00%)</b>	<b>6 (28.57%)</b>	<b>15 (71.43%)</b>
Transaction fee	9 (3.00%)	5 (55.56%)	4 (44.44%)
Shipping fee	7 (2.23%)		7 (100.00%)
Credit	5 (1.67%)	1 (20.00%)	4 (80.00%)
<b>Tone</b>	<b>300 (100.00%)</b>	<b>228 (76.00%)</b>	<b>72 (24.00%)</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>684 (100%)</b>	<b>435 (63.60%)</b>	<b>249 (36.40%)</b>

%App design+ was addressed by approximately half of the sample (51.67%), with the majority reviewing the design features of the apps positively (70.32%). %Reliability+, mentioned by one fourth of the sample (26.33%), was for the most part addressed in a negative manner, with 81.01% of these reviews expressing dissatisfaction. The %product portfolio+ on offer by the reselling and swapping apps was also addressed by approximately one fourth of all reviewers (23.33%). The majority of these reviews (85.71%) mentioned the %product portfolio+ as a source of satisfaction.

### ***App Design***

While the %tangibles+ dimension in the original SERVQUAL measurement pertains to all tangible elements of the service environment, i.e., physical facilities, equipment, as well as appearance of the personnel (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 23), the tangible elements of the %app design+ dimension in the app context relate mainly to the applicationsq design, i.e., their ease of use, speed, structure, visual appeal, as well as their technical feasibility and compatibility. For potential users, the app constitutes the interface and entry point to interaction with the app, its staff, as well as other actors trying to sell or buy things. The applicationsq design thus plays a vital role in instilling confidence in users regarding the capabilities of the app and convincing them to try this innovative mode of consumption. Shortcomings in the design or absence of certain features might consequently cause the formation of a negative or unfavorable attitude towards the quality of the app, which might result in rejecting the platform altogether and switching to a competing vendor, as can be seen in reviews of the studied which made comparisons between competing apps.

Looking closer at the %app design+ dimension, it becomes apparent that reviewersq preferences to %ease of use+, %structure+, as well as to the %visuals+ of the app constitute the majority of testimonials, with %ease of use+ been mentioned most.

*%Mawmawdog. Love this app!! So easy to use!+*

%ease of use+, which was mentioned by approximately one fourth of reviewers (23.33%), pertains primarily to the user-friendliness, convenience, and intuitive navigation of the app. Almost all reviews address %ease of use+(92.86%) of the studied apps as a source of satisfaction.

*%love it. Not much else to say. It's well done and beautifully designed. Looks great on iOS 7+*

Another source of satisfaction are the aesthetics of the app. Approximately 80% of the reviewers who address the %visuals+(9.67%) of the studied apps regarding them in a positive manner. These findings are in line with previous research on online environments, which suggests that %ease of use+and %visuals+constitute essential features, not only for the attraction of potential new users but also for the retention of existing ones (Yang et al., 2004).

*%Needs more options. Nice enough app but needs additional search filters (i.e., size, color, etc.)+*

While %ease of use+and %visuals+constitute sources of satisfaction for the users of these sharing apps, the %structure+of the studied apps, i.e., search and filter functions, constituted a cause of dissatisfaction, with 61.11% of the reviewers who mentioned this issue (12.00%) addressing this factor in a negative manner. This is in line with the findings of Rice (1997), who discovered that one of the key factors that made consumers revisit a given website were the site's design features, such as layout, but also the ease of locating information and content. As Yang et al. (2004, p. 1166) suggests, %A well-designed navigational structure can facilitate consumers' perceptions of online control and enjoyment+

### **Reliability**

The %reliability+dimension in the SERVQUAL measurement pertains to a company's ability to perform the promised service in a dependable and accurate manner (Parasuraman et al., 1988, p. 23). In the mobile context, i.e., in absence of direct human interaction with sales staff, it is

crucial to instill trust in users that the service vendor will live up to its promise that orders will be delivered promptly and correctly (e.g., Kim and Lee, 2002). Besides customer-service vendor interactions, which are primarily of technical and structural nature (i.e., how stable the app runs, the availability of app features), ~~reliability~~ also factors into the interactions between different users in the case of broker facilitated mobile C2C marketplaces. These latter interactions pertain primarily to transaction issues between buyers, sellers, or swappers (i.e., whether a user will receive what he or she purchased/bartered).

The ~~reliability~~ dimension in an app context addresses issues such as ~~speed~~, ~~updates~~, as well as ~~trustworthiness~~. When looking at this dimension, it becomes apparent that most reviewers (20.00%) address the ~~stability~~ of the apps. ~~Stability~~ encompasses matters of how smooth the app runs, whether or how frequently it crashes, and whether the app, its functions, or uploaded/edited information are always available. The majority of users who have mentioned the issue of ~~stability~~ indicated this to be a source of dissatisfaction, with 91.67% addressing this topic in a negative manner.

*~~ate it. It keeps on closing by its one. I'm on the app for like 10 seconds and then it's~~  
~~bam off. I think I would probably enjoy it even more if it would stay open.~~*

These findings are in line with those reported by Khalid *et al.* (2015), who suggest that users of iOS mobile apps most frequently complain about functional errors, feature requests, and app crashes, with these three types of complaints accounting for more than 50% of all complaints expressed by users. According to Khalid *et al.* (ibid.), these issues are tremendous sources of frustration for users, especially as they are of developmental nature, i.e., outside of the control of users.

While only mentioned by a few (4.67%), reviewers address ~~trustworthiness~~ in a similar vein, with a clear majority (64.29%) mentioning this topic as a source of dissatisfaction.

~~Trustworthiness~~ pertains to whether promises are kept and offerings are truthful.

*%Do NOT BUY ANYTHING SCAM!!!!.... Watch out. I just bought something stated as new!! Got something refurbished!.. I returned for full refund but they made me wait for almost a week and they just want to give me credit!!!!... This is Wrong!!!!... Where is customer service when you need it!!!!?? You will regret buying a nothing from here!!!. Trust me!!!!...+*

While technical issues are within the control of the app vendor, transaction issues are for the most part in the hands of other users who act as sellers or buyers in the marketplace. App vendors can set up rules or codes of conduct, which can be enforced by sanctions. Since erratic behavior is at first subject to interaction between users, app vendors have little influence over this kind of behavior. With 21.33% of all reviews indicating %reliability+ as a key cause of dissatisfaction, and only 5.00% addressing this dimension as a source of satisfaction, it is apparent that %reliability+ effectively indicates a hygiene factor: When absent, %reliability+ causes a negative evaluation; when present, however, it does not automatically grant a positive performance evaluation. These findings are in line with those of Yang *et al.* (2003), who suggest that %reliability+ constitutes a service dimension that is more likely to lead to dissatisfaction in the case of poor performance than cause satisfaction in case of positive performance.

### **Product Portfolio**

While not addressed in the original SERVQUAL measurement, product portfolio is a service quality dimension that has received attention by a few scholars interested in studying online service quality (e.g., Cho and Park, 2001; Yang *et al.*, 2004). Yang *et al.* (2004) for instance finds that a limited range and depth of the product portfolio on offer is most likely preventing interested users from purchasing products and services online. In the study at hand, %product portfolio+ refers to the %general portfolio+, %brands+, %sizes+, %pricing+, %styles+, as well as the %condition+ of the clothes shared on the apps.

*%Great find! This app has such a wide variety of high-end items at very reasonable prices.*

*Such a great find.+*

Users addressed several facets of this dimension ranging from more general statements regarding the portfolio (*%Love it. The selection is amazing.+*), specific brands, styles, sizing, pricing and deals to the condition of the traded clothes (*%Watch out. I just bought something stated as new!! Got something refurbished! [õ ]+.* %Pricing+(10.00%) and %General portfolio+(6.33%) were most frequently mentioned. Both factors constitute sources of satisfaction, with 90% addressing the pricing of resold products positively and 94.74% speaking in positive terms about the general selection. These findings are in line with Cho and Park (2001), who identified product merchandising, i.e., variety and newness of products, as a key influence on the satisfaction of Internet shoppers.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the existing literature in four ways. Firstly, this study tests the applicability of the traditional service quality scale developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) to the evaluation of quality in the broker-facilitated mobile C2C marketplace. With the emergence of the mobile market, not only for *two-sided sharing economy platforms* but for a wider range of products and services, it is paramount to develop a suitable set of measures for assessing the service quality in these new business environments. Secondly, this exploratory study provides the initial groundwork for the further development of reliable and valid measures by providing a tentative set of additional dimensions. In line with previous research, which is critical towards the universal applicability of the five SERVQUAL dimensions (e.g., Lee and Lin, 2005; Reeves and Bednar, 1994; Seth et al., 2005), the study at hand adjusted the original measure, with the %tangibles+dimension now pertaining to the %smartphone+app design. Additional dimensions, i.e., %product portfolio+, %cost of membership+, and %none+emerged while coding the app reviews.



Thirdly, this study casts light on the rather new mobile sharing economy by providing insight into the factors causing satisfaction and dissatisfaction with these new sharing apps. Although studied in the context of the reselling and swapping of fashion items, the identified factors causing satisfaction and dissatisfaction are assumed to be transferrable to the contexts of other *two-sided mobile C2C sharing marketplaces*.

Fourthly, this research provides a methodological contribution on how to make use of a new form of natural occurring data, i.e., user app store reviews.

The most striking finding is that the vast majority of reviewers expressed a general appreciation of the sharing of fashion items via the broker-facilitated mobile C2C marketplaces studied. This general positive evaluation of these sharing apps can be assessed as a crucial step towards changing consumer mindsets from a throwaway, consumption approach towards one that is focusing on extending the lifespan of products in order to alter the detrimental course of the current fashion consumption and production system.

With %app design+(i.e., %base of use+and %visuals+) as well as %product portfolio+(i.e., %pricing+and %general portfolio+) constituting the major sources of satisfaction, it can be deduced that the studied market operators have a good general understanding of their user base (e.g., what they like and do not like) as well as an ability to connect the right buyers and sellers. However, with %reliability+(i.e., %stability+) being the major cause of user dissatisfaction, it can be concluded that the app vendors and developers are not necessarily doing their jobs well in terms of listening and responding to their users' needs and complaints after the initial app development stages. This assumption can be supported by %structure+- an %app design+factor - constituting another source of frustration. This factor pertains to the filter and search functions available for screening through the products on offer. While *two-sided platforms* are assumed to reduce search costs and mitigate coordination problems by bringing together distinct consumer groups (e.g., Rauch and Schleicher, 2015), dissatisfaction in terms of %structure+indicate that, on the contrary, facilitators and developers are not doing a good job in reducing search costs in

marketplaces that are otherwise valued for their inventory. While these factors as such might not attract users to choose a certain app in the first place, their negative performance might lead to defection in favor of a competitor.

## **Limitations**

As with any empirical research, the study at hand faced certain threats to its internal and external validity. This study was performed using a sampling of three reselling and swapping C2C apps in iTunes. While the findings might not be generalized to all iOS apps that enable the sharing of clothes, a certain level of representativeness of the sample can be assumed. This was accomplished by (a) sampling all mature apps offering consumers the opportunity to share their clothes mobile within the US iTunes store, and (b) randomly sampling 100 reviews per stratum, i.e., apps, written within the last two years, (2013 and 2014), with a final sample size of 300 reviews, which were equally distributed over the different app types.

Additional generalizability issues arise from selection bias and review manipulation by vendors. Firstly, a high selection bias can be assumed, with presumably only highly involved users writing an app review, most likely in cases of extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Hence, few reviews express the average experience. Secondly, while not a dominant behavior, some companies engage in app review manipulation by purchasing fake reviews, clicks, and likes, which raises questions as to the validity of the reviews (Kornish, 2009) and supports the idea that the actual service quality evaluation in the study at hand is in fact less favorable than the reviews might suggest.

Regarding the study's internal validity, there are certain risks connected with manually processing data, which might cause incorrect labelling. Human error might have occurred, for instance, in the sampling of the studied apps by overlooking certain keywords. Besides potential sampling biases, measures were taken by the study's two researchers to mitigate the risks related to the incorrect coding of data such as developing a coding guide and taking an

iterative coding approach. However, the possibility of mistakes cannot be excluded due to the length and quality of the reviews as well as the multiple overlapping issues addressed in the reviews.

Finally, it was often a challenge to definitively determine ~~who~~ or ~~what~~ was being addressed in the app reviews studied. Since many actors were involved in the studied broker-facilitated mobile C2C marketplaces, a multitude of topics and stakeholders were also discussed in the app reviews, including interactions between (1) users and app platform employees, (2) users and the actual app, and most importantly, (3) users taking turns acting in the roles of buyer or seller. With the typical app review being rather short, it is difficult to identify and delimit the different levels of interaction referred to in the reviews. Besides levels of interaction, technical aspects, and traded products, reviews also pertain to the reviewers' own competencies. For instance, a review on instability issues might not necessarily be caused by the defectiveness of the app, but by the reviewer, who is using an outdated version or the reviewer's own technical competencies.

### **Future Research**

In order to further develop the SERVQUAL measure for the mobile context, this study also calls for more work on app store reviewing, especially with regards to the generalizing quality of this new form of natural occurring data. Further research is needed, including research on apps from additional digital distribution platforms beyond the iPhone operating system (iOS).

Furthermore, since little research has been conducted on which consumer segments actually write reviews, future research could address the following questions: What are the characteristics of those writing app reviews? What are the drivers and barriers for writing a review? What is the impact of user involvement on the decision to write a review(s)? To what extent are app reviews actually read and used by other potential users? What are the effects of fake reviews on users?

## Practical Implications

The findings of this study do not only inform organizations operating in the sharing economy but also those offering products and services in mobile C2C and B2C marketplaces. App reviews provide companies the ability to poll users and gain essential feedback on their products. Although it might make sense in the short-term for businesses to buy fake clicks, reviews, and likes, in the long-run, this will distort any gauge they have for assessing the perceived quality evaluation from users or for identifying aspect of their products that need improvement. As there are many vendors competing in the same marketplace and the costs to users for switching vendors is relatively low, this form of malpractice might have detrimental effects on a company's survival since it is costly and complicated to reestablish one's (damaged) reputation (e.g., Herbig et al., 1994). As with many sharing apps, users constitute not only the demand side but also the supply side . a dynamic which results in organizations being highly dependent on their users and vulnerable to changes in their customers' interests. It can be hypothesized that those sharing organizations will thrive that can navigate this dynamic and blurriness of stakeholder roles and interests.



## Chapter V

### ***Blurred lines: Stakeholder tensions and balancing strategies in partially-organized markets***

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## BLURRED LINES: STAKEHOLDER TENSIONS AND BALANCING STRATEGIES IN PARTIALLY-ORGANIZED MARKETS

### Abstract

*Stakeholder theory acknowledges the fact that any stakeholder can have multiple roles in the stakeholder network. So far, however, little has been done to examine the consequences of blurred stakeholder roles. In this chapter, the case of peer-to-peer marketplaces provides the backdrop for discussing potential tensions arising from the multiplicity in stakeholder roles and their related consequences. Based on the emerging literature on the sharing economy and partial organization, this chapter analyses stakeholder tensions relating to five organizational characteristics (membership, rules, monitoring, sanctioning, and hierarchy) and discuss balancing strategies for overcoming these opposing forces. This chapter contributes to the understanding of tensions in stakeholder relationships and the approaches to cope with them in peer-to-peer marketplaces.*

**Keywords:** balance, partial organization, relation management, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, tension

## I. INTRODUCTION: STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS IN THE SHARING ECONOMY

Stakeholder theory has long recognized that stakeholders can have multiple roles and identities (e.g., employees as customers, owners or community members). For instance, in his comprehensive analysis of the stakeholder model's graphical representation, Yves Fassin (2008) notes that individuals often belong to different stakeholder groups and occupy different roles at different times. Indeed, acknowledging the multiple roles that stakeholders may hold in the marketplace is in line with stakeholder theory's suggestion that we avoid simplistic stakeholder categories (shareholders vs. stakeholders, etc.) and inspire new ways of thinking about business (McVea and Freeman, 2005). For example, Post *et al.* (2002) argues that acknowledging the simultaneous roles of stakeholders can inspire a more holistic view of business:

*Particular individuals and groups may simultaneously occupy several roles . employee, customer, shareowner, neighbor, and the like. Recognition of these overlaps should lead both managers and constituents to acknowledge the varied impacts of corporate activity, and to think of corporate performance in multidimensional and comprehensive terms, rather than from the perspective of any single interest+(Post et al., 2002, p. 23).*

The blurriness of stakeholder roles is further accentuated by the emergence of new organizational forms which diverge from conventional business archetypes. In the recent decades, scholars and practitioners have described this organizational phenomenon by emphasizing issues like pluralism, hybridity, partiality, temporality, and virtuality. For instance, the rapidly growing literature on hybrid organizations highlights the fact that companies with a social mission often have to serve multiple masters. This complicates the management of stakeholder expectations and risks of mission drift (Haigh and Hoffman, 2012; Hoffman et al., 2012). Moreover, the circular economy movement is based on the premise that customers are



also actively engaged in providing input for new recycled or remade products (EMF, 2013a, 2013b; Murray et al., 2015; WEF, 2014). This type of business logic differs significantly from the linear ~~take~~ make-make-dispose+paradigm and sets new demands for stakeholder relationships.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the tensions in situations of blurred stakeholder relationships and organizational boundaries. While rethinking stakeholder relationships and organizations may pave the way to a more realistic and holistic view of business (as proposed by stakeholder advocates) this new perspective can also give rise to a number of challenges and dilemmas. Moreover, this chapter will outline a number of balancing strategies that can help companies in addressing these tensions in everyday organizational practices. Some tensions are built into the fabric of organizations, which means that companies should find ways to cope with them in day-to-day practices rather than looking for quick fixes to eliminate them. This chapter is in line with more recent efforts to break with the prevalent win-win logic dominating corporate sustainability literature and gives added emphasis to the built-in conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes (Hahn et al., 2014, 2015; Allen et al., 2015).

The analysis and discussion of the blurred lines between stakeholders and organizations will be illustrated with examples from *peer-to-peer* marketplaces and the key constituents taking part in these new sharing systems. *Peer-to-peer* marketplaces are part of the fast-growing sharing economy phenomenon, which is an umbrella term for a variety of business models that provide the opportunity to share underutilized assets and skills (e.g., Belk, 2010; Botsman and Rogers, 2010). With the concept making its way out of the niche into the mainstream (Grimm and Kunze, 2011; Seidl and Zahrt, 2012), the sharing economy is said to possess disruptive potential, which can bring about transformations in established industries (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Walsh, 2011). While the sharing economy has already developed a rather firm grip on certain industries and sectors such as accommodation and transportation, the phenomenon is yet to establish itself in the mainstream sectors of consumer goods, such as in fashion (e.g., Birtwistle and Moore, 2007).

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows: First, the chapter begins with a short introduction to the sharing economy and the implications of these new business models on stakeholder relationships and organizations. The introduction is followed by the analysis of tensions in consumer marketplaces arising between consumers and organizations facilitating the transactions (host organizations). To structure the analysis, this chapter will draw on the nascent literature on partial organization (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). More specifically, the five pillars of organizing (*membership, rules, monitoring, sanctions, and hierarchy*) are used for structuring the analysis of the tensions emerging from the blurred lines between stakeholders and organizations. The chapter will end with a reflection on balancing strategies, which can be used to address stakeholder tensions in the sharing economy.

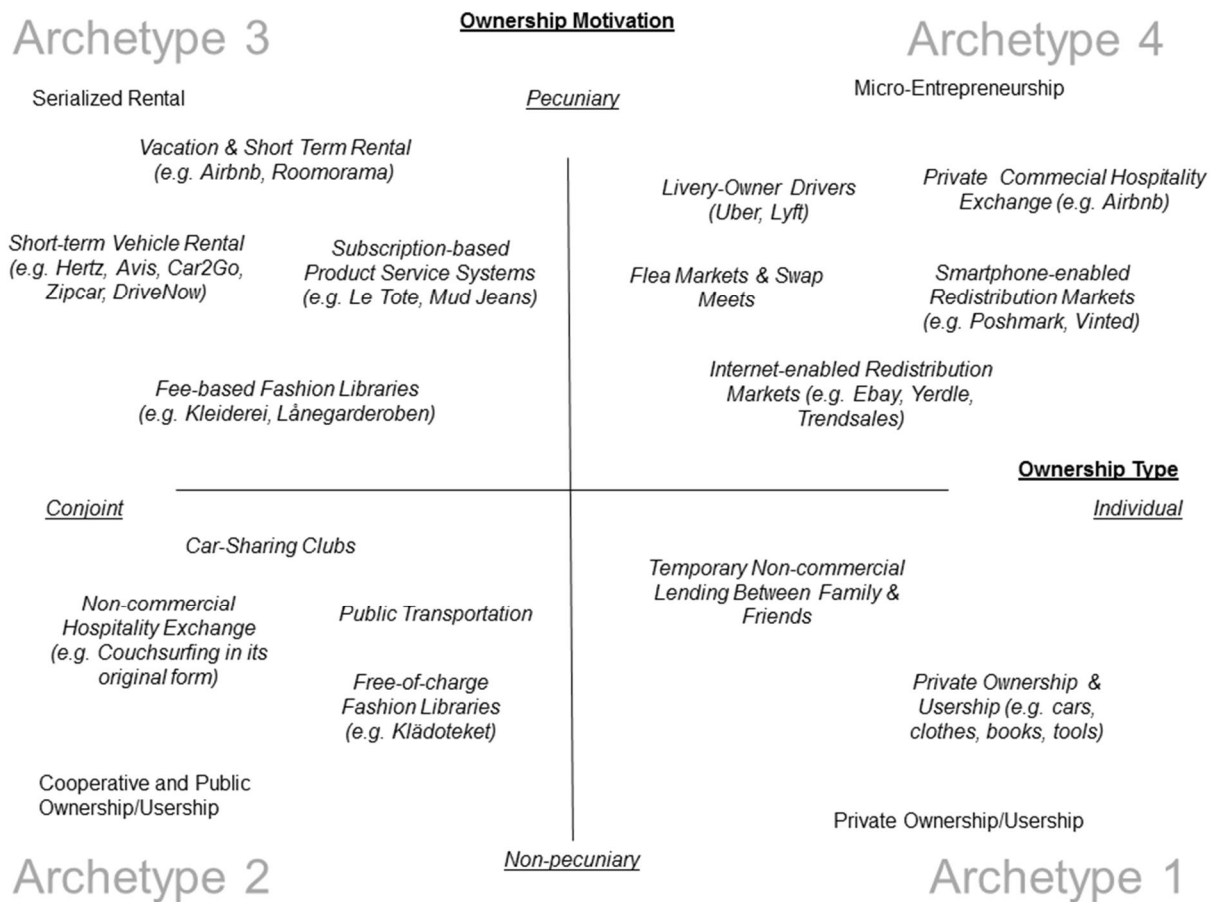
## **II. THE SHARING ECONOMY INTRODUCED**

There are a variety of different *peer-to-peer* marketplaces enabled by sharing initiatives. Among other things, business models can be distinguished based on their profit orientation (non-profit to for-profit approaches, membership based, transaction based or free-of-charge services) and temporality (e.g., temporary leases vs. permanent swaps, temporary pop-up stores vs. permanent setups). Some of the best known examples include *Uber*, offering transportation, *Airbnb*, allowing the rental of private homes and apartments, *eBay* and *Poshmark*, providing consumers with means of reselling and swapping underutilized consumer goods, such as clothing, all by means of information and communication technology. Most commonly, sharing platforms are smartphone enabled. These marketplaces vary not only in form - i.e., physical (offline), non-physical (online and mobile), as well as hybrid marketplaces (offline activities coupled with online and mobile platforms or vice versa) - but also with regards to the different types of services, ownerships and userships being traded. While some marketplaces are rather free, unregulated and of an informal nature, others are more formalized with fees, regulations, and sanctions in place.

## Sharing Taxonomy

In an early attempt by Cohen (2014b) to distinguish sharing economy business models, four sharing economy archetypes were introduced. These archetypes are distinguished by ownership motivation and structure, with shared items being individually or conjointly owned and driven by profit-seeking or non-profit-seeking motives. While *archetype one* and *two* typify what Botsman and Rogers (2010) call collaborative lifestyle, which is mainly non-profit and community-based, *archetype three* and *four* constitute commercialized sharing formats, more specifically product-service systems and redistribution markets. In *archetype one*, goods are owned by a single person, allowing for temporary, non-commercial lending to family members and friends. *Archetype two* is comprised of cases enabling collective ownership and usership, such as car-sharing clubs, non-commercial hospitality exchange or free-of-charge fashion libraries (e.g., *Klädoteket*). Cases belonging to *archetype three* range from short-term rentals, such as in the case of car-sharing schemes (e.g., *Car2Go*, *DriveNow*) or fee-based clothing and accessories rental (e.g., *Kleiderlei*), to subscription based product service systems (e.g., *Mud Jeans*, *Le Tote*). Micro-entrepreneurship cases in *archetype four* span from classical flea markets and swap meets to Internet- (e.g., *eBay*, *Yerdle*) or smartphone-enabled redistribution platforms (e.g., *Poshmark*, *Vinted*) to private commercial hospitality exchanges (e.g., *Airbnb*). This overview of examples of sharing economy archetypes is by no means exhaustive but comprises some of the most renowned sharing economy cases (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sharing Taxonomy



### III. STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SHARING ECONOMY

Instead of conceiving markets and organizations as two completely different sets of social order, Ahrne *et al.* (2014) suggest that both are rather similar, in the sense that they are both based on decision and decided order. Depending on the degree of organization in terms of *membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions*, markets and organizations can be distinguished between complete and partial organization (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). While formal organizations have access to all five elements, thereby identifying them as complete organizations (*ibid.*), markets can be conceptualized as partial organization, if one or few of these organizing elements are present (Ahrne *et al.*, 2014). The partial organization of markets,

i.e., market organizations, is accomplished by a number of stakeholders (or as Ahrne *et al.* (2014) would call them, *market organizers*) namely *profiteers*, ~~*others*~~ *sellers and buyers*. This chapter suggests adjusting this simplified stakeholder definition offered by Ahrne *et al.* (ibid.) in the context of the sharing economy. The label *profiteers* appears misleading, considering that ~~*others*~~ *sellers and buyers*, are all interested in furthering their economic interest by means of organizing. Instead of conceptualizing the organizations facilitating the transactions as *profiteers*, the authors of this chapter deem it more appropriate to refer to them as *facilitators*. In a similar vein, the label *sellers and buyers* can be considered misleading, implying that all sharing transactions are based on monetary transactions. The label *users and providers* is considered more suitable, encompassing a wider range of examples of one consumer providing a service, which is embraced by another. Lastly, this chapter suggests to broaden and adjust the definition of ~~*others*~~ originally defined as ~~%~~ persons and organizations that try to influence the organization of markets+(ibid., p.9-10). These actors claim that ~~%~~ they act not in their own interest, but in the interest of specific other persons or organizations, or even in the interests of everyone. They have little or no interest in making a profit, and they try to help seller, buyers or whoever is affected by what sellers or buyers do+(ibid., p.9-10). Instead, this chapter suggests including all those stakeholders who are (or consider themselves to be) affected by the activity of sharing markets and consequently try to shape the phenomenon.

*Facilitators* and *users/providers* constitute the two primary stakeholders of the sharing economy in terms of facilitating, initiating, and maintaining the *peer-to-peer* marketplaces of the sharing economy. Depending on the marketplace, different ~~*others*~~ (e.g., sharing lobby organizations, investors, media, governments, trade unions, established competing industries and their employees) exert direct or indirect influence at different life stages, such as in the case of funding and providing locations, providing financial resources, or shaping the wider environment by means of protests, calls for more regulation, or through the introduction of legislation.

What makes sharing marketplaces an interesting case study is that boundaries between different stakeholder groups are not clear and stable, but are frequently blurred and broken up, especially as most business models are still in flux. While so called *switch-role markets* are not uncommon (e.g., Aspers, 2009), as in the case of the stock market with buyers and sellers switching roles within their group of market organizers (e.g., Ahrne et al., 2014), this chapter advocates for the conceptualization of sharing marketplaces as *blurred-role markets*, in which stakeholders might switch roles within their group of market organizers - as in the case of the stock market. Indeed, *users* might not only switch with *providers*, but also take on both roles and identities simultaneously. Similarly, *users* might also switch roles with the formal *facilitators* and become formally involved in the running and maintaining of the marketplace (e.g., becoming online forum moderators in swapping platforms or volunteer staff in fashion libraries), while formal *facilitators* may also embrace their identities as *users/providers*, offering or making use of the services of their very own marketplace. Simultaneously holding multiple identities and roles, with different obligations and degrees of influence might give rise to a number of tensions and conflicts.

Hence, while power in the sharing economy is formally in the hands of the *facilitators* in regards to shaping the format of the sharing organizations and the facilitated *peer-to-peer* marketplaces, the high number of struggling and failed sharing initiatives indicates that these setups are rather vulnerable with majority power being held by *users/providers* and with ~~others~~ occupying multiple identities and roles in these marketplaces. This scenario creates an array of tensions and conflicting interests in which sharing organizations are highly dependent on their consumers and vulnerable to changes in consumer trends. In order to understand the working mechanisms, dynamics, and organization of these markets, it is crucial to understand the opposing interests of the acting stakeholders and the ways in which their interests are distributed (Aspers, 2009).

### III. STAKEHOLDER TENSIONS IN THE SHARING ECONOMY UNFOLDED

In the following, tensions will be identified along the lines of the five organizational criteria outlined by Ahrne *et al.* (2014), i.e., *membership*, *rules*, *monitoring*, *sanctions*, and *hierarchy*, by drawing upon examples from the four *archetypes*.

Table 1: Overview of Organizational Elements and Examples of Tensions

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Rules</b>	<b>Monitoring</b>	<b>Sanctions</b>	<b>Hierarchy</b>
<i>Definition</i>	The <del>who</del> is involved in the interaction+	The <del>common</del> notions about what they are doing and how to do it+	The <del>observing</del> each other to know how to continue+	The <del>taking</del> measures in order to make others do what they expect them to do+	The <del>understanding</del> of who has the initiative and power+
<i>Examples of tensions</i>	Risk of trading down (inventory)  High entry barriers (technology, finances)  Discrimination (ethnic, aesthetic, socio-demographic)  Labels of members & legal consequences	Unfair competition (established players & employees)  Undermining regulation, consumer safety & protection, workers' rights, tax evasion (governments)  Unclear standards, procedures, fees	Overall feedback app-store, feedback individual actors, feedback individual transactions  Wrong accusations, transactions gone wrong, no reaction from customer service	Public protests (e.g., taxi drivers), call for more regulation (-)  Special status of certain members/ privileges (+)  Hiding of listing, temporary/ permanent blocking (-) Personal/ app-store reviews (+/-)	Facilitators' markets (i.e., information asymmetry)  Inventory selection (community vs. personal preferences)  Competition  Reviews

#### Membership

*Membership* pertains to the decisions about who can become a member and who cannot (Ahrne et al., 2014). In the context of markets, this means primarily those who are able to act as *users/providers* in the market, as the *facilitators* are for the most part initiating a formalized

framework for the market. While in some cases there may be *formal rules* for who can obtain *member status*, in other cases this is more informally regulated (Ahne and Brunsson, 2010).

There are a wide variety of different memberships in the sharing economy. In the case of free-of-charge fashion libraries (*archetype two*) for instance, there is no decision mechanism for who can become a member (Pedersen and Netter, 2015). With users and providers in this context basically constructing and using a common wardrobe, the organization is open to everyone that decides to register as a member and wishes to contribute. Tensions might arise between *users* and *providers*, with some fearing the risk of trading down if there is no barrier to membership and no control on the quality and brands that constitute the inventory.

In the case of Internet- or smartphone-enabled redistribution markets (*archetype four*) such as *eBay* or *Poshmark*, membership is only available to those that have access to the necessary information and communication technology, and who are living in the platform's country of origin. Furthermore, most platforms require a credit card and a permanent address. Where conventional sharing practices were mainly found between family, friends and community-members, new types of sharing transactions take place between strangers, which comes with challenges in identifying their ~~true type~~ (i.e., trustworthiness). Stakeholders may not always be who they appear or claim to be - a possibility that requires *facilitators* to put in place an element of screening or identity verification before access to shared resources can be permitted.

Possible tensions might also arise from high entry barriers, which are largely at odds with the common narrative that praises the sharing economy as an empowering, democratizing and inclusive force (e.g., Netter, 2016). Furthermore, membership might be susceptible to ethnic, aesthetic, or socio-demographic discrimination, as was found by Edelman and Luca (2014) in the case of *Airbnb* (*archetype four*). Moreover, the issue of membership and official labels of stakeholder groups is also linked to wider legal discussions, as can be seen in the case of livery-owner drivers for providers such as *Uber* (*archetype four*) (e.g., Orsi, 2013; Sørensen, 2016), raising questions as to whether *Uber* drivers should be considered employees of a



transportation service or independent contractors of an electronic intermediary service. The legal label of stakeholders hence gives rise to issues such as public law violations (e.g., taxes, sector specific permits, unfair competition) and contractual challenges, forcing *Uber* drivers to insure themselves against accidents, illness, unemployment, and retirement (e.g., Sørensen, 2016; Eichhorst and Spermann, 2015). Closely linked to the issue of *rules*, *membership status* clarification might thus cause tensions for *facilitators* and *user/providers* alike (Brown, 2016).

## Rules

*Rules* can concern any aspect of the market such as product design or prices, as well as any kind of behavior or action, i.e., *user/provider* behavior, and guides for the conduct of how to handle transactions and exchanges (Ahrne et al., 2014). Besides *formal rules* of participation, there can also be more *informal rules* or recommendations such as standards, for which compliance is voluntary (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). While so far most of the sharing economy has operated in legal grey areas (e.g., Orsi, 2013), we have recently started to witness more and more regulation, deregulation, and self-regulation (e.g., Hartl et al., 2015) concerning issues such as consumer safety and protection, workers rights, and the safeguarding of established players and their employees, with different stakeholders taking different stances (e.g., Chang, 2015; Eichhorst and Spermann, 2015; Sørensen, 2016).

As highlighted with regards to membership in the case of *Uber*, *Uber* has adopted a rather confrontational approach in tackling the tensions with its *users/providers* and *others* such as competing established taxi operations and governing bodies. *Airbnb* on the other hand, which has also faced quite a deal of opposition from competing industries, local communities, and governments on the state and local level, has chosen a rather collaborative path in its attempts to resolve conflicts and secure its survival in the marketplace. In the case of online and mobile redistribution marketplaces, *rules*, which are usually established by the *facilitator*, primarily

pertain to transaction guidelines, inventory, community etiquette, logistics, return and complaint policies, as well as to guidelines for setting up one's personal page.

Tensions arise due to unclear standards, procedures, fees, lack of customer protection, as well as uncommunicated *sanctions* (Netter, forthcoming). In contrast to these rather commercialized formats, there are fewer rules in free-of-charge fashion libraries. *Rules* established by the *facilitators* primarily concern the amount and duration of rental, condition of returned goods, and fees for delay or damages. While *facilitators* cannot further their economic interest in these non-profit environments, they can guide the stylistic orientation and inventory of this collective wardrobe, which is interesting for them in their additional role as *user/providers*. Possible tensions might arise from this double agenda and style dictate issued by the *facilitators*.

## Monitoring

Just as in the case of *rules*, *monitoring* pertains to all aspects of the market. More specifically, it concerns how to monitor what members do, feel, and think (Ahrne et al., 2014). An element of *monitoring* is a prerequisite of sharing and other types of business models, as a system based solely on trust would eventually become vulnerable to the acts of less trustworthy stakeholders. Besides more *top-down monitoring* strategies, where one stakeholder group holding the power monitors another stakeholder group in the market, *mutual monitoring* enables the deliberation of experiences and the evaluation of actions by all members.

Most online and mobile business models in the sharing economy rely on reputation-based systems in terms of *monitoring* and *sanctioning* individual actors on sharing markets (Cohen and Sundararajan, 2015). In terms of *monitoring* and *sanctioning* stakeholders or entire stakeholder groups, it can be hypothesized that narratives, constructed by *others* are more powerful for inducing change and increasing self-regulation as a means to circumvent foreseeable calls for more regulation by governing bodies. In the case of *Airbnb* for instance, media horror stories on people returning to find trashed apartments, rentals turned into

brothels, and their identities and valuables stolen (e.g., Coldwell, 2016), have caused *Airbnb* to adjust its terms and conditions.

*Mutual monitoring* procedures are also in place in the case of most online and mobile redistribution markets. In most cases, *facilitators* have the opportunity to follow up on the individual transactions and shipping, by means of special payment systems and shipping labels. *User/providers* can give feedback to the *facilitator* as to whether everything went smoothly or in case there are any concerns or complaints. Additionally, in many markets, *users and providers* have the opportunity to rate one other. The overall feedback system in the app-store is probably the most important feedback system. In this system, current or previous members provide feedback, not only to the *facilitator* but also to potential future members, which thus acts as a powerful gatekeeping mechanism. Tensions might arise in cases in which members feel wrongfully accused, transactions go wrong and the customer service of the *facilitator* does not respond to reports or take action (e.g., Netter, forthcoming).

In contrast, *monitoring* in free-of-charge fashion libraries occurs mostly in a top-down fashion, without formalized mutual evaluation mechanisms *monitoring* the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the members (e.g., Pedersen and Netter, 2015). *Facilitators* check whether deadlines are met and remind members of their delay. Tensions might arise as members are only able to express their feeling about their experiences in this market via voluntary feedback, either in person or via the fashion library's *Facebook* page, commentary which might go unheard, get deleted, or simply fail to reach enough members to create a critical mass to bring about change.

## **Sanctions**

*Sanctions* can be both a positive or negative approach to enforcing members to do what they are expected to do (Ahrne et al., 2014). While *positive sanctions* provide incentives and rewards such as prizes, awards, and diplomas to reinforce preferable behavior, *negative*

*sanctions* such as penalties, certificates, and boycotts, deny or impede access, further membership and participation in the market (e.g., Ahrne and Brunsson, 2010). Both types of *sanctions* have consequences for the status, identity, and resources of the recipient.

In the sharing economy, different forms of *sanctioning* can be identified. In the case of *Uber* for instance, public protests by taxi drivers calling for governments to intervene in the constant growth of *Uber* and other ride-sharing transportation providers, constitutes one form of *negative sanctions* (Stallibrass and Fingleton, 2016). In online and mobile-enabled redistribution markets, both *facilitators* and *user/providers* make use of both *positive* and *negative sanctioning* mechanisms. *Positive sanctions* range from providing certain members with an elevated status . for example in the case of forum managers who act as an extension of the *facilitator* by directing extra attention to certain profiles or by generating more traffic to those featured shops or profiles, an activity that most likely results in a higher number of transactions and revenues for *facilitators* and *providers*. *Negative sanctioning* mechanisms by *facilitators* range from the hiding of *provider* listings to the temporary or permanent blocking of *user* profiles.

*User/providers* can *sanction* fellow *user/providers* with positive or negative reviews on their profiles, which will increase or decrease their chances of future transactions due to this trust-building mechanism and provide an incentive to follow the guidelines. *User/providers* can also *sanction* the entire marketplace (i.e., both *facilitators* and other *user/providers*) in their app store reviews by either praising the service and community or by highlighting their flaws and weaknesses. Tensions might arise for *user/providers* if expectations and evaluations do not match, there are perceived unfair ratings, listings are hidden, profiles get blocked for no apparent reason, or if only selected profiles receive positive attention or get featured.

*Facilitators* must handle the consequences of negative app reviews. As consumers perceive the reviews provided by other consumers on companies, services, or products as more trustworthy than vendor testimonials (e.g., Walther and Parks, 2002), these reviews . which are

for the most part outside of the control of the *facilitator* - are a powerful resources to tap into in order to judge the reputation of a market, form an attitude and potentially convince future members to shy away from choosing one product or service in favor of another altogether (e.g., Hong and Park, 2012).

There is no real *sanctioning* mechanism in free-of-charge fashion libraries as there is no mechanism for who can (or cannot) become a member. Membership usually lasts until someone actively revokes his or her membership. In most cases however, members simply switch from being active to passive users, in the sense that they stop making use of the library and its services. Membership status can also be revoked by the facilitator, for instance as punishment for disobeying the rules of conduct.

## **Hierarchy**

*Hierarchy* in market organizations pertains to those who have the initiative and power, i.e., those whose decisions are binding for current and future members. These decisions are usually binding as long as members wish to continue as members (Ahrne et al., 2014). While it could be argued that the formal initiative and decision-making power is held by the *facilitator*, social order is in most cases emergent and negotiated as a response to pressure rather than decided proactively in advance. *User/providers* are often the sole providers of inventory for these markets. The supply and demand side can exert pressure internally on the *facilitator* in terms of shaping the format of the marketplace. In a similar vein, *others* such as communities, trade and labor unions, competing established industries, and others exert external pressure.

In free-of-charge fashion libraries, the formal initiative and power is in the hands of the *facilitators*, as they develop the rules of conduct, which are binding, as long as one remains a member of the wardrobe. This power is frequently supported by a lack of competition in the case of these physical setups. Nonetheless, the survival of the library is highly dependent on the benevolence of *others* who are facilitating the space of the market. In the case of

*Klädoteket* for instance, a fashion library in Malmö, Sweden, the municipality is providing the building in which the fashion library is located. Without the support of this *ætherq* the fashion library *facilitators* would have to find another benefactor or adjust the business model, in order to be able to afford running the library.

The *facilitators* are thus incentivized to uphold a system that benefits and pleases their members in order to secure the support from *æthersq* In a similar vein, *facilitators* are dependent on members supplying the library with inventory. Although they have the final say as to which items are allowed to enter the wardrobe, *facilitators* must be careful to balance their selective behavior with the constant need to attract new and interesting inventory that pleases demands by members for renewal and variety (Pedersen and Netter, 2015). Similarly, the formal initiative and decision making power is in the hands of the *facilitators* in online and mobile redistribution markets, as they develop the rules of conduct, which are binding, as long as *user/providers* in these markets wish to keep their membership status.

These markets may be considered *facilitatorsq*markets, where the information asymmetry and its aftereffects are primarily to the benefit of the *facilitator* (Netter, forthcoming). In such a system, tensions might arise between *user/providers* and *facilitators*. However, with the constant emergence of new online and mobile marketplaces, competition is growing and switching costs are decreasing. Considering the impact of the various reputation systems, app store reviews tip the scale in favor of *user/providers* who have the opportunity and power to influence current and future possible members in their decision for or against any given platform.

Reviews, which are crucial for the maintenance and retention of the current membership base as well as for the attraction and adoption of potential new members, can thus be considered an avenue of tension. It is a double-edged sword for *facilitators* wishing to steer their reputation in a certain direction by purchasing likes and reviews. While the short-term benefits of such acts may be evident, *facilitators* must be careful to respond honestly to negative critiques and

promote positive feedback organically in order to continue to be seen as trustworthy and maintain their license to operate.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION: THE TEMPORALITY OF PARTIALITY**

Over the past decade, there has been a growing interest in the sharing economy and related/overlapping concepts including participative economy, collaborative economy, access-based consumption, product-service systems, collaborative consumption, and the mesh (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Gansky, 2010; Stokes et al., 2014). Until recently, the phenomenon was wrapped in lofty rhetoric about trust, community and sustainability. Increasingly, however, critics are beginning to question sharing business models and their benefits to society and the wider environment (Awad, 2016, Netter, 2016). While sharing can facilitate alternative marketplaces for sustainable-minded individuals, it is arguable that these marketplaces also act as safe havens for businesses wishing to circumvent regulation or avoid head-to-head competition with established players.

Based on stakeholder thinking and the emerging literature on partial organization, this chapter described the tensions emerging among stakeholders taking part in *peer-to-peer* marketplaces, facilitated by sharing business models. More specifically, the chapter demonstrated how tensions are manifested in sharing marketplaces when it comes to *memberships*, *rules*, *monitoring*, *sanctions*, and *hierarchy*. In many ways, sharing represents a more fluid organizational form where stakeholders can occupy multiple roles and functions. However, the blurred lines between stakeholders also create a number of challenges, e.g., regarding which rules to apply and where to place responsibilities. The blurriness creates a vacuum and gives rise to a number of business practices which critics believe run contrary to the true spirit of sharing.

Sharing no longer exists on the fringe of the marketplace; it has become a billion dollar industry that increasingly challenges conventional businesses operating in regulated markets. The growing popularity of sharing implies that these partially-organized marketplaces are increasingly under fire to meet the same standards, rules and regulations as those governing more complete organization in the market. Moreover, critics are increasingly challenging the roles and motives of the stakeholders taking part in sharing (Awad, 2016). Therefore, the question arises as to whether this partial organization ultimately represents a temporal phenomenon, which will eventually give way to a complete organization that is more *in sync* with existing institutional infrastructures? Ironically, the current upsurge of the sharing economy may also mark the beginning of its demise as we have come to know it as the growing popularity of the sharing economy intensifies stakeholder pressures to align the sharing practices with conventional market transactions orchestrated by formal, complete organizations.

The future of sharing will thus largely depend on the ability of sharing organizations to navigate between oppositional stakeholder expectations and institutional demands. On the one hand, they will have to conform to existing norms and rules to avoid negative stakeholder *sanctions*. On the other hand, they must push existing business practices in order to provide alternative marketplaces. Here, inspiration may be found in the organization literature, which demonstrates how organizations actually have access to a broad repertoire of strategic responses to stakeholder pressures . from actively resisting demands to actively broadening expectations (Oliver, 1991; Pedersen and Gwozdz, 2014). For instance, Pache and Santos (2013) elegantly describe how decoupling, compromise, and especially selective coupling play out in the context of hybrid organizations that are born with competing institutional logic. Likewise, the future success of sharing businesses may well depend on their ability to cope with tensions by carefully choosing between resistance, compliance, and opportunity seeking in decision-making processes and day-to-day practices.



## **V. CONCLUSION**

Stakeholder theory describes an organization as coalitions of groups and individuals, which affect and/or is affected by a corporation's goals and activities. Stakeholder thinking has evolved rapidly since the 1980s and is today an integrated part of mainstream management vocabulary (Parmar et al., 2010). Over the years, there has been a lively debate about the constitution of a stakeholder and his or her relationship to other groups and networks. Moreover, the theory has explored tensions that can emerge between stakeholders who may have differing views on the contributions made to the coalition and the rewards yielded from the coalition's market activity. Ultimately, however, the theory is characterized by a belief in harmony, i.e., that stakeholder interests will unify over time.

This chapter adds a layer of complexity to the current discussions about stakeholder status and tensions. Based on the emerging literature on partial organization, this chapter explores some of the tensions emerging from blurred lines between stakeholders in the sharing economy, which has become a rapidly-growing alternative to more conventional marketplaces characterized by complete organization. The blurriness of stakeholder status in sharing economy businesses invites the risk of tensions, which can negatively impact an organization's identity. For instance, a sharing platform can mean different things depending on whether the platform is viewed as a space for peers to exchange excess resources or as a distribution channel of stolen goods or counterfeit products. Likewise, car sharing has different connotations to different people; some see it as a way to make better use of underused assets whereas others consider it a hostile attempt to undermine a long-regulated transportation industry.

Fueled by new technology, the sharing economy has quickly established itself as one of the most interesting phenomena in business today. Some have even argued that the sharing economy will be bigger than the Internet (Wenzel, 2013). However, as sharing economy initiatives are becoming more visible in the market landscape, discussions about the sharing

economy too are moving beyond the lofty rhetoric about collaboration, trust, community, and sustainability that formed early discussions about the phenomenon. Critics are increasingly challenging the popular narratives surrounding the sharing economy and the motives of the actors engaging in these transactions. While the concept of sharing has existed at all times and in all cultures, the new sharing economy is likely to spark significant debate in the years to come; either as an increasingly consolidated player in the global economy or as a controversial actor operating in greyq unregulated markets.



## Chapter VI

### ***Conclusion***

#### **1. SUMMARY**

Guided by the research question, *What are the micro- and macro-level tensions that characterize the sharing economy?*, this exploratory thesis investigates the emergent sharing economy phenomenon and calls for a more nuanced understanding.

By introducing the notions of *availability cascades*, *multi-sided platforms*, and *partial organization* for studying the tensions arising from the institutionalization of the phenomenon and organization of sharing markets, this thesis contributes conceptually to the emergent field of research on the sharing economy. By empirically investigating the micro-level tensions experienced by two different types of fashion-sharing platforms, this thesis further expands the growing body of literature on the sharing economy, which is so far characterized by a lack of independent empirical work.

The thesis consists of four independent research papers, each based on different streams of literature and data sets. The first paper (*chapter II*) investigates how the sharing economy phenomenon is diffused and ~~talked~~ <sup>talked</sup> into existence by the communicative acts of a number of different availability entrepreneurs invested in the success of the phenomenon. The second research paper (*chapter III*) looks at how the reality of these narratives is actually experienced by the representatives of one type of sharing platform, i.e., fashion libraries. The third paper (*chapter IV*) further expands the understanding of micro-level tensions experienced by sharing platforms, by looking at the case of mobile fashion reselling and swapping markets. The fourth

and final paper (*chapter V*) of this thesis combines the perspectives of different sharing economy stakeholders and outlines some of the micro and macro tensions arising in and influencing the organization of these multi-sided markets.

So far, the future of the sharing economy is rather uncertain, not least due to its conceptual ambiguity, rhetorical controversies, and lack of sound measurements and empirical evidence+ (Codagnone et al., 2016, p. 6). The thesis concludes that fate of the sharing economy primarily depends on two factors. Firstly, it depends on its stakeholdersqability to resolve stakeholder tensions and arrive at a more nuanced and less normative discourse, which will largely inform the ways and format in which sharing initiatives can be supported and regulated. Second of all, it depends on the ability of policy-makers and sharing initiatives to shift consumer mindsets from ownership to access in order to increase the adaption of these new consumption practices while simultaneously reducing overall consumption levels, thereby contributing to more sustainable development.

While the sharing economy is ascribed vast potential to resolve sustainability challenges, most indications point towards an availability cascade or a bubble, rather than a substantial phenomenon, bearing the risk of rebound effects, such as increasing consumption levels, which might worsen the situation (*chapter II*). As little is known so far regarding the sharing economy's actual impact in terms of alleviating sustainability problems, this thesis proposes that the implications of increased activity of the sharing economy need to be critically explored before it is actively promoted by business and policy-makers as the latest cure-all.

As it stands today, the sharing economy constitutes an umbrella term for a wider variety of different platforms and markets, bringing together a wide range of stakeholders with different agendas, needs, and structural challenges (*chapter III and IV*). This needs to be accounted for, not only in terms of how to speak about the sharing economy and make sense of it but also in terms of how to cater for the different stakeholder demands. The thesis argues that in spite of increased media coverage, the actual practice of fashion sharing (such as by means of fashion

libraries) still constitutes a niche activity with few consumers having changed their mindset yet from ownership towards sharing practices. While other formats, such as mobile fashion-sharing platforms, appear to appeal to a wider audience in terms of appearance, functionality, reducing search costs, and providing attractive inventory, these platforms appear to struggle to transition towards more mature stages, with users fearing unfair treatment, higher search costs, and technical glitches. Overall, platforms appear to experience structural challenges, such as limited financial, technical, and human resources, limited understanding of their users' needs and fears, as well as a lack of strategies for how to overcome the barrier of shifting consumer mindsets from ownership to access.

The issue of how calls for regulation and support will be answered will further be influenced by the ways in which sharing economy stakeholders manage to resolve tensions arising from competing agendas, power struggles and how to avoid negative sanctions (*chapter V*). Sharing markets appear to differ beyond the usual distinction between communal and commercial sharing regarding their degree of organization with some resembling unregulated versions of established industries and sectors. With stakeholder roles frequently being blurred and giving rise to conflicting agendas and interests, operating in this (largely) legal grey area, a number of tensions arise between different stakeholder groups trying to shape the sharing landscape in their interest.

As any empirical study, the thesis at hand faces certain threats in terms of ensuring its quality. This thesis tentatively operationalizes the sharing economy as multi-sided for-profit and non-profit business-to-consumer and peer-to-peer platforms, which enable the compartmentalization of ownership and usership of goods, skills, and services by bringing together distinct groups of consumers through partly-organized multi-sided markets. While this operationalization appears suitable for the purpose and context of the study at hand, it can still be considered rather vague and might fall into the same trap as previous research, offering too over-inclusive or broad definitions.

The chosen qualitative exploratory approach of this study has certain limitations, primarily pertaining to the generalizability of findings, which is further elaborated on in the methodology chapter and the individual research papers. The empirical studies were performed on samples of four fashion libraries and three mobile fashion-sharing platforms. While the findings might not apply to all fashion libraries, all mobile fashion-sharing apps, or all fashion-sharing initiatives, a certain level of representativeness can still be assumed for the studied samples and fashion sharing archetypes based on the case selection criteria and sampling strategies. Besides the generalizability issues arising from selection bias and review manipulation by vendors regarding app reviews, there is also a risk of social desirability bias regarding the interviews conducted with fashion library representatives. In the course of interviewing subjects, attempts were made to minimize this potential bias by avoiding leading questions and using neutral formulations. With the aim to show the complexity and the field of tensions that the sharing economy is creating and operating in, the chosen approach was deemed suitable, despite its flaws.

## 2. THE FUTURE OF THE SHARING ECONOMY: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

*The sharing movement emerged as a form of social utopianism out of the broader narrative on the wisdom of the crowds and the creativity of the commons. After the development of sharing platforms has taken a more commercial turn, disenchantment has fuelled growing criticism. Other, more tangible interests and concerns exacerbated the conflictual debate that currently surrounds the sharing economy. These include the political activation of the disrupted incumbents, and urban tensions concerning the negative externalities caused by ride services and short-term accommodation rentals. The fact that sharing*

*platforms operate in a grey area where they are neither legal nor illegal, but at times violate local-level ordinances, also raises genuine or instrumental concerns about consumer protection and the rights of independent on demand workers.*+(Codagnone et al., 2016, p. 52)

The findings presented in this thesis contain a number of important theoretical and practical implications for future research pertaining to (1) micro-level tensions regarding resources and behavioral barriers, as well as (2) macro-level tensions in terms of the discourse, institutionalization of the phenomenon, and organization of markets. In the following, the main findings in terms of micro and macro tensions will be discussed. While some tensions can be considered clear cut micro tensions playing out on the level of individual organizations, others both reflect and inform wider tensions playing out on the macro-level between a wider set of stakeholders.

## **2.1. Micro Tensions**

In the following, some of the identified micro tensions will be brought forth and discussed.

### **Changing Consumer Behavior**

Looking at the comparatively small membership numbers of fashion libraries and their representatives' testimonies regarding the lengthy process of changing consumer mindsets and their behavior, more research is needed regarding the factors inhibiting consumers from changing their ways from possession to access. With the rise of fast fashion retailers, a throwaway consumer culture has emerged, emphasizing cheap and trendy garments, which are discarded after a short usage period (Birtwistle and Moore, 2007.) As research on



sustainable fashion consumption has shown, in the context of cheap and trendy clothes that are readily available and easy to access, matters of comfort of shopping might alleviate potential guilt associated with the disposability of these cheap fashion items (Beard, 2008). Furthermore, some of the main barriers to more sustainable fashion consumption practices pertain to inconvenience, difficulties in access and cost (Beard, 2008; Birtwistle and Moore, 2007; Domina and Koch, 1997, 2002; Ha-Brookshire and Hodges, 2009; Meyer, 2001; Morgan and Birtwistle, 2009; Niinimäki, 2010; Shaw et al., 2006). Regarding redistribution of fashion items, convenience and access not only determine the choice of channel but can also have a significant impact on the frequency, quantity, and variety of items selected for redistribution (Domina and Koch, 2002). Costs in this regard pertain not only to higher product prices of more sustainable alternatives but also to higher search costs, which is linked to limited availability, knowledge, and access (Meyer, 2001). It can be assumed that improving convenience and easing access to sharing initiatives will positively contribute to changing consumer mindsets and their behavior.

### **Structural Challenges Sharing Platforms**

To date, little is known about the effectiveness and potential of sharing economy platforms, as well as the needs for support and regulation of the different archetypes. More clarity is needed regarding the challenges faced and tensions caused by different initiatives, in order to provide an appropriate framework for their governance. While communal approaches, for instance, are struggling primarily in terms of securing the financial means to cover their expenses, commercial approaches . especially those in close competition with established industries following existing legislations . are concerned with future regulations hindering their operations as well as with maintaining an appealing price point once venture capital inflow subsides (e.g., Hill, 2016).

It can be hypothesized that approaches that follow traditional business logic and market structures might be at particular risk of producing rebound effects, which could offset environmental, social and economic benefits - if these in fact can be accomplished. On the other hand, approaches that aim to disrupt the existing system and shift consumer attitudes towards reducing materialism may be less susceptible to rebound effects (e.g., Stevenson, 2014). It can be hypothesized that small-scale activities, which are more tightly anchored in local communities and facilitate direct interaction between strangers are more likely to contribute to the transformation of consumption patterns, moving from ownership to usership, and thereby contributing to greater sustainable development. This shift might not only benefit the environmental bottom line but also contribute to the social dimension of sustainability, fostering well-being and creating a feeling of belonging in a world otherwise characterized by rising degrees of individualization and detachment.

Assuming that communal sharing initiatives have the potential to contribute to more sustainable development, more research is needed on how to promote and support these initiatives. As shown throughout this thesis, community-oriented sharing platforms such as fashion libraries are struggling to sustain their operations, primarily due to a lack of financial, personal, and technical resources as well as resistance by consumers to change their mindsets and consumption patterns. So far, most operations operate exclusively on the basis of voluntary engagement. Lacking the financial means to employ full-time staff, fashion libraries are at risk of going out of business before they can attain a critical mass of members. While changing the blueprint of the business model might allow these businesses to tap into new revenue channels and target additional customer groups, they also run the risk of antagonizing the existing member base. More research is needed on how operations, which are largely value-driven and based in local communities can transition to become a more commercially viable enterprise.

Considering the barriers to achieving sustainable fashion consumption behavior, online and mobile fashion reselling and swapping platforms show significant promise in their ability to

improve convenience, availability, and access for consumers while at the same time reducing search costs. This is especially the case for potential users from rural areas who are otherwise prohibited from participating in physical sharing activities more frequently found in urban settings. Compared to most local, niche, small-scale operations such as fashion libraries, online and mobile fashion-sharing platforms are frequently faced with fierce competition. While *eBay* and *Craigslist* constitute two of the first sharing platforms, which were originally operating without direct competition, nowadays, new platforms are entering the market at an increasing pace. Similarly, successful platforms such as *Vinted* or *Vestiaire Collective* are now expanding their operations beyond their original country of operations. Failure and success of these platforms is not only determined by their ability to produce network effects, offer attractive inventory at appealing price points, or present alternative currency valuations of offered items, but also by their ability to constantly improve the interface of their applications and reduce search costs for their members.

While it can be assumed that multi-homing, i.e., operating on different multi-sided markets, requires investment from users in the form of learning costs and time, it can still be considered relatively easy for users to switch back and forth between providers in cases of dissatisfaction. More research is needed regarding the factors causing users to multi-home and abandon one platform provider in favor of another. In these highly competitive environments, platform providers need to ensure high levels of customer satisfaction by providing quick and competent responses to customer complaints. Furthermore, platform providers need to be careful in their subsidization strategies, i.e., in their approaches to favor or positively sanction certain user groups while not antagonizing others.

## 2.2. Macro Tensions

In the following, some of the identified macro tensions will be brought forth and discussed.

### A Need for Clarity

One feature that makes the sharing economy concept so particularly attractive is its variety of forms and archetypes, which fulfills the hardened expectations on both sides of the socialist and capitalist ideological spectrum without being an ideology in itself (Botsman and Rogers, 2010, p. xxii). On one side of the spectrum, hedonistic consumers and venture capitalists searching for the next *Airbnb* see this paradigm shift as the rise of a new business model, as a new opportunity for consuming even more and capitalizing on such consumption. On the other side of the spectrum, political consumers see the sharing economy as a social movement, as an alternative to current overconsumption patterns. This appeal to different actors, which combines feel-good elements with business opportunities, helps to stabilize the sharing economy phenomenon. Within this context, it is understandable that the win-win rationale of the sharing economy has received heavy support from the business community. Similar observations have been made with regard to the development of the green growth agenda, especially in terms of the rapid acceptance of certain concepts, i.e., sustainable development and corporate social responsibility as central to our understanding of the relationship between nature and all actors involved (Lain, 2005). As in the case of sustainable development and the related CSR discourse, part of the sharing economy's success lies in its opacity and vagueness. However, the very factors that may make the sharing economy successful could also lead to its downfall, with the sharing economy running the risk of washing out because of its myriad of interpretations and applications, with various parties instrumentalizing concepts for their own gain.

As Schor (2014, p. 11) puts it, there is little doubt that the pro-sharing discourse is blind to the dark side of these innovations. At the same time, the critics are too cynical. Recently, we have

witnessed a shift in narratives, moving from overly positive to overly critical. One of the chief problems with this shift in attitude, however, is that the sharing economy is frequently only equated with its most renowned representatives, i.e., *Airbnb* and *Uber*. While it can be discussed whether these organizations can still be considered sharing initiatives, it is important to bear in mind that it is not possible to generalize from one sharing case to another. Even though *Airbnb* and *Uber* are frequently cited as representative of the sharing economy, sharing economy cases do not share a single business model. The sharing taxonomy introduced by Cohen (2014b) constitutes a useful tool to conduct a rough mapping of sharing initiatives. However, going through different rounds of iterations of their business model, most sharing initiatives could have been mapped in different sectors of the taxonomy, especially when making the transition from non-profit to for-profit operations. Consequently, it is more suitable to consider the taxonomy a dynamic framework, which tries to capture a phenomenon which is still emergent and in flux.

There is a strong need for a more nuanced understanding of the sharing economy. What is needed is a discourse that moves beyond the divide between overly critical or overly optimistic, and away from the semantic fetish of what deserves the label of ~~sharing~~ and what does not. Rather, the discourse would benefit greatly from grounding it in the actual practices, challenges and opportunities of the sharing economy. Following the public discourse - especially in its persistent focus on the sharing economy's biggest players, *Airbnb* and *Uber* - one might easily get the idea that the sharing economy only consists of commercial, monetized approaches that follow traditional capitalistic market logic. As shown in this thesis, however, the sharing economy consists of a wide variety of archetypes, which encompass a wide variety of business models. Instead of providing an umbrella definition for all types of sharing platforms, it might be more beneficial to instead tailor them to the different archetypes.

## **A Sharing Bubble**

While there is reason to believe that the sharing economy and associated business and consumption models have vast potential for alleviating some of society's economic, environmental, and social challenges, there is also a legitimate risk that the hype surrounding the sharing economy might in fact be a bubble - one based on powerful win-win narratives circling around commercialized archetypes and false assumptions regarding their current market size and potential to contribute to sustainable development. More research is needed on the narratives used for promoting the sharing economy. More specifically, narratives need to be more systematically dissected and critically assessed, especially with regards to the frequently-claimed benefits of sustainability. The conditions under which these benefits can be accomplished needs to be clarified, as do the rebound effects or unintended consequences that they might cause (e.g., increased consumption levels) and how to mitigate them (e.g., through regulation).

While it is problematic to uncritically accept the positive narratives brought forth by sharing economy advocates, it is equally problematic to generalize the entire sharing economy based on one ~~sharewashing~~ case. A more nuanced picture is needed, based on the individual marketplaces facilitated by the sharing initiatives. The fate of the phenomenon is thus highly dependent on how nuanced the discourse will become going forward, paying regard to the benefits and pitfalls of the different archetypes and the markets created by competing business models. As Quattrone *et al.* (2016, p. 8) suggest, ~~sharing~~ economy platforms are quite different from each other, and regulations should be tailored to each situation. The taxi industry and the hotel industry do not have the same legal framework; neither should Uber and Airbnb.+

## **Actors & Agendas**

It can be argued that the sharing phenomenon is talked into existence by the communicative acts of different stakeholders, who are defined by others or consider themselves as

stakeholders of the phenomenon (Netter, 2016) trying to define and organize the phenomenon in their favor. So far, the sharing economy discourse has been largely dominated by the most powerful sharing initiatives, which now have - after several rounds of iterations to their business models - taken on forms that more closely resemble those of established industry players. This has created a situation in which organizations such as *Airbnb* and *Uber* are seen as synonymous with the sharing economy, neglecting the fact that the sharing economy in fact encompasses a number of alternative approaches, which are frequently non-profit and community-based.

While a variety of broad and fuzzy definitions might be beneficial in the early stages of the formation of a new field, there is a risk of the most powerful players in the field hijacking the discourse in their favor. The current discourse is carefully driven by sharing economy proponents, who author and manage powerful win-win narratives, suggesting the sharing economy as an answer to all problems - one that will not only provide solutions for environmental problems and improve social issues but also further economic growth. More research is needed on the actors involved in the making and breaking of the phenomenon and their agendas. This will also enable a more critical assessment of sharing narratives, used for promoting or destructing the sharing economy.

While some actors are actively attempting to create decided social order in these sharing markets, order is mostly emergent and negotiated by a spectrum of stakeholders, at the forefront of which are users/providers, competing established industry players, and regulating bodies on the municipal and national level. What becomes apparent, with regard to the sharing taxonomy outlined in *chapter 1* as well as with regard to the different degrees of partial organization and multisidedness of platforms, is that the sharing economy by no means constitutes a stable phenomenon. Instead, the sharing economy must be regarded as highly dynamic in terms of how its discourse develops, how its initiatives endure multiple rounds of iterations to their business models and platforms, and how its market environments are

organized. More research is needed regarding the dynamic nature of the sharing economy and the actors involved in steering these processes.

### **Changes in the Organization Blueprint**

Thus far, we have not witnessed the levels of tension and conflict between fashion-sharing platforms, regulators, and established industry players that we have witnessed in other sectors such as transportation and hospitality. This might be due to the fact that established fashion industry actors do not perceive emerging fashion-sharing initiatives as a direct threat to their activities but rather as a source of inspiration in how to transform their own business models (such as in the case of *Filippa K* collaborating with the fashion library *Lånegarderoben* or in the case of ASOS creating the *ASOS Marketplace*) and enable consumers to operate their own boutiques for second-hand fashion items. Another explanation might be found in the degree of organization, with big sharing actors such as *Airbnb* and *Uber* constituting unregulated versions of established services. While partially-organized markets, such as in the case of fashion libraries, are also characterized by a number of tensions, they appear not to be as severe as in those that are moving closer to complete organization. It can be hypothesized that with the rising degree of organization, scale and scope, and available revenue, more stakeholders are feeling the need to get involved and shape the phenomenon in their favor. More research is needed on the factors that are pushing for more or less organization, which actors are involved in the organizing process, and what motivates them to drive or stifle the process.

Changes in the organization of sharing marketplaces can be explained by a number of factors. Aside from external influence from stakeholders in the wider environment shaping the overall playing field as well as initiating internal changes to the sharing platforms and the facilitated marketplaces, changes can also be explained by internal processes, such as business model iterations. While moving from partial to complete organization in certain markets might be appealing to sharing platforms wanting to establish decided social order and solidify the



hierarchical position and decision-making power of facilitating agents, others might be less inclined to push for complete organization as higher degrees of organization can lead to higher transaction costs.

It will be interesting to see how the wider sharing economy will develop in terms of the numbers of similar platforms and the strategies to deal with this competition. One possible scenario could be the envelopment of larger platforms, which will combine the functionalities of multiple platforms. This might be limited to certain product groups such as exclusive fashion-sharing platforms. However, it is also very likely that more platforms will emerge that bundle different types of consumer goods, such as *eBay*. Another possible scenario could be collaboration or ~~co~~competition+, i.e., cooperative competition strategies. More research is needed regarding the benefits and downsides of the individual approaches for ensuring the survival of individual platforms beyond the initial venture capital phase. It can be assumed that the strategies will not only be determined by the level of competition within the respective sharing markets but also, and possibly more importantly, with regards to the tensions experienced in the wider environment of the sharing economy and the pressure exerted by other stakeholder groups such as regulators, trade and labor unions, as well as competitors in established industries and sectors.

### **3. FUTURE RESEARCH**

While the thesis at hand has highlighted a number of tensions currently characterizing the sharing economy, there is a need for future research, especially in terms of resolving stakeholder tensions regarding regulation and shifting consumer mindsets from ownership to access.

On a general level, there is a need for more conceptual clarity in terms of what we are actually talking about when we refer to the sharing economy. Furthermore, more research is needed

concerning the framing of this phenomenon, the actors involved, and their agendas in order to demystify some of the current claims on both ends of the proponent-opponent spectrum. With ambiguous and vague definitions, as well as with a myriad of different business models catering to consumers in a number of different sectors and industries, it is difficult to establish an order that applies to all cases, especially in terms of *regulation*, *monitoring* and *sanctioning*. The future development of the sharing economy will largely depend on the ability of different stakeholders to position themselves as central to the discourse, and their abilities to define the phenomenon and its playing field. In light of the fact that a number of sharing initiatives and stakeholders lack the financial resources and political power to change the discourse in their favor, it remains to be seen how calls for additional regulation will be answered.

As Schor (2014, p. 11) suggests, ~~%~~we are at a critical juncture in which usersqorganizing for fair treatment, demands for eco-accountability, and attention to whether human connections are strengthened through these technologies can make a critical difference in realizing the potential of the sharing model.+There is considerable risk that the sharing economy is in fact a bubble, built on efficiency principles, which might fall short of meeting its goals, due to direct or indirect rebound effects offsetting or overcompensating for accomplished efficiency gains such as increasing the consumption of a good or service or freeing up resources for the consumption of additional good or services (Figge et al., 2014; Jackson, 2009). More research is needed on the prerequisites for bringing about more sustainable development by means of sharing practices. So far, most research on the sharing economy has tended to focus on the biggest players. Presuming that small-scale niche initiatives are better suited at bringing about change in consumer mindsets and behaviors, more research is needed on the drivers and barriers promoting and preventing consumers from participating in different sharing environments and the functional and psychological benefits that they experience. Insights in this area will help inform sharing initiatives on what they should offer consumers, how they should communicate with their customers, and how they can tailor their business models to suit target audiences.

It remains to be seen, whether participation in the sharing economy can replace the dominant consumption paradigm and change consumer mindsets towards more sufficiency-driven approaches to ~~making~~ do with less+ (Schäpke and Rauschmeyer, 2014). While ease of access and convenience are two important preconditions for changing consumer mindsets, consumers are operating in a growth- and materialism-oriented paradigm, which makes it difficult to switch paths without cutting social ties. So far, it is unclear what needs to be done on the part of governments and policy-makers to facilitate this shift and reshape social values and norms, and what kind of support, information, education, and infrastructure is needed for different segments of consumers before they are ready and able to share.

While it can be assumed that the different sharing channels ease the shift towards access-based consumption in different ways, more research is needed. Methodologically, field experiments might be the best way to study the factors influencing consumer behavior when sharing in different scenarios as it enables the researcher to study consumer behavior in complex real-world settings, infer causal relationships, and observe behavior in the context it naturally occurs. This approach thus differs significantly from interviews, participant observations or laboratory experiments, which all tend to occur in artificial setups (e.g., Doyle and Gidengil, 1977; Paluck, 2010; Sigurdsson et al., 2009).

It remains to be seen which kinds of organization will prevail in the wider sharing economy, which have the potential to become mainstream, and which will perish. Sharing initiatives appear to face different challenges depending on the degree of organization, their communal- versus commercial-orientation, as well as the number of actors involved in the respective sharing markets. This is not only the case in terms of their multisidedness, i.e., the number of different user groups they bring together, but also with regards to the involvement of *others*, such as established competing industries. More research is needed to identify beneficial combinations of factors that enable sharing initiatives to sustain their activities.

While case-by-case decision-making might be a cumbersome process, the sharing economy will be best served with sector-specific regulations, or adjustments to existing regulations that are tailored to the requirements and needs of the individual sectors. It remains to be seen whether calls for more regulation will be answered in favor of established industries or whether it will be possible to derive a framework that will enable the existence of a variety of approaches. Thus far, we have not seen much coordination within and across different groups of sharing stakeholders. Most tensions between regulators and specific initiatives have been dealt with on an individual level. Further research is needed on how the different sharing economy stakeholder groups resolve tensions, the factors promoting collaboration or confrontation, and how these stakeholder groups find ways to regulate the sharing economy or avoid it. Furthermore, the question remains as to whether attempts to regulate the sharing economy will pay notice to the different business models and markets, or whether regulators will aim for a one-size-fits-all solution.



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Humanitarian Discourse in the age of Mediatization*
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Social innovation i en forretningsmæssig kontekst*
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in Accelerated Medical Relationships*

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skabelse i relation til CSR ud fra en  
intern optik*
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finansieringsudgifter  
En skatteretlig analyse af SEL §§ 11,  
11B og 11C*
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Models  
Their Merits and Sophistication  
across Contexts*
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Evidence from Danish Micro Data*
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covered, by the Public Sector Directive"*
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- patientfigurer i hospitalets strategiske  
kommunikation*
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Studied in the context of medical  
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company Novo Nordisk A/S in the  
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Corporate Branding?  
A study of corporate branding  
strategies at Novo Nordisk*
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Multinational Enterprise*
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from Annual General Meetings*
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Reporting decision and content of the  
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Stakeholder Theory*



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*The prohibition against misleading names in an internal market context*
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*GIV EN GED!*  
*Kan giver-idealtyper forklare støtte til velgørenhed og understøtte relationsopbygning?*
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A study of the Think City electric car development*
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An empirical analysis of science-industry collaboration in a pharmaceutical company*
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Monografi om dobbeltheden i tænkning af strategi, dels som vidensfelt i organisationsteori, dels som kunstnerisk tilgang til at skabe i erhvervsmæssig innovation*

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- |   |   |
|---|---|
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|---|---|

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Uncovering the Generative Mechanisms  
of Open Data through a Mixed  
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– Technological-Integration  
Challenges – The Case of  
Digital-Technology Companies*
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Business Model Innovation in the  
Global Context  
Entrepreneurship-Enabled Dynamic  
Capability of Medium-Sized  
Multinational Enterprises*
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Structure in Value Chain Configuration  
A Contribution to Strategic Cost  
Management*

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