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# Framing the Collaborative Economy

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# Framing the Collaborative Economy

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## Abstract

Within the context of multiple crises and change, a range of practices discussed under the umbrella term of collaborative (or sharing) economy have been gaining considerable attention. Supporters build an idealistic vision of collaborative societies. Critics have been stripping the concept of its visionary potential, questioning its revolutionary nature. In the study, these debates are brought down to the local level in search for common perceptions among the co-creators of the concept in Vienna, Austria. Towards this aim a Q study is conducted, i.e. a mixed method enabling analyses of subjective perceptions on socially contested topics. Four voices are identified: *True Believers*, *Market Optimists*, *Dedicated Critics*, and *Healthy Sceptics*, each bringing their values, visions, and practical goals characteristic of different understanding of the collaborative economy. The study questions the need for building a globally-applicable definition of the concept, calls for more context-sensitivity, and the need for further exploratory approaches.

**Key words:** collaborative economy; sharing economy; Q study.

## 1. Introduction

The magnitude of interconnected ecological, economic and social issues has become referred to as multiple crises (Haberl et al., 2011; Brand et al., 2013; Scoones et al., 2015). In multiple crises reality, challenges such as poverty, growing inequality, biodiversity loss, to name just a few, need to be addressed, with consumption-focused lifestyles among the key areas (see e.g. (Raworth, 2012). To use Stirling's words: "the crucial challenge is not whether to achieve the necessary radical technological, political, economic and cultural changes, but how" (2015: 62). Regarding the how, attention is increasingly focused on the systemic nature of the issues in question, emphasizing the need for overhaul system transformation rather than its tweaking (Naidoo, 2014; Stirling, 2014; and 2015). Stirling (2014; and 2015) explores this realm through drawing a heuristic distinction between transition and transformation as two ways of thinking about radical social change. The former is

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characterized by management and control of the incumbents, tightly disciplined knowledges, reaching a particular known end, often hooked on a technological-fix. The latter brings diversity, unruly alignments challenging the mainstream, plurality of knowledges reaching contested or even unknown ends, with a stronger focus on social innovation.

Within the context of multiple crises and change, a range of practices discussed under the umbrella term of collaborative (or sharing) economy have been gaining considerable attention. Supporters build an idealistic vision of collaborative societies (see e.g. OuisShare, 2015; Shareable, 2015a). Critics have been stripping the concept of its visionary potential, referring to capitalism in new clothing, and portraying it more as a pipe dream (see e.g. Morozov, 2014; Eckhard and Bardhi, 2015; Cohen, in press). The terminology itself is a first step into the issues, since collaborative consumption, sharing economy and collaborative economy are often used interchangeably. In the paper, collaborative economy (CE) is mostly adhered to as intuitively most flexible of the terms, seemingly gaining followers in Europe (see e.g. Stokes et al., 2014; OuisShare, 2015).

In the whirl of definitional issues, and the voices of enthusiasts and critics, I look into the debates surrounding CE with the aim of uncovering common perceptions among the co-creators of the concept in Austria's capital, Vienna. Towards this aim a Q study is conducted, i.e. a mixed method enabling analyses of subjective perceptions on socially contested topics (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Q entails a set of statements representing the discourse in question. The statements are sorted by the group of interest (here: members of organizations, companies, communities, etc. involved in CE in Vienna) on a relative ranking scale. Through factor-rendering, Q enables a better understanding of the concept on a local level, elucidating both areas of consent and contention in the underlying views. The factors are interpreted and presented as narrative framings. Framings of the discourse of the sharing economy have been explored by Martin (2016), particularly in the context of socio-technical and sustainability transition research. Following Snow and Benford (1988) and Steinberg (1998), Martin defines framing as "a deliberative, communicative process through which actors seek to mobilise a consensus and collective action around a given issue" (2016: 150). In this paper, framing does not entail deliberation and collective action. It is used to refer to a broader set of values, visions, and practical goals that characterize different understanding of CE based on the Q factor rendering procedure that allows for a holistic reading of subjective perceptions on the concept in question. As such, this exploratory study adds to the nascent literature on CE.

Section 2, I bring a selection of voices present in the debates to the fore to outline the heterogeneity inherent to CE. Section 3 guides the reader through the essentials of Q methodology, and presents the identified factors in a narrative format. I close the paper with a brief discussion setting the identified framings in relation to the debates, and conclude with remarks on further research directions.

## **2. Collaborative economy – a concept in trouble**

Those fond of the topic often embark on their journey with Botsman and Rogers (2010), who adhere to the term collaborative consumption. They define it as sharing, bartering, swapping, lending, trading, renting, and gifting, redefined through technology and peer communities,

changing both what and how we consume (Botsman and Rogers, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. Ageyman et al. (2013) criticize this approach for focusing on goods and services relevant predominantly for affluent middle-class lifestyles. They emphasize that the “cutting edge” of sharing and collaborative practices is often not only of commercial value, but relates to shared use of infrastructure, public services, or even informal behaviour like unpaid care and support. The question of drivers behind the increased propensity to share and collaborate is less contested, spanning from a renewed belief in the importance of community, peer-to-peer social networks and real time technologies, growing environmental awareness, and the realities of the global recession (see e.g. Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Ageyman et al., 2013; Botsman, 2013; Parsons, 2014; Stokes et al., 2014).

In an attempt to capture the diversity of voices in sharing and collaboration related debates, Juliet Schor (2014) defines sharing (or collaborative) economy as a range of digital platforms and offline activities centred on the highly contested concept of sharing. The word broadly is of key importance, since relevant activities span from financially successful companies like Airbnb, carsharing platforms on both peer-to-peer level and provided by companies well-established in the car industry, to smaller initiatives such as repair collectives, makerspaces, or tool libraries, to take just a few of examples. This diversity and fuzzy boundaries drawn by both participants and initiatives render “coming up with a solid definition of the sharing economy that reflects common usage nearly impossible” (Schor, 2014: 2). Schor (2014) suggests four categories of CE: 1) recirculation of goods (with eBay and Craigslist at its origin); 2) increased utilization of durable assets (functioning well among the better-off possessing e.g. space or means of transport to be used more intensively via car- or lodging-sharing platforms, as well as bringing non-monetized initiatives usually on neighbourhood level to the fore); 3) exchange of services (originating from time banks, yet both monetary and non-monetary in character); and 4) sharing of productive assets (e.g. hackerspaces, makerspaces, co-working spaces, open and peer-to-peer educational platforms). In Schor’s take, collaborative initiatives are both for- and non-profit regarding market orientation, and P2P or B2P in terms of market structure, each of these being critical in determining the visions and goals e.g. regarding organizational growth. In terms of drivers, she adds the trendiness of collaborative platforms, along with a deeper commitment to social transformation.

These discussions are also anchored in issues surrounding ‘sharing’ itself. A strong position is held here by Belk who starts from looking specifically at what constitutes sharing (Belk, 2007; Belk, 2010) to later embed his approach in the context of sharing economy and collaborative consumption (2014a; and 2014b). Belk (2010) contrasts sharing with gift giving and commodity exchange as the three ways of resource distribution and acquisition. He sets sharing as a necessarily altruistic, non-reciprocal behaviour, opposing it to materialism and possessive individualism, and emphasizing the cultural-learning behind these (Belk, 2007; and 2010). Belk (2014a) investigates commonalities between sharing and collaborative consumption, focusing particularly on what he

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<sup>2</sup> The authors categorize these behaviors as **Redistribution markets**, i.e. redistribution of used or pre-owned goods from where they are no longer needed to where such need exists. **Collaborative lifestyles**, i.e. grouping of people aimed at sharing and exchanging less tangible assets such as skills, space, time, etc. (e.g. local exchange trading systems, co-working spaces). **Product-service systems**, i.e. systems whereby consumers pay for what a product does for them, rather than for the outright ownership of this product, thinking more in line with a “usage-mindset”.

would consider genuine sharing. In defining collaborative consumption, “bartering<sup>3</sup>, trading, and swapping, which involve giving and receiving non-monetary compensation<sup>4</sup>” (Belk, 2014a: 1597) are included, yet activities where compensation is absent are excluded. Collaborative consumption is, then, placed somewhere in-between sharing and marketplace exchange. Belk (2014b) introduces the term ‘pseudo-sharing’ to depict recently popularized practices that ‘masquerade’ as sharing. As long as the users have a utilitarian rather than communitarian and altruistic reasons, there is no sharing involved. Real sharing is embodied in e.g. online-facilitated offline sharing such as listing free goods on Craigslist and the like.

John (2012; and 2013) explores the increasing diversity in popular understandings of sharing, shaped and transformed through increased adoption of social media and sharing economy. He discusses sharing as “a concept that incorporates a wide range of distributive and communicative practices [which carries] a set of positive connotations to do with our relations with others and more just allocation of resources” (John, 2012: 176). He looks into three spheres (John, 2013): Web 2.0, sharing economies of production and consumption, and interpersonal relationships – each interrelated by the metaphor of sharing. Sharing economies i.e. “those in which money, or more specifically, the ability to make it, is not a relevant factor in motivating participation” (John, 2013: 118), can be either of consumption or production<sup>5</sup>. Similarly to Web 2.0, the concept of sharing is not bringing new modes of human behaviour to the table, “but rather these new forms are defined and discussed in terms of sharing” instead of e.g. gift giving. In consumption, the author focuses on Botsman and Rogers’ (2010) work, and points out that sharing is presented here in its naïve understanding of sharing what we own, and shared access to commonly owned goods (John, 2013). He emphasizes that the manifold practices of sharing economies are actually “old” practices often analysed as gift economy (as discussed by Mauss, 1925/54 and Hyde, 1983). These old practices, however, are often digital and come under a new discourse of sharing, which gained popularity particularly due to Botsman and Rogers (2010) publication.

The initial feel-good story of sharing economy is having trouble to stand the test of time with the involvement of for-profit giants and venture capital backed start-ups (see e.g. Schor, 2014; Schor et al., 2015; Martin, 2016). The involvement of actors with various interests, objectives, values and institutional settings (Martin and Upham, 2015) plays one of the key roles here. The proponents of the concept build their vision on the promise of wide-spread empowerment and participation of people, social connectedness, resource efficiency, and money saving (see e.g. Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Botsman, 2013; Stokes et al., 2014; Wagner and Kuhndt, 2015; OuisShare, 2015; Shareable, 2015a). Access over ownership, sharing, collaboration, co-creation, decentralization, peer-to-peer are some more key words, positioned as a vision that, if broadly implemented, will foster our search for answers to today’s reality overridden with multiple crises and “create value beyond economic aspects” (Wagner and Kuhndt, 2015:6). Voices of opposition

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<sup>3</sup> Curiously enough, contradictions are also present here, since in 2014b Belk discusses online-facilitated barter economies as a case of pseudo-sharing, “of either goods and services or of monies and virtual currencies, it is only pseudo-sharing, even if it is at a neighborhood level with face-to-face transactions.” (Belk 2014b: 14).

<sup>4</sup> To quote the author, “money profanes the sharing transaction and transforms it into a commodity exchange” (2014b: 20).

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia is given as an example of sharing economies of production. In production, sharing is used in reference to commons (shared by all), or in a way implicating an agent sharing e.g. time or knowledge with others (2013: 118-9)

keep growing, and once contrasted with the visionary tales of (often uncritical) supporters and the practices of giants quoted as the flagships of CE, they strike a chord. Many of these practices are seen as an abuse of the rhetoric of sharing (Schor et al., 2015). Regulatory issues bring both the consumer and worker rights into question (Kalamar, 2013; Baker, 2014), since instead of transforming the social fabric some of the platforms are exploratory and based on the mantra of self-interest (Morozov, 2014; Parsons, 2014; Roose, 2014; Eckhard and Bardhi, 2015). Cases of CE reproducing class, gender and racial biases can also be found (e.g. Hardin and Luca, 2014). Using sharing economy as “another vehicle for tax and regulatory arbitrage” (Baker, 2015) is also of concern. The commonly quoted environmental benefits still lack comprehensive studies and often function as a truism among sharers that does not pass the test of system-scale impacts (Schor, 2014; Cohen, in press), particularly once the ripple effects are taken into consideration. The social change at stake is also seen as more about “self-realization through cooperation than it is about redistribution or mobilization” (Schor et al. 2015:17). Criticism, however, frequently hits only a limited part of the sector, what Ageyman and McLaren (2014) refer to as commercial extremes. As Cohen (in press) explains, in his work he bashes “Big Sharing” with arguments that might lose validity outside of the US context. Such context-sensitivity, however, is often missing or indicated only as a side note.

Concluding the heated debates, following Schor (2014) one might say that CE is at a critical juncture – a juncture where the potential of this concept in terms of economic, ecological, and social values it can bring could be realized along the lines drawn by the proponents, or end up wasted by a short-lived hyped concept. Similar conclusions are drawn by Martin (2016) who captures the online discourse on the topic and sets it within theories of sustainability transitions<sup>6</sup>, suggesting six framings present among the relevant niche and regime actors in the supposed transition, both empowering the concept and resisting it. In the study, those active in diversifying the collaborative and sharing landscape in Vienna are placed on that juncture and asked for their visions and understandings.

### 3. Framing the collaborative economy with the use of Q methodology

Against such background, a Q study with co-creators of the collaborative scene in Vienna was conducted. The following sections introduce Q methodology in greater detail, closing with narrative interpretation of the identified factors.

#### **3.1 Q methodology**

Applied most often in its original discipline, social psychology, Q is a mixed method enriching the varieties of discourse analysis (Stephenson, 1953; Barry and Proops, 1999). Its use in various areas has been increasing to include political sciences (Brown, 1980), human geography (Eden et al., 2005), environmental policy issues (Addams and Proops, 2000; Cairns and Stirling, 2014), ecological economics (Barry and Proops, 1999; Swedeen, 2006; Davies and Hodge, 2012), and more.

Q is a qualitative, yet statistical approach, with its ‘mixed’ nature reflected in its ability to reveal key viewpoints of individuals and build a holistic understanding thereof (Watts and Stenner,

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<sup>6</sup> For full details on the approach see Martin 2016.

2012). It can be seen as a more and more appreciated enrichment of “the social scientist’s toolbox for understanding how people think about a given issue” (Danielson, 2009: 219). It is particularly suitable for topics around which there is social contestation. Q applies purposive sampling typically including 20-40 participants, and runs in roughly three stages:

- 1) a selection of statements reflecting the diversity of opinions about the subject of interest is collected (the *concourse*), and a sub-set of these are selected (the *Q sample/Q set*) in order to be fitted by the participants into a typically forced-choice distribution
- 2) participants (or the *P-set*) are selected to carry out the *Q sorting* process;
- 3) results are statistically analysed (in search for patterns, or frames, in understanding a given topic), and the resulting patterns are interpreted with the aid of comments made by participants

Source: (Cairns and Stirling, 2014: 27)

The inter-correlation of individual *Q sorts* investigates their degree of (dis)agreement, and opens the door to factor analysis in search for “groups of persons who have rank-ordered the heterogeneous stimulus items in a very similar fashion” (Watts and Stenner, 2012: 18). The final result, thus, is a set of factors that represent similarly performed sorts. These factors and the discourses they bring are interpretive units (Swedeen, 2006). The proceeding sections look into the conducted *Q study* in greater detail.

### 3.1.1 From *concourse* to *Q set*

The *concourse* statements, i.e. “a population of statements from which a final *Q set* is sampled” (Watts and Stenner, 2012: 34) were identified via reading of a range of sources: academic literature on the topic, non-academic sources (here mainly articles from the three key supporting networks: *Ouishare*, *Shareable*, and *Collaborative Consumption*<sup>7</sup>), and informal communication with individuals involved with the topic. The *concourse* reached ‘saturation point’ (Eden et al., 2005) at a total number of 328 statements. Before narrowing the *concourse* down, the statements were scrutinized in search for reoccurring themes, including e.g. pillars and activities, novelty, change, impact, criticism, drivers. These were reflected in a final *Q set* of 48 statements (see Table 2 for the list the final statements), the quality of which in terms of comprehensiveness, readability, and balanced content was tested in three pilot sorts.

### 3.1.2 Participants and procedure

The rationale for using *Q* in the first place can be seen as two-pronged, following Watts & Stenner's (2012: 173-174) discussion on content-related and expert-knowledge insights. Heterogeneity inherent to the topic of collaborative economy made a *Q* endeavour into its socially contested meaning particularly attractive. Furthermore, investigating this contested meaning among a group of people actively participating or involved with the topic was seen as most viable solution in this exploratory study of various framings and understandings of collaborative economy in Vienna. I am consciously careful in calling the final group of participants “experts” on the topic, halted by the few cases in which the participants themselves would tread carefully on that matter.

<sup>7</sup> *Ouishare* <http://ouishare.net/en>, *Shareable* <http://shareable.net/>, *Collaborative Consumption* <http://www.collaborativeconsumption.com/>

This brings us back to the previously discussed definitional issues, and can be seen as a repercussion of the fuzzy boundaries.

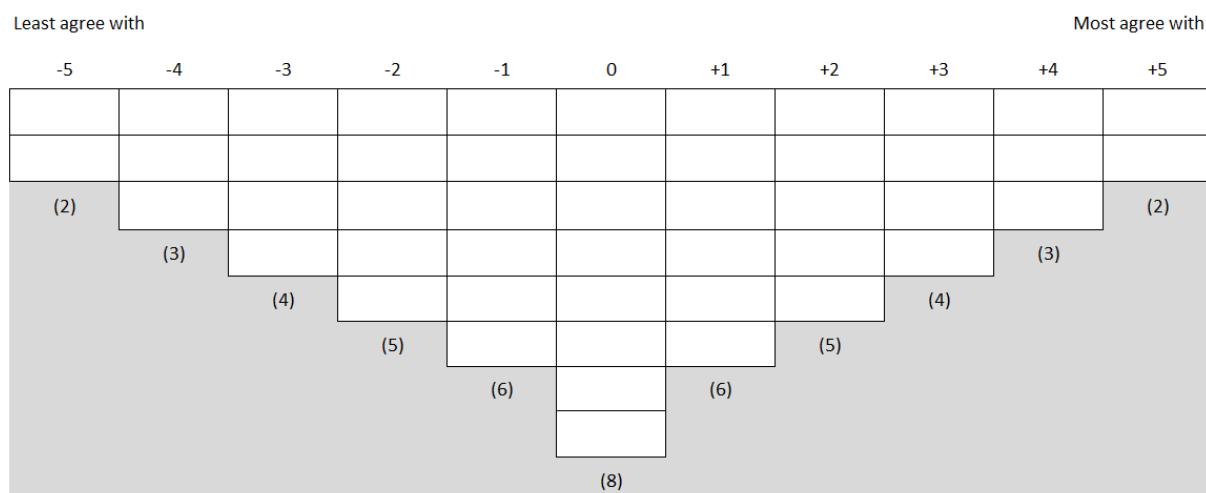
The study included 24 individuals coming from a variety of backgrounds (see Appendix A). The data was collected in the first months of 2015. With 52 initiatives/organizations/individuals initially reached out to, the final number of participants stood for an almost 50% response rate. The participants were assured anonymity, hence only limited information on their gender (14 male and 10 female participants), age, and type of affiliation is revealed. The age of the participants ranges from 23 to 50, with the majority being born in 1980s. Affiliation with a non-profit initiative dominates (see Table 1), while the general lack of interest from the commercial initiatives adds an interesting point to the debates surrounding CE.

**Table 1: Type of affiliation of the participants (for details see Appendix A).**

Type of affiliation	Number of participants
Non-profit initiative	13
For-profit initiative	6
Research	4
Public agency	1

A pyramid-shaped or quasi-normal 11-point distribution was used (Figure 1), forcing the participants to sort 48 statements into a grid scaled from +5 (what one most agrees with) to -5 (what one least agrees with). The study was held mainly in a face-to-face setting, with three participants choosing the self-sorting package prepared in dedicated FlashQ software (<http://www.hackert.biz/flashq/demo/>). During the task, participants were advised to first read all the statements in order to get an overall idea of the discourse expressed, then try to arrange the statements in three piles (in line with what they most and least agree with, and what they find ambiguous or are uncertain of), and proceed to actual grid sorting. The data was enriched with post-sort interviews, focused on reasoning behind the most salient statements placed on the extreme ends of the distribution, as well as the sort in general.

**Fig.1: The distribution shape for sorting the Q set.**





### 3.1.3 Statistical analysis

The Q sorts were analysed in PQMethod ([www.lrz-muenchen.de/~schmolck/qmethod/](http://www.lrz-muenchen.de/~schmolck/qmethod/)). Starting from a correlation matrix quantifying the level of similarity between any two Q sorts, the key step is factor extraction that groups Q sorts according to proximity in allocating individual statements in the grid. Initially, 7 factors were extracted with the QCENT option, i.e. centroid factor analysis. These underwent varimax rotation, recommended as suitable for inductive Qs keen on exploring the majority of viewpoints in the studied group (Watts and Stenner, 2012), and aiming at “finding the simplest structure in the data that can explain the greatest amount of variability” (Swedeen, 2006: 196). Factors with minimum two significantly loading Q sorts were kept for interpretation (Brown, 1980: 293), where a loading at the  $p < 0.01$  level was considered significant at  $\pm 0.37$  (calculated accordingly:  $2.58/\sqrt{n}$ ,  $n$ =number of items in the Q set; consequently  $2.58/\sqrt{48}=0.3723$ ). The criterion of minimum two sorts being indicative of the view expressed by individual factors narrowed their final number considered for interpretation to 4. Statistical significance of the final factors meeting the ‘two sorts’ criterion was also confirmed by corresponding eigenvalues greater than 1 (Watts and Stenner, 2012). The final four factors explain 40% of study variance. Importantly, a sort of an individual participant can be associated significantly with more than one factor, thereby showing the perspectives identified “are by no means mutually exclusive types” (Davies and Hodge, 2012: 52). The factors, therefore, show a range of perspectives inherent to a given group. In a procedure of weighted averaging of significantly loading Q sorts, estimates of the viewpoint of each factor are extracted, and factor arrays with ‘ideal’ versions of a sorting per each factor are prepared (see Table 2 below). Statement 1, for example, was ranked at +2 in Factor 1 and 3, +4 in Factor 2, and +3 in Factor 4. Factor arrays constitute the cornerstone of the interpretative process, which was conducted with the help of the crib sheet device outlined by Watts and Stenner (2012). Table 3 shows the values of the loadings of each participant’s sort on each factor. Table 4 presents the degree of correlation between the identified factors.

**Table 2: Statements in the final Q set, and the idealized sorting pattern (from -5 to +5) for each factor.**

Statement	Idealized sort pattern			
	1	2	3	4
1. Collaborative economy refers to sharing, swapping, bartering, trading, and renting.	2	4	2	3
2. In collaborative economy, social, economic and environmental values are equally important	0	-4	-3	3
3. Collaborative economy is a resurgence of traditional methods of consumption, production and service delivery revitalized by technological developments.	-2	1	-2	4
4. Collaborative economy is as much about sharing, as it is about competition.	-4	-4	-2	-4
5. Collaborative economy activities include both monetary and non-monetary compensation.	0	2	3	0
6. Collaborative economy is a bottom-up movement built on distributed networks of connected individuals as opposed to centralized institutions.	0	3	2	-1
7. Collaborative economy redefines business models and the buyer-seller relationship.	2	0	0	2
8. Collaborative economy increases resource efficiency.	1	5	1	2
9. Collaborative economy makes it possible for virtually anything, including specialized skills or knowledge and used goods, to become currency.	0	2	-1	3

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10. Collaborative economy is quickly becoming an unspecified catch-all term.	-2	1	3	2
11. Collaborative economy is media hype with little actual impact on consumer behavior.	-3	-5	-4	1
12. The discourse of novelty of collaborative economy is overrated.	-1	-3	1	5
13. There is a need for democratizing ownership and governance in collaborative economy.	3	-2	5	-5
14. Some collaborative economy initiatives are capitalism in new clothes.	2	0	5	1
15. Collaborative economy is a new term for renting.	-5	-2	0	-2
16. For-profit collaborative economy platforms have taken over what began as a progressive, socially transformative idea.	-1	-1	0	2
17. Collaborative economy aims to create fairer, more sustainable, and more socially connected societies.	5	2	-1	4
18. Collaborative economy promises stronger social connections and increased social inclusion.	4	-1	0	4
19. Collaborative economy occupies a middle ground between sharing and marketplace exchange.	-2	1	-1	0
20. Collaborative economy is embodied in recirculation or redistribution of unwanted or underused goods.	1	-1	-4	-2
21. Collaborative economy is embodied in increased utilization of assets that one owns.	-1	3	-2	2
22. Collaborative economy is embodied in exchange of services.	-1	0	-4	1
23. Collaborative economy is about sharing assets or space in order to enable production, rather than consumption.	-1	0	-2	-3
24. There are four pillars of collaborative economy: production, consumption, finance, and education.	-3	-1	-3	-1
25. Collaborative economy facilitates consumption and production on a local level.	0	1	-1	-1
26. Collaborative economy is based on both for-profit organizations and non-profit organizations.	1	3	3	0
27. Collaborative economy strengthens social inequality and addresses predominantly the better-off.	-4	-4	1	-4
28. The presumed environmental benefits of collaborative economy are based on the assumption of a reduction in demand for new goods and facilities.	-1	3	4	5
29. Collaborative economy has become a trendy concept.	1	4	1	3
30. Collaborative economy is a shift taking us towards new economy where self-interest and common good align.	1	0	1	-1
31. Collaborative economy values are at odds with the current predominant economic paradigm.	4	-1	0	-2
32. There is a need for measuring the environmental impact of collaborative economy.	3	0	2	-3
33. There is a need for measuring the social impact of collaborative economy.	3	0	2	-4
34. There is a need for assessing the economic impact of collaborative economy.	2	-2	0	-3
35. Collaborative economy can lead to less dependence on employers and more diversification in access to income, goods and services.	2	1	0	-2
36. Collaborative economy has been practiced within working classes and poorer communities, and is new to the better-off.	-3	0	-3	0
37. Collaborative economy has done little so far to change the politics, structures and institutions that underpin and promote unsustainable lifestyles.	0	-3	4	1
38. Social enterprises and community-owned enterprises are facilitated by collaborative economy.	0	-1	-1	-2
39. Cooperatives and participatory initiatives are at the core of collaborative economy.	4	1	4	0
40. The growth of collaborative economy reflects the increasing environmental awareness and commitment to changing our consumption and production patterns.	3	2	-3	-1
41. Collaborative economy helps in understanding that accumulating possessions is not going to guarantee wellbeing.	5	2	1	-1
42. Collaborative economy activities create new jobs and new market possibilities.	-2	5	0	0
43. Critics of collaborative economy are too cynical.	-2	-2	-2	-3
44. Collaborative economy mainly consists of venture capital backed startups.	-5	-2	-5	-5
45. Collaborative economy enables people to save money and tap into diverse sources of income.	1	-3	2	1
46. Many companies practice 'sharewashing': adopting sharing and collaboration as a buzzword for their products, regardless of whether these involve any actual sharing.	-4	-5	-1	1
47. Collaborative economy models cannot deliver the utopian outcomes its supporters	-3	-3	-5	0

suggest.				
48. We are consuming the same resources, whether we do it collaboratively or not	0	4	3	0

**Table 3: Degree to which each participant's sort correlated with each factor**

No.	Participants (by professional sector)	Degree of correlation of Q sorts with each factor			
		1	2	3	4
<b>Participants whose sorts correlate with just one factor:</b>					
1		0.6596*	0.1219	0.2873	-0.0662
4		-0.0001	0.4340*	-0.0270	0.1135
8		0.5814*	0.0738	0.1494	0.1761
9		0.3259	-0.2071	0.4650*	0.2880
10		0.5073*	-0.1287	0.1077	0.1265
11		0.0225	0.5516*	0.3288	-0.0571
12		0.2825	-0.0259	-0.0615	0.3376*
14		0.5736*	0.2953	0.0100	0.0033
15		0.0042	0.5386*	0.0435	0.1368
16		0.0799	0.2999	0.1191	0.5202*
17		0.7685*	0.2340	0.2222	-0.0287
19		0.2619	0.1314	0.4432*	0.0843
20		-0.0514	0.0992	0.5054*	-0.0129
21		0.1616	-0.0341	0.6906*	0.1065
23		-0.1012	0.0783	0.0647	0.6332*
<b>Participants whose sorts correlated with more than one factor:</b>					
2		0.4530*	0.1866	0.5258*	0.0682
3		0.4640*	0.6508*	0.1112	0.1871
6		0.5286*	-0.0033	-0.0848	0.4365*
18		0.3874*	0.4017*	0.0140	0.3437
22		0.4613*	0.4794*	0.3742	-0.0161

\* Indicates that a sort correlates significantly with the factor at the  $p < 0.01$  level

**Table 4: Correlations between factors**

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Factor 1	1.00	0.38	0.44	0.13
Factor 2		1.00	0.33	0.32
Factor 3			1.00	0.10
Factor 4				1.00

### 3.2 Four framings of collaborative economy

The following narratives constitute an attempt of interpreting the perceptions on the concept of CE brought by each factor. The proposed readings stand for a possible take on the factors, with no claim of them being carved in stone or finite. Rather, they point to possible directions in the discursive landscape investigated. Five Q sorts were confounded, i.e. loaded significantly on more than one factor, and were therefore excluded from building factor arrays (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Following Armatas et al.'s (2014) suggestions, confounded sorts were not completely discarded from the interpretative process, and post-sort interview materials were consulted for complementary views. The interlinkages between the factors need to be emphasized,

despite of their treatment here as discrete units. Each of the factors was assigned a name. The numbers in brackets correspond to the relevant statements from the sorted Q set (see Table 1). Contrary to Martin's (2016) approach, the narratives are not seen as in a clear-cut way either supporting or inhibiting the growth of the concept, but rather characterized by containing conflicting elements.

### ***True Believers***

Five participants' sorts loaded significantly on this factor, all associated with non-commercial initiatives. Factor 1 explains 15% of the study variance and has an EV of 3.6.

The predominant goal of CE is to create fairer, more sustainable, and more connected societies (17). As such, CE fosters change through helping people understand that accumulating possessions does not guarantee wellbeing (41). CE, therefore, stands for certain values, and these values are at odds with what is currently dominant in the economic sphere of our lives (31). The growth of CE is a reflection of increasing environmental concerns, as well as the will to change the approach to consumption and production (40). Equating CE to redefined renting (15) and accusing it of being an unspecified catch-all term (10) is criticized. Commercial involvement of venture capital backed start-ups have been there from the start, but such activities have not managed to co-opt the transformative idea brought by CE (16, 44), the core of rests on participation and cooperatives (39), and strengthening social ties (18). This vision can be better realized with introducing more participation and democracy in governance in CE as currently practiced (13). Also, for further progress of the concept, measurements of primarily its environmental, but also social and economic impact are inevitable (32, 33, 34). In relation to the market, the value of CE lies in bringing stronger diversification and redefining how we see certain relationships, e.g. buyer-seller (7, 35, 42). In terms of scope, CE is embodied in a broad range of activities, from sharing, swapping, bartering, to trading and renting (1), with recirculation of goods as a particularly important aspect (20).

### ***Market Optimists***

Three participants are significantly correlated with this factor, two coming from commercial organizations, and one from research. Factor 2 explains 9% of study variance and has an EV of 2.16.

CE encompasses sharing, swapping, bartering, trading and renting (1). The key benefits brought by these activities are twofold: a) the creation of new jobs and new market possibilities (42); and b) more efficient resource use (8), particularly in reducing the demand for new goods and facilities (28) and acting against the idle capacity of what one owns (21). The main driver lies in growing environmental awareness (40). As currently practiced, CE does not put social, economic and environmental values on a par (2), and its ability to strengthen social connections and increase social inclusion might be an empty promise (18). Originating as a bottom-up movement (6), CE is seen as a novel concept (12) that is already having an impact on consumer behaviour (11), as well as on broader structures related to our current lifestyles (37). The concept has firmly entered the market and is trendy (29), and it's more than just media hype (11). VC-backed start-ups are not the

main pillar of CE (44), and speaking of scaling-up practices of ‘sharewashing’ is unfounded (46). There is no strong need for reforming organizational structures of involved initiatives (13).

### *Dedicated Critics*

Four Q sorts load significantly on this factor, with two of their authors coming from a non-profit background, one from research, and from a public agency. The factor explains 9% of study variance and has an EV of 2.16.

As currently practiced, CE is at risk of losing its meaning and becoming an unspecified catch-all term (10). The organizational structures of CE need to be urgently democratized and participatory elements need to be boosted (13), since some of the initiatives are capitalism in new clothes (14). This must be done, as CE brings a vision of building cooperation and participation into our socio-economic backbone (39), and without structural changes this promise cannot be delivered (47). CE is valued for enabling people to save money and tap into diverse sources of income (45), but its current potential to bring broader institutional change (37) is strongly exaggerated, and the potential to create fairer, more sustainable, and more connected societies (17) is questioned. In some areas of activity, CE might actually be adding up to social inequality and addressing predominantly the better-off (27), rather than employing its capacity to work towards stronger social inclusion (36) and its “sharing over competition” logic (4). Categorizing and labelling the concept is difficult and perhaps not essential (20, 22, 3, 21), since the structural reflection of the vision is most relevant.

### *Healthy sceptics*

This factor is associated with sorting solutions of 3 participants, two coming from a non-profit background and one from research. Factor 4 explains 7% of study variance and has an EV of 1.68.

The discourse of novelty of CE is overrated (12): CE is a resurgence of traditional models of consumption, production and service provision, redefined by technological developments (3). Ideally, those redefined activities aim at strengthening social inclusion and social connections (18), with a limited (but still present) possibility to change buyer-seller relationship and business models (7). The governance structures of CE are fine (13), there is no need for stronger democratization. What is needed, however, is more emphasis on the bottom up activities (6). Even though VC start-ups do not constitute the core of CE (44), for-profit platforms might be taking over what stands for a transformative idea (16), and are practicing sharewashing (46). Sharing is not a new term for renting (15), but saying that it is at odds with the current economic paradigm (31), or claiming that it helps people understand that accumulation of possessions increases well-being (41) is farfetched. The impact of CE on consumer behaviour is questionable at the moment (11). CE does, however, have the potential to ease our harmful influence on the environment through reducing the demand for new goods and facilities (28). This presumed potential is enough – actual measuring of not only environmental, but also social and economic impact of CE is not of utmost importance (32, 33, 34).

The following closing section discusses these voices in greater detail, setting them in a broader context of change.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

In this take on the interpretative task, the *True Believers* and the *Market Optimists* bring the most content understandings of the concept of CE, yet the reasons for this contentment differ. To the contrary, the *Dedicated Critics* and the *Healthy Sceptics* are both openly critical, with the former still keeping faith in a vision brought by CE, and the latter being somewhat leery.

The *True Believers* seem to be genuinely convinced by the concept. The visionary framing of CE is here: changing the way we think about and do consumption, and how we approach the economic sphere of our lives, changing society towards more collaboration and sharing. In other words, the narrative of the “popular” proponents of the concept is captured in this factor. The often detrimental role of commercial extremes is recognized yet not really criticized, with participatory and cooperative initiatives still being the core in this reading. Measurements and impact indicators are called for and seen as inevitable to strengthen the concept, and the belief in its potential appears to exclude doubts about the outcomes of those measurements at the level of the economy as a whole as pointed out by Schor (2014) and Cohen (in press). The *Market Optimists* take up on these points, but here the idea of utility maximization dominates, and the emphasis is placed on the creation of new jobs and market possibilities, and resource efficiency (with no need of actual measurement) as the key “selling” points of CE. It is only in the *Market Optimists* reading where trendiness of CE is seen in positive terms. CE needs up-scaling for whatever reason – the role of visionary ideas and values backing the concept are downplayed. Finally, the debates on big VC players and some of the for-profits unfittingly co-opting a transformative concept are largely exaggerated in this understanding. This point is challenged by the *Dedicated Critics*, dominated by the dissatisfaction with the status quo of CE, particularly regarding organizational structures. The *Dedicated Critics* are the only ones to openly admit that there are areas in which CE might be deepening rather than easing social inequalities. The vision of CE based on sharing, collaboration and democratization is common with the *True Believers*, yet delivering this vision is seen as impossible without a re-direction towards more cooperatives and participatory initiatives. The underlying structures of a given initiative are placed among the decisive ‘who is in, who is out’ criteria. The sceptical tone continues with the *Healthy Sceptics*, additionally characterized by disillusionment with the novelty of CE. With a moderate less-excited approach to the supposed vision of CE, there is a stronger focus on bottom-up activities aimed at change in consumption and production. The key message of the *Healthy Sceptics* seems to be that change and transformation can come under many names, and as long as the process and the overall dedication to it continue, the specific nomenclature is of least importance.

This brief outline of the voices reflects some of the points present in the debates, while pushing others to the backdrop. The question of the scope of CE loses in significance, and the broad approach capturing it as sharing, swapping, bartering, trading, and renting posited by Botsman and Rogers (2010) seems satisfactory. Activities with both monetary and non-monetary compensation are accepted, undermining the stricter takings on defining sharing as necessarily altruistic, pro-social, and non-reciprocal (see e.g. Belk, 2014b). With this remark, particularly for the *Dedicated Critics*, the point seems to be not to draw a strong affiliation to gift economies or solidarity economies, since activities involving both monetary and non-monetary compensation are accepted. Rather, the point lies in the already mentioned insufficiency of participatory elements. Especially for the more critical voices the for- or non-profit nature of involved organizations is of little importance. What counts, though, is the message they bring and internal structures reflecting

it. These calls for the underlying structures and power shift as elements to gain more attention in the agenda have been voiced by e.g. Schor (2014) and Orsi (2013), particularly in terms of ownership and labour regulations. Such comments also often recognize that without democratizing ownership and governance of sharing initiatives, removing the badly acting for-profits out of the limelight, and placing more peer-to-peer economic activities in it is an onerous task. Against such background, a focus on more community-level and bottom-up processes as emphasized by *Healthy Sceptics* strengthening collaborative and sharing practices is needed in order to avoid further corporatization of the concept, making the sector socially just (Schor 2014) what Ageyman and McLaren (2014) would refer to as community-based and socio-cultural sharing.

This all brings us back to Stirling's (2014; and 2015) heuristic distinction to transition and transformation. One might say that the critical juncture that CE finds itself at is reminiscent of this distinction. The ease that this concept brings in connecting individuals, fostering exchange and cooperation does hold transformative potential (Schor, 2014). Still, the debates surrounding the status quo of CE are fully legitimate. The power within CE particularly as presented by the media and reinforced by some engaged voices rests within the hands of certain key players, pointing to a more transition-based logic. These debates are reflected even among the non-profit dominated participants of the study speaking voices of uncertainty and plurality, showing that there are seeds of transformation buried in this contested ground. Seen in a positive light, the ambiguity inherent to the concept might be a trigger for adding certain topics to the agenda. Harnessing the potential of the concept in "building social solidarity, democracy, and sustainability" (Schor, 2014) is at stake on that juncture.

In the study, I see contestation as a fertile research ground. However, the range of issues related to grasping the essence of CE may lead one to think that building a globally-applicable definition of this particular concept is not necessarily *the* path to follow. Instead, with such a 'hands-on' phenomenon, narrowing the focus down to a more local level seems promising, even more so with the notions of ownership and attachment to possessions being culturally-dependent (Belk, 2010). With a local-based Q study, this work offers an exploratory look into the conceptualizing collaborative economy as practiced in one's immediate surroundings, anchored in the developments in the broader narratives on the concept. The limitations of Q in yielding statistically generalizable results must be recognized, similarly to its key benefit in elucidating the dominant typologies and perspectives on a given concept in a given context (Steelman and Maguire, 1999), providing food for thought for future steps. As visible in the study, these steps on a smaller local scale enable an appropriation of a concept that is at risk of being stripped of its meaning, as if giving the local community of co-creators the possibility of grabbing it and shaping it according to their values, visions, and practical goals. The final constellation of the P-set, with a predominance of non-commercial initiatives is acknowledged as another limitation. A local yet more holistic approach might be brought by concepts such as Sharing Cities (see e.g. Shareable, 2015b), where multiple stakeholders including legislators, civil society, and CE initiatives are brought to one table (Wagner and Kuhndt, 2015). Finally, in terms of lessons learned and recommendations for future research, we are in need for more context-sensitive and exploratory approaches to what is perceived as sharing, as in the case of John (2012; 2013) who sees it as an evolving concept in the making.

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**Appendix A. Participant list**

No.	Gender	Education	Year of birth	Type of affiliation
1	M	Master	83	non-profit initiative
2	M	Master	73	research
3	F	Master	85	non-profit initiative
4	M	Bachelor	87	for-profit initiative
5	M	PhD	65	for-profit initiative
6	M	Bachelor	89	non-profit initiative
7	M	Bachelor	89	for-profit initiative
8	M	Master	83	non-profit initiative
9	M	Master	84	non-profit initiative
10	M	PhD	82	non-profit initiative
11	M	Master	87	for-profit initiative
12	F	Master	88	non-profit initiative
13	F	Master	84	for-profit initiative
14	F	Bachelor	87	non-profit initiative
15	F	Master	88	research
16	M	Master	78	non-profit initiative
17	F	Master	87	non-profit initiative
18	M	Master	70	for-profit initiative
19	F	PhD	72	Public agency
20	M	Master	84	research
21	M	Master	74	non-profit initiative
22	F	Bachelor	92	non-profit initiative
23	F	Master	81	research
24	F	Bachelor	73	non-profit initiative

The participants of the study were assured to keep their anonymity. Therefore, the above table presents only selected information that would not corrupt this premise.





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