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Rethinking tourism models in the platform era of the sharing economy – Implications for tourism marketing and management

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Abstract

Digital platforms and services have transformed the tourism ecosystem over the last few decades. In fact, these platforms have become direct competitors to traditional suppliers. The tourism sector has been able to adapt quickly to new technologies and the sharing economy has played a key role in this process. However, the term “sharing economy” remains contested and at times confusing for practitioners and academics alike. This chapter provides a better understanding of this concept. It also explores some of its emerging applications and limitations in tourism marketing and management today adopting an ecosystem perspective.

Keywords: Sharing economy; tourism ecosystem; digital economy; platform economy.

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, tourism has experienced significant changes due to the emergence of digital platforms and services, which have transformed the industry and its associated ecosystem (Briel and Dolnicar, 2021; Buhalis *et al.*, 2020). Digital platforms have emerged progressively as competitors for long-established (physical) suppliers of goods and services traditionally provided locally or via agencies, and often using face-to-face communication. Since its inception, tourism has been a key contributor to the economy as well as an early adopter of new technologies aimed at enhancing customer satisfaction (Buhalis *et al.*, 2019). Not surprisingly, the sharing economy has capitalised on tourism's favourable pre-disposition towards innovative technologies by developing a number of online platforms, which have grown rapidly to become household names (e.g. Airbnb, Couchsurfing, ToursByLocals, EatWith, and SocialCar, among others). However, the rather homogeneous term "sharing economy" encompasses, mostly, a myriad of online relationships and activities by individuals and organizations (Reinhold and Dolnicar, 2021). This rather eclectic phenomenon includes different types of exchange and interaction between individuals, who rent, lend, trade, barter, or swap goods, services, transportation solutions, space, or money using the Internet as their main channel for this (Möhlmann, 2015).

Although the sharing economy has become a key factor in the new tourism ecosystem, where sharing economy platforms often co-exist with other forms of digital platforms beyond this concept, there appears to be a growing level of confusion among practitioners and scholars alike with regards to what elements of this ecosystem actually belong to the sharing economy and which ones do not, arguably due to a lack of demarcation. For instance, even though the sharing economy (Altinay and Taheri, 2019; Priporas *et al.*, 2017) is largely understood and acknowledged as a wide-spread phenomenon, conceptual synonyms have also emerged. These have been referred to as the *collaborative economy* (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015; Kovács, 2021), *peer economy* (Briel and Dolnicar, 2021) and *platform economy* (Dann *et al.*, 2020; Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Rogers, 2016; Salet, 2021), to mention but a few. More specifically, and in reference to smaller-scale initiatives, terms such as the "gig economy" (Friedman, 2014; Woodcock and Graham, 2019; Page-Tickell and Yerby, 2020) and "on-demand economy" (Berg, 2016; Gurvich *et al.*, 2019) have also been used. However, the lack of consensus with regards to the use

of these terms to categorise elements of the wider sharing economy remains arguably a source of confusion for scholars and policy-makers alike, which has contributed to the development of negative perceptions of the sharing economy (Curtis and Lehner, 2019).

In view of the above, this chapter seeks to develop a better understanding of this field of knowledge as well as its future development. The sharing economy represents a key source of innovation for tourism, particularly with regards to rethinking and redesigning existing practices and business models for the sector. This chapter attempts to shed new insights on the key themes underpinning the sharing economy in general and, more specifically, its relevance to tourism marketing and management. Although currently there is a wide range of businesses that tend to converge towards the platform economy, it is envisaged that in the medium to long term, discussions trying to differentiate the platform economy from the sharing economy may become obsolete and even redundant.

From a methodological perspective, this chapter offers a review of the literature on this topic.

2. The rise of digital platforms and the sharing economy in tourism

Over the last decade, the tourism sector has undergone a significant shift, due to the emergence of digital platforms and services, which have led to a profound transformation of the tourism ecosystem. The sharing economy has developed progressively to become a viable alternative to more traditional suppliers of goods and services in tourism (Hu *et al.*, 2019). This has been driven primarily by the development and proliferation of digital platforms (Leung *et al.*, 2019; Schor, 2016), which today range from peer-to-peer accommodation (e.g. Airbnb, Couchsurfing, 9flats...), to tour guiding (e.g. ToursByLocals), hospitality (e.g. EatWith) and transport (e.g. SocialCar, Uber, Zipcar) among others (OECD, 2016). However, there is a lack of consensus among scholars with regards to how to refer to this new phenomenon.

The term “sharing economy” has been used in recent tourism studies to refer to a myriad of exchange relationships and customer trends in tourism, which include tourists, tourism destinations and online providers. However, this concept lacks a clear set of boundaries (Hossain, 2020). Although the sharing economy (Belk, 2014; Sundararajan, 2013) is

largely interpreted as a wide-spread phenomenon, scholars have referred to it using a large number of conceptual synonyms such as the *collaborative economy* (Dredge and Gyimóthy, 2015; Kovács, 2021), *collaborative consumption* (Möhlmann, 2015), *access-based consumption* (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012), the *peer economy* (Briel and Dolnicar, 2021) or the *platform economy* (Dann *et al.*, 2020; Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Rogers, 2016; Salet, 2021), among others. More specifically, and mainly referring to smaller-scale initiatives, terms such as the *gig economy* (Friedman, 2014; Woodcock and Graham, 2019; Page-Tickell and Yerby, 2020), and the *on-demand economy* (Berg, 2016; Gurvich *et al.*, 2019) have also been used.

The sharing economy involves different types of exchange between individuals, though scholars (e.g. Dolnicar, 2017; 2019; Reinhold and Dolnicar, 2021) have pointed out that the term “sharing economy” may be misleading in this respect as not all of these exchanges are carried out between equals. On the other hand, the concept of "peer-to-peer economy" does imply that the exchange (monetary or in kind) is carried out between equals (Wirtz *et al.*, 2019) nor that these exchanges may be of a non-commercial nature.

All in all, various studies have attempted to define the sharing economy concept, as shown in Table 1. Building on this, Eckhardt *et al.* (2019) identified a series of characteristics common to all these definitions, which revolve around the concepts of temporary access, transfer of economic value, platform mediation, expanded consumer role, crowdsourced supply, reputation systems and peer-to peer exchanges. On that basis, Eckhardt *et al.* (2019) defined the sharing economy as “a scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources that may be crowdsourced”. However, a higher level of complexity arises when trying to differentiate between what the sharing economy is and what it is not. Furthermore, a rather nebulous line appears to exist when trying to demarcate the sharing economy from the mainstream economy (Täuscher and Kietzmann, 2017).

Table 1. Sharing economy definitions

Source	Definition
Lessig (2008, p. 143)	“Collaborative consumption made by the activities of sharing, exchanging, and rental of resources without owning the goods.”

Source	Definition
Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012, p. 881)	“Transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place.”
Lamberton and Rose (2012, p. 109)	“Marketer-managed systems that provide customers with the opportunity to enjoy product benefits without ownership. Importantly, these systems are characterized by between consumer rivalry for a limited supply of the shared product.”
Botsman (2013)	“An economic model based on sharing underutilized assets from spaces to skills to stuff for monetary or non-monetary benefits.”
Heinrichs (2013, p. 229)	“Economic and social systems that enable shared access to goods, services, data and talent. These systems take a variety of forms but all leverage information technology to empower individuals, corporations, non-profits and government with information that enables distribution, sharing and reuse of excess capacity in goods and services.”
Stephany (2015, p. 205)	“The value in taking underutilised assets and making them accessible online to a community, leading to a reduced need for ownership.”
Kathan <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 663)	“This so-called sharing economy phenomenon is characterized by non-ownership, temporary access, and redistribution of material goods or less tangible assets such as money, space, or time.”
Sundararajan (2016, p. 23)	“The sharing economy is an economic system with the following five characteristics: largely market based, high impact capital, crowd based networks, blurring lines between the personal and professional, and blurring lines between fully employed and casual labour.”
Puschmann and Rainer (2016, p. 95)	“The use of an object (a physical good or service) whose consumption is split-up into single parts. These parts are collaboratively consumed in C2C networks coordinated through community-based online services or through intermediaries in B2C models.”
Habibi <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 277)	“An economic system in which assets or services are shared between private individuals, either for free or for a fee, typically by means of the Internet.”
Hamari <i>et al.</i> (2016, p. 2049)	“The peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services.”
Frenken and Schor (2017, pp. 4–5)	“Consumers granting each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets (‘idle capacity’), possibly for money.”
Narasimhan <i>et al.</i> (2018, p. 93)	“The recent phenomenon in which ordinary consumers have begun to act as sellers providing services that were once the exclusive province of ordinary sellers.”
Arvidsson (2018, p. 289)	“A new arena of economic action that builds...on common resources that are in themselves not directly susceptible to market exchange.”
Perren and Kozinets (2018, p. 21)	“A market that is formed through an intermediating technology platform that facilitates exchange activities among a network of equivalently positioned economic actors.”
Eckhardt <i>et al.</i> (2019, p.5)	“A technologically enabled socioeconomic system with five key characteristics (i.e., temporary access, transfer of economic value, platform mediation, expanded consumer role, and crowdsourced supply).”

Source: adapted from Eckhardt *et al.*, (2019)

Digital platforms have transformed the way tourism destinations (incl. accommodation and transport providers) and tourists communicate (David-Negre *et al.*, 2018; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011) by delivering a more active role in this process to tourists, residents, organizations, and visitors (Li and Wang, 2011; Thevenot, 2007). They also contribute to the search for authentic experiences that characterise many tourists today (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017; Souza *et al.*, 2019). As part of this process, tourists can share publicly photos,

videos and comments in real time. This, in turn, often influences the decision-making processes of other tourists, including the choice of destinations visited (Almeida-Santana *et al.*, 2020; Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017; Casalo *et al.*, 2011; Manap and Adzharudin, 2013). Today, as traditional information sources compete with digital platforms (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2010), the complexity of managing all this information has increased dramatically (David-Negre *et al.*, 2018). In this new tourism ecosystem, destinations have had to adapt their marketing strategies (Fatanti and Suyadnya, 2015; Sigala, 2017) to also deal with sources of misinformation (Guizi *et al.*, 2020). Over the next five years, the tourism sector will witness the rise of new platforms. In fact, it is likely that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the sector will act as a catalyst in this process (Dolnicar and Zare, 2020).

Some of the methodologies that will be incorporated in the advancement of the platform economy include biometric analyses. These techniques are available for the study of emotions and are particularly useful now as the tourism and hospitality sector enter a period of recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. These technologies will enable service providers to achieve a greater degree of personalisation of their service offer. Some of the techniques likely to be incorporated in these platforms will include facial expression analysis and facial electromyography (fEMG), eye tracking analysis, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS), electroencephalography (EEG), electrodermal activity (EDA) and heart rate monitoring (HR). The platform economy is likely to be influenced considerably by this data as well as emergent co-creation processes (David Negre *et al.*, 2020), which will result in a closer connection between tourists and other actors in the tourism ecosystem at any stage in their visitor experience (Campos *et al.*, 2018), with considerable strategic advantages, particularly as regards addressing new socio-economic trends (Grissmann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2012).

3. Case studies of sharing economy platforms in tourism

Tourists use different sources of information to make decisions related to their next holiday destination (Almeida-Santana, 2017; Ho *et al.*, 2012). The inception of e-tourism platforms has transformed the way tourists' knowledge is disseminated (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; David-Negre *et al.*, 2018). Even though

earlier studies have shown the importance of digital platforms in tourism (Leung *et al.*, 2013; Litvin *et al.*, 2008), scholars' understanding of the behaviour of tourists in relation to the use of digital information remains in its infancy (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017).

There is a substantial body of knowledge related to how e-tourism platforms can help Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) to develop better marketing strategies (Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil, 2017; David-Negre *et al.*, 2018; Cox *et al.*, 2009; Lo *et al.*, 2011; Miguens *et al.*, 2008; Tussyadiah *et al.*, 2011; Yoo and Gretzel, 2010). For instance, a study by Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2017) confirmed the vital importance of e-tourism platforms in the planning of holidays using factors such as nationality, gender and age, and how these, in turn, affect the way tourists use e-tourism platforms. On the other hand, David-Negre *et al.* (2018) shed light on the use of e-tourism platforms by European tourists when choosing their travel destination and found that sharing economy platforms play a crucial role in this respect. Similarly, Miguens *et al.* (2008) pointed out the importance of digital platforms in promoting tourism destinations and tour operators.

There are various innovative initiatives promoting the advancement of the platform economy. For instance, the European Union is investing into Digital Innovation Hubs (DIH), through the Europe Future Financial Framework (2021-2027) programme, which is developing a European network of DIH to help companies improve their processes, products and services through the use of digital technologies and develop them further within the platform economy ecosystem (European Commission, 2020).

All in all, although there is a reasonable level of consensus among scholars with regards to the crucial and growing role of digital platforms within the new tourism ecosystem, and most would also agree that DMOs and tourism operators need to enhance their digital competitiveness (Miguens *et al.*, 2008), the level of future-proofing of the sharing economy in tourism remains uncertain. For instance, the difference between sharing economy models and business models outside that framework may become even more tenuous over time. In fact, it is likely, though by no means certain, that the concept of the sharing economy may be replaced altogether by that of the "platform economy".

4. Towards a tourism-focused conceptual framework for digital platforms in the sharing economy

As digital communication technologies continue to grow in significance, particularly in the context of smart cities (Molinillo *et al.*, 2019), tourism is becoming increasingly influenced by the platform economy, which exists within the same digital ecosystem (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Srineck, 2016; Salet, 2021). This platform economy consists of a set of initiatives that mediate between different agents in the sector to carry out decentralized exchanges (Möhlmann, 2015), giving rise to new business models and reshaping the geography of economic activity (Kenney and Zysman, 2020). It has been also posited that the three most important characteristics of the platform economy are glocalization, ‘platformisation’ and individualisation (Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2019). However, evolving to adapt to this new paradigm remains a challenge for tourism, particularly as the new digital ecosystem relies heavily on a flexible approach to communication – one that allows access to information anywhere, any time and for a myriad of users (Werthner, 2003). It is only through this flexibility and global connectivity that new markets and experiences can be created under this new paradigm (Kenney and Zysman, 2015; Reinhold and Dolnicar, 2021).

Broadly, existing online platforms in tourism can be categorised as being either sharing economy platforms and non-sharing economy platforms. Whilst sharing economy and peer-to-peer trading platforms remain emerging phenomena (Braidbach and Brodie, 2017), they cannot be understood in isolation, since this trend is an extension of a new market mechanism that has been given the broader name of the platform economy (Drahokoupil and Fabo, 2016). The sharing economy encompasses different types of platforms, depending on the nature of the transactions effected (e.g. commercial versus non-commercial) and the type of agents involved in the relationship (e.g. equal or non-equal). For instance, the term peer-to-peer economy has emerged to refer to transactions carried out specifically for non-economic purposes and between equals. Importantly, sharing and non-sharing economy platforms co-exist, even if their boundaries are often hazy. However, the ever-growing number of platforms associated with new business models would seem to suggest that the term “platform economy” is altogether more appropriate than the “sharing economy”. The conceptual relationship between the digital

economy, platforms and the sharing (and non-sharing) economy has been outlined visually in Figure 1. In sharing economy platforms, offer and demand overlap, whilst co-creation is a natural process - based on a platform - where new technologies will allow real-time personalised adaptation to tourists' emotions and reactions.

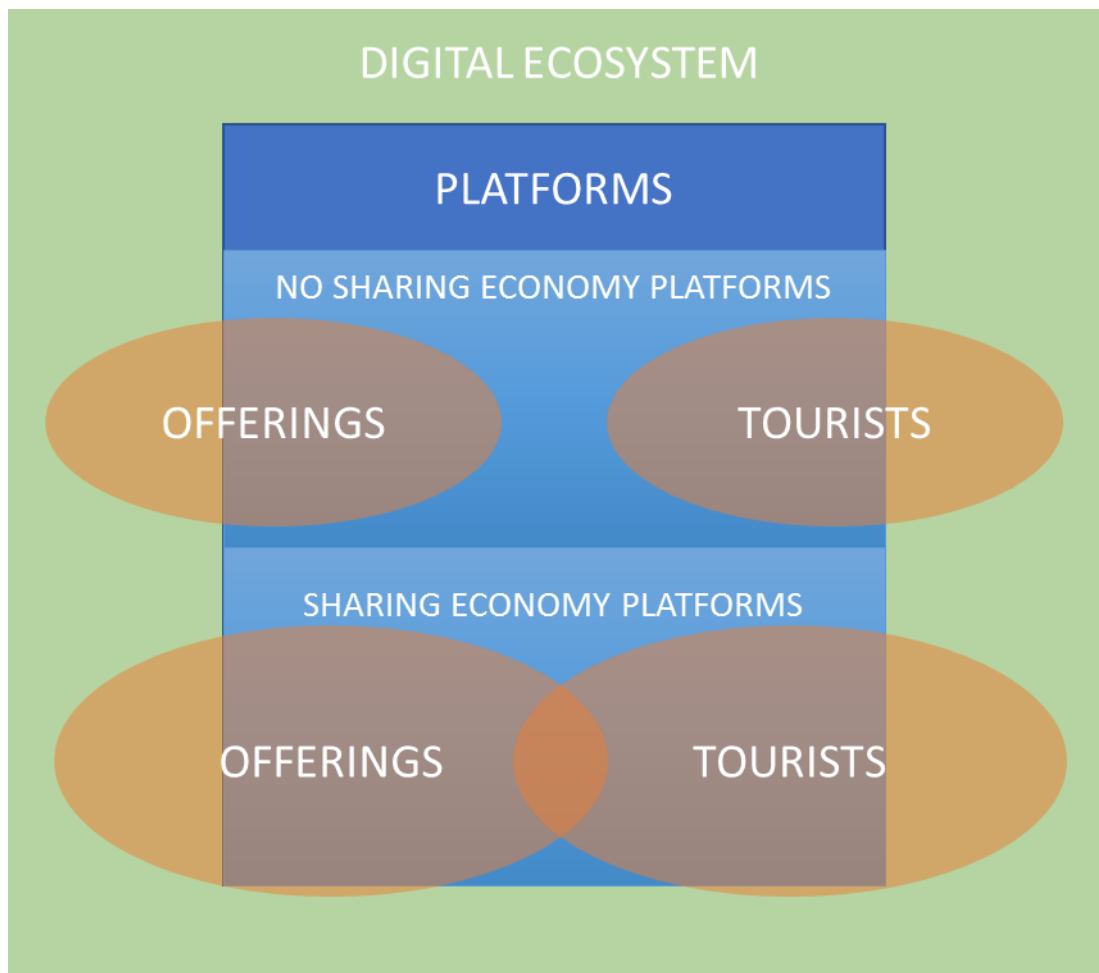


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the platform economy.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to shed new insights on the key themes underpinning the sharing economy in general and, more specifically, its relevance to tourism marketing and management. This interest arises from the on-going transformation of the tourism ecosystem led by digital platforms and services, where the sharing economy has played a key role taking advantage of the predisposition of the tourism sector in relation to new

technologies and digital platforms, which empower tourists, affecting consumers' decision-making processes. This chapter contributes to existing knowledge on the sharing economy, where little attention has been paid by scholars to its role in the new tourism ecosystem. In this context, the term “sharing economy” has been discussed in this chapter adopting a broader view. The sharing economy has been discussed as an exchange between individuals - either within or outside a peer group - that grant temporary access to a product or service through a transfer of value through digital platforms. These exchanges may be driven by profit or they may be not-for-profit.

From a methodological perspective, this chapter offers a framework to understand the new tourism ecosystem in which the platform economy plays a significant role. Further research studies should explore the sharing economy not as a synonym of the peer-to-peer economy, but as a broader concept. In line with this, it can be posited that concepts such as the “collaborative economy” may well be replaced altogether by a more holistic one – the platform economy. Indeed, this broader conception may transform destinations and other service providers in the tourism sector by encouraging them to develop new and more innovative marketing and management strategies. Similarly, the conceptual framework offered in this chapter could be beneficial to policy makers trying to plan for a future where the sharing economy can contribute to the visitor experience whilst remaining a fair competitor to more traditional forms of service delivery in this sector (Moreno-Gil and Coca-Stefaniak, 2020).

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