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ON THE DIFFICULTY TO DEFINE THE SHARING ECONOMY AND COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION – LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSING A DIFFERENT APPROACH WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF 'COLLABORATIVE SERVICES'

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DE LA DIFFICULTE DE DEFINIR L'ECONOMIE DU PARTAGE ET LA CONSOMMATION COLLABORATIVE – REVUE DE LA LITTERATURE ET PROPOSITION D'UNE NOUVELLE APPROCHE A TRAVERS LES 'SERVICES COLLABORATIFS'

Résumé : Alors que le nombre de publications scientifiques traitant de l'économie du partage et de la consommation collaborative a augmenté de façon très significative ces dernières années, aucun consensus clair sur une définition commune ne semble se dégager. Le périmètre même du phénomène reste sujet à de nombreux débats. Notre objectif est de comparer, à travers une revue de la littérature, les définitions existantes en fonction d'une liste de différents critères. A partir du constat qu'il existe une multitude d'acceptions et interprétations différentes, nous optons pour une approche différente basée sur le caractère innovant du phénomène: quels types de pratiques ont émergé récemment, qui n'existaient pas auparavant ? Quelles sont leurs caractéristiques et leurs spécificités ? Nous proposons de nommer ce nouveau type d'échanges 'services collaboratifs'.
Mots clef : économie du partage ; consommation collaborative ; services collaboratifs ; plateforme web ; triade

ON THE DIFFICULTY TO DEFINE THE SHARING ECONOMY AND COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION – LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSING A DIFFERENT APPROACH WITH 'COLLABORATIVE SERVICES'

Abstract : While the number of scientific articles related to the sharing economy (SE) and collaborative consumption (CC) has increased significantly over the past few years, many scholars still disagree on a shared definition. The scope itself of the phenomenon remains a subject for debate in the scientific community. Our objective is to compare existing definitions based on a list of different criteria. Recognizing that various interpretations exist throughout the literature, we suggest a different approach focused on the novelty and innovating features: what types of new practices have emerged, that did not exist previously? What are their characteristics and specificities? We propose to name these new types of exchanges 'collaborative services'.
Keywords : sharing economy ; collaborative consumption ; collaborative services ; online platform; triad

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The emergence of a new mass phenomenon

Over the past decade the sharing economy (SE) seems to have surged and developed across various different types of sectors: from using a velib in Paris to go to an appointment to renting someone else's house for our next vacation or ride-sharing in a complete stranger's car, many of us have already tried and experienced these new types of consumption practices. The SE has quickly grown to the point that it is now playing an important role in the overall global economy. It is not a niche market anymore and may even be on the verge of becoming a mainstream phenomenon (Perren and Kozinets, 2018; Schor, 2016).

An umbrella term (re)grouping a wide range of diverse practices

The expression 'sharing economy' (SE) has certainly become popular in the mass media and the number of scientific publications on this topic has increased significantly over the past few years. But there is still an important lack of consensus among scholars: from consultants to economists, management or marketing researchers, most if not all agree on the fact that the SE is difficult to define and many gaps remain in our understanding (Belk, 2014b; Perren and Kozinets, 2018). What's more, different terms are being used to refer to similar types of practices and the list can be quite long, to name a few : access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012), connected consumption (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015), peer economy (Bellotti et al., 2015), peer-to-peer rental (Hawlitschek et al., 2016) or peer-to-peer markets (Perren and Kozinets, 2018), collaborative economy (Acquier et al., 2016) and last but not least collaborative consumption (CC) (Belk, 2014b; Botsman, 2013; Herbert and Collin-Lachaud, 2017; Möhlmann, 2015). SE and CC appear as the most widely quoted terms in the literature and interestingly, while a majority of authors believes SE and CC are synonyms (Bellotti et al., 2015; Benoit et al., 2017; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015) several researchers on the other hand consider them as different concepts (Belk, 2014b; Frenken, 2017; Hamari et al., 2016).

The purpose of this presentation is twofold: first to present an overview of the existing literature on SE and CC based on a set of different characteristics in order to showcase the broad diversity of their current interpretations. Secondly, from this apparent lack of consensus, we suggest a new approach, based on what is different and innovative in the phenomenon. In particular our purpose is to identify what constitutes the core of the SE and CC in order to allow for a proper conceptualization, theorization and modelling. A category of practices surfaces along with its characteristics and specificities, we propose to name it 'collaborative services' (CS).

Sharing Economy (SE) and Collaborative Consumption (CC)

Surprisingly, while the SE is already present in our everyday lives and part of many of our consumers' choices, the interest on this topic from the scientific community is fairly recent and academic research on this new phenomenon is only emerging (Benoit et al., 2017). We can find a few scientific papers addressing the SE dated before 2010 (Benkler, 2004) but most articles were published after 2013. From a Marketing perspective, researchers have tried to describe and identify the phenomenon (Belk, 2014b), they have also investigated its specificities, looking for example into factors of satisfaction (Möhlmann, 2015) or participants motivations (Bellotti et al., 2015; Benoit et al., 2017; Hamari et al., 2016).

For Rachel Botsman (2013) “the sharing economy lacks a shared definition” and Juliet Schor (2016) states that “a solid definition (…) that reflects common usage is nearly impossible.” French researchers also make the same statement (Herbert and Collin-Lachaud, 2017; Peugeot et al., 2015). The origin of the term SE is not precisely associated to a specific author but as early as 2004, Yochai Benkler, in Yale’s law journal, describes and analyzes what he sees as a new form of exchange, the emergence of sharing and he calls it “sharing nicely”. Benkler admits that the term 'sharing' is unusual in the economic literature but more common in the anthropology literature. The apparent contradiction between ‘sharing’ and ‘economy’ is captured by Hawlitschek et al. (2016) when they qualify the expression as an oxymoron. Others (Herbert and Collin-Lachaud, 2017) talk about a semantic confusion around the term ‘sharing’ and question whether the SE is really about sharing or rather ‘pseudo-sharing’ practices (Belk, 2014a). Illustrating this idea that the SE and CC regroup a variety of diverse practices, Benkler refers to “a cluster of social practices forming an economic phenomenon”. Similarly, other authors talk about the “big tent” of the SE (Schor, 2016) or an “umbrella concept” (Hamari et al., 2016).

In Benkler’s original definition it should be noted that only exchanges between individual customers, ‘peers’, are included, also called C2C (or P2P) exchanges (ex: Blablacar). This seems to be a first point of disagreement among scholars as many share Benkler’s vision but others believe B2C exchanges (ex: Zipcar) also belong to the SE and/or CC. This is captured in Table 1: the first column, C2C only then C2C & B2C, displays the two different perspectives. SE and CC in parenthesis identifies whether the author(s) specifically referred to the SE or CC. In fact, when reviewing the different definitions from the literature, several other aspects have been interpreted differently and we outline three other characteristics subject to debate. First, when a majority of researchers believe solely triadic exchanges mediated by an online platform (ex: Uber, Airbnb) are part of the SE/ CC, a few others consider the phenomenon also includes more traditional and dyadic forms of initiatives such as local or face-to-face practices between friends or family members (such as lending or bartering). Secondly, for most researchers the new phenomenon is exclusively based on access, also referred to as ‘short term rental’ (Belk, 2014b) but others believe exchanges with both access and transfer of ownership (ex: eBay) are included. Last but not least several authors consider only transactions involving a form of compensation, monetary (ex: vacation rental) or non-monetary (ex: house swapping) belong to the SE/ CC while for others free exchanges (ex: Couchsurfing) are included. The different authors’ standpoints are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Sharing Economy (SE) and Collaborative Consumption (CC) characteristics

	C2C	C2C & B2C	Online	Online & offline	Access	Access & ownership	For a fee	For a fee & free
Ert et al. (SE)	x		x		x			x
Schor (SE)		x		x		x		x
Huurne et al. (SE)	x		x		x			x
Richardson (SE)	x		x		x			x
Frenken 2017 (SE)	x			x	x			x
Frenken 2017 (CC)		x		x		x		x
Benoit et al. (CC)	x		x		x			x
Hamari et al. (CC)	x		x		x			x
Mohlmann (CC)		x	x			x	x	

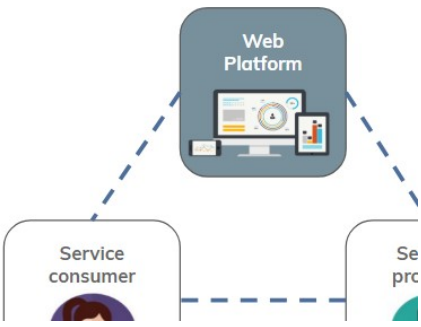
Belk (CC)		x	x		x		x	
Bellotti et al. (CC)	x		x		x			x
Peugeot et al. (CC)	x		x		x			x
Guillard (CC)	x			x		x		x
Botsman et al. (CC)		x		x		x		x
Herbert et al. (CC)	x			x		x		x

Introducing and defining Collaborative services (CS)

One first takeaway from this literature review is a possible explanation of the difficulty mentioned by many scholars to find a global definition for the SE and CC: the heterogeneity of practices encompassed within it. Table 1 reflects significant differences between authors' positions with regards to SE/ CC characteristics. What's more, it appears that several practices are not new and already existed before the rise of the SE/ CC phenomenon: sharing between friends or family members for example (Belk, 2014b), or B2C rental services (ex: Zipcar). More recently, the exchange of goods (with transfer of ownership) via an online platform (ex: eBay) started becoming popular towards the end of the 20th century. What comes to light is that one particular type of exchange is new and did not exist before the 21st century, the exchange of services between peers on a large and global scale, made possible by web platforms. By instantaneously matching the supply and demand for services provided by individuals, web platforms facilitate these exchanges, making it possible for strangers, 'peers', to provide and consume services such as vacation rental (Airbnb, Homeaway), car rental (Ouicar, Drivy) or ride sharing (Lyft, Blablacar). Whether those exchanges are for free (Couchsurfing, Mutum) or for a fee (Blablacar, Airbnb) doesn't seem to matter as both forms of exchange are new and did not exist before.

We propose to name them collaborative services (CS) and define them as "services exchanged between peers, a service provider and a service consumer, facilitated via an online web platform acting as a trusted third party, either for free or for a fee. Both the service provider and the service consumer are customers of the web platform." Interestingly Table 1 shows that 7 authors out of 15 (Bellotti et al., 2015; Benoit et al., 2017; Ert et al., 2016; Hamari et al., 2016; Huurne et al., 2017; Peugeot et al., 2015; Richardson, 2015) characterize either the SE or CC using similar characteristics : C2C, online, access, free and for a fee. As such, while SE and CC can be considered as umbrella terms regrouping a variety of different practices, CS could represent the core of the phenomenon.

Figure 1: Collaborative services (CS) triad



In order to explain how these new types of services are positioned with regards to existing forms of services, we use Eiglier et al.'s services typology (2010, p.10), and add a new category (in grey in Table 2).

Table 2: Services typology / classification including Collaborative Services

MARKET & SUPPLIER	BENEFICIARY		
	Person	**Object**	**Business**
Collaborative Services C2C	Vacation rental (Airbnb), Ride sharing (Blablacar)	Object loans (Mutum),	
Consumers B2C	Hospital, Transportation, Hotel	Post office, Bank	
Businesses B2B	Industrial catering, Transportation	Machinery maintenance	Advertising, Accounting

Conclusion

Collaborative services (CS) represent a brand new category of exchanges occurring within a triadic framework (Benoit et al., 2017). The CS triad is composed of individual service providers (1), individual service consumers (2) and a web platform (3) intermediating (1) and (2). In this new context, several aspects considered as 'traditional' problems already studied and addressed by Marketing researchers specialized in Services may and probably should be revisited. In particular we have identified three possible avenues for future research related to CS.

First, while marketing has thoroughly studied relationships, in both triadic and dyadic frameworks, researchers have mainly studied ongoing and continuous relationships, for example between buyers and sellers in B2B exchanges. With CS, we face a new and special combination of two different types of relationships, a continuous one with the platform/brand and a discrete one between peers; are they independent or do they interfere? How constructs such as brand trust for example or customer commitment are impacted? Second, perceived risks can be significant, including a combination of information asymmetry, intangibility and interdependence but also uncertainty related to physical harm, theft or even property damage. Both service consumers and service providers are exposed and while most research has been done on service consumers' trust, only little research exists on service providers' trust and decision making processes, in particular in the context of CS. We believe it could be investigated further. Lastly, studying how to ensure consumer experience consistency when service providers are not employees hence when the platform/brand doesn't have access to the traditional means of control is another interesting research topic. Said differently, what happens to standardization in the context of CS?

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