

BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS IN SHARING ECONOMY - OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

Grzegorz Leszczyński, g.leszczynski@ue.poznan.pl, Department of Marketing Strategies

Anna Waligóra, anna.waligora@ue.poznan.pl, Department of Sociology and Business Ethics

Piotr Zmysłony, p.zmyslony@ue.poznan.pl, Department of Tourism

Poznań University of Economics and Business, Poznań, Poland

ABSTRACT

The dynamic development of new forms of socio-economic activities performed at the junction of production, division, exchange and consumption of goods and services, collectively referred to as sharing economy, could be considered to be a new phenomenon both in terms of economic practice and the theory of economics. The concept of sharing is not new for the IMP group; however, it has not been examined from the perspective of sharing economy.

This paper is based on literature review which leads to the identification of common elements of definitions of sharing economy. This work-in-progress paper aims at opening a discussion on sharing economy from the perspective of the IMP approach. Thus, it presents dilemmas and research gaps for further research rather than applicable conclusions, however, it contains conclusions regarding the practice of sharing economy.

Keywords: sharing economy; business relationships; business interactions; networks

Aknowledgments

This study has been conducted as a part of research project „UEP DLA NAUKI – Nowe kierunki badań w dziedzinie nauk ekonomicznych”

INTRODUCTION

Sharing economy (SE) has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon in recent years, both in popular and scientific publications. It has gained interest as an economic, business-related or technological phenomenon (Sutherland, Jarrahi 2018). This concept is often associated with companies such as Uber or Airbnb which have quickly gained a lot of publicity and a strong market position; however, it also applies to other service types, e.g. Lyft, Couchsurfing or Sharetribe, to name a few. The SE is associated with the concepts of collaboration and co-creation, which are close to at least some of the researchers from the IMP Group. However, this group has so far omitted the SE phenomenon in their work, as evidenced by the lack of any publications about the subject on improup.org.

This may be due to the SE perception as a consumer-only phenomenon which fact could exclude it from the IMP Group's interest. Perhaps members of the group have assumed that the SE does not bring anything new to the available knowledge because it refers to sharing - phenomena which have long been reported characteristic of B2B relations and networks. It is possible, however, that the IMP Group members have overlooked the development of the

new phenomenon. Striving to determine which assumption is most likely, in the article we wonder in which areas the SE may be an exciting area of research for the IMP Group. Therefore, we analyse the critical concepts of sharing and the SE; then we define the specific features of the SE. Resultantly, we compare these issues with the achievements of the IMP Group, which leads to the identification of research gaps. The article is based on a scoping literature review. As a work-in-progress conceptual work, it aims to formulate research gaps as directions for further research on the topic.

THE VAGUE MEANING OF SHARING ECONOMY

The natural starting point for determining the SE seems to understand the meaning of the qualifier "sharing". We assume that it is a form of social exchange between people based on exchange without a deprived economic aspect. Researchers locate them mainly in households indicating that it concerns numerous aspects of living together as well as collective consuming of goods by families (Eckhardt, Bahrđi 2015). Sharing as an act of communication and distribution is of great social importance because it constitutes social relations (John 2013). In the 21st century, the term "sharing" began to appear in new contexts, i.e. sharing refers to activity popular in social media and social sharing has become a mode of producing value in culture, information, education, computation and communication sectors (Benkler 2004). However, when there is money in the form of a fee or remuneration in sharing, or if the sharing is of market nature and is taken over by realtors, we can no longer speak about sharing (Eckhardt, Bahrđi 2015). Such situations are described as the SE.

When looking for the possibility of defining the SE, we have encountered a vast diversity of approaches. Therefore, we decided to perform a systematic scoping review of the literature. Based on Sutherland and Jarrahi's (2018) study, we assumed that the literature on the SE is new, dispersed and interdisciplinary. That is why we took a broad approach to search instead of relying on a strict set of journals or a specific research area. Therefore, the first stage of the work consisted in identifying the Scopus database of works that contained the phrase "sharing economy" in the title, keywords or abstract and were published as articles, book chapters, conference papers, books, and editorials in the area of business, management and accounting. We identified 526 such works in the Business, Management and Accounting subject area, and then we chose 20 of them with the highest number of citations. These 20 the most frequently cited papers were analysed to determine how the SE was defined by the authors of these papers or by the others, whom they referred to. On this basis we have obtained a list of 40 definitions or quasi-definitions of the SE; subsequently, we came to analyse them to determine how the SE was defined. As a result of the decomposition of these definitions, we obtained a list of terms used to define the SE. This work was done independently by both authors, and their approaches were confronted in order to avoid the biased analysis error.

The SE is a relatively new phenomenon and hence probably far from the consensus in defining it. This task is also hampered by the fact that some of the publications on the SE focus mainly on the analysis of the two most common examples: Uber and Airbnb (Sutherland, Jarrahi 2018). However, the SE has a much broader scope and includes the exchange of products, services, work, jobs and money. A comparison of the approaches presented by various authors of the analysed articles allows us to distinguish key aspects of the SE. They relate to:

- the under-utilised resources available and the benefits of access to them (e.g. Stephany 2015; Kenedy 2016);
- online platforms that allow this access and actors who stand behind these platforms and become new intermediaries (e.g. Botsman & Rogers 2011; Cannon & Summers 2014);
- sense of community of those who want to share and change their need of ownership (e.g. Bardhi & Eckhardt 2012; Kathan, Matzler & Veider 2016).

It is also worth noting that the SE in most of the studied papers is described directly or implicitly as the sphere of individual exchange, hence it is sometimes described as a peer-to-peer economy (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Some authors suggest that the concept of SE is too wide and consider more specified terms like collaborative economy or access economy.

However, the SE is definitely not limited to individuals. The SE refers to human or business networks that exchange goods and services even if it involves access rather than the change of ownership. These networks are not created solely by individual owners, but also by firms based on dedicated internet platforms. These firms change the classic approach to analyse market participants' behaviour because the entry to business landscape they offer to the individuals blurs the division into supply and demand. Therefore, the SE should meet the interest of the IMP researchers.

SHARING ECONOMY – THE PHENOMENA NEGLECTED BY THE IMP?

The IMP framing has always paid attention to the importance of the interactions and relationships between business actors (Hakansson, Snehota 2017). The IMP authors describe the business landscape paying attention to the relatedness of interacting actors, resources and activities (ARA model). This is also reflected in the interest in the processes that create business relationships: adaptation, collaboration, conflict, social interaction and routinization (Hakansson & Snehota 1995). Thus, interacting in a business relationship is a critical business process. As dyads of companies become mutually dependent, such interdependencies become generalised in the business landscape. Thus, every company appears to be a node in a network of business relationship that is linked to other nodes. Such a network has no defined boundaries, is dynamic and no company has a picture of the whole network. Hakansson and Snehota (2017) point out the properties of such networks. Every company is unique in a network and has a unique set of relationships with the other network entities. . The set of these relationships is a company's asset that creates opportunities but also raises limits as the network embeddedness specifies what a company can achieve. If a company is dependent on others, it cannot fully decide on its development because that what a company can do partly relies on its activities and resources but partly on activities and resources of those that it is related to. The business network includes legal structures, technological solutions, logistical and administrative systems.

A short presentation of the IMP approach above - as we assume that no further explanation on this subject is needed in this group - justifies the question about the convergence (or usefulness) of such a perception of a business landscape with phenomena referred to as the SE. However, it is difficult to find direct research on this subject by the IMP researchers. The review of the papers published in IMP Journal and the papers submitted to the IMP annual conferences (conducted both by title and abstract) indicates that no researcher from the group of IMP has so far been interested in this subject. On the other hand, similar concepts which describe similar phenomena have appeared. The issues of information sharing (e.g. Baraldi & Stromsten 2009) or knowledge sharing (e.g. Cantu, Corsaro 2008, Oberg 2018), collaboration (e.g. Boyce & Mundy 2017), and co-creation (e.g. Baraldi et 2014) have been raised in the

context of interactive / network approach. However, they cannot be considered as convergent with the studies on the SE for two main reasons. Firstly, they refer to business actors, while in the publications on the SE the consumer perspective is often taken. Secondly, they do not consider the role of the internet platforms, which seems to be the crucial element of the SE.

INTERDEPENDENCIES IN SHARING ECONOMY

Should the IMP be never encountered in its scientific development? Can we afford it? Let us look at the SE through the prism of three dimensions where - according to the IMP legacy - interdependencies are analysed in relations to interactions of actors, resources and activities (Hakansson, Snehota 1995). We imply an extended approach to this model, also taking into consideration space and time dimensions of interactions in accordance with the IMP model of business interaction (Hakansson et al. 2010).

As a part of the dimension of interactions, the IMP pays attention to activities that link actors together. This link is created by a variety of activities both among individuals i.e. suggesting, requesting, requiring, reacting, performing, adapting and among organisations, i.e. ordering, producing, delivering, servicing, exchanging information (Hakansson et al., 2010). In the case of the SE - like in every exchange landscape - these activities are also present; however, they are crafted to and by platform algorithms. Intermediate actors in SE organise their activities in line with one of two models – centralised or decentralised. The first one is built on intervention, control of participants' activities and resources. The platform introduces automation to their activities and can significantly influence their business interactions (Spreitzer 2017). The latter model assumes a decentralised agency of participants.

One can also expect an increase in the specialisation of exchange participants within a given platform. It results from adjusting to the requirements and standards of a platform, which is mostly reflected in the algorithm for positioning offers and evaluating exchange participants. In the space dimension, networks with a structure that is a derivative of the model adopted by the mediator can develop. In the case of a centralised approach, many actors acting as suppliers are strictly platform dependent at the same time, they are also dependent on one another, but only to a small extent as there is no interaction among them. The similar situation can be observed with consumers (Lehdonvirta 2017). Therefore, the business network is centralised with a mediator at the central position. In the decentralised approach, the mediator focuses mainly on expanding a network with new actors and concentrating/compacting it by motivating the participants to build mutual links among them, not only in the virtual but also through real interactions (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Yuan et al., 2018). Thus, the mediator does not take the central position in the business network.

The IMP's work points out to an access to resources as one of the key dimensions of business interaction. One of the main assumptions of the approach is the heterogeneity of resources, according to which the value of an actor's resources depends on how they can be combined with the resources of other market participants. Therefore, the objective value of resources does not exist as it depends on who is given access to them by an actor and what they do with them in the context of their resources (Hakansson et al. 2010). The access to others' resources and sharing own resources is a distinctive feature of the SE, although different aspects of the access are highlighted in comparison to the IMP approach. An essential feature of resources is that they are under-utilised or unutilised by the owner, which is the primary motive to share them (Stephany 2015). In the SE, information about each actor - which is a derivative of interaction with others - becomes very important. It takes the form of rating, giving opinions or recommendations that describe each participant co-creating their identity. However, this

information remains outside its control, because it is created by algorithms entered/imprinted into the internet platform. This platform is a unique resource of one actor - mediator, which makes it available to participants, creates a system of rating and information exchange, and collects information about them.

In dynamic terms, the configuration of resources of individual suppliers is subordinated to the algorithm of the internet platform, which on the one hand is a source of centralised knowledge being the fundamental strength of mediator, and on the other it leads to the above-mentioned dependence and control of participants. Both the supplier and the consumer do not influence its formula; therefore their knowledge and control of resources are substantially limited in favour of the possibility of having access to the platform. In the space dimension, the SE can lead to increased heterogeneity of resources as suppliers have an option to broadly compare their offer with the competitors by standard functionalities of the platform. Also, some suppliers develop their resources by strategizing their development on the SE as the marketplace (Guttentag, 2015). On the other hand, the SE can lead to an increase in the homogeneity of resources as the consumers are not always able to choose an offer from a specific supplier as match-making is a strict platform function. Besides, as a result of the interaction, the consumers do not transform the suppliers' resources nor adapt them to their needs.

The ARA model does not imply the type of interacting actors; however, the interests of the IMP group members are unlikely to affect consumers. Although an actor is understood as an organisation (as a collective one), as well as the individuals who represent that organisation, the individuals themselves remain outside the IMP's interest focus. In the SE three roles of actors can be distinguished: the participants who can act as suppliers or consumers and mediators. The SE can be seen as covering only the individuals; however, it consists of quasi-business actors or business ones too. Some of them started their small business thanks to the SE, for example sharing their cars or apartments. Some big actors were also attracted by way of getting access to a new, huge market. The SE is also characterised by new types of actors – intermediaries that mediate and coordinate the activities of participants via and on (depending on the model) internet platforms. They play a new role as access facilitator and take a special, central network position. They provide a new set of functions: generating flexibility, match-making, trust-building, extended reach, managing transactions and facilitating collectivity (Sutherland, Jarrahi 2018). Their actions cause a change in supplier-customer (i.e. hosts-guests) dyads into supplier-mediator-customer relationships. Thus, the dependency of both types of participants on intermediary grows.

The IMP assumes that actors evolve as a change in their resources and activities implies an evolution of their goals, expectations and interpretations. In the case of centralised platforms, the change of of the SE participants is determined by the mediator who gains capacity enough to provide an access to an attractive scope of resources. The SE platforms are designed to benefit from scaling at the global level by reaching critical mass in a relatively short time to provide a useful density of connections (Botsman, Rogers 2010). Thus, the evolution of the participants seems to be limited to the initial stage of presence on the platform and their subsequent evolution follows the platform requirements. In the case of decentralised platforms, co-evolution of participants is moderated by their interactions and probably follows paths known from the conventional business. In the space dimension, the IMP assumes that mutuality influences the jointness of actors. In the SE, we can approach this process in two aspects: intensive attachment of participants to platforms manifests the first one, while global localhood of platforms referring both to their global range and local community focus manifests the other. Resultantly, the SE networks can be characterised by geographical discontinuity and diversified density driven by the participants' place of activity.

The above analysis focuses on the SE through the lenses of dimensions of the IMP model of business interaction. In the dimension of actors, we point out the new actors entering the market thanks to and through the SE. In the dimension of resources, we show a tendency to homogenise, but also – at the same time - to introduce heterogeneity of resources. In the dimension of activities, we indicate the significance of the algorithm of the SE platforms. Considering the dynamics of interactions, we pay attention to the intensity of actions in the initial stage of the platform development. In the SE space dimension, we suggest that it can have a significant impact on the structure of business networks. The presented phenomena make it possible to expect a significant impact on interdependency in the business landscape, which makes them an interesting area of research.

CONCLUSIONS

The mainstream of literature on the SE seems to consider it through the prism of individual users or suppliers, their activities or shared resources. In our opinion, such a perspective does not allow for a full understanding of the SE phenomenon. The IMP approach can make it possible to find a plausible explanation of the SE in a broader context of relationships and business networks. If we consider centralised platforms in terms of creating new conditions for business interactions and relationships, the decentralised model creates a new way for communication and extends the range, but it does not radically affect interactions themselves. Both of them do influence business networks, but only the first one can be perceived as the one causing profound changes to the business landscape. Therefore we focus on the centralised model of the SE what leads us to point out at least three issues of the SE that could be considered from the perspective of interactive/network approach: (1) interactions and relationships among actors sharing assets; (2) interactions and relationships among the actors who take part in the SE and the actors of "conventional" economy, (3) new actors of business networks that expand because of the SE development. The IMP has always been looking for a holistic approach that could explain business reality in a better way than atomistic models. Thus, we tend to term the SE as new wine for the IMP scholars because it opens opportunities for developing research on business interactions, relationships and networks in somewhat new conditions of the SE.

INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SE

On the elementary IMP's view of the business landscape, the question comes up how the interaction behaviours of the actors within inter-organisational business relationships in the SE emerge. Thus, a question arises to what extent one can assume that repetitive interaction built on a centralised platform leads to the development of relations among the participants of the exchange? Probably, such relations develop between the participants and the mediator. If the interactions are of a one-off character, as it is enough to exchange, so the adaptation and collaboration—which are the substance of relationships between participants—might be very limited. To what extent do such relationships attempt to achieve innovations or reduce uncertainty what is assumed to be an essential outcome of business relationships (Hakansson et al. 2010)? Can one expect to strengthen the relationships between participants and the mediator occupying a central position in the hierarchical business network? Therefore, we argue that discussion on the influence of such an environment of business interactions and relationships on interdependencies of actors needs to be further explained.

INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SHARING AND CONVENTIONAL ECONOMY

The SE is a phenomenon of a business landscape that is not separated from the market; it is within the market. The SE is not only virtual; it is about the new way of exchange of conventional goods. Participants of the SE are related to actors that run conventional business, and it would be impossible to draw a border between those spheres. It might be particularly interesting to study if in the case of centralised platforms the participants are still approached by others that are linked to them via the platform as individual actors, or the mediator would be perceived as their proxy? This question is now valid in the case of platforms like Airbnb which represent a supply on the tourism market in some cities. To whom could the authorities of Paris city refer to talk about the regulations of the flow of visitors – to the number of actors that share their apartments or to the management of Airbnb? The case of Airbnb in Paris raises a question about the influence of the model of digital mediation adopted by leading mediators of the SE on interactive behaviours and structure of business networks in general. The discussion of how interactions and relationships in the business network overlapping conventional and sharing economies could extend our understanding of the contemporary business landscape.

NEW ACTORS OF BUSINESS NETWORKS

The SE should also be discussed in the context of new possible actors of business networks and their roles. The most critical issue here is to determine how the SE mediator affects the traditional market and to discuss the economic and social consequences of their impact. In addition to the undoubted developing of the market, their role can be functional with reference to business relationships and networks. It is also essential to focus on the functioning of participants outside the platform. Do they function as business actors or do they not appear on the market in the context of conducting activities and seeking resources? Do they function in different SE networks, and in a way, consolidate the SE model of interactions and relationships? The crucial aspect here is the discussion on whether the SE participants are strictly business actors or prosumers who have achieved such a significant bargaining power thanks to the platform that they should be included in the reflections on contemporary business relations.

Despite many ambiguities and misunderstandings about defining the SE, it can be concluded that it should be considered not only in the context of trends in consumer behaviour, but also in the sense of its potential impact on B2B interactions, relationships and networks. The SE can shape the interdependency of business actors who participate in the SE landscape as well as those who are on its border or those who are drawn into the market by sharing platforms. Therefore, identified research gaps could be discussed as the starting point for researching the nature of the SE as a potential new archipelago in the interactive business world.

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