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Perez-Vega, Rodrigo and Jones, Brian and Travlou, Penny and Miguel, Cristina

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United Kingdom: An Examination of the Configuration of the Sharing Economy, Pressing Issues, and Research Directions

Rodrigo Perez-Vega

Henley Business School, University of Reading
Reading, United Kingdom
r.perezvega@henley.ac.uk

Brian Jones

Business School, Leeds Beckett University
Leeds, United Kingdom
b.t.jones@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Penny Travlou

Edinburgh College of Art
The University of Edinburgh
p.travlou@ed.ac.uk

Cristina Miguel

Business School, Leeds Beckett University
Leeds, United Kingdom
C.Miguel@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Abstract

This chapter aims to examine the configuration of the sharing economy in the United Kingdom. The chapter provides an examination of the key opportunities and challenges that this socio-economic model generates in the country. It includes an account of different sharing economy initiatives in the United Kingdom, including crowdfunding projects, tool libraries, timesharing banks, men's sheds, and shared workspaces, commercial sharing economy services, micro-libraries, community-

gardening projects, and paid online peer-to-peer accommodation. Increased consumer choice and economic benefits derived from an extended economy around the sharing economy are identified as key opportunities. Key challenges relate to policymaking and taxation of businesses and participants in the sharing economy, as well as the wider enforcement of health and safety regulations and the impact that the recent pandemic is having on the industry. The chapter also provides an examination of the latest developments and regulations in this area. In addition, the chapter identifies the most pressing issues and possible future directions of research in this context.

Keywords: Collaborative Consumption, Collaborative Economy, Policy, Sharing Economy, United Kingdom

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) has a significant stake in the collaborative/sharing economy, endorsed by the UK Government as a business opportunity (Woskow 2014). The adoption and usage of the sharing economy among the UK population is high, with a survey, with 62% of the UK population having had participated in some form of sharing economy, and 73% of them engage in the sharing economy more than once a month (Ozcan et al. 2017). It is, therefore, more useful to think in terms of kinds of services and industries where the sharing economy has permeated, rather than individual platforms and projects. Some of the main drivers of participation in the sharing economy resonate with academic literature in other contexts (Böcker and Meelen 2017), namely the role that convenience and availability since many of the sharing economy platforms use technology to coordinate communication and to mediate transactions (Ozcan et al. 2017). Saving or making extra money is also another important driver for participation, as well as environmental factors (Ozcan et al. 2017). Despite the government's broadly positive view of the collaborative and sharing economy, a type of platform that has received particular attention and that has dominated a lot of the discussion on the sharing economy in the UK has been short-term rental (STR) platforms. The UK Government has recently conducted a review of the impact of this type of platforms and has published a report that identifies some of the primary positive outcomes and concerns that this industry brings to the country (Cromarty and Barton 2018).

The analysis of the state of the sharing economy in the UK is organized in nine sections. First, the chapter identifies the way the sharing economy has been conceptualised from a governmental perspective by examining the working definitions present in official government reports. Second, the chapter provides a number of examples of local sharing economy initiatives to provide a sense of the variety and scope of sharing economy initiatives in the UK. Then it shows some contextual information on the unique nature of the UK policy in relation to the sharing economy, where the devolved nations and local councils play an important role. The chapter continues by examining the latest developments of this industry, followed by the key pressing issues, including new ones that have emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, a summary of the chapter and an examination of future directions of research about the sharing economy in the UK context is provided.

Definitions

There is no one agreed definition of the sharing/collaborative economy, but a number of common threads run through what is generally understood by these terms. As the names suggest, there is an element of sharing and thus of collaboration in the creation of mutually beneficial transactions made possible via online platforms. Some online sharing/collaborative economy platforms give access to other peoples' skills or their time, while others grant access to resources or assets (Woskow 2014). It is worth noting that the key term is "access to" and not "ownership of." The sectors in which sharing and collaboration take place is diverse, and the scale, scope, and operation of activity are complex.

More recent reports commissioned by the UK Government provide additional insights on the governments' perspective on this type of economy. For example, Rahim et al. (2017) define the sharing economy as the "economic activity facilitated by the Internet, through digital platforms and applications (apps) that enable people or businesses to share, sell, or rent property, resources, time, or skills." The report outlines that one of the main purposes of the sharing economy is to bring together suppliers with customers through a common platform.

Examples

Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding allows users to raise funding through an open call on the Internet (Belleflamme et al. 2013). Crowdfunder is the UK's nearest equivalent to Kickstarter: a major rewards-based crowdfunding platform, which supports community enterprise, charitable donation, and product generation. Crowdfunder focuses on social issues, partly organized by geographical location. This is counter-intuitive given the scaling potential of automated platforms but works to grow an audience for local activity. "Crowdfunder Local" on the platform website features area-specific campaigns to show off campaigns, for example, "Crowdfund Somerset showcases the best crowdfunding projects in the county. If you have a community group, business, charity, or another great idea, then add your project today." The platform is very active in scouting for and helping to encourage both new projects and new partnerships. "The team has taken an entrepreneurial approach to develop new partnerships. For instance, Crowdfunder works with several UK universities running micro-crowdfunding sites and provides coaching to people starting on the platform. At the time of writing, about £70M (~76.64M EUR) had been raised for projects across the UK (Crowdfunder 2019).

Funding model: Crowdfunding is a private limited company; therefore, their business model relies on the transaction fees that they charge to the crowdfunder. At the moment they charge a crowdfunder fee of 3% + VAT and a transaction fee: 1.67% + 25p +VAT on UK/EU cards, 3.25% +25p + VAT on non-UK/EU cards.

Digital presence: Crowdfunding platforms use websites and social media to engage users in diverse ways. For example, Crowdfunder has a website and presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

Micro-Libraries and Sites of Local Exchange

The Lewisham micro-library is on the main road in a former phone box in South London. It was adapted over the course of a week by a local resident. None of the

original books remains, as they are regularly taken out, traded in, and replaced by residents. Apart from a sign explaining what to do, the micro-library stands there on its own, used and maintained by the neighbourhood.

Funding model: Lewisham micro-library is a one-off, paid for by local residents who did the work to transform it from a disused public phone box.

Digital presence: Micro-libraries like Lewisham micro-library rely on owned media such as a Facebook page, and they have also achieved some earned media via coverage in other media platforms such as Londonist.

The Edinburgh Tool Library (ETL) Project

It is the UK's first tool library, promoting sharing as a way of reducing environmental impact. The members of the project lend to other members tools for do-it-yourself (DIY), gardening, decorating, and machine repair so that they do not need to own them. The launch of the workshop enables the members of the project to expand beyond their base in Leith and open a permanent tool library and woodworking workshop situated at the community co-working space, Tribe Party on Windsor Place. ETL collaborated with the charity The Bikes for Refugees, a volunteer-led community project who repair and uncycle donated bikes for New Scots. In this collaboration, four New Scots and ETL members teamed up and learned the skills to repair bikes for someone who needs them. So far, they have run three workshops. Finally, ETL has created the Edinburgh Tool Network based on local book libraries. Once a week, volunteers from the ETL would run tool library sessions in each of the book libraries in Piershill, Craigmillar and Portobello. Through this project, ETL has diverted 4,028,48 kg tools from going into landfill by enabling the members to share tools.

Funding model: The Edinburgh Tool Library Project is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organization and has received funding from the Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund and the European Regional Development Fund.

Digital presence: The Edinburgh Tool Library Project (<https://edinburghtoolibrary.org.uk>) has its website with information about workshops, courses, tools inventory and news. There is a strong presence on social media (Facebook and Twitter) as well as newsletter.

Men's Sheds and Shared Workspaces

"Men's Sheds" started in Australia as a forum to address men's wellbeing concerns, providing shared tools and support at carpentry and repair workshops. The sheds offer space to use craft skills to socially isolated older men. There is also a UK Men's Shed Association (<https://menssheds.org.uk>), funded by the Sainsbury Trusts.

Funding model: Lewisham's Men's Sheds were given the grant to set up and receive modest subscription or pay-per-visit for users to support running costs.

Digital presence: The initiative has a community page; very low use of digital tools for communication about the shed as (potential) members "tend not to be reached that way."

Commercial Sharing Economy Services

Patchwork (<https://patchworkit.com>) is a digital business that supports groups of people buying a single collective present. An item, such as a bicycle, or a series of elements, is divided into small, manageably priced bundles to buy, shown in a Patchwork image on the site.

Funding model: informally crowd-funded £250k to build the business. The company takes 3% of all money transacted on its website. Partners, such as PayPal, guarantee legitimacy.

Digital presence: the business uses their owned media (i.e., website) to collect gift money. They also have e-commerce capabilities via a Patchwork store.

Timebanking

Rushey Green Timebank runs alongside a medical practice. People give an hour of time to someone and, in turn, can claim an hour from another person in the scheme. Numbers have grown continuously, so there is now a distributed model with five hubs. The practice that it set up saw it as a remedy for issues not easily treatable, such as motivation and esteem. It has won awards for its work in community health and influenced the growth of other banks.

Funding model: the charity is supported by the local authority and other grants. The premises are given by the surgery. Time is banked and swapped (i.e., there is no voucher system).

Digital presence: a lively basic website (www.timebanking.org) shares news and events and offers a “Donate” button. Brokering between time-swappers is face-to-face, though they are exploring a digital tool.

Co-Owned Assets

The Ivy House community-asset pub is the first pub in the UK to be listed as an Asset of Community Value and the first building in Britain to be bought for the community under the provisions of the Localism Act 2011, invoked in haste to avoid redevelopment as apartments.

Funding model: loans and government grants secured the building. The pub is a cooperative, run day-to-day by a professional manager, with 371 local shareholders who contributed to refurbishments sitting on its committee.

Digital presence: the pub used social media to organize its share offer. Its website links to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with multiple email addresses to manage its celebrity status (“probably the first Asset of Community Value ever”) for press, bookings, and advice to other groups.

Community-Gardening

Breakspears Mews Community Garden was a run-down fly-tipping area full of car repair businesses. Big houses look over it on one side, while, on the other, are Council flats. People from both helped in its transition, led by a passionate local woman who still organizes the work.

Funding model: the local authority cleared the site, and local conservation society support enabled it to start-up and run.

Digital presence: a word press blog (<https://breakspearsmews.wordpress.com>) with information dated 2014 and only four followers; an email list alert about opening times.

Exchange of Idle Tools and Items

Borroclub (www.borroclub.co.uk) is an online marketplace for people to rent out household items to others who live nearby. To some extent, this project captures some of the essences of ETL discussed earlier in this section, as the platform encourages

its users to not purchase items that they will not necessarily use frequently and instead to borrow them from the local community for a fee.

Funding model: Borroclub is a private limited company. Therefore, the platform finances from the fees that they charge to users and people listing their items.

Digital presence: Borroclub owns a website; however, due to the COVID-19 situation, the service was temporarily on hold. They also have a presence in social media platforms Twitter and Facebook.

Exchange of Pets

Borrowmydoggy (www.borrowmydoggy.com) is a platform that aims to connect dog owners with local people who would like to look after their dogs. The platform facilitates the process of arranging walks, playtime, overnight stays, and holidays for pet owners that often struggle to find where to leave their pets during certain times.

Funding model: Borrowmydoggy is also a private company, and therefore they finance their activities from the fees they charge to pet borrowers and pet hosts.

Digital presence: the platform has an online website and presence in the main social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest).

Context

The UK offers flexibility in certain areas of regulation through the devolved parliaments and assemblies. Devolution in the UK has created a national Parliament in Scotland, a Welsh Parliament—or Senedd Cymru—and a national Assembly in Northern Ireland in 1999 (Torrance 2019). In addition, the operation of many sharing economy companies is mainly regulated at the city level. In London, the primary measure includes the 90-day annual limit for Airbnb hosts (Booth and Newling 2016). This measure was established alongside a public campaign against Airbnb, which one year later was revealed ineffective both in terms of avoiding gentrification and regulating the home-sharing practice (Simcock and Smith 2016), with a total of 2,444 Airbnb properties rented in 2016 for more than six months of the year (Institute for Policy Research 2016). Other types of sharing economy that is considered less lucrative (e.g., dog sharing) are subject to less regulation, mainly adhering to self-regulating measures to ensure the safety of the participants involved. Other sharing economy industries, such as the short-term rentals, on the other hand, have been at the centre of media and other stakeholders' scrutiny, mainly due to the perceived impact that those platforms are having in those industries. In many cases, the UK did not have policies in place until pressure from industry associations and local councils led to changes in the short-term leasing policies of organizations such as Airbnb (British Hospitality Association 2016).

As a consequence of the rapid increase of STR platforms, the UK government and the House of Commons (2018) has commissioned a report to assess the impact of these sharing economy platforms in the country. The government defines STR platforms as those that provide marketplaces that connect people who want to rent out their properties or spare rooms with people seeking short-term accommodation (Cromarty and Barton 2018). Some of the main positive impacts identified by this report are:

- Increased consumer choice of different types of accommodation.

- Property owners can generate additional income.
- Opportunities for tourism growth in the UK.
- The spread of tourists spending beyond traditional tourist areas.

In Scotland, since the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, there have been various discussions by policymakers and the Scottish Government on how Scotland can become a more sustainable and independent region within the UK, but also a key international player in innovation, technology, industry, science, business, and economy. Along these lines, the Scottish Government (2018, 2019) has looked at possible opportunities to develop a strong sharing economy presence in the UK by taking advantage of the already successful story of the digital economy and social enterprise business environment in Scotland. It appears, though, that until very recently, the discussion was limited to Airbnb and Uber sharing economy types of examples disregarding or excluding a more diverse collaborative economy where the user is at the forefront. In the Unusual Suspects Festival in 2015 in Glasgow, an event on social enterprise and innovation organized by Six (Social Innovation Exchange), it was evident that firstly, there was not much reference or information on the collaborative economy (with the only exception of OuiShare London giving a short workshop on the subject) and secondly, that there were a growing need and interest in finding a more sustainable and peer-to-peer economic model for bottom-up initiatives, as well as start-ups. Other similar events organized in the country have concluded that the collaborative economy should go hand-in-hand with social innovation. Nesta, an innovation foundation, has also opened a Share Lab Fund to support ideas and initiatives that can show how collaborative platforms and models can help public services and deliver social impact—offering funds of between £10,000 and £40,000, plus non-financial support to stimulate experimentation and collaboration.

Other devolved nations have also identified the opportunities and challenges that the sharing economy can bring to their local economies. For instance, the Welsh Government considers that the sharing economy as a beneficial player as it brings additional rates for accommodation capacity, but it also considers that if no additional demand for those rooms is generated, more traditional commercial providers will be impacted (Welsh Government 2020). Limited policy discussion has occurred in the Northern Irish Assembly in relation to the sharing economy.

Developments

For the sharing/collaborative economy, there is likely to be not one but many futures. These futures depend on the nature of the sector in which businesses operate; customer expectations; demand; competition; technology; innovation; regulation; public views and general acceptance or otherwise; stakeholder buy-in; and more besides. The need to make a financial return (profit)—even in the social enterprise (not-for-profit) sector—will continue; operating in the market economy will allow for no other option. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on how rapidly the world can be changed. Knight (2020) posits that some of the most successful sharing economy platforms are in the hospitality and travel sectors, and these are the ones that have been impacted the most during the pandemic. The sharing/collaborative economy will adapt to ongoing changes in the regulatory area and accommodate culture change, but as pressure builds from disgruntled stakeholders such as community groups,

challenges will increase. Some providers will withdraw from the market, and other platforms will cease to exist; new and better regulation will better address public concerns.

Issues

The issue of how to regulate in an effective and efficient manner the vast array of activity and transactions taking place in these settings has prompted much debate, as well as some degree of intervention. The emphasis is on “light-touch” regulation that allows businesses to flourish while also offering some degree of consumer protection. Achieving the right balance between regulating too much or not enough can perhaps best be described as a stakeholder balancing act.

One challenge for regulating the sharing/collaborative economy is that of larger players operating in the market and those who are small or dabble infrequently. Trying to produce regulations (e.g., of tax, health and safety, planning, consumer protection) that work in an efficient and effective way for providers and consumers of services in a range of settings is a challenge to a one-size-fits-all approach to the regulatory environment. The case that is made for championing the sharing/collaborative economy is that it allows for new products and services to be provided in new spaces and environments in a cost-effective and efficient way. New businesses result in new jobs, less payment in welfare, additional tax revenues and citizens are given new opportunities to create and realise value, be that in the form of social, monetary, or other forms. Bringing people together opens possibilities that were previously unknown and unseen, but from this process, life opportunities are enhanced, and deeper, richer, and meaningful ways of living are opened up.

For all of these reasons, the sharing/collaborative economy is growing, and although the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a number of challenges to its operation, these are expected to be temporary, and new business ventures will emerge to seize and to make opportunities. The size of the sharing/collaborative economy can be measured in terms of financial turnover, as well as the number of people participating. Its expansion can be explained in terms of customer satisfaction with the experience, such as having a degree of ownership of the process and having a more customised service, plus of course, the inevitable cost savings that the sharing/collaborative economy delivers. As more people participate, the messier is the line between employed and self-employed, and with this, the challenges of paying and being taxed appropriately. For many providers/suppliers operating in this space, the sharing/collaborative economy is a source of secondary income that offers a useful supplement to wages. Through digital platforms, assets that are underused can be better utilised, and this can help address the issue of sustainability and help meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The triple bottom line (Elkington 1999) of People, Planet and Profit, is delivered in and through the sharing/collaborative economy. As well as better matching suppliers and customers, it delivers economic and business uplift and makes better use of existing resources. For its advocates, it is a win-win situation, but for its detractors, the sharing/economy still occupies a space in which there are some who own the asset and others that do not. This inevitably raises the question as to who in the sharing/collaborative economy is the ultimate winner.

A summary of some of the most pressing concerns of the sharing economy in the United Kingdom are:

- The increase of commercial operators using residential properties as letting businesses in breach of planning rules.
- Challenge pose to local authorities in enforcing planning actions.
- Impacts on local housing markets.
- Negative effects on local communities and neighbours (e.g., noise disturbance and antisocial behaviour).
- Taxation compliance.
- Compliance with health and safety regulations.
- Implications of STR platforms in the hotel industry.
- How to ensure regulation is fit for purpose?
- How to protect and empower consumers and identify clear routes to redress?
- How to support the devolved Nation's business base to compete in the evolving market?
- How to ensure the wider economic, social, and community impacts are understood?
- What are the implications for the sharing economy suppliers, consumers and platform owners in an environment that is likely to be hit by travel and face-to-face interaction restrictions in the foreseeable future?

Other Major Players

There are different organizations that represent the sharing economy in the UK, as well as universities, with some projects exploring the phenomena.

Sharing Economy UK

Several sharing economy companies have organized themselves around a trade association. Sharing Economy UK (SEUK) is the trade body championing the sharing economy industry in the UK. Their main aim is to study and analyse the economic, social, and labour impact, current and future, of this economic activity and to collaborate with policymakers and the government in the development of efficient and rational policies that favour competition, innovation, growth, and development of the sharing economy (Sharing Economy UK 2019).

Ouishare London

Ouishare was founded in Paris in 2012 to provide opportunities for networking and accelerate projects around the collaborative economy (Ouishare 2020a). Ouishare expanded to other cities (40), including London, where Manuel Heredero is the coordinator (Ouishare 2020b).

Leeds Beckett University

Leeds Beckett University is leading the Erasmus+ project about the collaborative economy titled "Higher Education Curricula Development on the Collaborative

Economy in Europe,” which short name is COLECO (<https://colecoproject.com>). The COLECO project aims to develop cutting-edge curricula about the collaborative economy. In particular, the project is developing two master modules about the topic: (1) Collaborative Economy and (2) Digital Transformation, Peer-to-peer Accommodation and New Touristic Practices. Both modules would have a MOOC version with free access to the general public via the eLearning platform Edx.

Future Directions of Research

Future directions of research in the United Kingdom have been identified in three realms.

Post-COVID-19 and the Sharing Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a lasting impact on communities and the sharing economy for months, if not years, to come. Especially considering that some of the first sectors being affected are tourism, hospitality, and travel, which have normally been sectors where sharing economy platforms have been able to disrupt. There are a number of calls for more research in the areas of emergency management and tourism crisis that will have to consider the impact that this phenomenon had on sharing economy platforms.

Rental Market

Research on short-term rentals and peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation platforms has been substantial, but there are still several understudied areas. Sainahghi (2020) highlights that currently, most of the research in the area has focused on the demand side, looking at the motivations for usage, segmentation studies, drivers of consumer satisfaction. However, there are two elements that remain understudied in the rental market, particularly speaking about peer-to-peer accommodation: one in relation to the impact that P2P platforms are having in this sector. This is crucial since the economic impact studies reveal contradictory conclusions. This chapter also highlighted that there is still no conclusive position from governmental bodies and trade organizations in this sector. Secondly, more research on guests and hosts relationships studied, where most of the body of research has focused on non-commercial platforms.

Health and Safety Policy

A common concern of industries that have been disrupted by sharing economy platforms is the perceived uneven field that exists between new entrants and established market players. At the moment, some advancements have been made in relation to health and safety regulation for sharing economy platforms, mainly within hospitality (Woskow 2014), but many other sectors still lack specific policies due to their nascent nature. We anticipate that as the sharing economy grows in other sectors, the strain between the platforms and established contenders will require changes in policy. In addition, platforms in the hospitality sector will be forced to engage more proactively in health and safety measures as a consequence of the changes in attitudes and policy that the pandemic brought to the sector (Gerwe 2020).

Summary

In summary, sharing economy platforms in the UK have found not only a government with a pro-business approach that generally welcomes innovations such as the ones many sharing economy platforms have brought. In addition, the UK population is, in general terms, open and proactively using these platforms. Despite this generally positive outlook, there are some challenges that remain to be overcome. As the platforms gain more traction and other traditional players react to the disruption that sharing economy platforms bring to the marketplaces that they enter, changes in policy and other regulations usually follow. In addition, a new challenge emerged with the global pandemic experienced in 2020, and the long-term implications to the sharing economy in terms of adaptation of business models or service delivery remain still unknown.

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Nesta's work: www.nesta.org

Sharing Economy UK: www.sharingeconomyuk.com

The Collaborative Economy Lab: <http://collaborativeeconomy.com>

The Institute of Public Policy: www.ippr.org/search?search=sharing+economy

UK Hospitality: www.ukhospitality.org.uk/page/Resources