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Is sharing the solution? Exploring public acceptability of the sharing economy

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ABSTRACT

Advocated as a solution to a range of economic, environmental and social problems, the sharing economy has grown rapidly in recent years. However, despite rising up the political agenda, the concept has been increasingly critiqued in relation to unintended economic and social consequences. Whilst existing research has explored the motivations of existing participants in sharing-based practices and business models, little is yet known about wider public perceptions of the sharing economy. Investigating public discourses, this paper explores how citizens may respond to attempts to mainstream the sharing economy, discussing wider desires and concerns surrounding the concept. In a series of four two-day workshops (n = 51), we utilised deliberative research methods to engage participants in discussion surrounding the sharing economy and its role within a more sustainable, resource efficient future. Overall, positive perceptions dominated discussions, with participants independently highlighting reduced waste and resource use, increased access to unaffordable goods, and increased community cohesion as key benefits of sharing. However, echoing existing critiques, a number of concerns were also raised. Our findings suggest that, in addition to personal interests (such as affordability, convenience, and hygiene), public acceptability of the sharing economy was contingent on it meeting a number of broader social values. These include desire to: foster social equality, in relation to both the opportunity and benefits promised by the sharing economy; encourage and support the development of strong and independent local communities; and ensure that business practices operate fairly in the shared interest of business, consumers and the environment. Given the implications for everyday life and consumption practices, we argue public perspectives need to be given consideration within the debate surrounding which aspects of the sharing economy should, and should not, be fostered.

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1. Introduction

Emerging over the past decade, the sharing economy has seen significant growth in recent years, following an upsurge of interest in online platforms that encourage peer-to-peer sharing of resources such as accommodation, transport and products. However, the concept both solves and creates environmental, economic and social issues, and has been increasingly critiqued in relation to the unintended consequences of implementation. In addition, efforts to mainstream the sharing economy are likely to reshape everyday life in profound and unexpected ways, and as such there is a growing need for public debate considering which aspects of a sharing economy should (or should not) be fostered. Although existing research has explored the motivations of existing participants in sharing-based initiatives, little is yet known about wider public perceptions of the sharing economy. Beginning with a discussion of the debates surrounding the definition of the sharing economy, this paper investigates public desires and concerns surrounding attempts to mainstream the sharing economy and its role within a more sustainable, resource efficient future.

Whilst sharing itself is nothing new, the sharing of products and services between strangers is seen as a defining feature of the developing sharing economy (Belk, 2014). Reflecting both the impacts of the 2008 economic crash and a wider cultural shift surrounding consumption and lack of trust in corporations (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Heinrichs, 2013), the popularity of the sharing economy has grown rapidly in recent years, leading to the success of platforms such as Airbnb and Uber (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017; Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2015). At the heart of the concept is a focus on the need for the distribution and utilisation of idle

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capacity; by individuals granting each other access to existing assets, society as a whole can make more efficient use of products, as well as skills and time. However, often used interchangeably with terms such as collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011), access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) and the mesh (Gansky, 2010), defining the concept has been controversial, in part due to vast range of different sharing based practices and business models that could be classified within the sharing economy. Four interrelated divides have dominated the debate surrounding the definition of the sharing economy: as peer-to-peer vs. business-to-consumer; as profit vs. non-profit; as access-based rather than exchange-based; and as online (platform-based) vs. offline sharing.

The first two of these disagreements are now largely resolved. With the peer-to-peer nature of the sharing economy relatively firmly agreed, business-to-consumer sharing, such as renting, leasing and service provision, are instead usually united under wider terms such as product-service systems (Tukker, 2004) or access-based services (Schaefers et al., 2016), whilst peer-to-peer sharing via mediated online platforms (regardless of profit motive) such as Airbnb are still included. Whilst the literature on the concept of sharing itself often focuses on the family or community based 'act of distributing what is ours to others for their use' (Belk, 2009: 717), the growth of the sharing economy via (often for profit) online platforms means that this form of for-profit sharing is also usually included in contemporary definitions. Whether exchange-based sharing can be considered part of the sharing economy is contested: Belk (2014) and Frenken (2017) contend that non-transference of ownership should remain a key feature of the sharing economy (thus excluding 2nd hand market exchange), whilst Ertz et al. (2016) argue that as long as it occurs on a peer-to-peer basis (whether mediated or not), trading and swapping of products (with inherent transfer of ownership) should also be included within the definition. Cited as a key factor in the development of the sharing economy, the use of online platforms is often argued to be a central tenet of the sharing economy (Hamari et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2014). Contrasting this, Ertz et al. (2016) argue that online-platforms are a tool to allow easier connection between individuals, a thus that offline sharing initiatives that follow the same basic processes should not be excluded from understandings of the sharing economy.

Despite these ontological debates, and recent media controversy (primarily due to regulatory and social disputes following the rapid upscaling of such platforms - Frenken, 2017; Martin, 2016), the concept of the sharing economy has rapidly risen up the political and policy agenda (Wosskow, 2014), advocated by many as a solution to a range of economic, environmental and social problems. By encouraging the distribution and use of underutilised assets, the sharing economy is promoted as a promising shift towards more sustainable consumption. In addition to promoting new forms of economic growth, the sharing economy is seen by some as a positive force, empowering citizens through the provision of new opportunities for profit, employment and social interaction. For example, Hamari et al. (2016), argue that although the majority of consumers are rarely enthusiastically predisposed towards the notion of ethical consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2006), the sharing economy provides a potential solution, encouraging more sustainable consumption practices, whilst also providing a more affordable and social alternative to conventional consumption patterns. However, whilst such a reorganisation of the economy could be hugely empowering for citizens (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), given the vast range of different sharing practices and business models included with the concept, it is also clear that efforts to mainstream the sharing economy will reshape everyday life in profound and unexpected ways.

There is thus a growing empirical literature investigating consumer motivations and concerns surrounding participation in the sharing economy, identifying a range of factors that are influential in determining both attitudes to, and participation in, a range of community schemes and businesses models. Explored in relation to product rental (Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010), car sharing (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012), and accommodation sharing (Tussyadiah, 2015), a key driver for participation concerns economic incentives for sharing, which have been found to be based on personal utility maximisation that encompasses aspects of cost, value and convenience (Belk, 2009; Bellotti et al., 2015; Hamari et al., 2016; Lamberton and Rose, 2012). There are mixed findings surrounding the importance of environmental motivations for participating in the sharing economy; Piscicelli et al. (2015) and Lawson et al. (2016) find that concern for the environmental and sustainability issues are an important motivation for many consumers, whilst other studies find little or no relationship between environmental values and attitudes towards sharing practices surrounding transport, accommodation or products (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Moeller and Wittkowski, 2010; Möhlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah, 2015). Social benefits and a sense of community have also been identified as important to participation in certain sharing situations, such as toy libraries (Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010), accommodation sharing platforms (Tussyadiah, 2015) and use of wider online sharing and gifting platforms (Albinsson and Perera, 2012). The relative importance of these motivations has been found to vary significantly across different product categories. Böcker and Meelen (2016) found economic motivations dominated product based sharing e.g., car, tool and accommodation sharing, whilst meal sharing, and to a lesser extent ride sharing, were motivated more by social incentives for participation, with environmental motivations generally subordinate to both economic and social motivations.

However, whilst this literature exploring the drivers of consumer participation in the sharing economy is growing, leading to the identification of a vast range of factors that influence consumer attitudes and participation in sharing-based initiatives, little is really known about wider public acceptance of the sharing economy as a whole. To date studies have primarily focused on the motivations and concerns of individuals already taking part in specific schemes (and in particular those focused on the sharing of transport and accommodation), and as such, these findings are usually case study specific, sometimes leading to limited or conflicting findings and conclusions. In addition, this focus on individuals already participating in sharing schemes, has generally led to the conceptualisation of people primarily as consumers or users. Previous research exploring public participation and engagement around a diverse range of science and technology issues has emphasised how members of the public are not just consumers of products and services, but also citizens, both interested in and capable of engaging with complex debate (Pidgeon et al., 2014). We argue that whilst case study evidence is extremely effective at exploring in detail the motivations, concerns and benefits that participants identify in relation to specific sharing practices or sharing of particular product types, it does not do justice to the wider understandings and meanings that the concept may evoke within a wider public. Given the calls for a diverse range of sharing practices and business models to be more widely adopted, shifting mainstream consumption towards a sharing based economy, there is thus a need for a wider public debate considering which aspects of a sharing economy should (or should not) be fostered.

In this paper, we aim to address this gap, using deliberative methods to explore the concept of the sharing economy with members of the public. Adopting a more conceptual notion of the

sharing economy within this research, we follow a broad definition of the term, leading to the inclusion of all schemes and initiatives that either directly enable peer-to-peer sharing, trading or swapping, or allow for these via mediated online/offline platforms and organisations (regardless of profit motive). Whilst this is not to deny, that the sharing economy could be explained as a subset of wider collaborative consumption practices (as advocated by Frenken, 2017), the aim here was to consider as broad a view as possible of the plausible futures envisaged under the term sharing economy. Through this approach we aim to contribute to the existing literature in three ways: 1) to explore the differences between user and public discourses surrounding uptake of sharing economy practices and business models; 2) to reflect upon how citizens are likely to respond to attempts to mainstream aspects of a sharing-based economy, and explore their desires and concerns for such a future; and 3) to highlight the policy/business implications of our findings for the implementation of the development of the sharing economy agenda. Exploring the debate surrounding the sharing economy within the academic literature, we first provide a brief overview of the visions put forward to promote it, and the inevitable critiques that follow these. We then describe the research, detailing the methods adopted, before going on to illustrate our findings in detail, making use of exemplary participant quotes to discuss public perceptions of the sharing economy. Finally, we place our findings in context and conclude with a discussion of the role of public engagement in debating the possibilities for transitioning towards a sharing-based economy.

2. Visions and critiques within the sharing economy debate

Despite the complex debates surrounding the definition of the sharing economy, a shared vision for the positive benefits of such consumption initiatives acts as a unifying characteristic. Addressing the three pillars of sustainability, the sharing economy is often envisioned as a disruptive force (Botsman and Rogers, 2011) that can at once reduce resource use and carbon emissions, encourage economic growth by creating new financial and employment opportunities at all levels of society, and increase social cohesion and quality of life. Exploring the wider media and organisational discourse, Martin (2016) identifies the key solution frames used to promote the sharing economy. Three arguments were used to empower the sharing economy: as a more sustainable form of consumption; as an economic opportunity; and as a pathway to a decentralised, equitable and sustainable economy. A key argument deployed in support of the sharing economy, revolves around claims that by making better use of underutilised assets, sharing initiatives mark the beginning of a new, more sustainable form of consumption that reduces resource use and carbon emissions (Heinrichs, 2013; Martin, 2016). By reducing demand for the purchase of new products and vehicles (or even the construction of new buildings), access-based consumption can thus reduce carbon footprints whilst still meeting consumer needs and maintaining quality of life (Schor, 2016).

In terms of economic drivers, the sharing economy is often promoted as an antidote to the recent financial downturn and austerity (Böcker and Meelen, 2016), allowing individuals to act as micro-entrepreneurs (Martin, 2016), gaining income from their existing assets (both physical products and skills); a phenomenon seen as more likely as individuals suffer from increasing levels of financial hardship (Gansky, 2010). More widely the sharing economy is also endorsed as an opportunity for national economic growth. With growing investment in sharing start-ups, the sharing economy is gaining increasing support from Government, seen as an existing opportunity to transform all sectors of the economy and offer new competitive products and services to consumers (Wosskow, 2014). From a social perspective, Botsman and Rogers (2011) advocate the sharing economy as a way to meet people and make new friends. Beyond this, the sharing economy is also promoted as a solution to a range of social problems, acting to connect individuals and communities, encourage cooperation, and empower citizens and organisations through a more decentralised and democratic approach to economic activity (Martin, 2016).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the promotion of the sharing economy as a win-win-win solution to the sustainability trilemma (achieving energy security, social equity and environmental protection), a growing critique of the concept has been developing within the academic literature. Crucially, the first question concerns the environmental claims of the sharing economy, as in many cases the sustainability of such schemes is assumed rather than evidenced. The positive environmental impact of sharing initiatives has yet to be demonstrated empirically, with the few studies of this kind finding mixed results and that the true sustainability of such schemes is complex and dependent on a range of different factors (Schor, 2016; Zamani et al., 2017). For example, in relation to car sharing, Martin and Shaheen (2011) find that whilst some users did dramatically reduce their car use (and thus their carbon footprint), for many others, the increased access to a vehicle actually led to an increase in carbon emissions. Similarly, Zamani et al. (2017) found that whilst clothing libraries could act to increase the lifetime of garments (the key indicator for the reduction of emissions from clothing), the increased travel by participants could overshadow any emissions savings from the scheme. Concerns about rebound effects have also been raised, with Schor (2016) highlighting a range of different mechanisms by which this can occur. These include questions about what happens to the money saved through the use of sharing schemes (i.e., are savings spent on carbon intensive products or services), as well as whether the availability of cheaper transport and accommodation lead to an overall increase in travel.

The majority of successful sharing platforms currently operate on the basis of mediated online for-profit platforms. Considering concerns surrounding the economic benefits of sharing schemes, a major critique stems from concerns that whilst they do provide new income and employment opportunities for 'micro-entrepreneurs', many peer-to-peer based sharing platforms are primarily designed to act in the interests of corporate profit. Nowhere is this clearer than in the cases of Airbnb and Uber, that have been repeatedly criticised for exploiting regulatory loopholes, eroding worker's rights and creating a race to the bottom that shifts most of the risks, but few of the benefits, onto the individuals using the system (Schor, 2016). Contrasting smaller sharing schemes such as tool/product libraries that focus on community service provision, the corporatization of sharing has seen these platforms backed by large corporate enterprises in the name of the free market. Criticised for avoiding market and/or regulatory measures that traditional industries (such as hotel or taxi companies) are subject to, these platforms are accused of gaining an unfair advantage over such industries, as well as creating parallel economies and thereby avoiding taxes; seen as a market failure, this inconsistency has led to calls for taxation and regulation of the sharing economy (Malhotra and Van Alstyne, 2014; Martin, 2016).

Described by Morozov (2013) as 'neoliberalism on steroids', there are also concerns that rather than acting as a disruptive force for sustainable consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011), the sharing economy may act primarily to reinforce the existing consumerist paradigm. Contributing to the commodification of everyday life, mediated peer-to-peer sharing platforms are thus accused of making use of regulatory grey areas to harness peer based assets solely for corporate profit, whilst lobbying against any financial or legal restrictions designed to support the professed

collectivist goals of the sharing economy (Cohen and Kietzmann, 2014). In addition, by creating the opportunity to earn profit from existing assets and skills, this may further act to undercut genuine (and currently non-monetised) forms of sharing. Rather than supporting and encouraging the social values of community and cooperation so often promoted within visions of the sharing economy, a situation of increasing isolation, disenchantment and distrust may instead arise, especially when primarily enacted through online platforms and services (Ertz et al., 2016).

The idea that the sharing economy will in some way address social inequalities, providing new economic opportunities for hard-up consumers has also been questioned. There are two main concerns here, the first of which revolves around the idea that in many cases, in order to participate in sharing schemes existing ownership of sharable assets is required. Inevitably, this leads to a situation in which those already possessing wealth and resources are ultimately those most likely to benefit from the system; for example, half the profits generated through Airbnb go directly to those 'hosts' with more than one property (Schor, 2016). The second issue focuses on the question of who gets to participate in the sharing economy. Making use of data describing participation in sharing economy schemes in the USA (Cansoy and Schor, 2016; Smith, 2016), Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) discuss how class and race based inequalities (and in some cases discrimination) pervade sharing economy platforms. Again focusing primarily on Airbnb, this data supports wider claims that in many cases it is predominantly white, middle-class and well educated individuals who take advantage of such sharing platforms.

3. Research design and methodology

Aiming to stimulate public discourse surrounding alternative systems of production and consumption, our research builds on established methods for public engagement in science, technology and energy issues (Chilvers and Mcnaghten, 2011; Pidgeon et al., 2014). To do this, a series of four workshops were conducted, utilising deliberative techniques to explore the possibilities for a low material future with members of the UK public. The workshops made use of a range of six scenarios, each describing one of six key areas of everyday life that might require rethinking, including:

- Rethinking products: exploring increased product longevity, recyclability and reusability.
- Rethinking business: exploring extended producer responsibility and new business models.
- Rethinking ownership: exploring product-service systems and shifting from ownership to services.
- Rethinking community: exploring various elements of the sharing economy (described below).
- Rethinking waste: exploring new forms of packaging, recycling schemes and urban mining.
- Rethinking lifestyles: exploring absolute demand reduction e.g., carbon taxes or behaviour change.

Exploring public discourse surrounding the sharing economy, this paper focuses on the Rethinking community scenario. This section now describes the research methods in more detail, describing the choice of location, sampling and recruitment process, workshop protocol, and data analysis.

Two locations, Cardiff and Bristol, were chosen to provide access to a broad range of participants. These cities have different demographic profiles, with Cardiff representing a post-industrial location, with strong working class roots and recent economic stress, whilst Bristol provides a larger, wealthier and more socio-demographically diverse location. However, in part this was also a pragmatic decision, as due to the need to conduct in-depth research with a broad range of participants in each city, it was not possible to conduct further workshops at additional locations. Given the focus of the research on personal and future consumption patterns, social status and income were chosen as the key variable for recruitment. Two workshops were conducted in each city, one with higher and one with lower income participants (defined by socio-economic grade as described below). This decision was made in order encourage greater openness amongst participants by preventing large disparities in income.

51 participants were recruited using a professional recruitment company, with attendance of 11–14 for each of the four workshops. Although, final attendance varied the exact composition of each group, the aim of the recruitment process (face-to-face questionnaires) was to achieve a diverse sample of individuals from a range of backgrounds that was balanced in terms of gender, age and socio-economic grade (see Table 1). The latter is based on the widely used market research system for demographic classification in the UK (Wilmshurst and Mackay, 2010) that uses occupation and income to classify individuals on a scale from A-E, where ABC1 can be equated with a spectrum of middle class professionals and C2DE represents working class participants (from skilled workers to those not currently working). A good split of participants were recruited for all categories, with the exception of participants from socio-economic grade A, which were unable to be recruited due to their relative infrequency compared to other grades. Whilst not considered representative, this broad range of attendees thus allows for findings indicative of public discourse across a broad section of society (Jasanoff, 2003; Macnaghten, 2010).

The workshops utilised a range of deliberative techniques, beginning with group discussions of current consumption and how this has changed over time. Participants were then introduced to concepts of resource efficiency and the circular economy before each of the scenarios was described. Two sets of materials were provided to engage participants and prompt more detailed deliberation around the pros and cons of the sharing economy on both a personal and societal level. The first took the form of a vignette, or 'a day in your life' story that provided a narrative vision of the future of everyday life within a more sharing-based economy. A World Café style format (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) was then used to encourage participants to consider the details of each scenario in turn. The Rethinking community scenario analysed within this paper, emphasised the role of the sharing economy within a more resource efficient economy. Encompassing peer-to-peer sharing, trading, swapping and gifting (both on- and off-line, and for and not-for profit), the scenario highlighted a range of different aspects of the sharing economy, particularly focusing on peer-to-peer trading/sharing/swapping (such as Ebay, Freecycle, Swapz, Airbnb etc.), product libraries (e.g., Tool libraries or a Library of Things), and community skill sharing (through local events such as repair cafes). For this activity, participants were split into 3 groups (N = 3–5), with each group considering four of the six scenarios over a period of 45 min; as such two thirds of participants explored the

Table 1
Demographic profile of participants.

Gender profile	Women	**27**	**Socio-economic**	B	**12**
	Men	**24**	**grade**	C1	**17**
				C2	**8**
Age profile	20–29	**12**		D	**6**
	30–39	**8**		E	**10**
	40–49	**8**			
	50–59	**7**	**Location**	Cardiff	**24**
	60–69	**8**		Bristol	**27**
	70+	**8**			

Rethinking community scenario in detail. Following the World Café discussions, a full group discussion was held, making use of scenario posters (that provided more specific details of different products and services that may be available within this future) providing all participants with an opportunity to comment on the scenario.

Audio-recordings of the workshops were transcribed and anonymised, with participant names and all identifying information removed. This led to collation of a large qualitative data set. An interpretive grounded approach to analysis was taken, based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Henwood and Pidgeon, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Initially all six scenarios were coded and analysed together. Due to the careful comparative analysis required of the dataset, the NVivo qualitative analysis software package was used to code the data. An open-coding was conducted, developing a coding framework that was grounded within the data, rather than pre-prescribed before the analysis. This generated a series of codes (including both descriptive and theoretical categories) that were then subjected to several iterations of checking and comparison, to ensure a 'good fit' between codes and data. Finally a process of re-reading and (re) grouping these codes within broader and more theoretically relevant meta-codes allowed for the identification of key themes or messages within the public discourse. The data from each scenario was then analysed separately to identify key themes, values and concerns. For this paper, the Rethinking community scenario data was examined, with analytical focus placed on exploring the public discourses to reveal the substantive ways in which our participants engaged with both the specific forms of sharing and the concept of the sharing economy more broadly.

4. Public reflections on the sharing economy debate

This section describes our key findings, first discussing general perceptions surrounding the concept and feasibility of the sharing economy, before considering specific public concerns and desires surrounding the personal, economic and social implications across a range of sharing economy practices and business models.

4.1. General perceptions

Overall most participants were positively inclined towards the concept of the sharing economy and the specific initiatives discussed. Throughout the group conversations, the sharing economy was (at least in part) believed to be a possible solution to a number of economic, environmental and social issues. Some noted the benefit of the economic opportunities the sharing economy might provide, especially for less well-off individuals. The possibility for increasing community spirit, and reducing inequality were also seen as particularly important; 'It just seems so handy and helpful and kind of helping each other out rather than someone having these high gadgets and someone else not having them' (Sarah, B1). As well as the hope that 'we'll be cutting the carbon footprint' (Ralph, B1), increasing the utilisation of products was seen as a positive step to reducing consumption and waste:

> It's those appliances people would use [only a few] times a year, like ice cream makers and like these, because my mother's got a pasta machine, she's got an ice cream maker, a juicer. They buy them for the thing and they just sit there and you know for the whole year, we don't use them.
>
> *Aled, C2*

Whilst transitioning towards a mainstream sharing based economy was perceived as a radical proposal, for many, some of the specific sharing practices and business models discussed were not perceived to be that different from current consumption practices. Many participants had already taken part in some form of peer-to-peer trading and gifting (primarily online), whilst previous participation in community based sharing, swapping or gifting, such as swap shops, was less common. This contributed to a sense that upscaling the sharing economy might actually be 'quite workable because the elements or let's say the foundations are there already' (Neil, B2). However, despite this general approval, participants were divided regarding the feasibility of such a future. For some, the idea was 'splendidly idealistic' (David, B2) and seen as something we should aspire to regardless of feasibility. For others, it was seen as unfeasible to scale these niche practices and business models beyond community scale:

> No, no. It's only small communities that can get along and do it. And you must have the right community to be able to manage it and effectively produce what you're asking. […] I don't think it could grow to the commercial scale. […] It would only survive in the right types of community across the country and only then in a small way.
>
> *Ralph, B1*

Another participant highlighted the 'radical nature of how different the system would need to be' and the great uncertainty that may accompany such a transition:

> It's very difficult I think ultimately, that could definitely be a good thing and maybe it will need to happen basically, you know, what we're seeing with climate change and with that being the main thing. Something needs to happen, activities need to change, behaviours need to change. But there are so many variables to consider, so many possibilities as to how it could turn out.
>
> *Arnie, B1*

Beyond this, one final issue focused on the fact that 'all these things are relying on everybody joining in and taking part and doing the appropriate things' (Chantal, C2). As well as questioning the ease with which the entire population could be encouraged to engage with the new consumption practices inherent within the sharing economy, this also served to highlight the importance of trust within such a system:

> I think as I've mentioned before that you have to trust whoever you're sharing [products] with, that's [they're] going to look after them. And absolutely that's the big thing about this community … the whole, the issue here is this, you have to be a community for this to work properly. You have to trust each other and actually, you know, contribute. Because if somebody doesn't, it's not going to work, you know? From the minute that, that trust is broken, other people get, you know? It can be a thin edge of a wedge.
>
> *Chantal, C2*

4.2. Personal implications and concerns

Whilst many of these themes are relevant across different sharing practices and business models, this is not to downplay the significant differences in motivations between specific sharing sectors or initiatives (c.f., Böcker and Meelen, 2016). However,

without denying the importance of context, we briefly explore the overarching themes that arose within the data. Participants described a number of different motivations and concerns that influenced their personal interest in engaging with different practices and business models within a sharing-based economy. At the top of this list, cost, convenience and access, as well as the interrelations between these formed a key theme throughout discussions. The personal cost implications of sharing were prominent throughout the discussions. However, rather than simply describing cost savings as a motivation to share, participants described the difficulties in needing to balance costs with convenience, in terms of both effort and time, especially due to the greater level of engagement with diverse economic practices that would be required:

> I think it depends a bit on motivation really. […] It just seems like sorting out a whole pile of things in the house. It's like trying to separate what can be sold, what has to be given away, what goes to a charity shop, what gets recycled, all that. That is […] the bit which I think is […] quite time a consuming thing. Which if I wanting to try and make a bit of money, it's also quite hard to know how much things are worth and how much to sell them for.
>
> *Ben, C1*

The quality and condition of shared products was also a concern, with Arnie (B1) using the example of the library of things to suggest that 'things couldn't last very long when they're being passed around […], they're just going to get bad quite quickly'. Product hygiene and safety were a key concern, with many listing a range of products for which sharing might be a concern for them. Unfortunately, in many cases these were exactly the kinds of products for which sharing is often advocated, including food preparation appliances, clothing, luggage, electrical products and tools, leading some to suggest that procedures for assessing shared products would need to be in place:

> *Amy* My mother had this […] you put your fruit in it and you make a smoothie. And I think my sister had made something and in the bit that you couldn't see, it had clogged up and she hadn't cleaned it properly. It was all congealed, mould, it was disgusting. So imagine you [borrowed] something like that.
>
> *Sally* I don't think that would happen though because of electrical faults […] because it would have to be tested […] You can't even take electrical goods to the charity shops, can you? There's only one or two who would take them.
>
> *Frank* So I suppose [you'd need to be] checking everything we reallocated.
>
> *C2*

4.3. Economic implications and concerns

From an economic perspective, participants' overarching concerns surrounded the importance of a strong economy and the livelihoods that it supports. Whilst participants were not arguing the need for economic growth explicitly, a key issue surrounding the scaling up of various sharing practices (especially in relation to transport and products), was the possible threats posed to existing manufacturing and retail in the UK. Primarily 'worried about the jobs that will be lost in the process' (Olivia, B2), participants questioned the long-term impacts that mainstreaming the sharing economy may have on industry:

> So you'd be cutting down the quantity that people use. And therefore, either [products] get more expensive because you're producing less and [businesses] need to make their margins [or] you're going to get all sorts of economic problems, unemployment, you know, people's pension plans aren't getting their […] You know, that's a real minefield, […] there's a lot of deep financial thought on a global scale you got to think about.
>
> *Ralph, B1*

Combined with a wider distrust of business more generally, these concerns culminated in a sense that, one way or another, business would act to inhibit any measures that reduced overall consumption and resource use, even if upscaling sharing practices and business models was feasible. This might include advertising, designed in 'ways to make you feel, you're not adequate for not having your own' (Emma, C2), or at the other end of the scale, many participants held the belief that vested corporate interests would simply block any activities that threatened to reduce profits:

> I just sense the counter destructiveness, negativity, vested interest of corporations, corporate capitalist interest. So, you've got a tension there. Yeah, this is great. But the pharmaceuticals, the oil companies, all of them. All of the really powerful corporations, are they going to concede any ground to this, that hasn't got profit motive as its primary goal?
>
> *David, B2*

Concerns surrounding the role of big business in the sharing economy, and the question of who profits most, were also of concern to participants. Debating the pros and cons of online corporate platforms vs. small scale, community sharing schemes, Arnie (B1) highlighted his concern that despite recognising the benefits of global sharing platforms, it was difficult to know 'who exactly is coordinating that centralisation […] and what they're getting out of it'. Linked to the general distrust in business, this acted as a deterrent for Charles (C2), who stated:

> I'm very suspicious of peer to peer trading […] things like Airbnb and stuff like that, and Uber and so on. You don't know who you're dealing with. [They have] a veneer of community service, but actually, it's someone in California creaming off of the top while we do all the work down here.

Some of the more specific issues stemming from the recent upscaling of online sharing platforms were also noted, such as the impact of Airbnb on the housing market:

> There's big [issues] now at Airbnb that people are actually buying apartments just to rent out on Airbnb. And obviously, there's massive housing shortages in various places. So, it's pushing up rent and you've basically got an empty house in a way. So it's a theory and practice thing isn't it?
>
> *Chantal, C2*

4.4. Social implications and concerns

The social implications of the sharing economy were also seen as particularly important. One theme that dominated the wider public discourse across all workshops and pervaded discussions of the sharing economy, was a sense of the value of community and

the belief that over recent decades the breakdown of local community ties has led to increasing levels of loneliness and isolation. Discussing both online and offline sharing, the sharing economy was seen as a positive step towards tackling these issues, in part because 'it opens everything up for more people at different levels [and] just gets people communicating and involved in caring about stuff instead of in their own little pods thinking about themselves' (Lucy, B2). Often rooted in nostalgic conversations surrounding the value of traditional libraries (e.g., Neil's (B2) description of how his mother used to 'go to town for no other reason just to bring the book back to the library and spend half the day talking to people'), many participants were drawn to the idea of a library of things for social as well as practical or financial reasons.

Divergent opinions were declared surrounding the role of the internet in encouraging increased social connection and participation. Some participants saw the internet as a significant cause of the increasing community breakdown they perceived within wider society. Epitomizing a view common amongst older participants, Christine (B1) was stuck by the value of local and community based sharing, believing it to be the antidote to modern society 'where all the new IT and everything is […] isolating the people, the community', adding that 'this type of thing brings the community together, doesn't it?'. However, others criticised this view, highlighting the benefits the embedded nature of the internet within modern society provided, connecting people with similar needs and interests across much larger distances:

> It feels like creating a kind of a solution which is based around the community when there's already an online solution which is far superior I think than this. Because an online solution gives me the opportunity to buy or rent from anybody in the world. I don't just have to rely on what's in the local community centre. I mean I just think it feels like it's going, technology seems to be already a long way beyond this story, you know? That's why I just read it and it feels like history, this to me.
>
> *Ben, C1*

Echoing critiques surrounding the inequalities inherent within some sharing practices and business models, a number of concerns were also raised by some participants regarding the ease with which individuals from all backgrounds could take part in the sharing economy. One group's primary criticism took aim at the perceived 'middle-class' nature of the concept:

> See where I read it, it all sounded quite kind of middle class really. Where I was thinking like, it sounded like you had a £300,000 mortgage in [an expensive area of Bristol] and it's nice to save a bit of money for your cappuccinos. I was going to say, I actually read it with a little bit of contempt.
>
> *Katie, B2*

The importance of cultural capital in enabling participation was also highlighted, with David (B2) describing his niece 'who's just had her second kid, she's isolated, living in a small block of flats. […] and she's completely inhibited because of her background' and the practical and messaging challenges that would need to be overcome in order for her to participate. However, it was the concept and vision that was seen to be at fault here, rather than the details of specific sharing initiatives, with Olivia (B2) noting that if it could be made 'more ordinary, more normal in a community [and somewhere for] people to come and not be afraid and feel inferior', then sharing initiatives could be 'fantastic and hugely beneficial for people of a lower economic status' (David, B2).

Focusing in on concerns surrounding the unequal distribution of benefits of participation, one group discussed the issue that those with increased or higher quality assets are also more likely to benefit from sharing initiates. Considering the swapping or sharing of products and skills within the community, Emma (C2) described the likely unfairness inherent in the fact that those who 'have enough money to buy, like, quite good quality clothes [will benefit more than those] buying all their clothes at Primark'. This led to concerns that there was a risk of creating a two-tier society, highlighting the fact that 'someone's got to feed new [products] in' (Charles, C2) in order for the system to work. This led to the conclusion that this seemingly idealistic solution was unlikely to work for society as a whole, possibly leading to a situation where some consumers continue conventional consumption of products and services in order to facilitate sharing practices amongst the less well off.

There were also concerns that a more profit focused sharing economy may undermine more traditional or genuine sharing practices. Suggestions were made that asset utilisation initiatives (especially those that allow individuals to profit from exchanging or sharing their belongings) may undermine charity shops and organisations, which were seen as redistribution organisations and as important 'recycling hubs in themselves' (Charles, C2). One group took this a step further, discussing the importance of sharing skills and time within the community and to some extent criticising the gig economy in favour of more local community initiatives:

> I'm not sure that I like that because if you're volunteering, you should just, it should just be no cash gained. So I just feel a bit weird about that. But this is a lot nicer because if you, you get credits for like donating your clothes or you know you pay credits to help to get people in and help with that or if you help other people, you get [credits]. So I quite like that idea in terms of that kind of resource bank.
>
> *Monica, C2*

5. Discussion: research implications, limitations and future directions

Promoted as a form of consumer empowerment (Kenney and Zysman, 2016) and as one possible solution to a number of economic, environmental and social problems, the sharing economy has grown significantly in recent years. Despite this, the social and economic reorganisation required to support the mainstreaming of sharing practices and business models in the economy is substantial, and is likely to have unexpected and profound implications for everyday life. Investigating wider public discourses surrounding the concept, this paper has explored public desires and concerns regarding a wholescale transition towards the sharing economy. Overall, positive perceptions of the sharing economy dominated discussions, with participants independently highlighting threefold benefits of sharing: to reduce carbon footprints and resource use; to enable increased and equitable access to previously unaffordable goods and services; and to strengthen communities and reduce social isolation. However, a range of deep seated concerns and issues were also raised, highlighting practical, economic and social conditions that would need to be met if the sharing economy is to be viewed as part of an acceptable, feasible and desirable future. Exploring the differences between user and public discourses surrounding uptake of sharing economy practices and business models, this paper contributes to existing literature surrounding the consumer motivations for participation in the sharing economy. Whilst current publics can in one sense be considered

future users of sharing practices and business models, due to the niche nature of many sharing activities, it is not safe to assume that perceptions of current users will be mirrored by the general public; a conviction that is borne-out through our exploration of the wider concept of the sharing economy with participants.

On a personal level, the importance of affordability, convenience, and hygiene were echoed as crucial conditions influencing desire to participate in specific sharing practices and business models (c.f., Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Böcker and Meelen, 2016; Hamari et al., 2016). Through our focus on discursive concerns, rather than perceptions/motivations surrounding any specific sharing practice or business model, these findings raise a number of questions for further research. One such area is around the conjunction between the cost and convenience of sharing, which was primarily perceived as a trade-off between competing concerns for personal time, money and effort. Seen as a relatively logical and cognitive process, balancing these competing concerns was just taken as a normal aspect of everyday consumption. However, where the balance lies for different products and services, as well as different forms of sharing practices and business models is not yet known.

In addition, and following Botsman and Rogers (2011) note that products whose value reduces rapidly after use are more likely to be shared, it is clear that the value of products (both financially, personally and possibly emotionally) is likely to be an important determining factor, and one that warrants further investigation. Hygiene and safety were also found to be of particular concern to participants. Whilst, the importance of cleanliness has been previously highlighted in relation to specific products and services (Ameli, 2017; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Edbring et al., 2016; Ozanne and Ozanne, 2011), the extent to which a sense of contamination pervades the broader concept of sharing was surprising; raised in relation to almost all products (including clothes, other personal items such as luggage, and all products related to food preparation). Safety, particularly around tools, electronics and kitchen products, was also a serious concern that has not previously been explored within existing literature. More detailed investigation of the role of these concerns for both participation and perceptions of sharing for a wider range of different products and services will be an important area for future research.

However, in addition to these more practical and personal concerns, our approach also allowed for a much wider ranging discussion of economic and societal concerns. The importance of developing community within a future sharing economy was an interesting finding that warrants further investigation. As a concept, the sharing economy was particularly appealing to many participants due to a sense that in recent years, increasing isolation in society has led to a breakdown in local communities. However, depending on the sharing practices/business models under consideration, previous research on the role of community in motivating participation has found mixed results: as a positive motivation for participation in toy libraries (Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010), accommodation sharing (Tussyadiah, 2015) and meal sharing (Böcker and Meelen, 2016), whilst not seen as desirable for car sharing and tool sharing (Böcker and Meelen, 2016). Further research would be useful here, to both explore the relationships between sense of community and participation in specific sharing practices and business models, as well as to consider new ways in which sharing could contribute towards developing a wider sense of community, whilst still meeting a range of other conditions that govern participation.

Another novel finding surrounded the issue of trust in businesses. Although trust is a well-known component of consumer motivations to participate in specific sharing practices or business models (e.g., accommodation sharing, tool libraries and wider online sharing platforms), previous research has focused on consumer satisfaction around trust of specific businesses in relation to product/service delivery, insurance schemes and business responsiveness (Catulli, 2012; Hawlitschek et al., 2016; Mittendorf, 2016; Möhlmann, 2015). In contrast, by engaging wider publics with the concept of the sharing economy as a whole, our analysis highlights the prevalence of a broader more general distrust in business and corporations. This may act to hinder wider participation in sharing practices and business models, in part through encouraging distrust in specific businesses as and when new products and services are rolled out, but also in a more general way, leading to distrust and cynicism and inhibiting development of a positive sharing economy discourse. With trust a crucial 'currency' of sharing (Botsman, 2013), discursively tackling these concerns should be an important consideration for campaigners, businesses and policy makers in both the promotion of the sharing economy concept and the design and delivery of specific sharing business models.

Finally, our findings also have wider implications for the development and promotion of the sharing economy. Considering how citizens more widely are likely to respond to attempts to mainstream the sharing economy, our research has identified a set of broader social values (c.f. Demski et al., 2015) that may influence public acceptability of sharing practices and business models, including affordability, convenience, fairness, trustworthiness, cleanliness and safety. For sharing practices or new business models to be successful, it is thus likely that these values will need to be embedded within the arrangements for a successful sharing, as well as where possible emphasised within the surrounding discourse and communications. Businesses should thus be guided by these values when developing new and innovative business models, and test them with both general and specific publics to improve the possibility of successful public uptake. In particular, and despite concerns around safety and hygiene of shared products, the idea of the local library of things was popular with participants. Given the lack of previous research (with the exception of Ameli (2017)) this model may thus be a good candidate for further research and demonstration projects.

Bringing together these findings and observations, and in light of the limitations of our current research, two wider areas for future research can also be suggested. In particular, whilst our findings are important in relation to the communication, promotion and public acceptance of the sharing economy concept, they cannot speak to core questions regarding whether or not such social values and beliefs are maintained or changed once individuals are 1) made aware of specific and available sharing practices/business models, and 2) actually begin to make use of these services. Building on the call from Piscicelli et al. (2015), we would like to highlight again the importance of developing research that brings a biographical or practice theory lens to sharing economy studies; there is a need go beyond consumer motivations research to explore in detail of the wider contexts (including affect and emotion, materials and infrastructure, and knowledges and skills) that form the basis of sharing practices. Restricted as this research was to two case cities (in relatively close geographic proximity), a second area for further work requires exploring the concept of a sharing-based economy in other geographic settings. Exploring both the meanings and practices associated with the sharing economy, both elsewhere in the UK, and possibly more importantly, in Europe and further afield, may also yield important lessons as to the social and cultural preconditions that make different types of sharing-based consumption possible.

6. Conclusions

Advocated in the academic literature, as well as wider social discourses (Martin, 2016), the idea that the sharing economy has 'something for everyone' (in terms of environmental, economic and social benefits - Böcker and Meelen, 2016) and will thus be successful in upscaling across society, has often been assumed. However, as Frenken (2017) highlights, the effectiveness of the sharing economy depends on the details of the form it takes, which in turn depends on the market and regulatory systems adopted, as well as many other social and political dimensions. By exploring discourses surrounding what a desirable future might look like, three sets of conditions upon which support for such a transition would be based were identified. Linked to the economic, social and environmental benefits that the sharing economy is believed to foster, these included: ensuring that business practices operate fairly in the shared interest of business, consumers and the environment; fostering social equality, in relation to both the opportunity and benefits promised by the sharing economy; encouraging and supporting the development of strong and independent local communities.

With the dominant conceptualisation of the sharing economy framed almost entirely in terms of economic benefits, it is currently unlikely to achieve the desired environmental and social benefits promised (Martin, 2016). We argue this corporate co-option of the sharing economy agenda is also unlikely to be universally popular, due to the strong distrust in business and industry that permeated the public discourse; the challenge for businesses will be to develop new models that act to reduce this distrust and allow consumers to feel secure when entering into new business arrangements and relationships. As such, our research reveals a more complex picture surrounding public understandings and acceptability of the sharing economy. Moving beyond the conceptualisation of people primarily as consumers, we have demonstrated how participants are clearly able and interested in engaging with complex debates around the sharing economy and the nature of future society more widely (c.f. Pidgeon et al., 2014). We believe that, given the implications of a sharing-based economy for everyday life and consumption practices, there is therefore a need for widening the debate and allowing the public a voice in the consideration of which aspects of a low material future should, and should not, be fostered.

Declarations of interest

None.

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