



## Framing the collaborative economy –Voices of contestation



Katarzyna Gruszka

WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Welthandelsplatz 1, D5, 1020 Vienna, Austria

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### ABSTRACT

Within the context of multiple crises and change, a range of practices discussed under the umbrella term of collaborative (or sharing) economy have been gaining considerable attention. Supporters build an idealistic vision of collaborative societies. Critics have been stripping the concept of its visionary potential, questioning its revolutionary nature. In the study, these debates are brought down to the local level in search for common perceptions among the co-creators of the concept in Vienna, Austria. Towards this aim a Q study is conducted, i.e. a mixed method enabling analyses of subjective perceptions on socially contested topics. Four framings are identified: Visionary Supporters, Market Optimists, Visionary Critics, and Sceptics, each bringing their values, visions, and practical goals characteristic of different understanding of the collaborative economy. The study questions the need for building a globally-applicable definition of the concept, calls for more context-sensitivity, exploratory studies, and city-level multi-stakeholder dialogues.

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### 1. Introduction

The magnitude of interconnected ecological, economic and social issues has become referred to as multiple crises (Haberl et al., 2011; Brand et al., 2013; Scoones et al., 2015). In multiple crises reality, challenges such as poverty, growing inequality, biodiversity loss, to name just a few, need to be addressed, with consumption-focused lifestyles among the key areas where change is necessary (see e.g. Raworth, 2012). To use Stirling's words: "the crucial challenge is not whether to achieve the necessary radical technological, political, economic and cultural changes, but how" (Stirling, 2015: 62). Regarding the how, attention is increasingly paid to the systemic nature of the issues in question, emphasizing the need for overall system transformation rather than its tweaking (Naidoo, 2014; Stirling, 2014, 2015). Researchers from sustainability transition studies community have been delving into the how through their insights into promoting, understanding, and governing "a transition towards sustainability, i.e. a fundamental transformation towards more sustainable modes of production and consumption" (Markard et al., 2012: 955). Within the context of potential sustainability transitions, a range of practices discussed under the umbrella term of the collaborative (or sharing) economy have been gaining considerable attention. It is this concept that the study in question is concerned with.

In his investigation of the current sharing economy discourses, Martin (2016) reached out to transition studies through employing the Multi-level Perspective, framing the discourses employed by niche and regime actors. The discourses in focus are of complex and contradictory nature, with a diversity of actors and interests involved (Stokes et al., 2014; Martin, 2016). Supporters build an idealistic vision of collaborative societies (see e.g. OuiShare, 2015; Shareable, 2015; Sundararajan, 2016). Critics have been stripping the concept of its visionary potential, referring to capitalism in new clothing, and portraying it more as a pipe dream (see e.g. Morozov, 2014; Eckhard and Bardhi, 2015; Cohen, 2016). The terminology itself is a

E-mail address: [kgruszka@wu.ac.at](mailto:kgruszka@wu.ac.at)

first step into the issues, since collaborative consumption, sharing economy and collaborative economy are often used interchangeably. In the paper, collaborative economy is mostly adhered to as intuitively most flexible of the terms, seemingly gaining followers in Europe (see e.g. Stokes et al., 2014; OuisShare, 2015).

In the whirl of definitional issues, and the voices of enthusiasts and critics, I look into the debates surrounding the collaborative economy, contextualizing the discourses in question with the aim of uncovering common perceptions among the co-creators of the concept in Austria's capital, Vienna (for more details on the case, see Section 4). Focusing on this particular group is exciting, taking into consideration the recent developments in approaches towards the collaborative and sharing practices, especially on the governance and regulation levels, and their role for the future pathways of this potential transition. Towards this aim a Q study is conducted, i.e. a mixed method enabling analyses of subjective perceptions on socially contested topics (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Q entails a set of statements representing the discourse in question. The statements are sorted by the group of interest on a relative ranking scale (here: members of organizations, companies, communities, etc. involved in the collaborative economy in Vienna; for more details see Section 3.1.2). Through factor-rendering, Q enables a better understanding of the concept on a local level, elucidating both areas of consent and contention in the underlying views. The factors are then interpreted and presented in a narrative form. As such, Q allows for “elicit[ing] individual perspectives systematically and analys[ing] the overlap and differences between them using quantitative correlation analysis” (Hermans et al., 2012: 74).

The study develops a growing branch of transition research focusing on the role of discourse, narratives and framings in ongoing transitions further (Sengers et al., 2010; Geels and Verhees, 2011; Nicolini, 2012; Franceschini and Pansera, 2015; Hermwille, 2016; Martin, 2016). Here, Hermwille (2016) has called for a stronger employment of Q as a methodology suitable for exploring contextualized discourse in ongoing transitions. The study responds to this call, thereby enriching the discourse-focused strand of transition research with Q as a further methodological tool of exploration. It also adds to the budding literature on the collaborative economy (Martin and Upham, 2015; Martin, 2016). Importantly, though, with Q relying on a small sample, the study stands for a conceptual and contextual contribution to the developing field of literature, rather than operational or generalizable one.

In Section 2, I bring a selection of voices present in the debates to the fore to outline the heterogeneity inherent to the collaborative economy discourses. Next, I relate to the narrative and framing research in transition studies, and point to how the current study adds value. Section 3 guides the reader through the essentials of Q methodology, and presents the identified factors. The ambivalent and nuanced nature of the collaborative economy is discussed, with key overlaps and discrepancies among the emergent framings. Concluding remarks point to further research directions, focusing e.g. on the use of exploratory city-scale studies.

## 2. The collaborative economy—discourses in the making

### 2.1. *The collaborative economy—a concept in trouble*

Those fond of the topic often embark on their journey with Botsman and Rogers (2010), who adhere to the term collaborative consumption. They define it as sharing, bartering, swapping, lending, trading, renting, and gifting, redefined through technology and peer communities, changing both what and how we consume (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Ageyman et al. (2013) criticize this approach for focusing on goods and services relevant predominantly for affluent middle-class lifestyles. They emphasize that the “cutting edge” of sharing and collaborative practices is often not only of commercial value, but relates to shared use of infrastructure, public services, or even informal behaviour like unpaid care and support. The question of drivers behind the increased propensity to share and collaborate is less contested, spanning from a renewed belief in the importance of community, peer-to-peer social networks and real time technologies, growing environmental awareness, and the realities of the global recession (see e.g. Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Ageyman et al., 2013; Botsman, 2013; Parsons, 2014; Stokes et al., 2014).

In an attempt to capture the diversity of voices in sharing and collaboration related debates, Juliet Schor (2014) defines sharing (or collaborative) economy as a range of digital platforms and offline activities centred on the highly contested concept of sharing. The word broadly is of key importance, since relevant activities span from financially successful companies like Airbnb, carsharing platforms (both peer-to-peer level and provided by companies well-established in the car industry), to smaller initiatives such as repair collectives, makerspaces, or tool libraries, to take just a few of examples. This diversity and fuzzy boundaries drawn by both participants and initiatives render “coming up with a solid definition of the sharing economy that reflects common usage nearly impossible” (Schor, 2014: 2). Schor (2014) suggests four categories of the collaborative economy: 1) recirculation of goods (with eBay and Craigslist at its origin); 2) increased utilization of durable assets (functioning well among the better-off possessing e.g. space or means of transport to be used more intensively via car- or lodging-sharing platforms, as well as bringing non-monetized initiatives usually on neighbourhood level to the fore); 3) exchange of services (originating from time banks, yet both monetary and non-monetary in character); and 4) sharing of productive assets (e.g. hackerspaces, makerspaces, co-working spaces, open and peer-to-peer educational platforms). In Schor's take, collaborative initiatives are both for- and non-profit regarding market orientation, and P2P or B2P in terms of market structure, each of these being critical in determining the visions and goals e.g. regarding organizational growth. In terms of drivers, she adds the trendiness of collaborative platforms, along with a deeper commitment to social transformation.

These discussions are also anchored in issues surrounding sharing itself. A strong position is held here by Belk who starts from looking specifically at what constitutes sharing (Belk, 2007, 2010) to later embed his approach in the context of sharing economy and collaborative consumption (Belk, 2014a, 2014b). Belk (2010) contrasts sharing with gift giving and commodity exchange as the three ways of resource distribution and acquisition. He sets sharing as a necessarily altruistic, non-reciprocal behaviour, opposing it to materialism and possessive individualism, and emphasizing the importance of cultural-learning behind these (Belk, 2007, 2010). Belk (2014a) investigates commonalities between sharing and collaborative consumption, focusing particularly on what he would consider *genuine* sharing. In defining collaborative consumption, “bartering, trading, and swapping, which involve giving and receiving non-monetary compensation” (Belk 2014a: 1597) are included, yet activities where compensation is absent are excluded. Collaborative consumption is, then, placed somewhere in-between sharing and marketplace exchange. Belk (2014b) introduces the term “pseudo-sharing” to depict recently popularized practices that “masquerade” as sharing. As long as the users have utilitarian rather than communitarian and altruistic reasons, there is no sharing involved. Real sharing is embodied in e.g. online-facilitated offline sharing such as listing free goods on Craigslist and the like.

John (2012, 2013) explores the increasing diversity in popular understandings of sharing, shaped and transformed through increased adoption of social media and sharing economy. He discusses sharing as “a concept that incorporates a wide range of distributive and communicative practices [which carries] a set of positive connotations to do with our relations with others and more just allocation of resources” (John, 2012: 176). He looks into three spheres (John, 2013): Web 2.0, sharing economies of production and consumption, and interpersonal relationships – each interrelated by the metaphor of sharing. Sharing economies i.e. “those in which money, or more specifically, the ability to make it, is not a relevant factor in motivating participation” (John, 2013: 118), can be either of consumption or production. Similarly to Web 2.0, the concept of sharing is not bringing new modes of human behaviour to the table, “but rather these new forms are defined and discussed in terms of sharing” instead of e.g. gift giving. In consumption, the author focuses on Botsman and Rogers’ (2010) work, and points out that sharing is presented here in its naïve understanding of sharing what we own, and shared access to commonly owned goods (John, 2013). He emphasizes that the manifold practices of sharing economies are actually “old” practices often analysed as gift economy (as discussed by Mauss 1925/54 and Hyde 1983). These old practices, however, are often digital and come under a new discourse of sharing, which gained popularity particularly due to Botsman and Rogers’ (2010) publication.

The initial feel-good story of sharing economy is having trouble to stand the test of time with the involvement of for-profit giants and venture capital backed start-ups (see e.g. Schor, 2014; Schor et al., 2015; Martin, 2016). The involvement of actors with various interests, objectives, values and institutional settings (Stokes et al., 2014; Martin and Upham, 2015) plays one of the key roles here. The proponents of the concept build their vision on the promise of wide-spread empowerment and participation of people, social connectedness, resource efficiency, and money saving (see e.g. Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Botsman, 2013; Stokes et al., 2014; Wagner and Kuhndt, 2015; OuisShare, 2015; Shareable, 2015). Access over ownership, sharing, collaboration, co-creation, decentralization, peer-to-peer are some more key words, positioned as a vision that, if broadly implemented, will foster our search for answers to today’s reality overridden with multiple crises, and “create value beyond economic aspects” (Wagner and Kuhndt 2015: 6). Voices of opposition keep growing, and once contrasted with the visionary tales of (often uncritical) supporters and the practices of giants quoted as the flagships of the collaborative economy, they do strike a chord. Many of these practices are seen as an abuse of the rhetoric of sharing (Schor et al., 2015). Regulatory issues bring both the consumer and worker rights into question (Kalamar, 2013; Baker, 2014), since instead of transforming the social fabric some of the platforms are exploratory and based on the mantra of self-interest (Morozov, 2014; Parsons, 2014; Roose, 2014; Eckhard and Bardhi, 2015). Cases of the collaborative economy reproducing class, gender and racial biases can also be found (e.g. Hardin and Luca, 2014). Using sharing economy as “another vehicle for tax and regulatory arbitrage” (Baker, 2015) is also of concern. The commonly quoted environmental benefits still lack comprehensive studies and often function as a truism among sharers that does not pass the test of system-scale impacts (Schor, 2014; Cohen, 2016), particularly once the ripple effects are taken into consideration. The social change at stake is also seen as more about “self-realization through cooperation than it is about redistribution or mobilization” (Schor et al., 2015: 17). Criticism, however, frequently hits only a limited part of the sector, referred to as its commercial extremes (Ageyman and McLaren, 2014) or the economic framing of sharing (McLaren and Ageyman, 2015). As Cohen (2016) explains, in his work he bashes “Big Sharing” with arguments that might lose validity outside of the US context. Such context-sensitivity, however, is often missing or indicated only as a side note.

Concluding the heated debates, following Schor (2014) one might say that the collaborative economy is at a critical juncture – a juncture where the potential of this concept in terms of economic, ecological, and social values it can bring could be realized along the lines drawn by the proponents, or end up wasted by a short-lived hyped concept with a shadow of the transformation and change it envisioned. In the study, those active in diversifying the collaborative and sharing landscape in Vienna are placed on that juncture and asked for their visions and understandings.

## 2.2. Narratives and frames in transition

Within sustainability transition research, studies focusing on exploring and understanding the role of discourse, narratives and framing processes in ongoing transitions have been gaining in popularity (Nicolini, 2012; Smith and Raven, 2012; Geels, 2014; Franceschini and Pansera, 2015; Hermwille, 2016; Martin, 2016). They often employ the Multi-Level Perspective

(MLP), which organizes the analysis of transitions into three levels of socio-technical landscapes, regimes, and niches (see e.g. Geels and Kemp, 2007; Geels and Schot, 2007; Geels, 2010; Smith et al., 2010). Martin (2016) identifies two most common discourse-focused approaches within transitions literature: the narrative- and the framing-focused. The former refers mainly to Roe's (1994), and defines narratives as simple story lines describing a problem, a set of consequences, and potential solutions. Narratives are not expressions of "objective truths"; rather, their "success and traction is determined (...) by [their] internal logic and rhetorical persuasiveness" (Hermwille 2016: 238). In transition research, Smith and Raven (2012) explore the narratives of niche empowerment. Hermwille (2016) compares the post-Fukushima narratives evolving around the nuclear energy regimes in Japan, Germany, and the UK, and discusses their role "as the vehicle of meaning and intermediation between individual and social collective" (2016: 237).

The framing approach builds mostly on the social movement literature, where, following Snow and Benford (1988), Steinberg (1998) and Martin (2016) defines framing as "a deliberative, communicative process through which actors seek to mobilise a consensus and collective action around a given issue" (2016: 150). Frames "help to render events meaningful and thereby function to organise experience and guide action" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614), and "condition understandings of the fundamental entities, uncertainties, interests and values in play" (Cairns and Stirling, 2014: 26). In framing processes, the how and why of a given concept can be analyzed in terms of the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational sub-frames (Snow and Benford, 1988; Geels, 2014). Martin (2016) uses this conceptual tool in his study aimed at capturing the online discourse on sharing economy, and sets it within the MLP, seeing the sharing economy as a niche in the making. He suggests six framings employed by the relevant niche and regime actors, both empowering the concept and resisting it. Broadly speaking, the former frame the sharing economy as (1) an economic opportunity, (2) a more sustainable form of consumption, or (3) a pathway to a decentralised, equitable and sustainable economy. The latter see it as a niche development that is (4) creating unregulated marketplaces, (5) reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm, and (6) an incoherent field of innovation. The potential development pathways for sharing economy elaborated on the basis of the niche-regime alignments emerging between the six framings leave the author with little hope for a multiple regimes disruption.

As shown by Martin (2016) and previously in the discussion of the current debates and issues of the collaborative economy, the discourses surrounding the concept are conflicting and complex, particularly in terms of realizing the visions of transforming towards more sustainable socio-economies. Martin adds that "contradictory framings often surround innovations which seek to transform" along such visions (2016: 149). In the study, I add to the developing perspectives on understanding the discourses on the collaborative economy through taking the city of Vienna as a case for uncovering common perceptions and framings of the concept among the creators of the local collaborative scene. Framing is referred to as a broader set of values, visions, and practical goals that characterize different understanding of the collaborative economy based on Q factor rendering. The key aim is to build a holistic reading of subjective perceptions on the concept, rather than turn to the questions of deliberation in framing processes. As explained further on (see Section 3), boundaries between these understandings are to be treated as flexible in Q. This ambivalent and multivalent nature of the framing process is elaborated on through narrative descriptions of the factors, followed by a discussion of the key characteristics of the emergent framings, as well as overlaps and discrepancies between them, rather than employing a model solution such as the MLP (Martin, 2016). Furthermore, with the Q method I aim to establish a stronger interest of the sustainability transitions research community in opening ontological boundaries. This aim corresponds to Hermwille's call for explorative methodologies suitable for investigations of contextualized discourses, essential especially to the questions of governance, who sees Q as "[being] a vantage for such methodology that merits further exploration" (2016: 243).

### 3. Framing the collaborative economy with the use of Q methodology

The following sections walk the reader through Q methodology, closing with narrative interpretation of the identified factors.

#### 3.1. Q methodology

Q is a mixed method rooted in social psychology and enriching the varieties of discourse analysis (Stephenson, 1953; Barry and Proops, 1999). It is a qualitative, yet statistical approach, with its "mixed" nature reflected in its ability to reveal key viewpoints of individuals and build a holistic understanding thereof (Watts and Stenner, 2012). Its use in various areas has been increasing to include political sciences (Brown, 1980), human geography (Eden et al., 2005), environmental policy issues (Addams and Proops, 2000; Cairns and Stirling, 2014), ecological economics (Barry and Proops, 1999; Swedeen, 2006; Davies and Hodge, 2012), and more. It has become a more and more appreciated enrichment of "the social scientist's toolbox for understanding how people think about a given issue" (Danielson, 2009: 219). It is particularly suitable for topics around which there is social contestation, e.g. climate geo-engineering (Cairns and Stirling, 2014), or sustainability (Stevenson, 2015).

Q applies purposive sampling typically including 20–40 participants. As a "small n" methodology, it is intensive rather than extensive, and not meant to yield results generalizable to a larger population (Swedeen, 2006). The method's cycle runs in roughly three stages (Cairns and Stirling, 2014: 27):

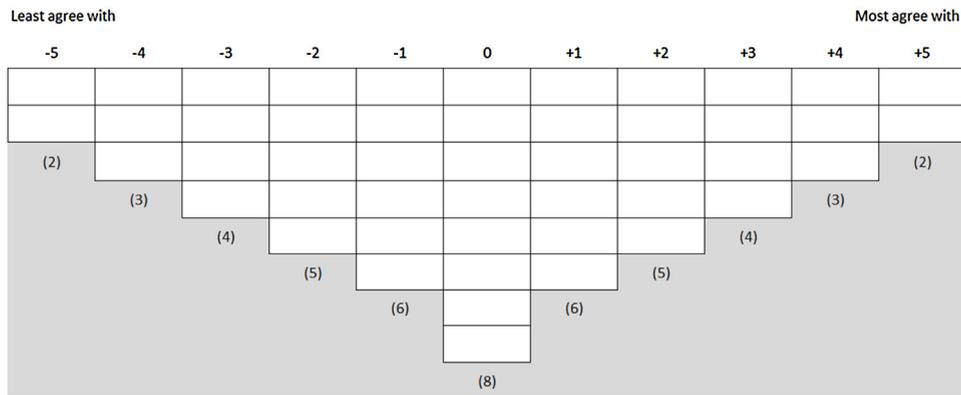


Fig. 1. The distribution shape for sorting the Q set.

- 1) A selection of statements reflecting the diversity of opinions about the subject of interest is collected (the concourse), and a sub-set of these is selected (the Q sample/Q set) in order to be fitted by the participants into a typically forced-choice distribution (see e.g. Fig. 1).
- 2) Participants (or the P-set) are selected to carry out the Q sorting process;
- 3) Results are statistically analysed (in search for patterns, or frames, in understanding a given topic), and the resulting patterns are interpreted with the aid of comments made by participants.

The inter-correlation of individual Q sorts investigates their degree of (dis)agreement, and opens the door to factor analysis in search for “groups of persons who have rank-ordered the heterogeneous stimulus items in a very similar fashion” (Watts and Stenner, 2012: 18). The final result, thus, is a set of factors that represent similarly performed sorts. These factors and the discourses they bring are interpretive units (Swedeen, 2006). The proceeding sections look into the conducted Q study in greater detail.

### 3.1.1. From concourse to Q set

The concourse statements, i.e. “a population of statements from which a final Q set is sampled” (Watts and Stenner, 2012: 34) were identified via reading of a range of sources: academic literature on the topic, non-academic sources (here mainly articles from the three key supporting networks: OuiShare, Shareable, and Collaborative Consumption), as well as informal communication with individuals involved with the topic. The concourse reached “saturation point” (Eden et al., 2005) at a total number of 328 statements. Before narrowing the concourse down, the statements were scrutinized in search for reoccurring themes, including: scope (key pillars and activities constituting the collaborative economy); motivations, drivers, and values; impact (in social, ecological and economic terms); criticism and opposing voices. These were reflected in a final Q set of 48 statements (see Table 2 for the list of the statements), the quality of which in terms of comprehensiveness, readability, and balanced content was tested in three pilot sorts, and consulted with a researcher experienced with Q.

### 3.1.2. Participants and procedure

The rationale for using Q in the first place can be seen as two-pronged, following Watts & Stenner's (2012: 173–174) discussion on content-related and expert-knowledge insights. Heterogeneity inherent to the topic of the collaborative economy made a Q endeavour into its socially contested meaning particularly attractive. Furthermore, investigating this contested meaning among a group of people actively participating or involved with the topic was seen as most viable solution in this exploratory study of various framings and understandings of the collaborative economy in Vienna emerging from Q. In compiling the initial list of potential participants to contact, I took a rather broad approach, trying to reflect the breadth of the scope of the collaborative economy. The initial list included both peer-to-peer and platform- or business-negotiated activities, ranging from e.g. commercial and P2P carsharing, bikesharing, lending and renting platforms and initiatives, redistribution markets and free cycling, space-sharing and the accommodation sector, to co-working and more. Those creating and shaping the local discourse on sharing and collaborative practices through e.g. connecting to the relevant global networks, holding thematic events and online presence were also included. Vienna-based researchers dealing with the topic were also invited.

The study included 24 individuals coming from a variety of backgrounds (see Appendix A). With 52 initiatives/organizations/individuals initially reached out to, the final number of participants stood for an almost 50% response rate. The participants were assured anonymity, hence only limited information on them is revealed, i.e. gender (14 male and 10 female participants), age, and type of affiliation. The age of the participants ranges from 23 to 50, with the majority being born in 1980s. Affiliation with a non-profit initiative dominates (see Table 1), while the low interest of the commercial

**Table 1**Participant affiliation (for more details see [Appendix A](#) and [Table 3](#)).

Type of affiliation	Number of participants
Non-profit initiative	13
For-profit initiative	6
Research	4
Public agency	1

initiatives adds an interesting point to the debates surrounding the collaborative economy. Such composition of the P-set is a limitation of the study I come back to in the final section.

A pyramid-shaped or quasi-normal 11-point distribution was used ([Fig. 1](#)), forcing the participants to sort 48 statements into a grid scaled from +5 (what one most agrees with) to −5 (what one least agrees with). The study was held mainly in a face-to-face setting, with three participants choosing the self-sorting package prepared in dedicated FlashQ software (<http://www.hackert.biz/flashq/demo/>). During the task, participants were advised to first read all the statements in order to get an overall idea of the discourse expressed, then try to arrange the statements in three piles (in line with what they most and least agree with, and what they find ambiguous or are uncertain of), and proceed to actual grid sorting. The data was enriched with post-sort interviews, focused on reasoning behind the most salient statements placed on the extreme ends of the distribution, as well as the sort in general.

### 3.1.3. Statistical analysis

The Q sorts were analysed with PQMethod ([www.lrz-muenchen.de/~schmolck/qmethod/](http://www.lrz-muenchen.de/~schmolck/qmethod/)). Starting from a correlation matrix quantifying the level of similarity between any two Q sorts, the key step is factor extraction that groups Q sorts according to proximity in allocating individual statements in the grid. Initially, 7 factors were extracted with the QCENT option, i.e. centroid factor analysis. These underwent varimax rotation, recommended as suitable for inductive Qs keen on exploring the majority of viewpoints in the studied group ([Watts and Stenner, 2012](#)), and aiming at “finding the simplest structure in the data that can explain the greatest amount of variability” ([Swedeen, 2006: 196](#)). Factors with minimum two significantly loading Q sorts were kept for interpretation ([Brown, 1980: 293](#)), where a loading at the  $p < 0.01$  level was considered significant at  $\pm 0.37$  (calculated accordingly:  $2.58/\sqrt{n}$ ,  $n$  = number of items in the Q set; consequently  $2.58/\sqrt{48} = 0.3723$ ). The criterion of minimum two sorts being indicative of the view expressed by individual factors narrowed their final number considered for interpretation to 4. Statistical significance of the final factors meeting the “two sorts” criterion was also confirmed by corresponding Eigenvalues greater than 1 ([Watts and Stenner, 2012](#)). The final four factors explain 40% of study variance, with 15 sorts in total loading significantly *only* on one of them. Five Q sorts were confounded, i.e. loaded significantly on more than one factor and were therefore excluded from building factor arrays ([Watts and Stenner, 2012](#)). Importantly, these show that a sort of an individual participant can be associated significantly with more than one factor, as the factors identified “are by no means mutually exclusive types” ([Davies and Hodge, 2012: 52](#)). In a procedure of weighted averaging of significantly loading Q sorts, estimates of the viewpoint of each factor are extracted, and factor arrays with “ideal” versions of a sorting per each factor are prepared (see [Table 2](#) below). Statement 1, for example, was ranked at +2 in Factor 1 and 3, +4 in Factor 2, and +3 in Factor 4. Factor arrays constitute the cornerstone of the interpretative process, which was conducted with the help of the crib sheet device outlined by [Watts and Stenner \(2012\)](#). [Table 3](#) shows the values of the significant loadings of the participants’ sort on each factor. [Table 4](#) presents the degree of correlation between the identified factors.

## 3.2. Four framings of the collaborative economy

The following narrative framings constitute an attempt of interpreting the perceptions on the concept of the collaborative economy (below referred to as: the CE) brought by each factor. The proposed readings stand for a possible take on the framings, with no claim of them being carved in stone or finite. Rather, they point to possible directions in the discursive landscape investigated. Following [Armatas et al.’s \(2014\)](#) suggestions, confounded sorts were not completely discarded from the interpretative process, and post-sort interview materials were consulted for complementary views. The interlinkages between the framings need to be emphasized, despite of their treatment here as discrete units. Each framing was assigned a name. The numbers in brackets correspond to the relevant statements from the sorted Q set (see [Table 1](#)).

### Visionary Supporters

Five participants’ sorts loaded significantly on this factor, all associated with non-commercial initiatives. Factor 1 explains 15% of the study variance and has an EV of 3.6. The emergent framing can be summarized as follows:

The predominant goal of the CE is to create fairer, more sustainable, and more connected societies (17). As such, the CE fosters change through helping people understand that accumulating possessions does not guarantee wellbeing (41). The CE, therefore, stands for certain values, and these values are at odds with what is currently dominant in the economic sphere of our lives (31). The growth of the CE is a reflection of increasing environmental concerns, as well as the will to change

**Table 2**

Statements in the final Q set, and the idealized sorting pattern (from –5 to +5) for each factor. **Bold** numbers indicate distinguishing statements for a given factor, i.e. those that a particular factor ranks in a significantly different way to all the other factors ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Bold Underscore** indicates significance at  $p < 0.01$ .

Statement	Idealized sort pattern			
	1	2	3	4
1. Collaborative economy refers to sharing, swapping, bartering, trading, and renting.	2	4	2	3
2. In collaborative economy, social, economic and environmental values are equally important	<b>0</b>	–4	–3	<b>3</b>
3. Collaborative economy is a resurgence of traditional methods of consumption, production and service delivery revitalized by technological developments.	–2	<b>1</b>	–2	<b>4</b>
4. Collaborative economy is as much about sharing, as it is about competition.	–4	–4	<b>–2</b>	–4
5. Collaborative economy activities include both monetary and non-monetary compensation.	0	2	3	0
6. Collaborative economy is a bottom-up movement built on distributed networks of connected individuals as opposed to centralized institutions.	0	3	2	–1
7. Collaborative economy redefines business models and the buyer-seller relationship.	2	0	0	2
8. Collaborative economy increases resource efficiency.	1	<b>5</b>	1	2
9. Collaborative economy makes it possible for virtually anything, including specialized skills or knowledge and used goods, to become currency.	0	2	–1	3
10. Collaborative economy is quickly becoming an unspecified catch-all term.	<b>–2</b>	1	3	2
11. Collaborative economy is media hype with little actual impact on consumer behavior.	–3	–5	–4	<b>1</b>
12. The discourse of novelty of collaborative economy is overrated.	–1	<b>–3</b>	1	<b>5</b>
13. There is a need for democratizing ownership and governance in collaborative economy.	<b>3</b>	<b>–2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>–5</b>
14. Some collaborative economy initiatives are capitalism in new clothes.	2	0	<b>5</b>	1
15. Collaborative economy is a new term for renting.	<b>–5</b>	–2	0	–2
16. For-profit collaborative economy platforms have taken over what began as a progressive, socially transformative idea.	–1	–1	0	<b>2</b>
17. Collaborative economy aims to create fairer, more sustainable, and more socially connected societies.	<b>5</b>	2	<b>–1</b>	4
18. Collaborative economy promises stronger social connections and increased social inclusion.	4	–1	0	4
19. Collaborative economy occupies a middle ground between sharing and marketplace exchange.	–2	1	–1	0
20. Collaborative economy is embodied in recirculation or redistribution of unwanted or underused goods.	<b>1</b>	–1	<b>–4</b>	–2
21. Collaborative economy is embodied in increased utilization of assets that one owns.	–1	3	<b>–2</b>	2
22. Collaborative economy is embodied in exchange of services.	–1	0	<b>–4</b>	1
23. Collaborative economy is about sharing assets or space in order to enable production, rather than consumption.	–1	0	<b>–2</b>	<b>–3</b>
24. There are four pillars of collaborative economy: production, consumption, finance, and education.	–3	–1	–3	–1
25. Collaborative economy facilitates consumption and production on a local level.	0	1	–1	–1
26. Collaborative economy is based on both for-profit organizations and non-profit organizations.	1	3	3	0
27. Collaborative economy strengthens social inequality and addresses predominantly the better-off.	–4	–4	<b>1</b>	–4
28. The presumed environmental benefits of collaborative economy are based on the assumption of a reduction in demand for new goods and facilities.	<b>–1</b>	<b>3</b>	4	5
29. Collaborative economy has become a trendy concept.	1	4	1	3
30. Collaborative economy is a shift taking us towards new economy where self-interest and common good align.	1	0	1	<b>–1</b>
31. Collaborative economy values are at odds with the current predominant economic paradigm.	<b>4</b>	–1	<b>0</b>	–2
32. There is a need for measuring the environmental impact of collaborative economy.	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	2	<b>–3</b>
33. There is a need for measuring the social impact of collaborative economy.	3	<b>0</b>	2	<b>–4</b>
34. There is a need for assessing the economic impact of collaborative economy.	<b>2</b>	–2	<b>0</b>	–3
35. Collaborative economy can lead to less dependence on employers and more diversification in access to income, goods and services.	2	1	0	–2
36. Collaborative economy has been practiced within working classes and poorer communities, and is new to the better-off.	–3	0	–3	0
37. Collaborative economy has done little so far to change the politics, structures and institutions that underpin and promote unsustainable lifestyles.	0	<b>–3</b>	<b>4</b>	1
38. Social enterprises and community-owned enterprises are facilitated by collaborative economy.	0	–1	–1	–2
39. Cooperatives and participatory initiatives are at the core of collaborative economy.	4	1	4	0
40. The growth of collaborative economy reflects the increasing environmental awareness and commitment to changing our consumption and production patterns.	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	–3	–1
41. Collaborative economy helps in understanding that accumulating possessions is not going to guarantee wellbeing.	<b>5</b>	2	1	–1
42. Collaborative economy activities create new jobs and new market possibilities.	–2	<b>5</b>	0	0
43. Critics of collaborative economy are too cynical.	–2	–2	–2	–3
44. Collaborative economy mainly consists of venture capital backed startups.	–5	–2	–5	–5
45. Collaborative economy enables people to save money and tap into diverse sources of income.	1	<b>–3</b>	2	1
46. Many companies practice “sharewashing”: adopting sharing and collaboration as a buzzword for their products, regardless of whether these involve any actual sharing.	–4	–5	<b>–1</b>	<b>1</b>
47. Collaborative economy models cannot deliver the utopian outcomes its supporters suggest.	–3	–3	<b>–5</b>	<b>0</b>
48. We are consuming the same resources, whether we do it collaboratively or not	0	4	<b>3</b>	0

**Table 3**  
Participants whose sorts correlate with just one factor and the degree of correlation.

No.	Type of affiliation	Degree of correlation of Q sorts with each factor			
		1	2	3	4
1	Non-profit initiative	<b>0.6596*</b>	0.1219	0.2873	−0.0662
8	Non-profit initiative	<b>0.5814*</b>	0.0738	0.1494	0.1761
10	Non-profit initiative	<b>0.5073*</b>	−0.1287	0.1077	0.1265
14	Non-profit initiative	<b>0.5736*</b>	0.2953	0.0100	0.0033
17	Non-profit initiative	<b>0.7685*</b>	0.2340	0.2222	−0.0287
4	For-profit initiative	−0.0001	<b>0.4340*</b>	−0.0270	0.1135
11	For-profit initiative	0.0225	<b>0.5516*</b>	0.3288	−0.0571
15	Research	0.0042	<b>0.5386*</b>	0.0435	0.1368
9	Non-profit initiative	0.3259	−0.2071	<b>0.4650*</b>	0.2880
19	Public agency	0.2619	0.1314	<b>0.4432*</b>	0.0843
20	Research	−0.0514	0.0992	<b>0.5054*</b>	−0.0129
21	Non-profit initiative	0.1616	−0.0341	<b>0.6906*</b>	0.1065
12	Non-profit initiative	0.2825	−0.0259	−0.0615	<b>0.3376*</b>
16	Non-profit initiative	0.0799	0.2999	0.1191	<b>0.5202*</b>
23	Research	−0.1012	0.0783	0.0647	<b>0.6332*</b>

\* Indicates that a sort correlates significantly with the factor at the  $p < 0.01$  level.

**Table 4**  
Correlations between factors.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Factor 1	1.00	0.38	0.44	0.13
Factor 2		1.00	0.33	0.32
Factor 3			1.00	0.10
Factor 4				1.00

the approach to consumption and production (40). Equating the CE to redefined renting (15) and accusing it of being an unspecified catch-all term (10) is criticized. Commercial involvement of venture capital backed start-ups have been there from the start, but such activities have not managed to co-opt the transformative idea brought by the CE (16, 44), the core of rests on participation and cooperatives (39), and strengthening social ties (18). This vision can be better realized with introducing more participation and democracy in governance in the CE as currently practiced (13). Also, for further progress of the concept, measurements of primarily its environmental, but also social and economic impact are inevitable (32, 33, 34). In relation to the market, the value of the CE lies in bringing stronger diversification and redefining how we see certain relationships, e.g. buyer-seller (7, 35, 42). In terms of scope, the CE is embodied in a broad range of activities, from sharing, swapping, bartering, to trading and renting (1), with recirculation of goods as a particularly important aspect (20).

#### Market Optimists

Three participants are significantly correlated with this factor, two coming from commercial organizations, and one from research. Factor 2 explains 9% of study variance and has an EV of 2.16. The emergent framing can be summarized as follows:

The CE encompasses sharing, swapping, bartering, trading and renting (1). The key benefits brought by these activities are twofold: a) the creation of new jobs and new market possibilities (42); and b) more efficient resource use (8), particularly in reducing the demand for new goods and facilities (28) and acting against the idle capacity of what one owns (21). The main driver lies in growing environmental awareness (40). As currently practiced, the CE does not put social, economic and environmental values on a par (2), and its ability to strengthen social connections and increase social inclusion might be an empty promise (18). Originating as a bottom-up movement (6), the CE is seen as a novel concept (12) that is already having an impact on consumer behaviour (11), as well as on broader structures related to our current lifestyles (37). The concept has firmly entered the market and is trendy (29), and it's more than just media hype (11). VC-backed start-ups are not the main pillar of the CE (44), and speaking of scaling-up practices of “sharewashing” is unfounded (46). There is no strong need for reforming organizational structures of involved initiatives (13).

#### Visionary Critics

Four Q sorts load significantly on this factor, with two of their authors coming from a non-profit background, one from research, and one from a public agency. Factor 3 explains 9% of study variance and has an EV of 2.16. The emergent framing can be summarized as follows:

As currently practiced, the CE is at risk of losing its meaning and becoming an unspecified catch-all term (10). The organizational structures of the CE need to be urgently democratized and participatory elements need to be boosted (13), since some of the initiatives are capitalism in new clothes (14). This must be done, as the CE brings a vision of building

cooperation and participation into our socio-economic backbone (39), and without structural changes this promise cannot be delivered (47). The CE is valued for enabling people to save money and tap into diverse sources of income (45), but its current potential to bring broader institutional change (37) is strongly exaggerated, and the potential to create fairer, more sustainable, and more connected societies (17) is questioned. In some areas of activity, the CE might actually be adding up to social inequality and addressing predominantly the better-off (27), rather than employing its capacity to work towards stronger social inclusion (36) and its “sharing over competition” logic (4). Categorizing and labelling the concept is difficult and perhaps not essential (20, 22, 3, 21), since the structural reflection of the vision is most relevant.

### *Sceptics*

This factor is associated with sorting solutions of 3 participants, two coming from a non-profit background and one from research. Factor 4 explains 7% of study variance and has an EV of 1.68. The emergent framing can be summarized as follows:

The discourse of novelty of the CE is overrated (12); the CE is a resurgence of traditional models of consumption, production and service provision, redefined by technological developments (3). Ideally, those redefined activities aim at strengthening social inclusion and social connections (18), with a limited (but still present) possibility to change buyer-seller relationship and business models (7). The governance structures of the CE are fine (13), there is no need for stronger democratization. What is needed, however, is more emphasis on the bottom up activities (6). Even though VC start-ups do not constitute the core of the CE (44), for-profit platforms might be taking over what stands for a transformative idea (16), and are practicing sharewashing (46). Sharing is not a new term for renting (15), but saying that it is at odds with the current economic paradigm (31), or claiming that it helps people understand that accumulation of possessions increases well-being (41) is farfetched. The impact of the CE on consumer behaviour is questionable at the moment (11). The CE does, however, have the potential to ease our harmful influence on the environment through reducing the demand for new goods and facilities (28). This presumed potential is enough – actual measuring of not only environmental, but also social and economic impact of the CE is not of utmost importance (32, 33, 34).

The following closing section discusses these framings in greater detail, teasing out the tensions and overlaps between them.

## **4. Discussion and conclusion**

In this take on the interpretative task, the *Visionary Supporters* and the *Market Optimists* bring the most content understandings of the concept of the collaborative economy, yet the reasons for this contentment differ. To the contrary, the *Visionary Critics* and the *Sceptics* are both openly critical, with the former still keeping faith in a vision brought by the collaborative economy, and the latter being somewhat leery.

The *Visionary Supporters* seem to be genuinely convinced by the concept. The idealistic framing of the collaborative economy is here: changing mindsets on the way we consume, approach the economic sphere of our lives, fostering more collaboration and sharing. In other words, the vision of the “popular” proponents of the concept is captured in this framing. The often detrimental role of commercial extremes is recognized yet not really criticized, with participatory and cooperative initiatives still being the core in this framing. Measurements and impact indicators are called for and seen as inevitable to strengthen the concept, and the belief in its potential appears to exclude doubts about the outcomes of those measurements at the level of the economy as a whole as pointed out by [Schor \(2014\)](#) and [Cohen \(2016\)](#). The *Market Optimists* take up on these points, but here the idea of utility maximization dominates, and the emphasis is placed on the creation of new jobs and market possibilities, and resource efficiency (with no need of actual measurement) as the key “selling” points of the collaborative economy. The collaborative economy needs up-scaling for whatever reason – the role of visionary ideas and values backing the concept are downplayed. Finally, the debates on big VC players and some of the for-profits unfittingly co-opting a transformative concept are irrelevant.

This point is challenged by the *Visionary Critics*, dominated by a dissatisfaction with the status quo of the collaborative economy, particularly regarding organizational structures. The *Visionary Critics* are the only ones to openly admit that there are areas in which the collaborative economy might be deepening rather than easing social inequalities. The vision of the collaborative economy based on sharing, collaboration and democratization is common with the *Visionary Supporters*, yet delivering this vision is seen as impossible without a re-direction towards more cooperatives and participatory initiatives. The underlying structures of a given initiative are placed among the decisive “who is in, who is out” criteria. The sceptical tone continues with the *Sceptics*, additionally disillusioned with the novelty of the collaborative economy. With a moderate less-excited approach to the supposed vision of the collaborative economy, there is a stronger focus on bottom-up activities aimed at change in consumption and production. The key message of the *Sceptics* seems to be that change and transformation can come under many names, and as long as the process and the overall dedication to it continue, the specific nomenclature is of least importance.

This brief outline of the framings reflects some of the points present in the debates, while pushing others to the backdrop. The question of the scope of the collaborative economy loses in significance, and the broad approach capturing it as sharing, swapping, bartering, trading, and renting posited by [Botsman and Rogers \(2010\)](#) seems satisfactory. Activities with both monetary and non-monetary compensation are accepted, undermining the stricter takings on defining sharing as necessarily altruistic, pro-social, and non-reciprocal (see e.g. [Belk, 2014b](#)). With this remark, particularly for the *Visionary Critics*, the

point seems to be not to draw a strong affiliation to gift economies or solidarity economies, since activities involving both monetary and non-monetary compensation are accepted. Rather, the point lies in the already mentioned insufficiency of participatory elements. Especially for the more critical framings, the for- or non-profit nature of involved organizations is of little importance. What counts, though, is the message they bring and internal structures reflecting it. These explicit calls for more critical views on governance, the underlying structures and power shift as elements to gain more attention in the agenda are particularly salient in the *Visionary Critics* and *Visionary Supporters* framings. Similar voices come from e.g. Schor (2014) and Orsi (2013), particularly in terms of initiative ownership and labour regulations. Such comments also often recognize that without democratizing ownership and governance of sharing initiatives, removing the badly acting for-profits out of the limelight, and placing more peer-to-peer economic activities in it is an onerous task. Against such background, a focus on more community-level and bottom-up processes as emphasized by *Sceptics*, strengthening collaborative and sharing practices, is needed in order to avoid further corporatization of the concept, making the sector socially just (Schor, 2014) – what Ageyman and McLaren (2014) would refer to as community-based and socio-cultural sharing.

Following Schor (2014), one might say that the collaborative economy finds itself at a critical juncture, where particularly the ease that the concept brings in connecting individuals, fostering exchange and cooperation does hold transformative potential (Schor, 2014). Harnessing the potential of the concept in “building social solidarity, democracy, and sustainability” (Schor, 2014) is at stake on that juncture. Still, the debates surrounding the status quo of the collaborative economy are fully legitimate. The power within the collaborative economy as presented by the media and reinforced by many of the engaged voices rests within the hands of powerful key players. As visible here, the debates are reflected even among the non-commercial dominated participants of the study, speaking much more nuanced voices, rather than drawing a plain “for or against” picture.

In MLP-terms, the study focuses predominantly on niche actors, with no representatives of the established incumbents from e.g. the accommodation or car rental regimes. Apart from being a limitation to the study, and a potential follow-up for future research, this point also opens the door to intriguing observations. Coming back to Martin's (2016) work, some resemblance to his framings can be found, most strikingly between the “economic opportunity” niche actors framing and *Market Optimists*. Among the remaining niche framings from Martin, traits of the *Visionary Supporters* can be found in “sustainable consumption” framing, as well as in the “decentralised, equitable and sustainable economy” framing. Many points from this framing could be agreed upon by *Visionary Critics* and *Sceptics*. Curiously enough, these two readings could identify partly with the regime framings of the sharing economy as “reinforcing neoliberalism” and being an “incoherent innovation”. Moreover, many of the characteristics of both the remaining niche and regime framings (for details, see Martin, 2016) are somewhat distributed among the framings emerging from the Q study. Taking the observations on the interplay of these framings with Martin's (2016) input into consideration, as well as reflecting on the diversity inherent to the framings identified in this paper, one might say that heterogeneity of perceptions and understanding of the sharing or collaborative economy manifests itself not only when regime and niche actors are investigated and confronted. The heterogeneity of framings among niche actors only points to the difficulties with claiming that these actors can be considered as representatives of the sharing or collaborative niche. This inner-niche heterogeneity has been stressed by e.g. Smith and Raven (2012). Furthermore, this heterogeneity points to fluid rather than polarized perceptions among the framings, and emphasizes the flexibility of discursive boundaries essential to Q.

In the study, I see contestation as a fertile research ground, and the concept investigated as a “discursive phenomenon, the bounds of which are continually being negotiated” (Cairns and Stirling, 2014: 26). However, the range of issues related to grasping the essence of the collaborative economy may lead one to think that building a globally-applicable definition of this particular concept is not necessarily the path to follow. Instead, with such a “hands-on” phenomenon, narrowing the focus down to a more local level seems promising, even more so with the notions of ownership and attachment to possessions being culturally-dependent (Belk, 2010). With a local-based Q study, this work offers an exploratory look into the conceptualizing the collaborative economy as practiced in one's immediate surroundings, anchored in the developments in the broader narratives on the concept. Through elucidating the dominant typologies and perspectives on a given concept in a given context (Steelman and Maguire, 1999), Q can foster decision making in local ecosystems (Steelman and Maguire, 1999; Swedeen, 2006), and “open more robustly – and multivalently – critical debate” (Cairns and Stirling 2014: 36).

The results of the study are limited in terms of generalizability – as both a single case and a Q study, they are rather suggestive and built to enrich further understanding of the concept in question (Flyvbjerg 2001; Swedeen, 2006), functioning as a “heuristic tool” in future enquiries into the dynamics of the collaborative economy. As already mentioned, the final constellation of the P-set, with a predominance of non-commercial initiatives is acknowledged as another limitation.

As visible in the study, steps on a smaller local scale enable an appropriation of a concept that is at risk of being stripped of its meaning, as if giving the local community of co-creators the possibility of shaping it according to their values, visions, and practical goals. As such, these steps may foster the process of grabbing the concept from what Martin (2016) refers to as a niche currently following a trajectory of corporate co-option. However, studies reaching a bigger variety of multiple stakeholders than the one presented here, including legislators, civil society, and the collaborative economy initiatives brought to the table are recommendable. In the case of Vienna, taking into consideration the recent developments in approaches towards the collaborative and sharing practices, incorporating relevant representatives of local governance in the discussion and further studies would certainly be beneficial for the future pathways of this potential transition. Recently, after the study presented in this paper had been finalised, Vienna city authorities issued a report expressing their stand on the issues brought by the concept, and primarily its commercial side. The report outlines new regulation in accommodation sector

(e.g. Airbnb, 9flats). It also draws a strong normative stand by claiming that: “Vienna is favourable to the innovative and participatory original idea of sharing offers in the non-profit sector. (. . .) We want that courageous entrepreneurs can do business. The limits are drawn, however, where the interests of the citizens, consumers and fair competition are affected.” (Stadt Wien, 2016: 2). Moreover, the sharing economy has been put explicitly on the city’s agenda and institutionalized through e.g. the introduction of sharing working group dedicated to raising the public’s awareness of the city’s regulatory approach, while making sure the appointed rules are not overstepped. The for- and not-for profit element has come to the fore. Through capturing the collaborative economy discourses and exploring their dynamics with those behind the local initiatives and actively shaping the scene, I hope for this study to provide the grounds also for a more fruitful and tailored city-level multi-stakeholder dialogue in the future. Comparative city-based analyses are yet another potential direction of exploration, feeding into such holistic urban-scale approaches as posited by e.g. McLaren and Ageyman (2015). Finally, in terms of lessons learned and recommendations for future research, we are in need for more context-sensitive and exploratory approaches to what is perceived as sharing, as in the case of John (2012, 2013), who sees it as an evolving concept in the making.

## Disclosure

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## Appendix A. . Participant list

No.	Gender	Education	Year of birth	Type of affiliation	Activity
1	M	Master	83	non-profit initiative	Supportive network/events
2	M	Master	73	research	n/a
3	F	Master	85	non-profit initiative	P2P exchange platform
4	M	Bachelor	87	for-profit initiative	Space sharing
5	M	PhD	65	for-profit initiative	Bikesharing
6	M	Bachelor	89	non-profit initiative	Food-coops
7	M	Bachelor	89	for-profit initiative	Co-working
8	M	Master	83	non-profit initiative	Foodsharing
9	M	Master	84	non-profit initiative	P2P library of stuff
10	M	PhD	82	non-profit initiative	Freecycling
11	M	Master	87	for-profit initiative	Crowdfunding
12	F	Master	88	non-profit initiative	Supportive network/events
13	F	Master	84	for-profit initiative	Space sharing
14	F	Bachelor	87	non-profit initiative	Supportive network/events
15	F	Master	88	research	n/a
16	M	Master	78	non-profit initiative	P2P exchange platform
17	F	Master	87	non-profit initiative	Supportive network/events
18	M	Master	70	for-profit initiative	P2P carsharing
19	F	PhD	72	public agency	Neighborhood sharing
20	M	Master	84	research	n/a
21	M	Master	74	non-profit initiative	Supportive network/events
22	F	Bachelor	92	non-profit initiative	P2P library of stuff
23	F	Master	81	research	n/a
24	F	Bachelor	73	non-profit initiative	Neighborhood sharing

The participants of the study were assured to keep their anonymity. Therefore, the above table presents only selected information that would not corrupt this premise.

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