

5 A Critical Review of Sharing Economy in Tourism

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Introduction

On the basis of World Economic Forum data, the phenomenon of the sharing economy has continued to grow since 2013. It is estimated that by 2025 the value of this phenomenon will reach 335 billion dollars (PwC, 2017). Most of this growth will depend on the tourism sector, in which the sharing economy can be a valid alternative to professional tourism services (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2018; Tussyadiah & Zach, 2017; Farmaki et al, 2020; Sarlay & Neuhofer, 2020). Compared to the past, today's tourists demand more individual and authentic experiences, stronger relationships with the local community, and an active participation. To respond to these needs, online sharing platforms have become relevant, especially in the accommodation and transport fields, where individuals can access resources directly from other individuals, either for free or for fee (Sthapit & Björk, 2019). Despite the wide potential of the sharing economy in tourism, the phenomenon is still little understood and the scientific contributions, largely fragmented, do not provide a clear definition of the functioning of the online peer-to-peer platforms and do not examine in depth all the consequences of its spread in the sector (Dolnicar, 2020a). Starting from these considerations, a systematic review of the literature on the sharing economy in tourism was conducted. The purpose was to obtain information about the main trends, the main authors involved in the topic, the methodologies used, and the main qualitative or quantitative methods used in research. The core contributions, the main themes, and the key emerging themes are also investigated.

After this introduction, an overview on the sharing economy in tourism is presented. Subsequently, the research design is elaborated, by explaining the systematic review, a method for identifying and evaluating key scientific contributions to a field among an extensive literature (Tranfield et al., 2003). Third section is about the data analysis, in order to obtain general and deeper information on the topic. Finally, conclusions are presented.

The sharing economy in tourism

In the last decade, the tourism sector has been subject to important changes, especially related to two aspects (Camilleri & Nehuofer, 2016): changes in the tourists' behaviour, and the rapid development of new technologies. Compared to traditional tourists, modern tourists are more active during their decision process, are more interested in living authentic experiences, and want to live in the destination as temporary members of the community. They want to actively participate to the local life, know more about the history and identity of places, and they want to be co-creators of their own experiences (Zhang, 2019; Buonincontri et al., 2017). For these reasons, they often organize their trip themselves (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). Changes in the behaviour of tourists is strictly related to the rapid development of technologies, that have allowed more information to circulate faster and a closer interaction between customers and companies. Technology has offered also new business opportunities that can be exploited by ordinary individuals. A great number of online platforms, in fact, have developed with the aim of sharing goods and services among individuals, providing new ways for end-users to generate income from their possessions (Heo, 2016).

The sharing economy started in the first years of the 21st century. In the beginning, the general goal of the sharing economy, expressed through several different business models, was to share with the added benefit of helping people to save money.

In tourism, the spread of the sharing economy has favoured the development of a new way to travel, by facilitating the relationships and the economic exchanges between ordinary citizens; consequently, this has put strong pressure on the established tourism sector. By using the online sharing platforms, in fact, tourists and residents can share their homes, cars, traditional meals, and local knowledge (Sigala, 2017). It allows the provision of extra benefits, strictly related to social interactions and connectedness among tourists and locals (Priporas et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2016; Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). Furthermore, according to Azenha et al. (2015) and Dolnicar (2020a), an increase of non-professional service providers in tourism: opens entrepreneurial opportunities, allowing to locals to obtain more income and be involved into micro-entrepreneurship activities; increases choice for tourists; and puts commercial providers under pressure to differentiate or improve their services. It also impacts on society by allowing a deeper and increasing cultural exchange, and by allowing to tourists to be engaged in non-standard offers, experiencing the local culture and authenticity (Qin et al., 2020 Altinay & Taheri, 2019).

In the last 12 years, the sharing economy has changed, including in the tourism industry. It has attracted the attention of traditional providers, who have started to include their offers into the sharing platforms in order to differentiate their businesses and to cover new demand targets (Altinay & Taheri, 2019). On the demand side, also traditional tourists have started to use the sharing platforms, more interested in saving money by renting cars and rooms from locals, than in living genuine experiences with them (Sthapit et al., 2020; Sthapit et al., 2019). The wide diffusion of the sharing economy in tourism has led researchers to consider also its dark side, due to its undesirable social, environmental, and economical impacts, and its change of focus from altruistic purposes to profits (Buhalis et al., 2020).

The situation is expected to change again in the near future, due to the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on the tourism industry (Dolnicar, 2021; 2020b). The perceived risk of Covid-19 has led to very important consequences to the travel and tourism industry around the world and, consequently, to the global economy. In tourism, the key consequences of Covid-19 have been a strong decrease of demand and of gross revenues in all the fields, including the sharing economy. Since the sharing economy in tourism is composed largely of micro-entrepreneurs and individuals who share their own resources, they are highly exposed to the tourism downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (UNWTO, 2020). Often, individuals lose not just some discretionary income and the opportunity to meet new people and socialise, but their primary source of income. Furthermore, the sharing economy, particularly in the tourism sector, is based on trust (Ert et al., 2016). It is a necessary condition, due to the fact that it implies an exchange of goods / services / money, among strangers. With Covid-19, the trust that owners have built over the years, can not be as strong as in the past, with serious consequences to relationships and to business activities. The only way to avoid new cases of Covid-19, at the moment, is to pay attention to hygiene, by sanitizing the places, avoiding crowding, and avoiding close contacts. The choice to share goods, cars, or rooms that have been shared by many others before, implies having a strong trust in the actions taken by the owner to protect the health of others and to ensure that goods and spaces have always been sanitized. It may take time before individuals will acquire the necessary trust to approach locals rather than to buy from entrepreneurs.

In order to maintain the relationship with their users, and to preserve the trust built until now, online sharing platforms should transform themselves by focusing more on their original aim, that was to help the society and to enhance the communities. They should devote more attention to the creation of stronger relationships with users, in order to create the trust necessary to share goods and services in a second time.

Research methodology

The aim of this study is to increase the knowledge on the topic of the sharing economy in tourism, by conducting a systematic review.

Systematic review is a method for identifying and evaluating key scientific contributions to a field or question among an extensive literature (Tranfield et al., 2003). It plays a key role in evidence-based practices and is regarded as a fundamental scientific activity (Mulrow, 1994); and is able to provide a rigorous and transparent compilation to map an area containing dispersed and diverse knowledge. For these reasons, is particularly suitable to know more in depth about the sharing economy in tourism.

The initial stage of systematic reviews is an iterative process aimed at defining the subject area, in order to identify and clarify the relevance and size of the literature. Keywords and search terms are identified in this phase, to best clarify the topic. Not all the papers collected through this process are relevant for the review, and are excluded. The second stage is about the extraction of information from the selected sources. It includes details related to the paper (e.g. title, year, authors, affiliation, journal), and deeper data on the study (e.g. context of the study, main purpose, methodology, main findings, emergent themes). The final stage provides a report to allow to the readers to understand the research by synthesizing extensive primary research papers from which it was derived. The report is able to inform about the main trend of the studies, the main authors involved in them, the methodologies of reference, the core contributions, the main themes related to the topic, and the key emerging themes.

Table 5.1: Stages of a systematic review

Stages	Actions
First stage: Planning the review	Definition of the topic Identification of keywords and search terms
Second stage: Conducting a review	Selection of studies Extraction of information
Third stage: Reporting and dissemination	Descriptive and thematic analysis of the topic

Source: Adapted from Tranfield et al., 2003.

The first stage of the study is focused on the definition of the topic and on the identification of keywords and search terms. The sharing economy is a relevant phenomenon in the sector of tourism, and is often confused or overlapped with the concept of collaborative consumption and the collaborative economy. The debate is still open among the scientific community and, in order to avoid confusion, this study was focused exclusively on the sharing economy. For this reason, the keywords selected were 'sharing'