

# Sharing Economy Versus Access Economy

## A Critical Reflection on Social Interaction Between Peers

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**Abstract.** Disruptions caused by Web 2.0 and easily accessible technologies have had an impact on many thematic areas. In the economic sector these developments have resulted in the creation of a new business model: the sharing economy (SE). Despite its success in the last decade however, researchers are debating a clear definition without highlighting the key concept in terms of functions and processes that are fundamental to the SE model. Therefore, this paper focuses on functions of peers that are either consuming or providing, and elucidates the relation in accordance with business transactions in that both peers interact. Through a critical review of previous papers, we analyze the SE model by reflecting on prior definitions of sharing. We then compare motivations of peers to participate in the SE and, as a result, find discrepancies between providing and consuming peers in relation to their respective functions in the SE. Based on these findings, we introduce a theoretical framework that exemplifies the SE concept based on social interactions between peers and, thus, relates motivations of peers to transaction types and processes based on social interactions required.

**Keywords:** Sharing economy · Peer economy · Access economy · Business · Social interaction

## 1 Introduction

Since the introduction of the information communication technologies that enabled Web 2.0 and social media, research in a variety of disciplines has sought to analyze their impact on our society. In the field of business, these new technological developments have initiated the creation of a new business model, and with it, have introduced a new area of research that combines technology, economy, and society. The sharing economy (SE) is a new economy that disrupts any common idea of business. Instead of business-to-customer relations (B2C), we now create business transactions between peers (P2P). Uber ([www.uber.com](http://www.uber.com)) and Airbnb ([www.airbnb.com](http://www.airbnb.com)) are already profiting from their business models, which are anchored in the concept of sharing [1]. Hence, the SE makes use of online platforms to connect individuals interested in providing private goods or services to

other individuals looking for a convenient way to access these goods or services [2–4]. Fundamental to these transactions is communication between peers [2, 5]. Thus, social interaction—in an economic process once solely regulated in commercial terms—becomes an essential cornerstone of the SE model.

Previous research has largely focused on the motivations of peers to participate in the SE [5–11]. Accordingly, social interaction is not only the key to facilitating the SE, but it also serves to motivate peers to participate in this economic model. While social interactions in a virtual space are necessary in the SE to enable business transactions in the first place, the SE also offers peers the option to interact further in the physical space [4, 8]. However, two aspects deserve more clarification. First, it is unclear to what extent the driver to participate in the SE is purely for social reasons—meaning the participant’s interest in social interactions with other users rather than for economic reasons. Second, the extent to which relations between peers may become more than business depends on the willingness of peers to further engage socially, after the actual business transaction is completed. Here, the SE only serves as an incentive for further social interactions, but the impetus was not social in the first place. Thus, the aim of this paper is to highlight the role of social interaction in terms of the SE model, as well as to differentiate social interactions as the foundation of, motivator for, and consequence of business transactions between peers.

Focusing on the act of sharing in the SE reveals the lack of actual sharing in many businesses that are referred to as SE [2, 10]. While many studies focus on the term sharing in the SE, conflict has increased as to its meaning [2–5, 7, 12]. Although the label itself has been debated [3, 13], no determinant can be found to alter the term and its definition [7, 10, 13]. Accordingly, many researchers overlook ambiguities and correlations among the definitions of sharing, social interactions between peers and their motivations. While research highlights the motivations of individuals, it ignores the key concept of the SE. To fill this gap in research, this paper seeks to examine social interactions between peers according to the part they take in the SE, as well as their respective motivations. Specifically, we address the following key question: Taking into account the lack of a shared definition of the SE—how does the role of social interaction define the concept of the SE?

Towards that end, this study uses an extensive literature review and critical analysis of previous studies to clarify the definition and the principles of the SE. In an attempt to justify or amend the terminology, this study compares the definitions of sharing with the findings on the motivations of peers in the SE and, accordingly, highlights discrepancies between peers relating to their respective functions. Based on our findings, we present a theoretical framework that elaborates on transaction types and transaction processes between peers in accordance with their motivations. Thus, this paper highlights transaction types based on ownership and access, relating to social interactions between peers. Consequently, the access economy (AE) is often suggested as opposite to or as replacing the SE concept. While accessing prevails actual sharing transactions we do not replace the SE label but introduce a framework that simplifies a differentiation of both. Finally, we propose further research questions based on our framework in order to derive more tailored motivations of peers in accordance with respective transactions in the SE.

## 2 Defining the Sharing Economy

Reviewing previous research on the SE reveals a variety of definitions, but beyond this lack of clarification, several similar terms are often equated with the principle of the SE. Researchers have listed many terms that are used synonymously with the SE [7, 10, 13]. These include *inter alia*, business sharing, space sharing, P2P lending, skill sharing, crowd-sourced investments, collaborative economy, and collaborative consumption, as well as P2P economy, access economy, on-demand economy, reputation economy, trust economy, and many more. While three papers mention—as referred to by Jiang—label battle, the result is still far away from a solution [7, 10, 13]. Botsman [10] prefers using the term collaborative economy, whereas Cartagena [13] is of the opinion that AE would be the correct term to describe the phenomenon.

A report published by the European Commission in 2013 describes the foundation of the SE as being “peer-to-peer platforms that enable consumers to access consumer-owned property or competencies” [14, p. 2]. Eckhardt and Bardhi [2], Samuel and Zhang [4], and Yan and Zhao [15] all agree with this description by reusing the verb “to access”. Cartagena refers to the SE as a new economy that “is based on sharing, rather than owning” [13]. The same view is shared by Jiang, who highlights the principles of the SE that lie within the concept of access “rather than possession of goods and assets” [7]. Finally, an analysis of more than 30 papers and articles on the SE reveals that terms access and sharing are used equally in the SE context.

In addition to the principle of the SE, which fits somewhere between accessing and sharing goods and services, there appears to be one common denominator that divides the SE from the collaborative economy, also referred to as collaborative consumption (CC). Kamal and Chen identify the rise of the SE in technological development [8]. Lee et al. regard “advanced technologies and social media” [3, p. 2] as drivers of the SE. However, there is still disunity among researchers in terms of separating the SE from the collaborative economy. Some researchers use CC or collaborative economy synonymously to mean the SE. For example, John observes a correlation between CC, sharing, and Web 2.0 and describes CC as a “high-tech phenomenon” [16, p. 2]. Lee et al. [3], however, clarify CC as only the foundation of the technology-mediated SE. Botsman, one of the leading figures in the CC sector, also prefers the term collaborative economy, arguing it best explains “the shift from centralized institutions towards decentralized connected communities” [10]. Yet, Botsman’s preference is related to the fact that she regards sharing ventures as separate from other collaborative economies [10]. Consequently, she reveals the core issue in clarifying the definition of the SE: not all SE businesses are actually based on the principle of sharing.

Thus far, it is still unclear what phenomenon we describe when referring to the SE, and whether the common definitions of the SE do, in fact, describe what we refer to as the SE. Prior attempts to choose one term to describe the phenomenon have not succeeded. Some researchers have only one objective: to divide CC from the SE. For the following sections we shall keep in mind one aspect that will be of high importance for the further discussion: we find that, on the one hand, access is a key principle: on the other hand, the act of sharing is just as relevant. To solve the continuing issue of inconsistency in the application of a label and definition of this new economic phenomenon, we will elaborate on the details of the SE concept in the following section.

### 3 Peer Interaction in the Sharing Economy

In the SE, social interaction is found to be the key element enabling business transactions [9]. Yet, the role of social interaction in the SE remains unclear. As seen in Fig. 1, social interaction between peers usually takes place online, enabling business transactions in the first place [16]. Social interaction may then continue in a physical place when two peers have to exchange goods or services [14]. Furthermore, social interaction may take place between parties with the same function in the form of reputation systems that enable peers to communicate experiences to other interested users [17, 27].

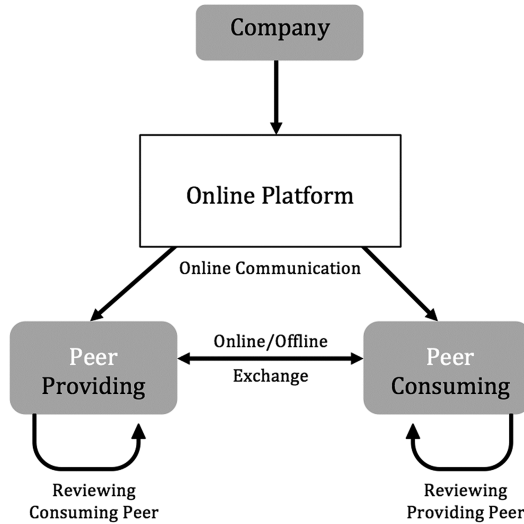


Fig. 1. Participants in the sharing economy

#### 3.1 Different Parties in the Sharing Economy

Other than traditional business models such as B2C, the SE enables a new economy that is based on consumer to consumer (C2C) transactions. These consumers are usually referred to as peers, hence the P2P economy. However, peers per se do not yet facilitate business in the SE; thus, we have one additional intermediary that makes the SE possible. Jiang is one of few researchers who has elaborated on participating parties within the SE [7]. Accordingly, a classification scheme by Jiang reveals the role of online platforms provided by a third party that can be either an individual or business. This third party helps to connect the two other parties [7]. Further, Eckhardt and Bardhi confirm this third party in the form of a company that would serve as the regulating party in the SE [2].

Focusing on two of the three participating parties in the SE, providing and consuming peers, Schor highlights that “[those] can be on either side of a transaction” [19, p. 4]. Several researchers have defined peers according to the actions they take part in the SE. One side of peers is described as a using [4], consuming [19], buying [14, 20], demanding [7], and obtaining [21] party, whereas the other side of peers is described as a providing [5],

contributing [19], selling [20], sharing [8, 21, 22], supplying [7, 14], and giving [21] party. Yet, most prior studies describe peers as consuming and providing. Figure 1 shows a brief overview of the previously described features and structures of the SE.

The new and highly important phenomenon concerning this business model, which is mainly ruled by consuming and providing peers, is the shift of power that the P2P economy enforces. Labrecque et al. [24] and Owyang [25] both mention the empowerment of consumer or customer. Thus, while the main business transaction occurs between peers, the role of the company regulating these processes becomes minor. While providing peers are now responsible for facilitating their own success in business, consuming peers also have to actively engage with the providing peers in order to make a deal. The responsibility of creating business now lies only within the willingness of peers to do so. Primary business transactions occur between two equally standing parties, as the term peer already implies. The role of peers or consumers, opposite to the role of businesses, has changed significantly. There is no obvious sign of a business or a company in the P2P economy, highlighting the novelty of business transactions between two equally standing parties using the concept of sharing.

### 3.2 Sharing in the Sharing Economy

In the SE, business transactions between peers enable an exchange of services or goods; however, it is debated whether the principle of the SE is actual sharing. Seeking to clarify the definition of sharing and, accordingly, the SE, two opposite views can be revealed: Whereas many researchers simply adapt to the usage of the term sharing or justify it [5, 8, 16], other researchers criticize or even try to alter it [2, 7, 10, 17, 23]. Wittel focuses in his paper on the act of sharing and the qualities of it [5]. Wittel is of the opinion that sharing exists in two forms: sharing as distribution and sharing as social exchange [5]. In his view, sharing can describe different social practices with different functions and motivations. Further, it depends on the individual's subjective reasoning and the willingness to share [5]. Kamal and Chen, too, see the roots of sharing in a broader cultural context [8]. Accordingly, sharing is anchored in humans in the form of natural instinct [8]. Kamal and Chen [8] suggest that the sharing principle in the SE has overcome the previous boundaries of only sharing between closely related people, such as family and friends.

Opposite to the views that sharing can define a large spectrum of phenomena, many more researchers tend to reject the use of the term sharing in terms of the SE. Botsman prefers the term collaborative economy, or CC, instead of SE [10]. Botsman believes that sharing is too overarching of a term for all marketplaces in this sector, and she notes the importance of discerning different forms of sharing [10]. Belk agrees with Kamal and Chen that sharing usually takes place within a close circle of acquaintances and points out the ambiguity of the act of sharing [8, 17]. Accordingly, "although giving and receiving are involved in sharing, they differ from the giving and receiving involved in commodity exchange and gift giving" [16, p. 127]. Hence, different forms of giving and receiving exist, as in gift giving and sharing, opposite to providing and consuming, as in exchange.

The most common principles used when defining the SE, are reciprocity and ownership, according to Belk [23]. Thus, giving and receiving may or may not include transfer of ownership, temporary ownership, and/or exchange in either material or immaterial forms. For example, giving someone temporary access to one's car may be a non-reciprocal act between friends, but the same act between people who are not very closely related might include expectance of compensation, or a reciprocal act. Supporting Belk, Jiang defines giving, exchanging, and sharing independently [7, 17]. Thus, gift giving is a caring act that does not involve compensation. In contrast, exchange is defined as being impersonal and includes the transfer of ownership. Finally, sharing is similar to giving and can be described as nonreciprocal and voluntarily [7]. The main difference here is that sharing, according to Jiang [7], does not involve the transfer of ownership. However, companies such as Uber and Airbnb that are commonly quoted in the SE context [22, 24, 25] are, against definition, of a reciprocal nature; drivers and hosts are being paid for their services.

Various terms are representative of the SE model. Confirming the incorrectness of the label SE for different internal processes, a few researchers have introduced new labels; these reveal that most processes are in fact not about sharing, but about accessing. Whereas Botsman [10] prefers the overarching term of the collaborative economy, Cartagena [13] and Jiang [7] share the view that the main principle of the SE is access. Thus, Jiang [7] introduces the economy of access-based distribution that is marked by balanced reciprocity and no full ownership transfer—an “alternative view of how sharing with a calculated return may actually work” [7, p. 9]. In seeking to clarify principles in the SE model, scholars have pointed to ownership and reciprocity as two main aspects that influence the relation between peers and the way in which they interact.

## 4 Motivations to Participate in the Sharing Economy

After analyzing the act of sharing, the definition of the SE is still unclarified. To move towards a clear description of the SE, peer motivations can help to highlight discrepancies according to the function of a peer: consuming or providing. Three main motivations of peers to participate in the SE can be identified: social, economic and environmental. This section, first, briefly examines all three motivations and, second, continues to highlight socially driven peers according to their consuming or providing function.

Recently, researchers have focused on peers' general willingness to share [3, 4, 21, 26]. Anti-capitalism, the burden of ownership, enjoyment in sharing, hedonic motivations, income, knowledge, modern lifestyle, product variety, quality, a sense of belonging, social experience, social influence, substitutability, sustainability, thriftiness, ubiquity, availability, and uniqueness have been found to be factors that positively influence participation in the SE [26]. Further, some researchers have also mentioned convenience as an important factor [2, 4, 11, 17, 27]. A study by Owyang and Samuel [11] shows that the most popular reasons to choose sharing services are convenience (78%), followed by price (68%). In terms of choosing sharing over buying though, the price is more important (53%) than convenience (30%). Another aspect here that appears to be even more important is brand (33%). The most prominent, however, are the given overarching motives—economic,

social, and environmental [6, 9, 18]. Thus, some peers choose the SE for economic or environmental benefit, whereas others embrace the opportunity to socially engage. Yet, the role of a social motivator has been largely overlooked. Social interaction is a key construct on which the SE model is built. Social interaction is more than simply an impetus to participate. Taking into account the diversity of consuming and providing peers, as well as the two given acts of accessing and sharing, reveals a new dimension of the P2P economy.

#### 4.1 Social Interaction as Motivator in the Sharing Economy

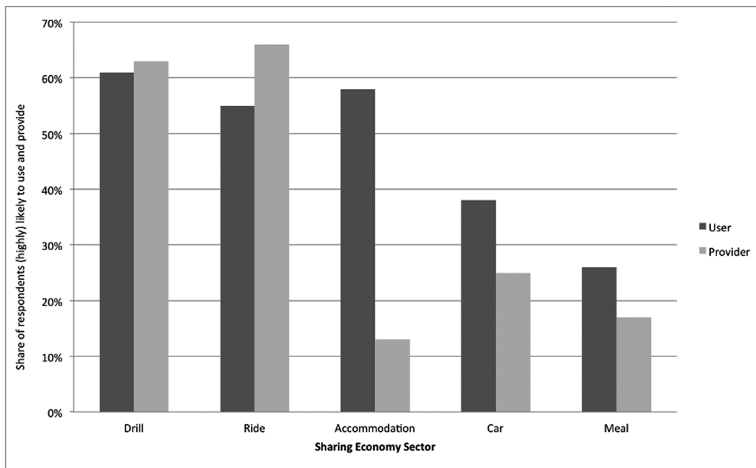
One aspect that has not yet been largely considered in terms of motivations is the prominence of three different parties in the SE: intermediaries and consuming and providing peers. While this paper focuses on the individual level [3], we highlight the relation between peers, more precisely, two different types of peers that have different functions in the SE model either providing or consuming. While a few papers specify the motivations of providing or consuming peers, others simply analyze the willingness to share [3, 4, 21, 26]. While sharing can include providing as well as consuming peers, as in sharing a car ride or rooms in an apartment, lending someone a drill clearly implies a utilitarian benefit for the consuming party but does not clearly suggest a benefit for the providing party. Thus, it is necessary to specify the motivations of different types of peers to understand the role of social interaction in the SE model.

Researchers focusing on the motivations of providing peers mostly find that economic motives drive them to provide services or goods in the SE. For example, Dillahunt and Malone are one of few researchers to specifically target providers in the SE [28]. Their research focus is on the economic benefits that the SE has to offer to providers; in this case, drivers in disadvantaged communities. A professional's report from Ernst & Young also highlights the creation of new jobs—hence, the benefits for providers. However, the findings are not consistent. Bellotti et al. [29] find that users seek convenient and valuable services, while providers “place great emphasis on idealistic motivations such as creating a better community and increasing sustainability” [29, p. 1]. Furthermore, Scholdan and Van Straaten [25] mention that social aspects motivate both providers and consumers due to “socio-demographic changes nowadays”. It is likely that economic benefit is an advantage of the SE, but not all participating peers are seeking an economic benefit. Social interaction can be a significant reason to decide for or against being part of a P2P economy.

The most significant aspect when analyzing motivations is the specific occasion during which the action takes place. For example, car sharing and accommodation sharing place different requirements on both peers. The way in which interaction is required depends on this type of sharing occasion, as shown in a study by Böcker and Meelen [9]. Böcker and Meelen focus on the discrepancies between providing and consuming parties based on the three previously mentioned main motivations, which are economic, social, and environmental [9]. Their findings reveal that sociality is most important for providing and consuming parties in terms of meal sharing. The least important are social factors in the case of car sharing, which is even less important for users compared to providers, confirming the Bellotti et al.'s study suggesting that providers have a more pro-social or pro-environmental stance in the SE [29]. In contrast, accommodation sharing is the most

economically driven sharing opportunity for both providers and consumers [9]. However, users appreciate the social aspect more than their providing counterparts [9]. Finally, the most environmentally driven are users in terms of ride sharing; however, providers—again mirroring the findings of Bellotti et al. [29]—regard car sharing, tool sharing, and ride sharing as the most environmentally beneficial SE types [9]. Interestingly, providers are least driven by economic factors when sharing a ride or tool [9].

Combining the findings shown in Fig. 2, the willingness to participate in the SE, and the different motivations of providing and consuming peers, we find that food sharing is not only the most social activity, but it is also the least interesting form of sharing, especially for consuming peers. Further, tool sharing is not only the most interesting form of sharing in the SE but also the most balanced one. Consumers and providers are almost equally interested in tool sharing. However, the motivations here are highly unequal. Whereas users are motivated mostly by economic reasons, providers are least motivated by economic and most influenced by environmental reasons. One last aspect that we will point out because of the highest discrepancy of willing providers opposite to willing users is accommodation sharing. As Fig. 2 shows, only 13.1% are willing to provide accommodation, while 58% would like to rent an accommodation from peers. However, adding the second findings of the motives of providers and consumers reveals that for both parties, economic reasons are the most prevalent in either providing or renting accommodation.



**Fig. 2.** Willingness of providing and consuming peers to participate in the SE by Böcker and Meelen, 2016

This section highlights the small amount of research that focuses on the different motivations between providing and consuming peers and the significant differences that these previous findings reveal. A pattern can hardly be found. An overview of the findings reveals that meal sharing is most social and least interesting. Sharing a meal means to give part of a meal away to someone else. The act of sharing a meal may be social as it might happen in the same place at the same time but it also implies a benefit



for only one side of the sharing process and a loss for the giving party. Tool sharing and accommodation sharing imply temporary ownership and no final loss for the giving party. However, while using a tool is done by one party, accommodation sharing can imply use by two people at the same place at the same time, entailing possible further interactions rather than a pure transfer of business-related commonalities.

As previous studies show, motivations between providing and consuming peers can be very different. As Fig. 2 illustrates, the highest discrepancy exists among accommodation sharing, and the least interest is in meal sharing. Taking into account the required social interaction in meal sharing and accommodation sharing, it appears that purely social activities are not favoured by SE participants. Referring to the previous sections, sharing is usually a personal act between people who are known to each other. Sharing a home or a meal cannot usually be referred to as a kind act between strangers. However, giving someone a ride or lending someone a tool can happen in a short time window that does not require more interaction than necessary. Not only is the divide of consuming or providing peer important but also is the transaction occasion as well as the actual process in terms of social interactions between peers required. Böcker and Meelen argue that it is important “to not conceive the sharing economy as one coherent phenomenon” [9, p. 9]. Schor [18] also sees the importance to distinguish transaction types. Thus, to fully understand the SE concept and its participants it is fundamental to synthesize not only motivations but especially transactions types and processes.

### 5 Social Interaction in P2P Economies

Combining the findings that the literature review of the previous sections revealed, the lack of a uniform definition of the SE is found to be linked to an interdependence of three overlooked but significant factors; first, the divide between consuming and providing peers, second, the act of sharing in contrast to acts of accessing in relation to,

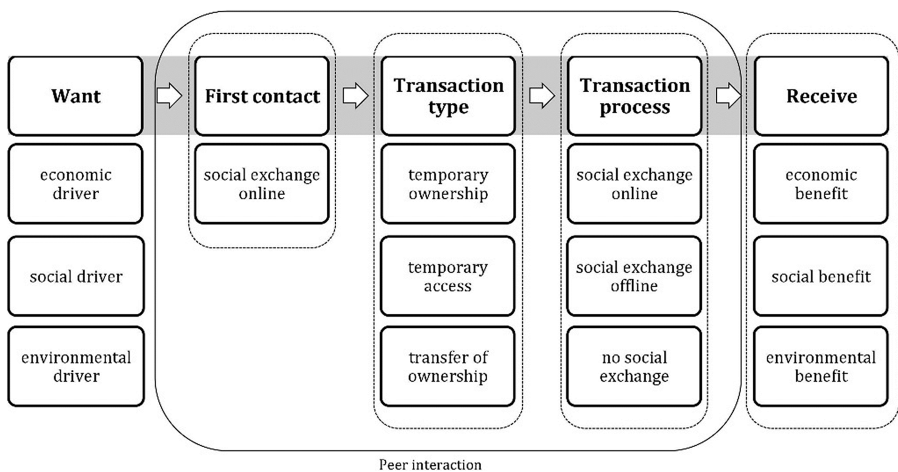


Fig. 3. Theoretical framework: social interactions between peers in the SE model

third, transactions types and processes. As a consequence, we introduce a theoretical framework (Fig. 3) that illustrates the P2P economy process focusing on peer interactions and motivations of peers.

With social media, the free culture movement [5], or maker movement [22] the SE concept originally supports the idea of a pro-social business model: An economy that uses Web 2.0 and timeless and effortless connectedness experienced through social media to develop a social economy. Schor [18] describes the origin of the SE as a “socially transformative idea” that has been disrupted ever since by for-profit platforms. Furthermore, the SE would be the “expression of a utopian” [5] image. Yet, values do not guide actions [21, 30] even if “people [may] find sustainability and sense of community important values to themselves” [30]. Although it might be that pro-social values motivate participants of the SE to provide a good or service to peers, the determinant question is the value of social interactions in contrast to economic and utilitarian benefit.

The whole transaction process in the P2P economy model can be divided into five steps while three steps define the peer interaction in detail. The first contact between peers in the SE model is based on social interaction online. In the following business transaction, thus exchange of goods or services, is defined by transaction type and process. While transaction types lay the foundation for the following exchange between peers, the transaction process results from the type of business transaction. Following Böcker and Meelen [9], we divide temporary ownership such as in accommodation sharing, car sharing or tool sharing from forms of temporary access such as in ride sharing, or accommodation sharing in terms of renting a room in a home and, finally, transfer of ownership as, for example, in meal sharing. Though, while some transactions imply on-going social exchange during the transaction process, others remain quick and easy handovers. Thus, as seen in Fig. 3, the transaction process can imply either social exchange online such as in online service exchange, social exchange offline such as in ride sharing, or no social exchange when accommodation, car, or tool are only handed over.

The peer interaction is imbedded in impetus, what either providing or consuming peer motivates, and outcome, what either peer receives from the transaction process. Though, while motivations have been researched and, thus, can be measured, the challenge when analyzing a P2P transaction is the evaluability of benefits or, more precisely, how social interaction can develop to be a benefit after the transaction has been concluded. A transaction starts with a want to either provide or consume goods or services. In this case, we can refer to the common motivations that are economic, social or environmental. However, during the process when socially engaging with the opponent peer, the final benefit may potentially change. Fundamental is that consuming peer will always satisfy a utilitarian need, whereas economic motivation or benefit equal monetary exchange and can be essential for both consuming and providing peer [23].

Transaction type and process submit information on whether the transaction is of reciprocal nature for providing and consuming peer. For example, transferring ownership will most likely imply economic loss for the providing party. However, a transaction process that consequently implies social exchange online or offline could result in social benefit. Thus, when sharing a meal, the providing party may have less of the meal, but in return, sharing the meal with the consuming party at the same time at the same place

can imply a gain in sociality. On the contrary, interactions that only exchange tools, cars, or accommodation [9] with no continuing social exchange in the process do not facilitate social exchange and, with it, no social benefit. Our theoretical framework, Fig. 3, serves to illustrate social interactions between providing and consuming peers and measures the occurrence and, with it, the significance of social exchange in the SE model. As a consequence, it seeks to determine when a SE model only uses social interaction as a basic instrument or when social interaction can become fundamental and predominant to the business transaction.

## 6 Conclusion

Reviewing more than 30 papers on the SE, we find that there is a lack of a uniform concept of the SE. The label is being criticized to a large extent and does not explain the diversity of P2P concepts. Resulting from an extensive literature review, we can find the common determinants that are new technologies, social interaction and the exchange of goods or services. Further, we divide three transaction types that consider ownership and access rather than the act of sharing as the dominant feature in the SE model, suggesting the AE label as a more tailored title. However, we do not exclude the possibility of sharing transactions but rather relate transaction types to transaction processes that define motivations and benefits. Thus, whether a transaction can be defined as a sharing transaction or an economic driven exchange is dependent on how this transaction between peers proceeds. Hence, P2P business transactions can be analyzed based on the suggested framework in order to clarify the nature of certain transactions: SE or AE.

Answering the guiding question of this paper—how the role of social interaction defines the concept of the SE—we conclude that the SE, and consequently the AE, is not only based on social interaction. Social interaction guides the definition of the P2P concept throughout, from first contact until the end of the transaction process. Thus, social interaction is a key factor in transactions between peers and can significantly affect motivations to participate in the SE. However, what remains unclear is how social interaction can transform business transactions during its process and, as a result, turns out as a social benefit. For further research we suggest to engage with the question on how social interaction during the transaction process can influence motivations of either providing or consuming peer to further participate in the SE. Further, we propose focusing on how offline social exchange during a transaction may differ from online social exchange in the P2P economy context. Lastly, empirical studies may highlight the impact of monetary compensation on perceiving social interaction with strangers as beneficial.

Concluding, this paper clarifies the SE concept, its features and determinants, elucidates the activities sharing and accessing, and, thus, creates a foundation for further research and P2P businesses to better establish customers.

**Acknowledgement.** This research was supported in part by grants no. CityU 21500714 from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong SAR awarded to the second author.

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