

# A stakeholders' perspective on the effects of the Sharing Economy in tourism and potential remedies

Alexander Frey<sup>1</sup>, Maximilian von Welck<sup>1</sup>, Manuel Trenz<sup>1</sup>, and Daniel Veit<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Augsburg, Chair of Information Systems and Management, Augsburg, Germany  
{alexander.frey,maximilian.welck,manuel.trenz,daniel.veit}@wiwi.uni-augsburg.de

**Abstract.** Due to the continuous growth of the Sharing Economy, its positive and negative consequences become highly visible in our daily life and are controversially discussed. The majority of existing studies on the impact of the Sharing Economy and corresponding actions stays on a descriptive level and is mostly limited to governmental intervention without incorporating other involved parties. This study provides empirical data on the impact of P2P accommodation sharing and derives precise and applicable recommendations for regulations, platform providers, and users of Sharing Economy services. We found that the consequences of this phenomenon depend on the kind of sharing and differs regionally. Our findings indicate that the Sharing Economy could be managed without necessarily imposing bans or adapting existing regulations.

**Keywords:** Sharing Economy, P2P accommodation, impact, recommendations.

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, the Sharing Economy is well known by a lot of people. Besides success stories on this phenomenon, a variety of negative headlines circulated through the media - in particular, associated with the prime examples Airbnb and Uber [1]. Sharing Economy supporters bring forward the arguments that it will lead to reduced unemployment, increased sustainability, and increased social interaction [2–4]. Critics dissent and argue that Sharing Economy firms circumvent consumer and employment rights [5] and, accordingly, unfairly disrupt existing industries [6].

These negative effects raise questions concerning the necessity for stricter regulations of the Sharing Economy, a question that is discussed controversially: some reject the idea of establishing new regulations as market failures will be countered by self-regulation [7], while others demand strict governmental intervention to protect the rights of consumers and employees [8].

Existing studies discussing the impact of the Sharing Economy tend to bring important ideas forward, but often lack empirical evidence supporting their feasibility. Studies in search of solutions for potential issues cover the phenomenon on a very broad level and mostly are limited to the intervention and regulations of the government without incorporating other parties that also shape the influence of Sharing Economy services such as platform providers or service users.

In order to gain in-depth insights on the impact of the Sharing Economy, we focus our research on peer-to-peer (P2P) accommodation sharing – one of the fastest-growing types of sharing economy services [9]. In contrast to an all-encompassing perspective, this focus allows us to directly link effects to precise and applicable recommendations for regulations, platform providers, and users that go beyond regulation and also consider facilitation of the Sharing Economy. Based on interviews with representatives of the tourism industry, we aim to answer the following research question: *How does P2P accommodation potentially impact our society, the tourism market, and the users and how can these effects be supported and mitigated?*

In the following, we provide a conceptual understanding of the Sharing Economy and review extant literature on its impact. We then describe the qualitative research methodology before presenting the potential impact and recommendations to address them. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings.

## 2 Theoretical foundation

### 2.1 The Sharing Economy

In line with common definitions, we see the Sharing Economy as an umbrella concept encompassing different forms of consumption [10–13] that focus on capturing and redistribution of idling capacity [14] and eventually lead to a reduced need for ownership [15]. We investigate one of the fastest-growing type of Sharing Economy services [9] and focus on P2P accommodation services like Airbnb, wimdu, or 9flats.

### 2.2 Studies on the impact of the Sharing Economy

The impact of the Sharing Economy can be classified as economic, ecological, or social impact [16]. We review prior studies on those aspects and reveal a collection of effects that are partially contradicting and span across a broad variety of contexts.

**Economic impact.** A variety of studies claim that the Sharing Economy has both positive and negative economic effects. It is seen as a way to save money for resource providers and consumers through cost sharing [3, 17]. Carsharing, for instance, reduces ownership duties and lowers the number of vehicles held by individuals [18]. By providing new forms of work (e.g. renting out own property), the Sharing Economy may decrease unemployment [2]. In the tourism industry, the reduction of costs leads to an increase of travel frequency, length of stay and expenditures at the destination [19]. The higher expenditures benefits the entire tourism industry and may generate new jobs [19]. However, Zervas et al. [6] show that P2P accommodation negatively affects lower-priced hotels not catering business travelers. Therefore, the marginal effect of P2P accommodation decreases as its size increases [20]. This is aggravated by the fact that most jobs which are created by these services are part-time employment [8] and are often described as “precarious and grey workforce” [5].

**Ecological impact.** Sharing Economy services in general are said to reduce waste and carbon emission, as compared to traditional businesses [3, 21]. Furthermore, it should

result in a more efficient use of resources [22]. However, lower prices of providers and increased supply may lead to higher consumption which would compensate the claimed positive effects on emissions and waste [8]. From a tourist perspective, the increased travel frequency caused by P2P accommodation may lead to an increased resource exploitation and overcrowding in certain destinations [19].

**Social impact.** Besides economic and ecological impacts, the literature states that Sharing Economy users aim for new social connections [23]. A variety of studies found that the Sharing Economy conveys the perception of belonging to a community [11, 24]. P2P accommodation services satisfy in many cases this need by facilitating direct interactions with the host and hereby ease the access to local communities [25]. Renting a shared room may yield a more intense social interaction with the hosts, compared to renting an entire house or apartment [19].

### **3 Research design**

#### **3.1 Research methodology**

We draw on a multiple-case study approach to uncover the impact of the Sharing Economy and to derive recommendations. This method is particularly suitable in this context for three reasons. First, it is in line with our goal to derive an in-depth understanding of the impact of the Sharing Economy [26]. Second, the case study approach is particularly suitable to investigate how and why certain impacts of the Sharing Economy occur and to derive recommendations for regulations, platform providers, and users of these services [26]. Third, we are able to triangulate our insights by combining multiple sources of evidence [27] such as interview data and other available documents (e.g. reports) of different tourism and hotels associations.

We follow a multiple-case study design [26] with an interpretive stance to understand the phenomena by exploring the subjective and intersubjective meanings of participants when they interact with their environment [28]. We are conscious that the investigations are shaped by predefined beliefs, interests, and values of the researchers [29]. With our multiple-case study approach and the interpretative stance we are able to deeply understand the potential impact of the Sharing Economy in the context of accommodation sharing without manipulation or explicit control of variables [29]. The collection of data from multiple organizations supports us in studying the phenomenon in different settings and enables cross-case analysis [26].

We choose the positive and negative impact of the Sharing Economy on the economy, on the environment, and on the society as unit of analysis to derive recommended actions for regulations, Sharing Economy platform providers, and users of these offers.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

For our study, we confine on one of the fastest-growing types of sharing economy services, namely P2P accommodation [9]. By focusing on one sector, the interviewed associations are comparable in their environmental setting. We collected data from 13 tourism associations as well as three hotel and restaurant associations representing the German hospitality sector. As they stand in for the flourishing of a region they have a deeply grounded view on P2P accommodation and observe it practically. In their role as overarching industry proxies, they collect and integrate the perspectives of all involved parties in their area and, therefore, are excellent objects for uncovering the impact of P2P accommodation. Each is responsible for the tourism marketing in their region. However, the associations differ regionally and, therefore, represent different types of tourism (e.g. city vs. nature tourism), allowing us to uncover the impact of P2P accommodation in different settings by cross-case analysis. At the same time, agreement between different associations points towards possible paths on how to reduce negative and foster positive impact for the region, hosts, and individuals. We combined different sources of evidence and triangulated interviews with presentations and reports of the associations and data extracted from news and websites.

We developed a semi-structured interview guideline [27, 30] with 64 questions based on the literature on the potential impact of the Sharing Economy [6, 19, 20, 25, 31], surrounding conditions [22, 32, 33], drivers and motives of the Sharing Economy [11, 24, 34]. This guideline was used to conduct 16 semi-structured interviews with top level representatives of the respective associations. The interviews, with an average length of 42 minutes, were recorded, transcribed, and coded.

We first coded the interviews regarding potential impacts of the Sharing Economy, based on the different areas of impact (economic, ecological and social). Then we explored who is affected by this impact and derived three different actors: the society, the tourism market, and users of Sharing Economy offers. Based on the consensus among different approaches named by the interviewed stakeholders as potential solutions for these effects, we finally derived six applicable recommendations to positively shape the effects of P2P accommodation and show how regulations, platform providers, and users could contribute to these actions.

## 4 Findings

This section describes the findings of our analysis. We structured our results according to the three affected parties (society, market, and users).

### 4.1 Impact of the Sharing Economy

**Impact on society.** Our analysis indicates that P2P accommodation has both positive and negative effects for the society. P2P accommodation services seem to attract new guests in a specific region. This is triggered, on the one hand, by providing further accommodation options to tourists who cannot, or are unwilling to stay in hotels. On

the other hand, P2P accommodation services increase publicity to less well-known regions, in particular, for rural areas and tourism with natural heritage:

*“It is certainly positive that one [thus] reaches target audiences, which one wouldn’t reach otherwise. [...] The success of Airbnb, or also of Wimdu, shows the potential [of these new types of hospitality].” (I2)*

In line with the findings from Tussyadiah and Pesonen [19], our analysis denotes positive economic side effects: an increased amount of visitors leads to an increase in touristic consumer spending (e.g. for dining out, museum visits, etc.):

*“But at least the other parties that participate in tourism, namely, the guests will eat out, go out for drinks. [...], this will have [positive] economic impact.” (I2)*

Third, in rural areas, private rental is an important part of the economy [35]. Yet, in many of these regions, private rental is declining. P2P accommodation services help to compensate this trend, to preserve the rural structures, and the village life by leveraging the above mentioned economic side effects:

*“Airbnb helps to compensate the declining offers of private accommodation. It is important that private accommodation exists. Especially, rural areas with traditional structures need holiday guests to keep up these rural structures.” (I10)*

Besides positive effects, the Sharing Economy also bears negative economic effects for the society. Critics claim that Sharing Economy suppliers (e.g. hosts) actively bypass existing regulations [7, 8]. Some, for instance, do not adhere to applicable safety rules (e.g. fire protection) [22, 36], or avoid taxes and further royalties (e.g. visitor’s tax) [37]. The missing transparency and the lack of cooperation of P2P accommodation services impedes the work of tax authorities and control organizations which leads to tax losses and even conscious delusion of tax authorities:

*“These [nights’ stays] are missing in taxes. This means, the profit is taken from the destinations. [...] We know of apartment blocks, which have fantasy doorbell nameplates, to confound the tax authorities.” (I3)*

**Impact on the tourism market.** Offers in P2P accommodation also have implications for the tourism market. By leveraging technology, the Sharing Economy facilitates new ways of how goods and services are offered [38] and leads to an increased competition for existing market participants [4], which will be beneficial for the market since the hotel industry now has to compete with innovative services:

*“Prices and accommodation became more transparent. This might lead to bandwagon effects [that hosts need to modernize their holiday apartments]. [...] Landlords of holiday apartments in our area are fully loaded at the moment, they have not yet come to the conclusion that they need to change.” (I11)*

Again, these positive effects are confronted with negative effects. We discussed how the breach of regulations negatively affects the society. Yet, it also distorts the competition. By ignoring regulations, P2P accommodation offers gain competitive advantage over competitors [22] and, consequently, can offer lower prices than the traditional businesses [8]. This applies in particular in times of high demand:

*“Throughout the year we don’t have problems. But with certain events (e.g. the Oktoberfest), [...] a lot of people offer their own sleeping rooms, [...] this forces us to reduce our [otherwise increased] prices.” (I12)*

**Impact on users.** Apart from the impact on the society and the market, our analysis denotes impact for consumers and providers of Sharing Economy services. If private individuals become a potential peer provider for goods or services, the supply capacity increases drastically [5]. This increased supply encompasses not only offers similar to existing ones, but also an extension to the existing portfolio:

*“Take the [name of exhibition]. [...] At that time, [the city] is fully occupied. [...] Naturally companies come up with the idea to have a look at Airbnb.” (I3)*

The Sharing Economy claims to increase the social interaction among the involved actors [25]. Our analysis indicates that, if hosts act as tourist guides or do share their apartments with the guests, P2P accommodation can indeed increase the social interaction. However, this effect decreases with an increasing frequency of renting:

*“I am certain that some people enjoy hosting guests three or four times a year, and to show them around in the city. [...] But they won’t do this twice a month.” (I9)*

Likewise, if the host is neither sharing the apartment with the guests, nor acting as a local guide, the positive social interaction may reverse in even more anonymity, than in hotels, where one at least regularly interacts with staff.

Finally, the issue of the digital divide in the context of the Sharing Economy needs to be discussed [39]. Some private lenders and renters are without the necessary access (e.g., due to lack of knowledge or infrastructure) to those technologies which are necessary to participate in the Sharing Economy. This could lead to crowding out of traditional private renters and lenders of holiday flats:

*“We observe a predatory competition. [...] Grandmother Jane Doe is, naturally, not connected to digital platforms.” (I11)*

Finally, Sharing Economy platforms claim to be solely intermediaries and not the provider of resources. Thus, they do not assume any liabilities, which leaves any risks with the individual providers and consumers (consciously or unknowingly) [8, 22]:

*“Hosts often don’t even know which risks and which insurance risks they take.” (I3)*

## **4.2 Recommended actions**

This section describes a solution-oriented approach to overcome the previously discussed negative effects of P2P accommodation and to promote the positive effects.

**Improvements of infrastructure.** One way of facilitating the positive effects of P2P accommodation is to improve the public transport infrastructure. This includes an extension of the public transport, for instance, by carsharing with participation of municipalities to avoid the necessity of arriving with own vehicles in a tourist region:

*“Nowadays it is desired that guests also use trains. [...] With the help of the visitor’s tax, it is possible to rent a car [...] for free [in certain regions].” (I11)*

Some regions in Germany still have limited access to broadband internet [40], which increases the negative effect of the digital divide. There is an ongoing debate in German Federal ministries how to accelerate the roll-out of broadband internet access [41], since the improvement of infrastructure lies in the responsibility of regulations and telecommunication providers and can facilitate the distribution and scope of the Sharing Economy, while mitigating the effect of the digital divide.

**Better controls instead of more regulations.** There is a variety of sources claiming that further regulation of P2P accommodation is not necessary, since market failures will regulate themselves [5, 7, 8, 42]. On the one hand, many sharing platforms check their users before entering their network and sort out automatically any black sheep of the actors after incidents through rating and feedback systems [8, 38]. On the other hand, the transparency enabled through information technology decreases the chance for undesired behavior [38]. The majority of our interviewees agrees that existing laws are sufficient for fair competition, as long as these are generally enforced:

*“As a hotel, you have to provide two emergency exits. [...] In a private holiday flat, you are left without any emergency exits. [...] We don’t need to curtail the Sharing Economy, but it should adhere to the same regulations as others.” (13)*

For real private offers (e.g. if the host shares, from time to time, his or her apartment with guests), no tax problems arise, since these hosts don’t have to pay taxes:

*“Municipalities say that as long as the host remains in the apartment, we will tolerate these sharing models. [...] in [all] other cases they step in.” (13)*

A more problematic situation arises for offers that are actually commercial, but operate under the smoke screen of private rentals. Therefore, clear boundaries for private rentals have to be defined, and effective control mechanisms established:

*“Overregulation is completely unnecessary. We need clear boundaries for private and commercial activities. Thresholds could help [...], but the best regulations will achieve little, if the market is not audited.” (19)*

In the long run, if these regulations are enforced, the market will regulate itself:

*“For many hosts, renting out flats is only profitable in a gray area. [...] If certain regulations have to be met, then these offers would certainly be culled.” (18)*

It’s the government’s duty to assure that regulations are met by intensifying controls. These controls create political pressure for platform providers and could convince them to cooperate with the government. In the long run, this leads to an increased transparency on the market mentioned in the next paragraph.

**Increasing transparency.** An increased transparency concerning P2P accommodation offers and the numbers of users could contribute to both, society and platform providers, as it could mitigate the circumvention of taxes, by ensuring that tourists are registered and, consequently, pay their visitor’s taxes and further royalties:

*“Obliging platform providers to certain transparency towards authorities, [...], so that taxes are paid on commercial activities. [...] Airbnb already moves a little [...], yet it is still not ready to provide municipalities with their user data.” (16)*

For the provider of the sharing platform, an increased transparency helps to transform the business into a sustainable business, in particular in terms of scalability:

*“[More transparency] would facilitate a fair trade. [...] Especially if one wants to grow and expand [...] it is sensible to cooperate, to reach, with refreshed and rejuvenated established concepts, further positive effects for the market.” (I6)*

Third, visitor’s tax and other royalties are a necessity for municipalities to preserve the touristic infrastructure. Thus, if sharing platforms facilitate the comprehensive evasion of taxes and royalties, this would, in the long run, contribute to a deterioration of the local touristic conditions and, therefore, reduce the attractiveness of a region:

*“The landlord needs to complete a federal registration form for each guest. I don’t know whether the tax, which is essential for the survival for the touristic infrastructure, is deducted in all cases [of P2P accommodation offers].” (I11)*

Besides the mentioned political pressure, cooperation of the platforms in form of providing data on offers could contribute to increased transparency and could transform the business from a legal grey area into a sustainable business.

**Comply with existing policies.** A trivial approach to overcome the majority of the negative impact of the Sharing Economy is to comply with existing policies. This includes that both platforms and users observe applicable laws and regulations to eliminate the distortion of competition and to create fair conditions for all:

*“Airbnb became a professional business, thus, one needs to take care that all participants have to adhere to the same regulations.” (I4)*

One way to achieve compliance with policies, is to offer an incentive for users:

*“Some [regions] introduced clever guest card systems, which created a large covetousness by the guests. This card permits free entrance to mountain railways, swimming pools [...] and led to a strong increase in paid visitor’s taxes.” (I10)*

Increased controls could contribute to the compliance of users. For the platform, the transformation into a sustainable business and the increasing professionalism of offers entails compliance with existing regulations. From a consumer’s perspective, certain incentives can improve compliance with existing policies (e.g. discounts).

**Assure quality of offers.** Besides complying with the policies previously mentioned, the quality of the offered accommodation should be assured:

*“We, as a destination, have certain quality requirements. [...] It is not about offering just anything. We want to convey a positive image.” (I5)*

The assurance of the offered quality should not only avoid negative effects on prices and prevent a race to the bottom, but also ensure that the image a tourist destination wants to create and transfer to its guests corresponds to Sharing Economy offers, in particular private rentals. The following quote highlights this issue:

*“We pay attention to this [quality], [...] if you suffer from a reputational damage, as a tourist region, then it takes a long time before you can catch up.” (I11)*

Besides actions triggered by regulations, the increasing professionalism of P2P accommodation services forces platforms to ensure the offers' quality, since the majority of users demand a certain standard of quality.

**Increase responsibility.** Another approach to overcome certain negative effects of P2P accommodation is to express the responsibilities for platforms and users more clearly. On the platform side, an increased responsibility to clarify rights and duties of guests and hosts would contribute to a more enduring business. First, as mentioned above, if the business grows the transfer of royalties for P2P accommodation offers needs to be assured. Second, platform providers should understand their responsibility to inform users and to assure legal royalties. For the platform, it's advantageous to control for duties and constraints of users, before municipalities intervene:

*"It is now on the [holiday home] suppliers to make the next move, and naturally on the platform providers, [...] who should assign duties to their [holiday home] suppliers, before the municipalities pass corresponding laws." (I3)*

The duty of the platform to inform users counters to the unconsciously taken risks, mentioned above, and at the same time, serves as safeguard for the users:

*"Hosts often don't even know which risks they take. [...] If something happens, then they are left out in the rain. [...] Here we need improvements. [...] It is the same with carsharing, [but] there we have indemnity insurances." (I3)*

By informing the users on their duties, the platform calls attention to the host's responsibilities for the guests and the society, in particular with an increasing professionalism of offers. If the platform wants to operate a sustainable business, it has to be aware of its responsibility. The same applies to the user's side. By being aware of risks and duties, the host should realize that the guests' wellbeing is very important. For consumers, an increased awareness of the risks will make them demand certain safety and quality standards from their host.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

We provide insights for the effects of the Sharing Economy on the tourism industry. Our analysis shows that P2P accommodation has both positive effects (e.g. increasing the attractiveness of a destination) and negative effects (e.g. distortion of competition by undercutting regulations) on the tourism industry. We recommend six actions to positively shape the effects of P2P accommodation. Some of these can be triggered by regulations, whereas others are dependent on platform providers and users.

Our cross-case analysis indicates that these impacts differ depending on the type of accommodation sharing and the geographic region of the destination. In contrast to other studies social effects of P2P accommodation [25], we found that a positive social impact solely arises if the host truly shares the apartment. However, if the host is neither sharing the apartment with the guests, nor acting as a local guide, this effect may reverse in even more anonymity, since users have less interaction with staff than in hotels. Contradicting to studies on negative economic effects [6], we found that effects differ regionally. Rural tourism destinations welcome the advent of P2P

accommodation, since these regions were highly dependent on the rental of private accommodation in the past. Therefore, the Sharing Economy contributes to the existence of these areas by leveraging economic side effects. However, for urban areas and destinations with hotel tourism, a more negative picture of the Sharing Economy is drawn, as it is doubted that all taxes and duties are paid.

This study aims to contribute to research in two ways: First, we enrich the understanding of potential impacts of the Sharing Economy by providing qualitative empirical data from the tourism industry. The more fine-grained examination on the impact of the Sharing Economy shows that, although focusing the investigation on P2P accommodation, the overall effects of the Sharing Economy not only depend on the type of sharing (e.g. carsharing or accommodation sharing), but also highly differ regionally. Second, we provide avenues to overcome the negative effects and highlight how each party (regulations, platform providers, and users) can contribute to these issues. We show that not only the government and platform providers, but also users could serve as a trigger for better and fair conditions in the Sharing Economy.

Still, we need to acknowledge some limitations to our study. First, we focused on P2P accommodation in Germany. As mentioned above, the results might be different for other types of sharing (e.g. carsharing) or other countries. However, we choose a sample within the same industry and regulatory system to ensure the comparability of the findings. Second, we follow a qualitative approach with an interpretive stance. We recognize that reality is socially constructed, and that the collected data is subject to human interpretation. Accordingly, instead of aiming at generalization, we contribute to the understanding of the Sharing Economy in this specific context [30].

P2P accommodation sharing has without doubt positive impacts on an economic and social level. The analysis with focus on one type of the Sharing Economy and the incorporation of regional differences allowed us to gain a deep contextual understanding of impact and possible actions. In contrast to common belief, our findings suggest that the executive could facilitate those positive impacts and mitigate the negative ones without necessarily imposing bans or adapting existing regulations.

## 6 Acknowledgements

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