**The Sharing Economy**

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What came to be called the sharing economy emerged on the U.S. scene in 2008. Originally termed “collaborative consumption” (Botsman and Rogers 2010) it was born out of technological possibility and economic necessity. Technological possibility came via platforms and apps[[1]](#endnote-1) that could provide real time information, use algorithms for complex scheduling, facilitate easy payment methods, and importantly, crowd-source ratings and reputational data from large numbers of users. Economic necessity was caused by a crippling recession, which hit young people especially hard.

Collaborative consumption is based on the idea that there is considerable excess capacity in the assets held by ordinary households—rooms, cars, and durable goods such as tools or photography equipment. The idea was to create a new market that allows people to rent or freely share those assets to others. While these kinds of transactions were not new, they had been mostly confined to known others or members of ongoing social networks, and were mostly informal. They were also not highly monetized. The hope of platform founders and consultants was that they could transform this informal, thin market into a large and growing one that was based not on existing social ties, but on transactions among strangers. To do so, they touted not only the financial benefits of the monetized versions of collaborative consumption, but a range of supposed social benefits. Sharing rooms on Airbnb was going to reduce the construction of new hotels, thereby reducing environmental impacts. Ridesharing allowed people to make new friends, thereby countering widespread social disconnection.

The prevalence of these common good claims helped fuel a robust public debate about the sector. Critics ridiculed the idea that renting rooms or driving for money had anything to do with sharing (Hill 2015; Reich 2015). Labor advocates derided platforms for exploiting the people doing the work (Scholz 2017). Housing activists responded to reductions in the supply of rental housing and the transformation of neighborhoods into Airbnb enclaves (Slee 2015). Consumer advocates worried about safety, discrimination and accessibility. The business and popular press published numerous stories about the sector, from ebullient predictions that it would eventually “disrupt” everything, to lurid tales of exchanges gone wrong. Proponents and critics predicted pervasive “Uberification.” Controversy continues, largely in the regulatory realm, as cities and states have begun to address lodging and transport issues. Labor groups and community activists have squared off against the companies and their supportive users, resulting in ongoing contentious politics. However, throughout the controversy, the role of consumers in the sharing economy has been far less fraught. They have mainly responded with enthusiasm and appreciation for these new services.

While collaborative consumption (durable goods sharing) is the discursive core of the sector, the term “sharing economy” came to denote a larger set of activities, including goods exchange, labor services, and efforts to build social connection. Although the for-profit platforms have gotten the bulk of public attention, the Great Recession also spurred the creation of many not-for-profit, community-based economic initiatives that embraced the term “sharing economy.” These include neighborhood goods sharing platforms, gifting sites, makerspaces, food swaps, time banks, repair collectives, freestores, foodwaste apps, and many other innovations using technology for the common good. Of course, many of these initiatives pre-dated the recession, but the term “sharing economy” came into use in its aftermath.

Relatively quickly, the sharing economy became a global phenomenon. In part this was because the two biggest platforms—Airbnb and Uber—expanded internationally, Airbnb by 2009 and Uber in 2011. Competitors sprung up around the world, especially in the transportation sector. But globalization was not merely a big company phenomenon. The concept of sharing also sparked the imagination of city officials and planners, local entrepreneurs, and community activists. Seoul branded itself a “sharing city.” Amsterdam embraced sharing as well. The result has been that both global platforms and both local variations are flourishing. In this chapter we focus on the U.S., as that is the location for our research. However, a number of the findings we report on with respect to consumers and providers are also relevant in other countries. Major areas of difference between the U.S. and other nations’ sharing sectors seem to be in regulation and government policy and the relative importance of non-profit, or solidaristic sharing, especially in Europe. For example, a recent study of commons and sharing initiatives in the Belgian city of Ghent (300,000 population) found 500 separate projects in operation (Bauwens and Onzia 2017).

We have been studying the “sharing economy” since 2011, as part of a MacArthur Foundation project.[[2]](#endnote-2) Our research team is comprised of eight PhD students or recent graduates in sociology. We have studied eleven sharing economy cases. We began with four non-profits—a timebank, a food swap, a makerspace, and open educational resources. In 2013 we turned to for-profit platforms, where our cases have been Airbnb, RelayRides (now rebranded as Turo), TaskRabbit, Uber, Lyft, Postmates and Favor. Our final case is Stocksy, a provider cooperative for stock photographers. Our research has largely been qualitative—in the non-profit cases we did participant observation and in-depth interviews. In the for-profits we did interviews, and in the case of Airbnb, we collected a database of hundreds of thousands of listings which we are analyzing. We currently have more than 350 interviews with sharing economy participants, including members of sites, consumers, and people who are earning on the platforms (ie., providers). To obtain interviews we used a variety of sampling approaches, attempting random recruitment whenever possible. In the pages to follow, references to “our research” will be this body of data.

Because the sharing economy is a new and rapidly evolving sector, there is a limited body of literature to draw on. Furthermore, today’s findings may not be a good guide to the future. But there is enough work that has been done to report on various aspects of this new market. First, we turn to a discussion of definitions and terminology. We then discuss research on participants’ experiences in the sector, as well as critics’ views and how they relate to larger trends in consumer culture. We then turn to research in a few specific areas: inequality and discrimination, as well as the conflicts over regulation of the two biggest platforms: Airbnb and Uber. We conclude with some thoughts about the future of the sharing economy.

**Definitions and scope: what is the sharing economy?**

The term “collaborative consumption” came into use via the efforts of a management consultant named Rachel Botsman. However, by 2010, the preferred term had become the “sharing economy.” While some contend its earliest use is unknown, others claim it originates from Lawrence Lessig’s *Remix* (Lessig 2008)*.* This attribution suggests a connection to the history of collaborative online activity. Aspects of the sharing economy were already well established, such as crowd-sourcing of ratings and reputational data on sites like eBay, Trip Advisor and Yelp, as well as sharing of files and other content. The phenomenon of “collaboration” had been thriving for some time in the open source software movement (Benkler 2006), citizen science and distributed computing (Benkler 2004). We mention this because the connection to these earlier digital activities suggests a different history than popular origin stories, for example Brian Chesky of Airbnb’s decision to rent out his air mattress during a space crunch in San Francisco. Linking the sharing sector to earlier cyber-utopian ideas and communities de-centers the role of venture capital and acknowledges the aspirational beginnings of some platforms, as well as the not-for-profit portion of the sector. Many participants online peer-to-peer communities believed they would be democratizing, empowering, and perhaps even an alternative to market capitalism (Benkler 2006). Similar ideas have also animated many in the sharing sector.

Many identify the core of the sharing economy as the use of idle assets (Frenken and Schor 2017). Airbnb is the classic example, but in the early days of UberX and Lyft the idea was that people with a car and spare time could put those “idle” resources to use as well, and some research claims ridehailing drivers are more efficient than conventional taxis (Cramer and Krueger 2016). There were also a number of platforms that promoted non-monetized exchanges, such as loaning and gifting. Prominent examples include Yerdle (goods loaning), Landshare (pairing would-be gardeners with landholders), and Neighborgoods and ShareSomeSugar (neighborhood-based loaning sites). While Airbnb, Uber and Lyft scaled rapidly, none of the four just mentioned are still operating. The sharing economy also came to cover platforms that specialized in “gig labor,” such as generalized task and errands sites (TaskRabbit, Zaarly, Takl), specialized task sites (DogVacay), and delivery services (Deliveroo, Favor, Postmates). Some observers also included sites that were attempting to establish second-hand markets as part of the sharing economy. This category, which in recent decades had been low-value, localized, and under-developed, was boosted by crowd-sourced ratings and reputational data (eBay) and convenience (CraigsList). Here there were also for-profit and non-profit offerings, including freecycle, ThredUp (the Netflix of apparel, a for-profit) and Swapstyle (apparel exchange).

In practice, the terminology has been analytically incoherent. One reason, pointed out by critics, is that many of these sites, such as ride-hailing or gig labor apps, developed in ways that left them with few or no true sharing features. Russell Belk (2014) has claimed that sharing cannot include exchange of money, however, this position has been persuasively criticized (2015). The weaknesses of the “sharing cannot include money” perspective is also evident from work in economics and sociology, on the complexity of motives (Zelizer 1997). Belk and others reproduce popular tropes, adopting what Zelizer (2005) has termed the “hostile worlds” perspective. As John (2016) has noted, sharing is a polysemic term that covers multiple practices. We have found that participants on some platforms do use the terminology of sharing to describe their activities (Fitzmaurice et al. 2018), however Ravenelle (2017), who studied providers in New York City, finds that those who lack substantial assets, such as Uber drivers and TaskRabbits, reject that usage. She terms the sector “rational capitalism.”

Another terminological issue is that very similar platforms are treated differently. Uber has never considered itself part of the “sharing economy” but Lyft, a nearly identical platform, has. Some gig labor platforms (TaskRabbit) are in; while Amazon’s MechanicalTurk is not. In large part, platforms have self-selected into or out of the “sharing” sector (Schor 2014). As Richardson (Richardson 2015) has argued, the term has become performative.

**Demographics**

Who is active in the sharing economy? Overall, usage has been structured by age and cultural capital, as well as geography. The sharing economy began in urban areas and remains disproportionately urban. Furthermore, participants are young and highly educated. Although hard numbers are difficult to obtain because surveys have been sporadic and sample sizes small, there is widespread agreement that college students, recent graduates and the under-35 age group made up the bulk of early participants. Even as the sector mainstreamed, its makeup remained disproportionately young and highly educated, on both the consumer and the provider sides. A 2016 national survey by the Pew organization found that 18-29 year olds are more likely to be consumers of ridehailing, clothing rental, and co-working spaces than older age groups. The 29-44 age group is more represented in lodging (likely because of cost). The youngest age group are also heavily represented as buyers of second hand or handmade goods and consumers of gig labor for household tasks. Among 18-29 year olds, 15% had used ridehailing services, 11% homesharing, 4% coworking and task labor and 2% had rented clothing from platforms. Overall, usage begins to drop off significantly after age 45 (Pew Research Center 2016b). A 2015 survey found that 34% of U.S. residents between the ages of 16 and 34 said they belonged to a sharing service or expected to within the next year (Bloomberg Brief 2015). The provider side also skews toward youth, with Pew reporting that 18-29 year olds were twice as likely to participate in gig work and task sites than the population as a whole (Pew Research Center 2016a).

Sharing economy participants are highly educated. The Pew survey found that across many sites, the college educated were more likely to be using services, and nearly half of this group was already users. TaskRabbit reported that 70% of its providers had a college education or more (Newton 2013). Hall and Krueger (2016) report from a survey of 601 Uber drivers that 37% have a college degree, and 40% have either an Associate’s Degree or some college. In addition, 11% a have post-graduate degree. These education levels are far in excess of the population as a whole. In our research, we find almost no participants who have less than a high school diploma. Most are college graduates (or in college) and a significant fraction have graduate degrees. The high levels of education in our sample can be partially explained by the fact that most of our respondents were based in Boston, but high education levels are common on most platforms.

**Participants’ Experiences**

Much of the public discourse on the sharing economy has focused on the experiences of workers, with widespread criticism of Uber and similar platforms for their low wages and poor treatment of drivers. There has been far less attention paid to to the experiences of participants on other platforms, or either as producers or consumers. In our research, we find that the sharing economy is a productive site for understanding consumer trends, as well as developing theoretical approaches to the sociology of consumption.

Users are a high cultural capital (hereafter, HCC) group, with a distinctive, trendsetting habitus. Furthermore, because they are young, most have limited economic capital. This was especially true in the early years, during the Great Recession. Participants looked to platforms to save and earn money and many of our respondents, especially on Airbnb, were both consumers and earners, Furthermore, a number of our non-profit cases require engagement on both sides of the exchange (e.g., food swap, timebank). Thus, the strict demarcation between consumer and producer is not always operative in this sector, although at the low wage end of the gig labor market there is less overlap.

While economic motives have been important in attracting users, participants also embraced the “sharing economy” because it offered a chance to enact moral projects and practice a distinctive eco-habitus that had already been emerging in urban areas. (Carfagna et al. 2014). It is rooted in a shift of young HCC consumers toward a more bodily, material and locally rooted set of practices. It is also highly structured through a particular moral orientation.

A key part of this orientation is that across both for-profit platforms and non-profit community sites we have found that participants articulate critiques of corporate capitalism, often for reasons tied to consumption. In some ways, this may not be surprising, as young adults’ attitudes toward capitalism have become rather negative. In 2011, more 18-29 year olds had a negative view of “capitalism” than a positive one (47% to 46%) (Pew Research Center 2011). Perhaps more surprisingly, this age group also held a more positive view of “socialism” than “capitalism” (49% to 46%). This shift occurred on the heels of the Great Recession, which represented a massive failure of economic opportunity and fairness, especially for young people. While our respondents do not understand the sharing economy as a “socialist” project, it represents an alternative to corporate capitalism and dominant cultures of consumption (Fitzmaurice et al. 2018). This is especially true for participants in the non-profits and the more remunerative platforms. (It is less true of the lowest-end gig work, such as ridehailing and food delivery.)[[3]](#endnote-3) Respondents consistently disparage impersonal hotel chains, anonymous service encounters, and ecologically-oblivious companies operating at transnational scale. Many shop at thrift stores and farmers’ markets. They prefer to avoid global supply chains, processed foods, and mass produced items. Some even attempt to de-link from commercial markets altogether, opting for lifestyles of bartering, DIY provisioning, and acquisition via gift or secondhand markets. They express relational goals for transactions, and believe that economic activity should foster well-being, via financial and personal autonomy, as well as social connectedness and meaning. They indict corporate life for failing on these terms.

In many ways, sharing economy participants’ anti-corporate attitudes seem to align them with the critics of neo-liberalism. Indeed, neoliberal capitalism is a trope they frequently reference as a foil.

However, their views of the sharing economy differ from those of most critics of neoliberalism. The latter see the sharing economy as the cutting edge of a rapacious system destroying yet another social realm. By commodifying everyday life, it turns people into neoliberal subjects and crowds out altruistic sharing. Furthermore, the critics see platform sharing as a fraudulent concept, because it involves the pursuit of economic gain, rather than genuine solidarity. Participants are merely “sharing the scraps,” with platforms appropriating the bulk of the value generated (Reich 2015). In the critics’ view, the platforms are creating an even more efficient, ruthless and totalistic system of exploitation in which the ongoing risk shift onto workers is accelerated (Hill 2015; Scholz 2017; Slee 2015). As Evgeny Morozov (2013) has argued: “The sharing economy amplifies the worst excesses of the dominant economic model: it is neoliberalism on steroids.”

Research with actual participants gives a mixed picture. Alexandrea Ravenelle (2016, 2017), who interviewed 100 providers on four platforms in New York argues that they are unlikely to consider their activities sharing, and that they are critical of the platforms. By contrast, Germann Molz (2013) argues that Couchsurfing, a free hospitality platform, functions as a “moral economy” in which participants are highly invested in this ethical form of travel. Ikkala and Lampinen (2015) find that hospitality is an important motivator for Airbnb hosts. Ladegaard’s (2018) Airbnb hosts aim to meet and connect with exotic others, although they put limits on the extent of exoticism they desire—and aim for what he a terms a “comfortable” level of alterity.

In our research, we find that respondents have social orientations to their sharing practices (Fitzmaurice et al. 2018). For them, the sector offers social connection, flexibility, autonomy, and novel means for entrepreneurship and money-making. They identify as actors in an innovative attempt to transform markets from the bottom up, to make them morally accountable, and forces for social good. So, for example, they experience their peer-to-peer exchanges as having higher levels of personal accountability and social interaction. They engage in face-to-face connection and distinguish exchanges from commodified transactions with impersonal corporations. This is one reason they like platform payment mechanisms (credit cards and electronic transfers) which operate “backstage” or out of view and allow them to avoid the awkwardness of discussing money in this personalized relationship. Ikkala and Lampinen (2015) find that hosts feel monetization frees them to engage in hospitality with a greater sense of ease and control and ease. We also find that participants hold ideals of community, seeing trading partners as potential long-lasting connections. Rather than extending their critiques of the market to this sector, our participants see an opportunity to build an innovative kind of market.

In an early paper (Schor 2015) on three for-profit platforms (Airbnb, RelayRides and TaskRabbit) with a sample of just over 40 earners, we found strong social motives among the three distinct economic models of behavior we found. Indeed, social orientation and inter-personal relations were key for a plurality of the group. While they do appreciate the ability to earn money, their orientation was relational. Some refrain from charging what the market will bear for ethical reasons. Some Airbnb hosts in this group offer their homes gratis on Couchsurfing, or claim that they would continue to host even if they had all the money they could want. They describe socializing with their guests and in some cases developing long-term friendships. TaskRabbits also frequently discuss the social dimensions of their work. By contrast, under one-third of the sample conform to the assumptions of the neoliberal subject. These *homo economici*, who are more likely to be found on RelayRides and TaskRabbit than Airbnb, are income maximizers with limited social motivations. Among the third group, *homo instrumentalis,* platforms are just a way to earn the limited amounts of money they need to meet their expenses. They are not oriented to maximization and are motivated more by survival than wealth accumulation. They do not have the entrepreneurial, risk-taking attitude characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity.

However, it is also the case that not all socially oriented participants are satisfied. A number of these platforms fail to deliver durable social ties even for people who want them. At the timebank, we found many participants were disappointed in the extent of social connection they developed (Dubois, Schor, and Carfagna 2014). At the food swap, some participants articulated regret that their socializing with fellow swappers never rose to the level of meeting outside the swap (Fitzmaurice and Schor 2018). In her study of carsharing, Fenton found that the two parties to the transaction often never met, on account of remote access technology (Fenton 2015). We also find this with some Airbnb users. Parigi and State (Parigi and State 2014) also found that over time the ability of Couchsurfers to make durable ties declined.

We found that most of our respondents have constructed an economic imaginary which is pre-capitalist, pre-modern and rooted in a vision of the domestic sphere (Fitzmaurice et al. 2018). For many of them, such as Airbnb hosts and TaskRabbit providers, the market is literally enacted within the home. For others, communal sites such as makerspaces and food swaps reproduce domesticity via small-scale community and intimate relations. Among them all, we find a desire to build markets which foster and value artisanal, craft-like production, whether it is by offering prepared food at a swap, a personalized, cozy Airbnb bedroom, or literal craft production in a makerspace. Their vision of a “moral market” is rooted in the return of small-scale economic production within a domestic sphere.

In these ways, participants reproduce the idealistic discourse of the early days of the sharing economy. If the profit motive has transformed these platforms from the feel-good, do-good hybrids of the early days to market-savvy growth maximizers, this shift is recognized unevenly by participants. This is one reason we argue that the neoliberal critique is at best partial—or at worst reliant on an explanation in which participants must be seen as duped, unaware of their own interests and their role in a transformation that is undermining their own well-being and that of others.

The moral orientation of sharing economy participants is not something that is segregated from their general consumer orientation. In contrast to the arguments of Lamont (1992) who argues that Bourdieu under-theorized morality, and that cultural capital and morality are largely independent, we find that moral considerations are at the heart of the emergent HCC habitus (Carfagna et al. 2014). They are not orthogonal to the basic binaries that structure HCC tastes and practices, but underlie those foundational orientations. The “ecological” logic of the habitus is a moral stance toward nature, other species and humans. We see this logic played out most clearly in the timebanks, food swaps, gift sites, repair collectives, and food sharing apps. Reducing resource use, providing healthful, local food for people who need it and giving free or low-cost access to goods and services are central to the motives of participants. They have an “eco-habitus,” not so much because it represents a low-impact lifestyle in environmental terms (although it can), but because it habitus is structured by calculations about, consideration of and attention to an ecological sensibility.

We have identified three dimensions of the eco-habitus. They are a preference for the local (over the global), the manual (over the mental), and the material (over the abstract). These are in contrast to the earlier findings of Holt (1998) and Bourdieu (1984), and represent a shift in how HCC consumers locate themselves with respect to longstanding binaries that shape the field of lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984; Carfagna et al. 2014; Fitzmaurice and Schor 2018). Participants enact these three dimensions in their sharing practices. The first is the most overtly articulated, in large part because it is so salient in the discourses of sharing sites. Food swaps, timebanks, tool libraries, and neighborhood goods sharing platforms are all committed to building local economies of production and consumption. Consumers categorize these initiatives with other efforts to “Buy Local,” such as farmers’ markets and Community-Supported Agriculture. But the preference for the local is also present in large, for-profit platforms such as Airbnb. “Live like a local,” is not merely a branding slogan, but a theme that comes up repeatedly in guests’ discussions of why they like the platform. Guests are appreciative of insider knowledge of restaurants, bars, and other consumer experiences. They enjoy living in “real” neighborhoods, rather than being confined to tourist-filled city centers. Disdaining mass tourism, as they reject mass consumption more generally, Airbnb gives them an opportunity to live in the homes of locals and to experience local culture. Airbnb’s recently introduced “Experiences” market takes the local experience farther, offering not merely lodging and knowledge of retail, but the opportunity to spend time with local hosts and their friends—for a price, of course. (This new product gives additional fodder for critics’ view that the platforms are colonizing daily life.) We note that there is a certain contradiction in this discourse—as guests often travel long distances, and even globally—to experience the local. Furthermore, we find that the “local” that is desired by HCC consumers is an upscale, cosmopolitan local, that is distinct from the “parochial” local that Holt’s lower cultural capital consumers preferred.

The second and third dimensions of the eco-habitus, the manual and the material, are closely related. In the earlier postwar era analyzed by Holt (1998) and Bourdieu (1984), the HCC habitus was oriented away toward the abstract and ideal, and away from the mundane and material, which was associated with the working class. In contrast, we find that sharing economy participants have an orientation toward doing things with their hands and being creative. “Hacking” everyday objects by working to transform them is a popular trend among young HCCs who exhibit the eco-habitus. As one participant noted: “what I know is that if I’m not creating, life is miserable.”

The urge to create is almost axiomatic at the makerspace, but participants in other sites also engage in manual practices. At the food swap, offerings must be “homemade,” that is, made by hand. Timebankers use the network to learn manual skills, such as whittling. They also discuss their desire to escape from the “mental” orientation of day jobs such as coding, to offer manual skills like home repair and gardening. Participants for-profit platforms engage in and extol manual skills. Many TaskRabbits assemble Ikea furniture. One provider spent much of his interview bemoaning the loss of knowledge of plumbing, and other home repair skills. TaskRabbit consumers discussed their attraction to manual tasks such as repurposing furniture. Some Airbnb guests discussed their preference for homes over hotels because they could engage in manual practices such as cooking or ritualized coffee preparation, without interruption (Fitzmaurice and Schor 2018). The turn toward manual labor, and away from the traditional HCC realms of the abstract, mental and intellectual, is also connected to the importance of materiality in the eco-habitus. Our respondents talk about the qualities of the foods they embrace and reject. They have a tactile orientation, especially to natural materials such as wood. They like to get their hands dirty with soil. They reject materials that are too closely connected with mass consumption, such as plastic. This is one reason many prefer the more personalized experiences they can construct on a platform like Airbnb or TaskRabbit.

While the eco-habitus is not exclusive to the sharing economy, we do find that the moral aspirations of the HCC consumers we study mesh well with the common good claims of the sharing economy. Personalized, small-scale exchange, creativity and autonomy are central to the enactment of an eco-habitus. At a time when global capitalism is generating extreme inequality, climate derangement, and social disconnection, the consumers we study are looking for an alternative. Whether the sharing economy truly represents one, or is merely “neoliberalism on steroids,” as its critics claim, our participants are optimistic about its potential.

**Inequality and the Sharing Economy: race and class**

As noted earlier, the for-profit segment of the sharing economy has put forward common good claims of efficiency, sociability and environmental benefit. Companies also claim to increase equity. One claim is that it benefits disadvantaged groups via enhanced access to economic opportunity. However, independent empirical studies have consistently found that discrimination, based primarily on race, is widespread. Another claim is the sector provides income to struggling middle class households. The evidence here is mixed, particularly if one also includes the losses of jobs and income associated with “disrupted” industries. We think the more likely effect is that platforms are increasing incomes for the better-off segments of the middle class at the expense of lower-educated workers. We start with the latter issue and then move on to discuss racial discrimination.

The economic opportunities presented by the sharing economy are often discussed in terms of potential benefits to providers. Proponents focus on how the platforms eliminate formal, onerous and expensive barriers to entry in the market for transportation (taxi medallions) or accommodations (licensing). This allows individuals who could not have cleared those barriers a chance to compete (Horton and Zeckhauser 2016; Zervas, Proserpio, and Byers 2015). A less remarked upon but also relevant point is that some platforms do not discriminate against providers with criminal records, in contrast to most employers (Pager 2008), although over time pressure to exclude those with records has increased, especially on ridehailing platforms. In any case, platforms have relatively low barriers to entry, in comparison to conventional employment. Signing up is often as easy as filling out some fields on an app and attending an orientation session, or listing a property. In theory, this should disproportionately benefit groups with fewer resources, such as youth, the poor and racial minorities. While national surveys have not published data that would allow us to test this finding, in our limited, local sample, we find that earning on platforms is stratified by income and race, with the more lucrative sites having participants who are whiter, higher-income and higher-educated.

Proponents of the “economic opportunity” argument also note that some platforms allow people to earn passive income by renting out capital goods they have access to (Fraiberger and Sundararajan 2015; Sperling 2015), or even tap into a higher rate of return on their capital goods than they otherwise would through conventional wage labor (Sundararajan 2016). It is also the case that especially when they were introduced, sharing economy platforms offered higher wages for lower skilled labor than were generally available in local labor markets. However, the existence of the wage premium is now contentious in the case of ridehailing, as wages have fallen and wages net of expenses are complicated to estimate. Writing for Uber, Hall and Krueger (2016) have argued that the sharing economy is a flexible source of income to compensate for instability in conventional labor markets. Indeed, as the conventional labor market has improved, the growth participation slowed markedly (Farrell and Greig 2016). Airbnb has argued that hosting “combats middle class income stagnation,” allowing people to remain in homes they could not otherwise afford or helping them weather job loss or other adverse events (Sperling 2015). The sector also consumers opportunities to purchase goods such as cars or lodging at cheaper prices (Horton and Zeckhauser 2016). On the other hand, there is growing evidence that Uber is using its market power and asymmetric access to information to extract value, compress wages and control workers (Calo and Rosenblat 2017), and that these advantages to the platform are endemic to this sector.

The “middle class income stagnation” argument suggests an equity effect that begs further study, which is that the sharing sector is benefitting middle class, highly educated people at the expense of the working class. People who are already privileged in the conventional economy may be taking jobs and income from less privileged participants and creating more inequality within the bottom 80% of the income distribution (Schor 2017). In our qualitative data, two findings suggest this outcome. First, sharing platforms have led highly educated young people to take on work that has traditionally been done by those of lower educational attainment. Examples include driving (higher educated Uber drivers taking away work from taxi drivers), Airbnb hosts taking business from hotels (whose cleaning staff are immigrant women with lower educational attainment), and gig labor sites taking jobs from informal workers (such as domestic house cleaners, another low educated, immigrant labor force). The platforms appear to have erased some of the stigma associated with these low status jobs, perhaps because they are technologically novel and emerged with a hip, common good discourse and youth “vibe.” The extent of this effect cannot not be determined without a comprehensive model of each local economy, in part because platforms are reducing the demand for conventional labor, but also increasing total consumer demand for these services. However, the collapse of the taxi business and the movement of leisure travelers out of urban hotels suggests that for the two largest platforms (Uber and Airbnb), the effects may be significant. This type of effect is also typical of recessionary times—more privileged workers move down the labor market ladder, pushing out those below them.

A second effect is that most sharing economy earners have other sources of income. In our sample, only about 30% are “full-timers” who rely on the platform to pay their basic (Schor et al. 2017). Many have full-time jobs and use the income for discretionary or even luxury spending. These supplementary earnings increase income for better-off workers, and to the extent that there is job loss in conventional employment also erode earnings at the bottom. This effect will make the income distribution from the upper middle to the bottom of the distribution more unequal.

Platforms are also having impacts on racial inequality. Because they have been mostly unregulated, there has been little explicit policy outlawing discrimination. In the lodging sector, for example, public accommodation laws that prevent racial discrimination do not apply. And for the most part platforms have taken a hands-off approach to discriminatory behavior by their users. All the studies we have identified have found the presence of racial discrimination, on one side of the market, the other, or both.

We begin with studies which analyze discrimination against consumers. An audit study by Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky (2017, 1) has found that guest accounts on Airbnb with “distinctively African-American names were 16% less likely to be accepted [for a reservation] than identical accounts with distinctively White names”. A similar audit study by Cui, Li and Zhang (2016) found a similar sized effect for accounts associated with African-American and White names on the platform. Another audit study, focusing on the transportation platforms Uber and Lyft, found that consumers with distinctively African-American names faced higher waiting times, and more frequent cancellations (Ge et al. 2016). A mixed-methods study of TaskRabbit producers found that they engaged in discriminatory behavior based on the geographic location of consumers, reporting an unwillingness to accept jobs in areas with higher proportions of minority or low-income residents (Thebault-Spieker, Terveen, and Hecht 2015).

On the provider side of the market, Edelman and Luca (2014) found that hosts, who were identified as Black based on their pictures charged 12% less per night on Airbnb, compared to similar listings with non-Black hosts. Laouenan and Rathelot (2016) present similar results, with minority hosts[[4]](#endnote-4) charging about 3% less than non-minority hosts. A study on TaskRabbit and Fiverr found that producers who were identified as female or Black received fewer reviews, indicating that they are hired less often (Hannak et al. 2017). A 2017 report about Airbnb found that even in Black majority neighborhoods in New York City, the vast majority of hosts were White, suggesting that the platform’s economic opportunities are not equally distributed (Inside Airbnb 2017). In our work on racial discrimination on Airbnb, we found that in the 10 largest markets in the U.S., areas with higher concentrations of residents of color had fewer listings on Airbnb (Cansoy and Schor 2018). In these locales, Airbnb listings had lower prices and fewer bookings.

A feature of the sector that is often touted as an important factor in reducing discrimination is the public reputation systems. Multiple studies have highlighted the potential of these systems to counteract interpersonal discrimination, by providing producers and consumers with relevant and trustworthy information about their counterparts (Abrahao et al. 2017; Cui, Li, and Zhang 2016; Laouenan and Rathelot 2016). These systems have also played an important role in platforms’ responses to claims of discrimination, alongside the stronger regulation of user behavior, and an interactional design that downplays racial identifiers (Murphy 2016). However, it is unclear whether public reputation systems will be able to temper discriminatory behavior. One study has found that controlling for the information communicated through photos, the review scores of an Airbnb host had no effect on the listing’s price or the likelihood of a listing being booked (Ert, Fleischer, and Magen 2016). Our study of Airbnb (Cansoy and Schor 2018), as well as Hannak et. al.’s work on TaskRabbit and Fiverr (2017) indicates that the reviews system itself is biased against areas with higher concentrations of minority residents and minority producers, respectively.

Taken together, these findings suggest that market-based and technocratic fixes to discrimination highlighted by the proponents of the sharing economy have not been very effective to date. Perhaps more importantly, these approaches have restricted the debate about discrimination in the sector to instances of person-to-person discrimination. However, as we have argued for the case of Airbnb (Cansoy and Schor 2018), structural inequalities in access to housing assets is an ongoing, major source of inequality that cannot be addressed by the existence of a platform, even if its barriers to entry are low.

**Regulatory contestation**

The emergence of for-profit sharing economy platforms in urban areas has been the subject of significant public attention on account of their impact on housing, traffic, tax revenues, and the industries with which they compete. Some scholars have argued that the platforms should not be regulated by the state because they provide consumers with better access to information, empower them with reputational tools and self-regulate (Koopman, Mitchell, and Thierer 2015). However, the overwhelming response by academics, policy makers and activists has been in favor of greater oversight, especially of Uber and Airbnb.

In the case of Airbnb, the primary focus has been on how the rise of short-term rentals affects the availability and price of long-term housing and the quality of neighborhoods and urban life. Local activists (Dougherty 2015), municipal and state authorities (Isaac 2015; O’Sullivan 2017) and researchers have voiced concerns that Airbnb and other short-term rental platforms are creating incentives for property owners to convert long-term rental properties to exclusively short-term use. This results in higher rental prices, potentially driving long-term residents out of urban centers and harming their communities.

One analysis of third-party data on Airbnb activities (Stulberg 2016) has argued that the number of units converted to exclusive short-term rentals is too small to have a significant impact on the housing market. However, an increasing number of studies have found that Airbnb listings are not equally distributed across the urban landscape and in areas with high concentrations of listings, there can be a significant impact. Lee (Lee 2016) found that in 2014, almost half of all Airbnb listings in Los Angeles were concentrated in just seven neighborhoods. With Airbnb listings making up between 3% and 12.5% of the housing stock in these areas, he argues that the short-term rentals play an important role in the rapid rise of housing prices in these neighborhoods. Wachsmuth and Weisler (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018) have recently presented a similar analysis for New York in 2016, showing how the concentration of Airbnb listings in specific areas, coupled with high revenues for short-term rentals, created strong pressures on local housing markets. A study by Barron, Kung and Proserpio (Barron, Kung, and Proserpio 2017) reports a similar relationship across the U.S., finding that higher numbers of Airbnb listings in an area are associated with higher rents and higher house prices, and that this association may be caused by property owners converting long-term housing to short-term housing.

While these concerns have resulted in local organizing, and action by municipal authorities, it is not yet clear how effective these attempts will be. Regulation has often taken the form of restricting the number of days a unit can be rented, or requiring property owners to obtain permits to engage in short-term rentals. However, authorities have faced significant hurdles in enforcing these regulations (Walters 2017). Over the last few years, the platforms have also begun to collect hotel taxes for municipal authorities, which reduces incentives to take firmer action against short-term rentals. A ballot measure aimed at strengthening short-term rental regulations in San Francisco in 2015 was defeated, with Airbnb in its opposition campaign highlighting the amount of taxes it collected on behalf of the city (Romney, Lien, and Hamilton 2015). However, in January 2018 stronger regulations did come into effect which halved the number of legal rentals. If the city is able to enforce these new regulations, many of the adverse effects that housing activists have identified will be mitigated (Dent 2018). Regulations have also been put into place in other areas. New York State passed a law in 2016 that made most Airbnb and other short term rentals illegal unless the host is present. In 2018 Boston began a process of putting in a similar ordinance. In Los Angeles, short term rentals are illegal, however the regulation has not been enforced. In early 2018 the City Council was considering regulation that would legalize listings of primary homes only and for only 180 days per year. If these various regulatory efforts are successful, their bans on absent hosts will dramatically reduce the number of listings, exclude commercial operators from the market, and return lodging platforms to their origins as facilitators of “accommodating sharing.” However, so far illegal actors have found ways of returning to the platforms. Whether the latest round of regulations will be able to prevent that remains to be seen. One difference is that Airbnb finally appears to be cooperating with regulators, and will likely be able to ban commercial operators if it wants to.

In the case of Uber, the ongoing conflict over regulation has focused on two major areas – their access to the urban transportation market alongside conventional taxis and the classification of drivers on the platform. Uber and other ridesharing apps have generally entered urban markets in the absence of regulatory approval and with considerable political clout. Indeed, it was revealed in early 2017 that Uber had been making use of software tools of questionable legality to avoid agents of regulatory bodies in many municipalities (Isaac 2017). Uber’s growth has resulted in significant upheaval within these markets, because an Uber driver can operate without purchasing a taxi medallion, commercial insurance, or a vehicle that conforms to municipal regulations. While the first years of Uber’s market presence didn’t seem to have hurt medallion prices, medallion values in New York have fallen from an all-time high of 1.3 million dollars in 2014 to under $200,000 by late 2017 (Sernovitz 2017). Similar problems, at a smaller scale, plague the conventional taxi industries in many cities. Taxi operators and medallion owners have frequently protested against authorities allowing Uber and other ridehailing apps to operate without medallions. In response, regulators have announced changes to the medallion system to rescue medallion prices (Hu 2017) and refinance medallion-related debt (Gray 2017). However, regulatory action against ridehailing apps or drivers has been infrequent and inconsistent.

One meaningful instance of regulatory action was undertaken against the ridehailing platforms by the city of Austin in 2015, when the city council passed regulations that mandated the ridehailing companies to share some of the data they collected, as well as requiring their drivers to undergo a background check using their fingerprints (McPhate 2016). In response, both Uber and Lyft ended their operations in the city for a year, until legislation at the state level ended the fingerprint requirement (Vertuno 2017). Despite the lack of meaningful regulation of ridehailing, Gabel (Gabel 2016) has argued that the taxi industry is still able to hold onto some market power, because they effectively monopolize curbside hailing, dedicated pick-up spots in public spaces like airports and segments of the population that do not use smartphones. It is unclear if these monopolies can be maintained, and whether they will be enough to protect the existence of a highly regulated medallion taxi sector alongside a largely unregulated ridehailing one. However the bigger regulatory challenge for the sector today is about the classification of its drivers

Since their inception, the platforms have depended on classifying the drivers as independent contractors, and using terms like “driver-partner” (Hall and Krueger 2016) in order to highlight the lack of an employment relationship. However, this classification has received significant pushback, both from drivers and local regulators that have been sympathetic to such demands. Perhaps the best known example of this struggle over classification is a class-action lawsuit filed in 2013 by a group of drivers in California (later joined by drivers from Massachusetts), which alleged that the drivers should be classified as employees, and are owed back pay, benefits and expense reimbursements (Isaac 2016). While this case, and the legal question of classification, has attracted significant public and scholarly attention (Acevedo 2016; Lobel 2017; Ross 2015; Dubal 2017), there has also been a strong movement towards unionization among drivers. In Seattle, this movement has been helped along by a law that mandated ridehailing companies to enter into collective bargaining agreements with a union representing drivers (Johnson 2017). In New York, Uber drivers are represented by a “guild” recognized by Uber. However, there are questions about the independence and the legality of this organization, because it is funded by Uber itself (Scheiber 2017). Meanwhile the classification debate shows no signs of abating, and multiple lawsuits, sometimes with contradictory outcomes, are making their way through the court systems in several jurisdictions. Harris and Krueger (2016) have argued against legal solutions and in favor of establishing a new regulatory category with limited benefits. However, others have pushed back against this approach by refocusing the classification debate on the control exerted by the platforms (Cunningham-Parmeter 2016; Prassl and Risak 2016). A new regulatory category represents a step backwards for workers, and in any case such a shift is highly unlikely under the current Administration. A longterm analyst of this sector, Veena Dubal, is pessimistic that significant progress to protect Uber workers is likely, on any front. (Collier, Dubal, and Carter 2017).

An optimistic view of regulation comes from by Rauch and Schelicher (2015), who argue that there will be novel evolution as governments harness the platforms, or their technologies and business models, to deliver public services, enact economic redistribution and generate enough surplus in the sectors platforms operate to do away with the need for extensive regulation. We can see some movement in this direction. Some municipalities in the US have experimented with limited subsidies to the ridehailing apps to enhance their public transit systems (Dungca 2016). A few are subsidizing platforms to replace public transit services (Jenkins 2018). Revenues from taxes on ridehailing are being used to fund infrastructure. Airbnb has mobilized its hosts to house refugees in Europe and evacuees in the US, proving the some viability of its model for emergency management (Shen 2017). However, these developments do not reduce the urgent need for better and clear regulation of the for-profit sharing economy or begin to tackle the difficult task of doing so. We are more optimistic about the possibility of adequate regulation in Europe than the U.S., where the political power of the big platforms remains formidable.

**Concluding Thoughts**

We began this chapter by noting that the emergence of the “sharing economy” has engendered considerable debate. Critics have assailed platform companies for their treatment of labor, impacts on the supply and price of urban housing, and toleration of racial discrimination. Additional concerns center on how monetizing household assets may change the culture of everyday life, leading to a hyper-commodification of social relations. While the existing literature on these issues remains limited, we attempted to shed light on a number of these debates, with an emphasis on those most closely connected to consumption. A key finding in our research is that consumers and providers (especially outside of the ridehailing segment), see their activities in this sector as contributing to a new type of economic exchange. They are engaged in moral projects that are based on personal relations, trust, and autonomy. They feel that even the big platforms are alternatives to global companies that lack accountability, transparency and ethics. They part company with critics who see the platform economy as the latest leading edge of neo-liberalism. Yet there is mounting evidence that on a number of grounds—discrimination, exploitation of workers, housing supply—the critics have a point. Even as they are offering new, more personalized ways to make and save money, the platforms are also responsible for a variety of adverse effects. The non-profits, which rarely have negative impacts, have failed to scale. They remain small and generally unable to compete with the large commercial companies.

At the moment, these debates are hard to resolve, in large part because the sector is quite dynamic. Platforms change policies frequently. In some cases, such as Uber and Lyft, policy change is near-continuous. In others, such as TaskRabbit, there have been numerous “pivots,” or re-formulations of the business model and the basic operation of the site. For Airbnb, change has come from various quarters. In the early days, it consisted of social encounters via shared accommodation. Over time, hosts became more likely to vacate their premises, commercial operators flooded onto the site, and “entire home” listings came to dominate. As a result, political pushback in larger cities led to regulations that seem likely to exclude commercial operators and restrict absentee hosts. What looked like convergence to a business-as-usual lodging company may now be a case of returning to its more alternative roots. And yet it is premature to make firm conclusions.

Another reason to expect continued change is that the current labor force is diverse, in terms of economic situations, motives and needs. We have found that platforms that work well for supplementary earners (currently the majority) may be unable to provide decent work and income for full-timers (Schor et al 2017). Will there be growing pressure for earners to put in longer hours? We know that ridehailing companies are already doing quite a bit to induce more work from their drivers. Airbnb has also attempted to entice hosts to book more nights. If supplementary earners become less numerous, will labor conditions become more exploitative? Is Uber the “canary in the coal mine”? Or is it an outlier—a predatory company that will be brought to heel by regulation and competition?

In some ways, debates about the sharing economy have been as much about the future as the present. Proponents envision a world in which traditional employment has been eliminated, workers have autonomy and flexibility, and efficiency reigns. Critics also see platforms taking over, and developing unchecked market power over both workers and consumers. A decade in, it’s clear that there is not one path that all platforms follow. It’s also clear that trajectories are by no means linear. Perhaps even more importantly, the developing regulatory environment suggests that if consumers, providers, citizens and policymakers weigh in forcefully, there is hope for aligning the sector to the common good claims with which it began.

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1. We use the terms platform and app interchangeably. Companies that started with platforms, like Airbnb and TaskRabbit now also have apps. Others, like Uber were always app based. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Our project is called the “Connected Consumption and Connected Economy” project. Papers may be found on our website: https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/sociology/connected.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This may be partly because Uber has always rejected the language of sharing and has never participated in the sharing community (unlike Lyft, for example). In addition, wages can be quite low and desperation high for full time earners on these platforms (Schor et al. 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Their data includes Airbnb markets in Europe, Canada and US. Ethnic minority hosts are defined as Black and/or Muslim identified based on their pictures and names, for the purposes of their study. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)