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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sharing is not for the weak: A systematic review of the main drawbacks of the sharing economy

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Abstract
The sharing economy has expanded rapidly, reshaping consumption, labor, and service delivery across sectors. While much research highlights its benefits, critical perspectives on its limitations remain fragmented. This study addresses that gap through a systematic literature review, identifying and categorizing the main drawbacks of the sharing economy across five dimensions: social, legal, technological, economic, and environmental. By synthesizing these critiques into a cohesive framework, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the structural challenges associated with sharing economy platforms. It draws on interdisciplinary perspectives to highlight issues such as platform power asymmetries, regulatory gaps, and labor precarity – concerns that have intensified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper contributes to theory by integrating insights across academic domains and to practice by offering targeted recommendations for policymakers and managers. These include differentiated regulation and improved governance strategies to support fairer, more sustainable platform models.

Keywords: sharing economy; dark side; problems; value co-destruction; systematic literature review

Introduction

The sharing economy (SE) market was valued at $113 billion in 2021 and is projected to reach $600 billion by 2027 (Proficient Market Insights, 2022). Driven by technological innovations, this model has facilitated the exchange of goods and services among peers, experiencing rapid global expansion (Belk, 2014). The SE has the potential to redefine the concept of community, extending it beyond traditional inner circles to include weakly connected individuals through digital platforms (Acquier, Daudigeos & Pinkse, 2017).

Since the widespread adoption of this paradigm, new markets and opportunities have emerged, creating new income sources and alternative pathways for establishing social relationships (Pera & Viglia, 2016; Stofberg & Bridoux, 2019). However, this shift also poses challenges to traditional business structures and socioeconomic conditions (Geissinger, Laurell, Öberg & Sandström, 2019; Leung, Xue & Wen, 2019; Trenz, Frey & Veit, 2018).

The SE has expanded and is now a significant component of many economies worldwide, although it remains a dynamic concept with ambiguous boundaries (Baumber, Scerri & Schweinsberg, 2019). This growth contributes to the complexity of ecosystems and affects global economic and social life (Buhalis, Andreu & Gnoth, 2020). By promoting a model for redesigning conventional consumption, the SE aims to reduce waste, increase efficiency, support bottom-up change, and have a transformative impact on all involved variables and agents (Guo, Li & Zeng, 2019; Kauffman & Naldi, 2020). Specific sectors, such as lodging and transportation, are particularly susceptible to its influence, even though the SE has the potential to extend across all industries with shareable resources (Altinay & Taheri, 2019; Chasin, von Hoffen, Hoffmeister & Becker, 2018; Ert, Fleischer & Magen, 2016; Kauffman & Naldi, 2020).

Given the recent emergence of the SE, existing literature has predominantly focused on its positive outcomes. Scholars have highlighted its potential to increase access to resources, reduce costs for consumers, encourage more sustainable consumption practices, and foster innovation in underregulated sectors (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014; Sundararajan, 2016). While these benefits are widely acknowledged, critical assessments of the SE's limitations have only recently begun to emerge. The discourse surrounding its adverse effects, such as social exclusion, labor insecurity, algorithmic bias, and regulatory evasion, remains fragmented and underdeveloped (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Buhalis et al., 2020; Murillo, Buckland & Val, 2017).

Although some studies have explored isolated issues within the SE, such as housing pressures caused by short-term rental platforms or precarious employment in gig work, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks that systematize these drawbacks (Baumber et al., 2019; Jing & Sun, 2018). As a result, academic literature tends to lack integration across disciplines and geographies, limiting the ability of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to holistically evaluate the SE's long-term implications. In light of the continued expansion of platform-based models into various sectors, this gap in the literature presents both a theoretical and practical challenge (Barnes & Mattsson, 2016; Kauffman & Naldi, 2020).

This study addresses this critical need by providing a systematic review of the main drawbacks associated with the SE. Through an analysis of peer-reviewed academic literature, the paper categorizes these challenges into five interrelated dimensions: social, legal, technological, economic, and environmental, offering a more structured understanding of the SE's limitations. This framework not only facilitates the identification of the most pressing issues but also serves as a foundation for evaluating the consequences of SE practices in different contexts.

To guide this analysis, the study draws on critical perspectives that examine the structural dynamics of the SE. These include research on how digital platforms concentrate power through data and algorithms, how regulatory and normative environments shape platform behavior, and how gig work often exposes individuals to insecurity and limited protections. Together, these perspectives offer a multidimensional understanding of the SE's evolution and its broader social and institutional implications.

In addition, this review reflects on recent developments, particularly the impact of COVID-19, which amplified platform dependency while exposing systemic risks in labor, safety, and governance (Nuttah, Roma, Lo Nigro & Perrone, 2023).

To guide the investigation, this paper is driven by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main documented drawbacks of the sharing economy in the current academic literature?

RQ2. How can these drawbacks be systematically categorized to enhance understanding and inform future research, policy design, and business strategies?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: The 'Literature review' section presents an overview of previous research on the topic, which frames the rest of the study. The 'Methodology' section explains the methodology employed in this research, detailing the approach to identifying and categorizing the issues. Following this, the 'Problems with the SE' section presents an in-depth exploration of the identified problems across various dimensions. Finally, the 'Discussion and conclusions' section includes the discussion, conclusions drawn from the findings, theoretical, managerial, and policy implications, and suggestions for future research directions.

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Literature review

Recent social, environmental, and economic developments have ignited discussions about the necessity for a fundamental shift in our living and consumption patterns. Some argue that the optimal paths forward are those enabled by the Internet and new technologies (Barnes & Mattsson, 2016). Advancements in these areas have paved the way for the emergence of a new socio-economic system, now increasingly dominated by the SE (Basukie, Wang & Li, 2020). This phenomenon is considered a disruptive force impacting international business, industries, markets, and processes (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020). It alters power dynamics within the value chain (Antoniadis, Kontsas & Spinthiropoulos, 2019; Newlands, Lutz & Fieseler, 2017) and evolves into a significant financial value-creation mechanism (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020).

The SE, which operates on digital platforms, has transformed our perceptions of ownership and trust. It allows users to access goods as needed and return them once their need is met (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). These interactions gain significant attention because they occur between strangers – individuals who do not know each other but trust the system due to platform reputation ratings and a sense of belonging fostered by shared beliefs and interests (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018; Sundararajan, 2016). However, these dynamics are mediated and increasingly shaped by said digital infrastructure, which often grants disproportionate control to platform owners over users and providers. Recent research highlights how this centralized control structure facilitates the extraction of value from user activity, governs interactions through opaque algorithms, and reinforces dependencies that can deepen inequality across the platform ecosystem (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard & Wengronowitz, 2020; Schor & Vallas, 2023).

Although previous research has highlighted the positive externalities generated by the SE, such as reduced transaction costs and improved process efficiency (Jing & Sun, 2018), the understanding of its negative implications remains limited. The few available studies on this topic have predominantly been conducted from the perspective of non-sharing firms (Meng et al., 2020). This has led to a general call from academics for more comprehensive research into the SE's drawbacks and the development and use of analytical frameworks (Baumber et al., 2019; Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Murillo et al., 2017).

The initial goals of the SE were to promote principles like collaboration, trust, and a sense of community, while fostering more ethical, moral, and responsible consumerism. However, unintended consequences have emerged in various forms (Jing & Sun, 2018).

Despite the soundness of the concept, users may unintentionally or intentionally exploit the system, undermining the potential benefits for all parties involved over time (Marcos-Cuevas, Prior & Enz, 2015; Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). According to Dreyer, Lüdeke-Freund, Hamann, and Faccer (2017), these negative effects are particularly severe for users who are already vulnerable due to their personal characteristics, exacerbating issues arising from SE practices and relationships (Baumber et al., 2019) and contributing to societal unfairness and discrimination (Basukie et al., 2020).

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the digitalization of services, prompting both consumers and workers to rely more heavily on SE platforms. This shift led to increased demand for delivery services, short-term rentals, and remote gig work, but it also laid bare the vulnerabilities embedded in platform-based labor systems (Kuhn, Meijerink & Keegan, 2021; MacEachen et al., 2022). Workers in these environments experienced heightened income precarity, exposure to health risks, and insufficient institutional safeguards, particularly those engaged in informal or app-mediated work with minimal protection or recourse (Gray & Suri, 2019; Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Tran & Sokas, 2017; Wang, Li & Coutts, 2022). Recent research has provided a more nuanced view of the pandemic's uneven effects on the sector, distinguishing between 'symptomatic' platforms – those whose models were heavily impacted due to their reliance on physical interaction – and 'asymptomatic' platforms, which were either resilient or benefited from the crisis (Nuttah et al., 2023).

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These observations are supported by Duan (2023), who provides a nuanced classification of SE models into knowledge-based, supplier-oriented, and consumer-socioeconomic-sustainability types. While much research has focused on the first category, our review highlights how the latter two, especially those grounded in local labor and resource contributions, are particularly prone to underexamined externalities, including power asymmetries, labor exploitation, and systemic inequality.

This so-called 'dark side' of the SE refers to the undesirable effects that arise from adopting this new practice, encompassing social, environmental, and economic areas, among others. These negative outcomes include disappointment resulting from malpractices within platforms. As the SE has grown, aggressive and unregulated practices have proliferated, leading to the abuse of shared resources and corrupting what was intended to be an exchange of underutilized assets (Buhalis et al., 2020). These issues impact relationships among all community members and emerge across every area of the ecosystem (Anderson et al., 2013; Breidbach & Brodie, 2017). The value co-creation and co-destruction inherent in the SE must be realistically addressed due to their potential to harm the well-being of users and communities. This is particularly crucial as these global trends continue to evolve over time (Kos Koklic, Kukar-Kinney & Vida, 2022).

According to prior research, many of the negative externalities in the SE are caused by individuals who act selfishly, violating moral values such as dependability and honesty, and maximizing their own value at the expense of others (Buhalis et al., 2020; Jing & Sun, 2018). These interactions can lead to value co-destruction, which not only harms users but also results in the loss of the SE's social license, diminishes the sense of community that these platforms aim to foster, and reduces authenticity for residents and communities (Buhalis et al., 2020). Additional issues in the SE include reverse pricing wars (Clemons, Waran, Li, Hermes & Schreieck, 2021), lack of genuine consumer interest engagement, continuation of unfair regulatory regimes, and shortages of long-term assets (Abbasian Fereidouni & Kawa, 2019; Meng et al., 2020). Moreover, non-sharing businesses have expressed concerns over unexpected competition from unrelated business models, leading to instability in their core industries (IBM Global Business Services, 2015).

Recent developments have brought increased attention to the role of regulatory and societal structures in shaping the trajectory of the SE. The growth and legitimacy of platform models are deeply influenced by the legal, normative, and cultural environments in which they operate. As governments respond in diverse ways to platform-led innovations, companies either adapt to existing frameworks or strategically circumvent them to maintain flexibility and scale (Woodcock & Graham, 2020; Zvolska, Voytenko Palgan & Mont, 2019). Understanding this dynamic is key to assessing how platforms expand, resist oversight, or secure legitimacy across different contexts. As policymakers confront complex challenges, such as taxation, labor classification, zoning, and data privacy, the fragmented nature of regulation often enables platforms to exploit gaps and loopholes, thereby consolidating their influence and disrupting traditional governance models. Gerwe (2024) highlights how growing societal resistance, coupled with shifting legal boundaries, is giving rise to a new era of re-regulation that is fundamentally reshaping the SE landscape.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic literature review to map and analyze the main drawbacks of the SE identified by previous research and categorize them into different categories to facilitate its analysis. The systematic literature review methodology follows widely accepted procedures that ensure validation and replication by other researchers (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). Specifically, the review process adhered to the five-step framework proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009): (1) formulating the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting and evaluating studies, (4) analyzing and synthesizing findings, and (5) reporting and utilizing the results. The research design is illustrated in Fig. 1 using a PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram (Page et al., 2021).

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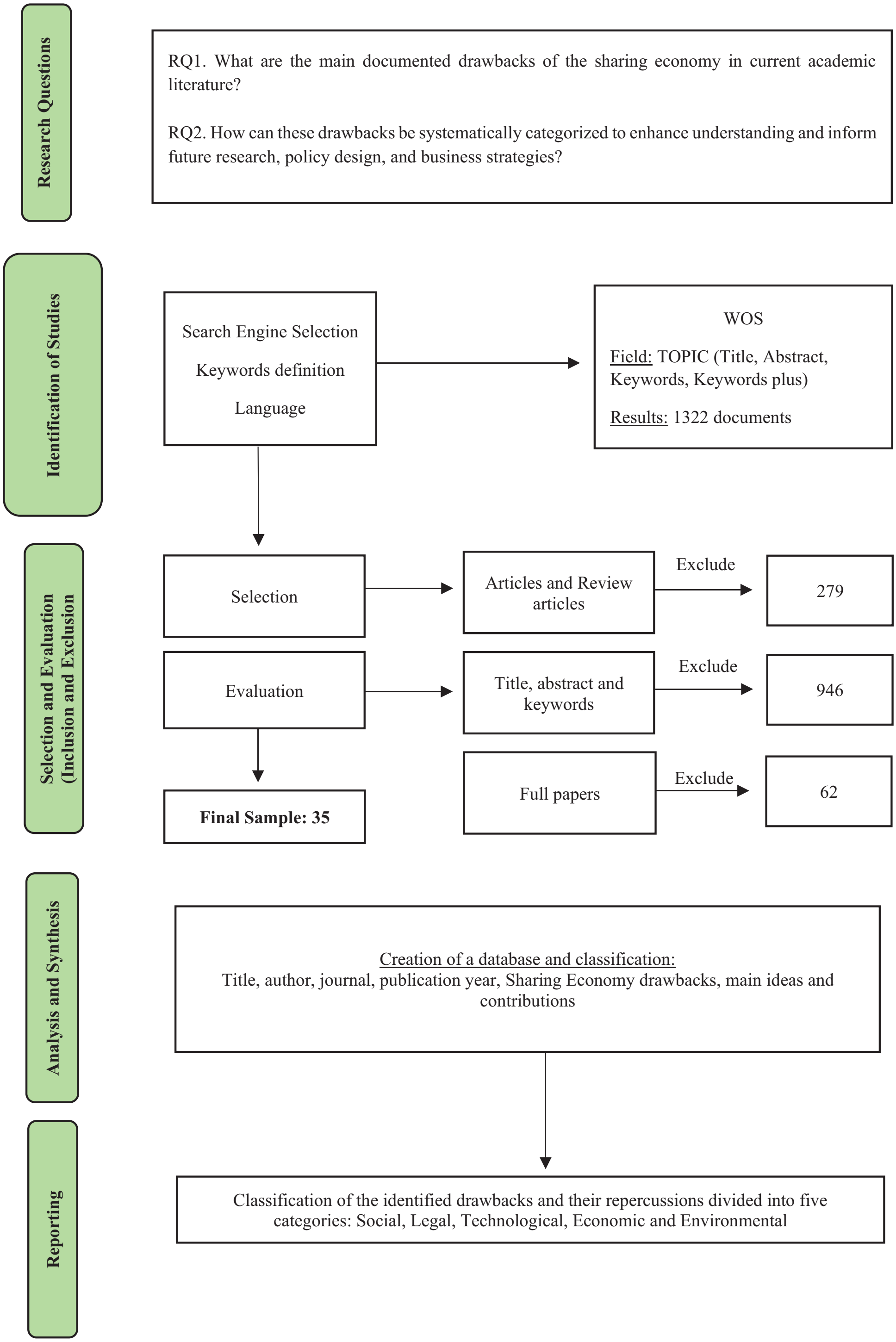

Figure 1. Systematic literature review process.

To ensure a comprehensive and high-quality literature review, we selected the Web of Science Core Collection as our primary database. Web of Science is recognized as a leading source for academic publications and citation reports, providing access to top-tier research journals (Guerras-Martín, Ronda-Pupo, Zúñiga-Vicente & Benito-Osorio, 2020). Our search strategy included the following keywords: 'sharing economy', 'collaborative economy', 'collaborative consumption', 'dark side', and 'problems'. Given the various terminologies used to describe the SE phenomenon, incorporating the most widely recognized terms ensured comprehensive coverage of relevant literature.

The initial query retrieved 1,322 references published in English up to June 2024. We then applied exclusion criteria to refine the sample. First, we removed all documents that were not research articles or review articles, ensuring that only peer-reviewed literature of a certain quality standard was included. This step reduced the dataset to 1,043 articles. Subsequently, a thorough screening of titles, abstracts, and keywords led to the exclusion of 946 additional articles that lacked direct relevance to the SE domain. At this stage, the remaining 97 articles were reviewed to focus on those addressing the drawbacks of SE. At this point, all remaining articles underwent a full-text review, where we systematically extracted and coded key information, including research topics, main findings, and supplementary details. With the assistance of Atlas.ti, we built a dataset that contained the key research topic of each paper, its main findings, and other supplementary information. This process enabled us to categorize the findings according to the dimensions presented in the results section, ensuring a comprehensive and methodical analysis of the entire sample.

To mitigate bias and enhance the reliability and accuracy of the findings, multiple researchers participated in the selection and analysis process (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). Ultimately, after assessing the relevance of the articles to the study's objectives, 35 articles were identified as explicitly addressing the drawbacks of the SE.

While the final sample includes only 35 articles that explicitly address the drawbacks of the SE, this limited number reflects the constrained and emergent nature of the topic. To overcome the limitations of fragmented literature and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the negative aspects of the SE, we broadened our analysis to include academic papers that examine relevant intersections of the topics analyzed. This expanded approach enables the integration of diverse disciplinary perspectives, including platform governance, labor precarity, regulatory frameworks, and digital infrastructures, which are essential to capturing the systemic and multidimensional drawbacks of the SE. In doing so, our review is guided by theoretical frameworks that help uncover the underlying power structures, institutional dynamics, and socio-economic vulnerabilities embedded in platform-based models. By synthesizing insights from adjacent but relevant literature, we aim to build a more holistic theoretical framework capable of addressing the complexity of this evolving research area.

Problems with the SE

As previously noted, the existing literature offers limited insight into the negative implications and systemic challenges associated with the SE, leading to increasing calls for more comprehensive research in this area (Baumber et al., 2019; Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Murillo et al., 2017). In response, this study synthesizes findings from a broad range of SE-focused academic sources and organizes them into a clear, structured framework. Drawing on the categorization proposed by Esposito, Clement, Mora, and Crutzen (2021), we examine five key dimensions commonly used to assess the socioeconomic dynamics of communities: social, legal, technological, economic, and environmental. As affirmed by Barnes and Mattsson (2016) and Buhalis et al. (2020), the primary drivers and impacts of SE adoption typically align with these domains. Accordingly, we adopt this multidimensional framework to systematically categorize and analyze the key drawbacks of the SE.

Social perspective

When examining the social issues brought about by the sharing model, it is important to consider that this system has questioned existing market structures, disrupted community interactions, changed boundaries, and altered the psychology of ownership (Lee, Yang & Koo, 2019). These changes have elevated social relations to a new level, where individuals are expected to operate sustainably, consciously, and cooperatively to advance the common good and achieve efficient resource use and allocation (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020; Sabitzer, Hartl, Marth, Hofmann & Penz, 2018). However, sharing has been associated with numerous issues, such as people acting out of self-interest, exploiting others without contributing, and fostering avoidable group conflicts (Culiberg, Abosag & Čater, 2023; Kauffman & Naldi, 2020; Ozuna & Steinhoff, 2024). These behaviors often arise because individuals do not perceive themselves as part of the community and view their participation as merely a business transaction rather than an integral component of the community's overall social mission (Acquier et al., 2017).

Several forms of sexual harassment have been identified as significant issues within the SE (Buhalis et al., 2020). Additionally, prejudices based on factors such as race, class, ethnicity, education, or social connections have been observed. Information leaks are also frequent in co-working environments associated with the SE, leading to general mistrust and potentially harming entrepreneurial efforts and community-building initiatives (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018). These issues highlight the challenges of fostering inclusive and safe environments within the SE.

Some authors argue that the SE has evolved from a non-profit, community-oriented approach to a for-profit business model. In this model, users can access goods and services at lower prices, leading to increased consumption. However, this can also exacerbate traditional capitalist and monopolistic tendencies, as well as widen social and economic inequalities (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Ciulli & Kolk, 2019; Ravenelle, 2017). These effects are particularly concerning in contexts already marked by high levels of inequality and vulnerable populations (Dreyer et al., 2017; Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2021). In such settings, individuals who are already at risk of social or economic exclusion are often drawn into roles within the SE that lack formal protections, stable income, or long-term security. While platforms often promote narratives of empowerment and flexibility, they may, in fact, reinforce precarious conditions, leaving participants exposed to fluctuating demand, algorithmic management, and limited institutional support (Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

In remote areas with few users, platforms may struggle to function effectively, potentially exacerbating existing disparities (Dervojeda et al., 2013). Additionally, it's important to note that many activities within the SE do not provide the benefits of regular employment and have faced criticism for potentially exploiting individuals rather than empowering them (Stein, 2015). These factors underscore the complexities and challenges associated with the SE, particularly in terms of equitable access and fair labor practices.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize the impact certain platforms have had on specific urban neighborhoods, particularly concerning rising housing costs attributed to their introduction and widespread use (Baumber et al., 2019). For example, Airbnb has been criticized for transforming residential properties into short-term rentals, which can displace long-term residents and alter the fabric of communities (Clemons et al., 2021).

Legal perspective

The rapid expansion of the sharing-based model has outpaced the capabilities of existing regulatory systems, leaving them ill-equipped to manage the new challenges it presents (Abutaleb, El-Bassiouny & Hamed, 2023). While some regulatory actions have been taken in response to platform activities, these measures have often been inadequate, lacking a cohesive philosophical or strategic framework, as well as the foresight to anticipate these developments (Dellaert, 2019). Non-sharing businesses have voiced concerns that their demand has declined and that they have been forced to lower their prices

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due to the uneven regulatory landscape, which imposes different restrictions on sharing platforms compared to non-sharing companies (Gunter & Önder, 2018; Koh & King, 2017).

The legal issues extend beyond mere restrictions or their absence. Governments have focused on the sharing-based model due to its reliance on the flow of information and the exchange of personal data, such as consumption patterns, locations, and payment methods (Ranzini, Etter, Lutz & Vermeulen, 2017). With fewer restrictions on data sharing, platforms can more extensively exploit user data. While this can enhance service delivery, it also raises the risk of private information being leaked, leading consumers to question the legitimacy and ethical implications of such practices (Ranzini et al., 2017).

When questioned about their regulations, platforms argue that their own background checks and swift resolution of member disputes allow them to identify stalkers more effectively than government agencies (Malhotra & van Alstyne, 2014). This approach to self-regulation not only provides greater operational freedom but also facilitates cross-platform collaboration to gain a social license, which could lead to improved regulation in the future (Baumber et al., 2019). An example of this is Sharing UK, a trade body established to protect and promote the interests of individuals and businesses involved in the SE (Sharing Economy, 2022).

The emerging global digital economy has demonstrated how large, powerful high-tech companies aim to maintain their dominance by adopting an early-mover approach, which limits governments' ability to regulate their products and services (Kelsey, 2017). Similarly, sharing platforms tend to prioritize their own interests and financial objectives, sometimes fostering systems that are vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination in pursuit of higher profits (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020). These dynamics are enabled by regulatory delays and ambiguities, which allow platforms to present themselves as neutral intermediaries rather than service providers. In doing so, they often sidestep legal responsibilities while actively influencing the evolution of policy and governance in ways that reinforce their strategic advantage (Zhang, Pinkse & McMeekin, 2024; Zvolska et al., 2019). To mitigate these issues, basic regulatory measures and ongoing activity monitoring have been recommended to manage the impact of sharing activities within different communities (Buhalis et al., 2020).

Technological perspective

With the widespread adoption of the Internet, sharing activities have become more accessible, facilitating collaboration beyond personal social circles. However, this ease of sharing has also enabled illegal activities, such as the unauthorized distribution of movies and music, which have garnered significant opposition from the affected industries (Bag, Gupta, Srivastava, Sivarajah & Kumar, 2022; Belk, 2014).

Platforms have recognized the necessity of using algorithms and computational power to manage matchmaking mechanisms and pricing processes, as members of these communities often do not know each other personally. These systems must be robust enough to handle all demands and can encounter significant issues when they fall short (Marr, 2016). These restrictions, coupled with the necessity for mobile devices, have been suggested to limit the expansion of this phenomenon (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020).

Users are more likely to embrace the SE if digital platforms, whether accessed via smartphones or websites, are user-friendly and intuitive (Lacan & Desmet, 2017). Some authors have proposed integrating blockchain into these platforms to enhance safety and efficiency, and reduce perceived risk (Chang & Wang, 2018; Großmann, Merfeld, Klein, Föller & Henkel, 2024; Kapassa, Themistocleous, Christodoulou & Iosif, 2021; Krivenchuk & Smutny, 2019). However, despite the high expectations surrounding blockchain technology, it may not fully eliminate the need for trust in the SE (Hawlitschek, Notheisen & Teubner, 2018), and it involves complex and costly technologies (Baldimtsi, Kiayias & Samari, 2017).

Moreover, the digital infrastructures underpinning these platforms, particularly algorithms and data collection systems, are not neutral. Rather, they are often designed to advance the interests of the platform itself, shaping user behavior, controlling visibility, and extracting value in ways that may compromise transparency and equity (Vallas & Schor, 2020).

Economic perspective

The SE has experienced rapid growth, making it one of the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy. Platforms that act as intermediaries, managing transactions and profiting from them, have become particularly significant in this process (Gössling & Michael Hall, 2019). Some authors argue that the SE has evolved from a nonprofit, community-oriented phenomenon into a for-profit business model capable of transforming production, consumption, finance, and learning due to its rapid expansion (Ravenelle, 2017). These claims are substantiated by the substantial market dominance that platforms have quickly achieved, often nearing monopolistic power (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020). This shift has also raised concerns about value allocation within the system, as the intermediary platforms that facilitate exchanges tend to capture the majority of the profits, leading to an inequitable distribution among all participants and compensation insecurities (Alnaggar, Gzara & Bookbinder, 2024; de Filippi, 2017).

Despite these limitations, non-sharing businesses are increasingly adopting the SE model, potentially exacerbating wealth inequality and reinforcing capitalist and monopolistic tendencies. This adoption allows more people to access commodities, leading to a boomerang effect that increases overall consumption (Ciulli & Kolk, 2019). Additionally, financial risks associated with fraud and the possibility of members not receiving what was promised must be considered (Yi, Yuan & Yoo, 2020). There is also the potential for increased prices of new products due to their after-purchase sharing potential (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020). These economic shifts can be understood through a lens that shows how platforms create significant profits by capitalizing on users' resources and work, while minimizing their own risks and offering little in terms of wealth redistribution (Srnicek, 2017).

However, these are not the only financial issues associated with the SE's integration into daily life. The increasing demand for 'shared' residences is known to limit the availability of affordable long-term housing, subsequently raising living expenses, rents, and home prices (Malhotra & van Alstyne, 2014; Newlands et al., 2017). When examining the effects of the sharing movement on the automotive sector, the results are mixed. On one hand, car sharing suggests that fewer people will own cars, potentially reducing the number of automobiles sold by 2% to 4% annually (Schiller, 2014; Schmidt, 2020) and increasing competition within the automotive sector. This shift will also affect the manufacturing of car components, support services, and related industries (Barnes & Mattsson, 2016). However, since shared cars are likely to be used more intensively, they will wear out faster and need replacement sooner, leading to a gradual but steady increase in industry sales (Grosse-Ophoff, Hasler, Heineke & Moller, 2017).

Environmental perspective

Although some have questioned the environmental effectiveness of the SE (Martin, 2016; Ricci, 2015), it is widely regarded as having significant potential to contribute to sustainability (Martin, 2016; Ricci, 2015). Some concerns stem from the occasional neglect of community and environmental care by some users, while others focus on the system's long-term impacts on communities, which are under scrutiny by regulators and governments (Marchi & Parekh, 2016).

The true environmental impact of the SE remains uncertain at this stage of research (Liu & Chen, 2020). Its inherent nature complicates regulation, posing challenges to ensuring its sustainability (Ma et al., 2019). Additional concerns include the rise of overconsumption patterns due to price reductions and increased market availability (Kauffman & Naldi, 2020), the escalation of traffic congestion and air pollution from decreased public transportation use (Clemons et al., 2021), and the increase in travel frequency and length of stay (Wirtz, So, Mody, Liu & Chun, 2019).

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All these factors likely have a negative environmental impact, casting doubt on the claim that the SE inevitably reduces resource consumption. This supports the argument that the SE may not be the path to sustainability nor accelerate the transition to it (Munkøe, 2017). From a regulatory perspective, these environmental shortcomings are exacerbated by weak regulatory mechanisms and the absence of enforceable sustainability standards that would hold platforms accountable for their ecological claims (Zvolska et al., 2019).

Discussion and conclusions

The SE has gained significant attention in both academic and policy circles, being heralded for its potential to revolutionize traditional industries, empower consumers, and promote sustainability (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Sundararajan, 2016). However, a growing body of literature highlights the unintended consequences and structural vulnerabilities that have emerged alongside these promising developments (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Schor, 2016). Despite the optimistic narratives of increased access, flexibility, and democratization, SE platforms are increasingly associated with issues of labor exploitation, market concentration, and regulatory challenges (Graham, Hjorth & Lehdonvirta, 2017). This study aims to address these shortcomings by offering a systematic review of the main critiques of the SE, organized within an integrative framework that highlights social, legal, technological, economic, and environmental dimensions. Building on the work of Barnes and Mattsson (2016) and Buhalis et al. (2020), Table 1 summarizes the key benefits of the SE alongside the main drawbacks identified in this review.

Theoretical implications

One of the key contributions of this study is its theoretical framework, which synthesizes diverse critiques of the SE and positions them within a broader academic discourse. Central to this perspective is the growing body of research that examines how digital platforms, often seen as decentralizing forces, actually concentrate power among a limited group of stakeholders, including platform owners and the algorithmic systems that govern user behavior (Srnicek, 2017). Through the lens of this perspective, our study underscores how these platforms' business models create inequalities and perpetuate control, particularly in their labor practices (Schor & Vallas, 2023; Vallas & Schor, 2020). This theoretical perspective has become increasingly critical in explaining the growing tension between platform owners and users, with the latter often experiencing heightened precariousness and exploitation.

In parallel, existing literature on the role of legal and normative systems offers valuable insights into the broader forces shaping the development of platform-based models. The SE is currently undergoing a critical transition, where regulatory boundaries and societal pushbacks are challenging the legitimacy of many platforms (Gerwe, 2024). As regulatory frameworks lag behind technological innovation, platforms exploit gaps in governance, often engaging in self-regulation that benefits their interests but fails to protect workers or consumers (Zvolska et al., 2019).

Our analysis also reflects ongoing debates about the changing nature of work, particularly the structural vulnerabilities faced by those engaged in platform-based labor (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Research has shown that many gig workers face economic insecurity, inconsistent income, and minimal safety nets – conditions that have been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (MacEachen et al., 2022). The crisis amplified existing inequalities, revealing how platforms were able to capitalize on surging demand while offering little in the way of protection for their workforce.

Through the integration of these frameworks, our study contributes to theory building by mapping out the structural dynamics of the SE and highlighting the critical intersections of the factors. We draw attention to the fragmented and contested nature of the SE, emphasizing how these platforms evolve within specific institutional contexts and how this evolution is shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures (Gerwe, 2024).

Managerial and policy implications

Our findings carry significant implications for policymakers operating in the increasingly complex and fast-moving landscape of the SE. Platforms often function within regulatory gray zones, where oversight is limited and accountability is diffused. While these gaps have enabled rapid innovation, they have also exposed consumers and workers to considerable risk. The pandemic has further highlighted the insufficiency of self-regulation, as many platforms capitalized on crisis conditions while offering little institutional protection to their workforce (Nuttah et al., 2023; Ravenelle, 2017). This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive regulatory frameworks that address labor rights,

Table 1. Positive and negative aspects of the SE

	Positive aspects of the SE	Author/Year	Negative aspects of the SE	Author/Year
Social	The SE can contribute to the achievement of a more egalitarian system, where opportunities are presented to everyone, reducing gender, education, and income inequalities. It fosters deeper social bonding and promotes local communities over individualism.	Fioramonti et al., 2019; Gössling and Michael Hall, 2019; Shereni, 2019; and Wu et al., 2021	Some of the SE's users can act in a self-interested manner, taking advantage of the rest of the community, generating problems such as sexual harassment or discrimination. Urban communities can also be affected by the increase in traffic and house prices. Contexts with higher degrees of inequality are more at risk.	Baumber et al. (2019); Buhalis et al. (2020); Clemons et al. (2021); Culiberg et al. (2023); Dreyer et al. (2017); Kauffman and Naldi (2020) and Ozuna and Steinhoff (2024)
Legal	The SE can reduce information asymmetries between national and local governments, a key point in addressing dislocations and negative externalities. It goes beyond capitalism and planned obsolescence, which will break with old institutional paradigms and promote a new system.	Barnes and Mattsson (2016) and Schaltegger et al. (2018)	Governments and regulatory bodies have been caught off-guard, and their responses have left non-sharing companies at a disadvantage against the SE. Also, due to its business model, the SE is based on the exchange of personal information, which can be misused due to the lack of legislation.	Abutaleb et al. (2023); Dellaert (2019); Gunter and Önder (2018); Koh and King (2017) and Ranzini et al. (2017)
Technological	The SE fosters innovation to address social or environmental challenges and focuses on building domestic ICT and industrial capabilities. It enables digital relationships and social networking.	Aluchna & Rok, 2018; Gössling & Michael Hall, 2019; Shereni, 2019; and Si et al., 2021	Due to the digital nature of the SE, some illegal activities can emerge, as well as insecurities when using the platforms due to the lack of trust among strangers. Although the SE has mechanisms to prevent abuse and foster trust, technological problems may arise, hindering the use of platforms.	Bag et al. (2022); Baldimtsi et al. (2017); Belk (2014); Chang and Wang (2018); Kauffman and Naldi (2020) and Marr (2016)

(*Continued*)

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Table 1. (*Continued.*)

	Positive aspects of the SE	Author/Year	Negative aspects of the SE	Author/Year
Economic	The SE offers diverse sources of income and fosters opportunities for entrepreneurship. It also reduces the transaction costs of operations.	Barnes and Mattsson (2016); Fioramonti et al. (2019); Gössling and Michael Hall (2019); Schaltegger et al. (2018); and Shereni (2019)	Due to its growth, the SE may have turned into a for-profit business model with the potential to modify all processes and value distribution in the value chain. Also, due to the goods being shared, fewer of them are needed, so sales decrease, and competition among companies increases. Problems related to fraud and financial risks may also emerge, as well as compensation guarantees.	Alnaggar et al. (2024), Barnes and Mattsson (2016), Ravenelle (2017), Schiller (2014) and Yi et al. (2020)
Environmental	The SE can promote a more sustainable consumption system and pave the way to sustainability.	Aluchna & Rok (2018); Fioramonti et al. (2019); Gössling and Michael Hall (2019); Plewnia & Guenther (2018); and Schaltegger et al.(2018)	Although it has been said that the SE is the pathway to sustainability, the lack of community and environmental concern, as well as the lack of knowledge about the long-term effects, suggests the opposite. This model has been said to increase traffic congestion and air pollution and reduce the use of public transport. It has also been said to increase travel frequency and boost patterns of over-consumption, negatively affecting the sustainability of the system.	Clemons et al. (2021); Marchi and Parekh (2016); Munkøe (2017) and Wirtz et al. (2019)

algorithmic governance, data privacy, and market concentration. Policymakers must move beyond reactive measures and develop anticipatory policies that can evolve alongside platform innovation.

In this context, a one-size-fits-all regulatory approach is unlikely to be effective. Our study emphasizes the importance of differentiated regulations based on platform typologies. For example, supplier-oriented platforms that rely heavily on gig labor demand stronger enforcement of labor protections, including fair wages, job security, and social benefits. Conversely, platforms that emphasize sustainability and community-building must be held accountable for their environmental and social claims through stricter transparency and impact reporting standards. By tailoring regulations to specific platform models and risk profiles, governments can strike a more effective balance between fostering innovation and safeguarding the public interest.

For platform managers, these findings present both a challenge and an opportunity. As regulatory and societal scrutiny intensifies, managers must adopt concrete governance practices that not only meet emerging compliance standards but also actively mitigate the risks inherent in platform-based models. This includes implementing clear, enforceable labor policies, such as minimum pay thresholds, transparent performance metrics, and grievance mechanisms, to reduce worker precarity and foster retention. Platforms should also invest in internal audits of algorithmic decision-making processes, particularly for worker evaluation and task assignment, to ensure fairness and accountability.

To strengthen trust, managers can establish third-party certification for environmental and social claims and provide publicly accessible reports on sustainability efforts. For instance, ride-sharing platforms could report on vehicle emissions or incentivize the use of electric vehicles, while accommodation-sharing platforms could track energy consumption and community impact in high-density rental areas. In addition, managers should create dedicated ethics or compliance roles responsible for monitoring evolving regulations and ensuring that platform policies remain adaptive and responsive. Embedding these functions into the organization signals long-term commitment and operational readiness.

Equally important is the alignment of platform values with consumer expectations. Increasingly, consumers are demanding accountability from digital platforms on issues ranging from labor conditions to climate impact. Platforms that demonstrate a genuine commitment to transparency, fairness, and sustainability are likely to enjoy greater trust and loyalty from users. Managers should view these shifts not merely as regulatory pressures but as opportunities to differentiate their brands and gain a competitive advantage in a saturated market. Embedding these values into the core business strategy is no longer optional; it is essential for long-term viability and responsible innovation.

Limitations and future research

While this study provides valuable insights into the structural challenges of the SE, there are limitations that should be addressed in future research. The focus on English-language publications and business-centric literature means that certain perspectives, such as those from urban studies or environmental policy, are underrepresented. Future research should broaden the scope to include cross-national comparisons and insights from other academic domains to enrich our understanding of the SE's global impact.

Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to examine how platform practices evolve in response to regulatory changes, societal pushbacks, and technological innovations. Future research could also explore the intersectionality of the five dimensions discussed in this study, exploring how labor conditions, environmental impacts, and regulatory issues intersect and amplify one another.

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