

Kritische Verbraucherforschung

Isabel Cruz · Rafaela Ganga  
Stefan Wahlen *Editors*

# Contemporary Collaborative Consumption

Trust and Reciprocity Revisited



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# Kritische Verbraucherforschung

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Isabel Cruz · Rafaela Ganga  
Stefan Wahlen  
Editors

# Contemporary Collaborative Consumption

Trust and Reciprocity Revisited

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*Editors*

Isabel Cruz  
Matosinhos, Portugal

Rafaela Ganga  
University of Liverpool  
Liverpool, UK

Stefan Wahlen  
Wageningen University  
Wageningen, The Netherlands

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## **Preface:**

# **Contemporary Collaborative Consumption. Trust and Reciprocity Revisited**

With increasing digitalization of everyday life, consumers' access to goods and services in the online world is expanding. Not only do these developments influence how people interact and socialize, but the digitalization also extends more profoundly to how we organize daily lives, identities and sustenance. One of the overarching terms describing this change is the sharing economy. With regard to consumer activity in the sharing economy it is possible to speak of collaborative consumption. The new forms of consuming described as collaborative consumption are assumed to mitigate environmental and social outcomes of consumer capitalism and accordingly positively contributing to more sustainable development. A conflicting perspective portrays collaborative consumption in exacerbating new forms of inequalities manifesting in a form of turbocharged capitalism with individualized and tailored on-demand production and consumption. Looking at the empirical reality within these two extreme positions, the book series on "Critical Consumer Studies" is a well-fitting outlet illustrating cases of collaborative consumption in a European context.

The series "Critical Consumer Studies" is interested in ways of theorizing consumers and consumption beyond the prevailing paradigm focusing on markets and acts of purchasing. Indeed, the book series criticizes the centrality of a buyer's role and individual behavior. Consequently, "Critical Consumer Studies" is interested in scrutinizing consumption in situated everyday contexts and in considering implications for consumer education and consumer policy. This volume addresses the critique of the one-dimensional consumer image by examining societal developments coined as sharing economy and seemingly novel forms of collaborative consumption.

The distinction of economic categories as consumers and producers are vanishing in times of increasing digitalization and identification of individuals as both, producer and consumer. Being considered a solution to slow down processes of



destroying our livelihood, but also as subordinating areas of life to an efficiency and growth paradigm, the empirical reality of collaborative consumption is more diverse. This volume provides empirical cases of collaborative consumption oscillating around the concepts of trust and reciprocity. The authors outline aspects of collaborative consumption away from the prevailing market paradigm and contribute to critical consumer studies by explicating the role of trust and reciprocity in exchanges of increasingly digitalized everyday life.

Isabel Cruz, Rafaela Ganga and Stefan Wahlen

*Porto, Liverpool and Wageningen, February 2018*

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## **Vorwort:**

# **Zeitgenössischer kollaborativer Konsum. Vertrauen und Reziprozität überdenken**

Mit einer zunehmenden Digitalisierung des Alltags expandiert auch der Zugang von Verbrauchern zu Gütern und Dienstleistungen über die digitale Welt. Diese Entwicklungen beeinflussen nicht nur wie Verbraucher interagieren und Kontakte knüpfen, sondern die Digitalisierung erstreckt sich auch auf weite Teile der Organisation des täglichen Lebens und manifestiert demgemäss Identitäten und der Existenz. Einer diese Entwicklungen umschreibende Begriffe ist der der Sharing Economy. Im Hinblick auf Verbraucheraktivitäten in der Sharing Economy wird oft von kollaborativem Konsum gesprochen werden. Auf der einen Seite wird angenommen, dass kollaborativer Konsum ökologische und soziale Konsequenzen des Konsumkapitalismus abschwächt und entsprechend zu einer nachhaltigeren Entwicklung beitragen kann. Auf der anderen Seite arbeitet eine widersprüchliche Perspektive heraus, dass kollaborativer Konsum Formen von Ungleichheiten verschärft und als eine Form des turbogeladenen Kapitalismus daherkommt welcher individuelle und maßgeschneiderte Produktion und Konsumtion auf Abruf propagiert. Die Buchreihe „Kritische Verbraucherforschung“ ist ein passendes Forum um sich mit der empirischen Realität dieser beiden extremen Positionen zu beschäftigen. Dieser Sammelband präsentiert Fallstudien des kollaborativem Konsums in einem europäischen Kontext.

Die Reihe „Kritische Verbraucherforschung“ interessiert sich für die Konsumtheorie jenseits des vorherrschenden Markt-Kauf-Paradigmas, das sich auf Märkte und Kaufakte konzentriert. Durchaus kritisiert die Buchreihe die Rolle des Verbrauchers als Käufers. Folglich ist eine „Kritische Verbraucherforschung“ daran interessiert, den Konsum in situieren Alltagskontexten zu untersuchen und Konsequenzen für die Verbraucherbildung und die Verbraucherpolitik zu berücksichtigen. Dieser Band befasst sich mit der Kritik des eindimensionalen Verbraucherbildes, indem er zeitgenössische gesellschaftliche Entwicklungen untersucht. Die mit zunehmender Digitalisierung einhergehende Sharing Economy und scheinbar

neuartige Formen kollaborativen Konsums sind dementsprechend von höchster Relevanz für eine „Kritische Verbraucherforschung“.

Die Unterscheidung von ökonomischen Kategorien der Konsumenten und Produzenten verschwimmen in Zeiten zunehmender Digitalisierung und der Sharing Economy. Die in diesem Bande herausgearbeitete empirische Realität des kollaborativen Konsums zeichnet ein Bild wie die zunehmende Digitalisierung des Alltags einen Beitrag zur Verlangsamung von lebenszerstörenden Prozessen leistet, aber auch Lebensbereiche einem Effizienz- und Wachstumsparadigma als unterwirft. Dieser Band bietet empirische Fallstudien kollaborativen Konsums, welche um die theoretischen Konzepte von Vertrauen und Reziprozität drehen. Die Autoren skizzieren Aspekte des kollaborativen Konsums abseits des vorherrschenden Markt-Kauf-Paradigmas und tragen zu kritischer Verbraucherforschung bei indem sie die Rolle von Vertrauen und Gegenseitigkeit im Austausch des zunehmend digitalisierten Alltagslebens erklären.

Isabel Cruz, Rafaela Ganga und Stefan Wahlen

*Porto, Liverpool und Wageningen, Februar 2018*



# Contemporary collaborative consumption: An introduction

Isabel Cruz, Rafaela Ganga and Stefan Wahlen

The recent decade has seen unprecedented societal challenges. Since the beginning of the economic and social crisis in the global North a decade ago, consumers have started rethinking their everyday lives. Consumers have not only become more mindful in their spending habits, but also more ingenious in living on a limited budget. In times of crisis, individuals have to an increasing extent started thinking about their way of life and the social, economic and natural environment in which they live. The changes that took place during and after this crisis appear to have endured. Individuals and groups of consumers started rethinking ownership and the possibility of accessing rather than owning particular goods and commodities. Moreover, service provision has increasingly attracted modes of sharing rather than provisioning via a traditional market setting.

A term that has been rediscovered to coin these developments in provisioning goods and services is collaborative consumption. This renaissance of alternatives and ancient systems of provision in the broad capitalist market economies raises questions regarding the quality of life and what the future holds for both individuals and communities. The economic downturn in Europe has given rise to increased debate on what future world is envisioned. The United Nations responded with the development of, and agreement upon, Sustainable Development Goals to deal with global injustice and environmental burdens. The sustainable development goals that have been agreed by world leaders in 2015 envision a society without poverty, with a lower impact on ecosystems and a liveable environment for all. Achieving sustainable development by the year 2030 appears imperative.

In that sense, the new forms of sharing that emerged during the crisis, particularly collaborative consumption, are expected to provide possible solutions on the way to more sustainable development. On the other hand, since collaborative consumption is associated with the sharing economy (e. g. Wahlen and Laamanen 2017), critics also stress the challenge of a turbo capitalist approach, bearing in

mind new forms of labour injustices and workers' conditions deteriorating. Hence different versions of the sharing economy and collaborative forms of consumption are discussed, one pertaining to a more affirmative and progressive version, seeing solutions to world problems in the promotion of social cohesion and alleviating the environmental burden through collaborative consumption. In contrast, there is a more sceptical and daunting version, which sees collaborative consumption as an exploitative practice that exacerbates existing inequalities and injustices, as well as promoting individual self-interest. Yet social reality is far more complex than these polarized positions. There are ample examples of commercially oriented collaborative consumption which nevertheless impacts the social sphere, demonstrating that the variety of forms of collaborative consumption changes the way that individuals consume collaboratively and thus helps to mitigate the societal challenges present in contemporary society.

Alongside social, economic and environmental developments in recent decades, there has also been a socio-technological shift, with increased digitalisation having an impact on the ways individuals organise their everyday lives and consumption trends. Socio-technological changes associated with the Internet allow for new ways of communicating and interacting in the social sphere, which has impacted on the everyday lives of individuals and communities. Since the 1990s, the Internet has gained ground, and new ways of communicating have generated new forms of interaction. Together with e-mails, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have become more popular, with individuals becoming increasingly interconnected. Using platforms to stay in touch with friends or to share a particular identity or lifestyle – e.g. sharing music – allows individuals to express themselves not only in the analogue world, but to an increasing extent in a digital version of the self. Digitalisation has also brought, equally, new forms of exchange and market organisation, allowing consumers to interact and exchange goods and services far more widely than in analogue times.

Digitalisation has also affected working life: the boundaries of leisure and working time are blurring: all-day access to e-mails from anywhere in the world, or remote forms of work are just two examples. This fact is also inseparable from the increasing use of portable electronic devices. The rise of smartphones, tablets and e-readers has been a major factor in decreased computer use as the primary means of accessing the Internet. Over the past decade, the use of smartphones and tablets has changed the role of the Internet in daily life, enabling us to communicate with each other from anywhere, buy the latest fashion, order a taxi, do grocery shopping, show friends what we are eating, etc. and stay continuously connected. This list could be broadened to an unlimited array of everyday activities that have changed as digitalisation has taken hold of contemporary life. With the rise of new

kinds of mobile devices since the early 2000s, the use of mobile phones and apps has changed the social grid and the way we acquire commodities and provide services. Not only do we exchange information, or buy and sell commodities. These new technological devices also enable consumers to manage their everyday life in new ways: it is not only possible to shop for groceries or other items, but also to access a variety of other services such as banking and paying tax, for which an in-person visit is no longer required. These things can be done from the couch in your living room.

Contemporary collaborative consumption can accordingly be understood as a relational practice, since individuals consume goods and services while at the same time relating to each other (e.g. meals, travelling, working, school). These 'practices of collaborative consumption' must be analysed in relation to the temporal and geographical context as well as the social and natural environments in which they occur (Felson and Spaeth, 1978). In contemporary societies of the global North, consumers find more satisfaction and status in experiencing, rather than owning material goods. In digitalised societies, collaborative forms of consumption are often characterized and mediated by digital networks and technologies. In the digital age, individuals engage in collaborative forms of consuming in order to pursue their self-interest while also considering the collective good, eventually making a move towards more sustainable consumption on a larger scale.

This book is interested in the social, environmental and (to a lesser extent) economic aspects of contemporary forms of collaborative consumption. The collection of chapters in this book comprises a selection of European case studies. The book discusses the role of collaborative consumption and the new sharing ethos in contemporary society. The book addresses the way alternative and new forms of collaborative consumption are socially shared and understood and how these unfold and change existing thinking about consumption and production as well as work and leisure. The authors are not only interested in innovative business ideas, but in the attitudes of consumers as well as the societal implications of a sharing ethos. We address possible implications and interdependencies for consumer landscapes and the sharing economy in a future society. In this way, we seek to engage in critical debates to promote change towards a more sustainable future, one which acknowledges a diverse set of ideas, approaches and principles in a broad array of systems of provision.

In the aftermath of the multiple crisis outlined above and an increasingly digitalised everyday life, contemporary collaborative consumption is propelling a contemporary wave towards alternative modes of everyday activity but also advancing alternative understandings of consumption. In the times of crisis we have witnessed over the last decade, bartering has become a more common mode of exchange in our societies. Collaborative consumption is a way of accommodating

needs and desires in a more sustainable way and possibly lightening the burden for individuals, communities and the wider environment (Botsman and Rogers 2010). Collaborative consumption may bring benefits for the parties involved, in different fields: in economic terms (savings), in social cohesion (relationships or friendships), and in terms of its environmental impact. Collaborative consumption allows individuals to make money from dormant resources in underutilized goods and equipment. In collaborative consumption, the sharing of goods and services may reduce usage costs in economic and environmental terms. Sharing is the basis of collaborative consumption in the sharing economy. Sharing means getting in touch with other people and not just extracting resources from the market system in the form of commodities as suggested by traditional economic and capitalist thought.

Collaborative consumption is in fact shaking up seemingly well-established economic categories, in various ways. The developments outlined above appear to challenge traditional (economic) conceptions which see consumption as the market exchange of commodities. The newly generated interest in alternative forms of exchange challenge the concept of ownership and involve new modes of using and accessing goods (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Collaborative consumption needs to be seen in wider social, economic and environmental contexts. Consumers are showing a robust appetite for collaborative consumption in a sharing-based economy. Collaborative consumption revives ancient usages such as barter and swaps, coping with situations of crisis and translating these concepts for the digital age. As also outlined above, the traditional economic dichotomy of consumers and producers is being eroded as the field of work extends to what in earlier times was regarded as leisure time.

In traditional economic understanding, workers produce and consumers consume. This dichotomist understanding, dividing the economy into consumption and production, is questionable (Piorkowsky 2017; Fridrich et al. 2014). In collaborative consumption, the concept of the 'prosumer' (Toffler 1980) has been revived as the economic categories of producer and consumer have started to merge in collaborative forms of consumption in the sharing economy. This conceptual amalgamation opens up new possibilities on the road to sustainable development. Traditional roles in the sphere of consumption assign roles to consumers and producers. In collaborative consumption, resources may be used in more efficient ways, at least to some extent. It is precisely these dormant resources which are assumed to solve some of the problems raised by the UN's sustainable development goals. Even though certain modes of contemporary collaborative consumption encourage development towards those goals, there are also counter-trends which have 'rebound effects' in the form of greater environmental burdens and antagonisms rather than solidarity and social justice.

In enabling more social ways of consuming, contemporary collaborative consumption reduces alienation. At the same time, collaborative consumption still operates within capitalist market economies and to some extent also contributes to new forms of alienation, for instance in terms of work. Consumer activity in the sharing economy might be interpreted as entrepreneurial activity. To the extent that collaborative consumption takes place in peer-to-peer networks, consumers are taking over the role of the providing market participant. In this sense, collaborative consumption is assumed to involve new business models, e. g. where individuals rent out an apartment or share a ride and thus move into what is conventionally regarded as the producer side of the economic system (Piorkowsky 2017). The emergence of new business models such as co-working, crowdfunding, crowdlending or crowdequity may challenge traditional economic models and their associated representations of how (labour) markets are organized (Laamanen, Barros and Islam 2018).

Stakeholders in business ventures have shown increasing interest in these new models as ways of generating new, large-scale profits as the number of individuals participating in the sharing economy has grown. However, there are also downsides to the new ways of organizing collaborative forms of consumption: the contemporary sharing economy is marked by increasing inequalities, for example between those who give and those who receive, leading to unfairness when providers of a particular service lose their job security. A prominent example of this is the replacement of taxi drivers by ride-sharing services. The micro-entrepreneurial activity in ride-sharing is not sharing in the colloquial sense, but represents a new form of income which threatens unionised markets such as those of the taxi companies. Those who work for those companies see their rights eroded, because they are now seen as (micro-)entrepreneurs.

From an environmental perspective, there may be both advantages and disadvantages to collaborative consumption. It is widely believed it may lead to more intense resource usage as the number of users for a product or service grows. The car or drill is not used for just a few minutes – so in collaborative consumption total usage time increases. Contrarily, even though an empty apartment being rented out to tourists while the owner is away leads to increased usage, a new problem arouses with entrepreneurs reducing the amount of accommodation available to local residents, as has occurred in major European cities. Collaborative consumption does not therefore always lead to a decrease in levels of consumption, since the resulting savings are often used in the acquisition of other goods and services (Vaquero and Calle 2013), possibly leading to a rebound effect. Hence, the ideal picture painted by proponents of collaborative consumption is of a horizontal structure in which there would be no power-induced hierarchy and materials such as space or tools would be shared, as well as immaterial resources such as



time (Arcadiano 2018). It is possible to think of shared production and distribution with dispersed people and organizations in collaborative consumption. In this vein, collaborative consumption is seen to be more efficient in the allocation and life-time usage of resources by means of redistribution. New sharing initiatives such as repair cafés promote the recycling, repair and re-use of goods. Collaborative consumption may have opposite effects: it has not yet been proven that these alternative forms of sharing activity are different from traditional forms of capitalism and consumption. Accordingly, we need to critically assess the activities of collaborative consumption as there are tensions in the approaches, institutions and ways of organizing. This book seeks to fill some of the gaps in knowledge of the interplay of these opposing forces and of the many nuances in collaborative consumption.

The central aim of this book is to shed empirical and theoretical light on the many contemporary forms of collaborative consumption. We are interested in the nuances of social and economic activity across and beyond traditional markets, the interplay of the various actors involved in collaborative consumption and the propelling of social change towards more sustainable consumption. We are also interested in establishing to what extent crisis-derived collaborative consumption practices focused on sharing and bartering challenge prevailing productionist economic models and their associated growth paradigm. Based on this overarching objective, other relevant questions arise: in what ways has collaborative consumption impacted society, the environment and the economy? How can contemporary concepts of sharing and collaborating extend existing ways of living and consumer agency? What are the practices, perceptions, and motivations of those involved in collaborative consumption in the current societal context? Which interdependencies of individual and collective action in collaborative consumption and a sharing economy encourage more sustainable development?

In contemporary societies marked by singularities and individualism, collaborative consumption may help consumers and citizens to do more with less and to promote social ties. Increasingly, the concepts of 'do it yourself' and 'change from the bottom up' promoted by certain social or lifestyle movements with a view to enhancing collaborative practices have gained ground in discussion of the responsibility for consumer activity and the role of the state and political parties. In this book, we assume that the new digital technologies promote individual consumers' contribution to the public good. Individual consumers look after collective interests in the sense that social networks encourage the sharing of goods and services among strangers. Collaborative consumption goes viral by placing different types of actors and forms of exchange in relation to each other, and sharing concern with both the environment and sustainable development. In this way, collaborative consumption is to some extent moving away from the monetarized and capi-

talist market economy approach to consumption. We have organized the chapters of this book in line with the concepts of trust and reciprocity in the sharing economy, with the aim of moving beyond conventional business models and providing a broader social science perspective on collaborative consumption. The concepts of trust and reciprocity as discussed in sociological debates lay the foundations for this, but also set collaborative consumption in a broader social scientific context. The role of trust and reciprocity in social relationships is discussed from various angles in the different chapters of this book. These concepts allow us to critically assess collaborative consumption and its role in societal developments. Each of these concepts enables us to look at how contemporary collaborative consumption practices, enhanced by new technologies and social networks, have altered traditional forms of capitalist market exchange and sharing.

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## **Trust in collaborating and sharing**

In the traditional understanding of a capitalist market economy, consumers demand products from the market (Fridrich et al. 2014). Market exchange is made possible with money, which facilitates the exchange of goods and services and transforms them into commodities, thereby alienating producers and consumers. In terms of vital social relations, money creates a distance between producer and consumer. Yet, money also plays a vital role in avoiding risks and uncertainties of exchange both in markets and beyond. Some collaborative consumption initiatives provide alternative repositories of value, such as time used as the medium of exchange in time banking (Arcidiano 2018; Laamanen, Wahlen and Campana 2015). Indeed, other forms of exchange, not involving money and traditional markets, have emerged in collaborative consumption. These new forms of exchange are based on different mechanisms of trust, as the example of timebanking elucidates (Arcidiano 2018). Time as valuation might mitigate inequalities in access to goods and services by enabling consumers to contribute their expertise within a social network. The mutuality of the exchange is mediated by a platform which creates trust as a repository of value.

In contemporary collaborative consumption, strangers exchange goods and services without having to rely on money as a medium of exchange. These exchanges are often intermediated through (virtual) social networks or platforms, which make it easier for strangers to communicate and exchange with each other. Individuals can establish a virtual identity, generating a feeling they actually know each other and reducing risk and uncertainty in exchanges, hence allowing for trust in the unknown other. Bonds created through the act of sharing property or personal belongings require trust. In collaborative consumption, exchange prac-

tices have to be accommodated in a relationship of trust between the different parties involved. Saving money and sparing the environment by sharing goods and services also makes it more attractive to trust strangers. There are several mechanisms for building trust beyond monetary exchange: systems of verification, feedback and evaluation on the platform and in networks, but also collaboration with insurance companies. In this book, we seek to explore the social aspects of trust in contemporary collaborative consumption.

Trust is acknowledged as a crucial element for building social relationships. Trust relies on the integrity of a person. But how do we get to trust strangers to share our car/house or exchange goods and services with them in collaborative consumption? The digital social network's ability to create social cohesion and to influence the social process is a major contribution of collaborative consumption. Establishing trust with strangers will endow the relationship with greater importance, and participants in collaborative consumption are willing to sacrifice and to commit to it. With regard to contemporary forms of trust in collaborative consumption, the key factor is the positive or negative consequences of behaving or not according to a particular desired scheme of action. The decision to reciprocate, i. e. to keep trusting, depends on the other party's interpretation of one's behaviour.

Social history can play a significant role in reinforcing individuals' predisposition to trust. Knowing how trust has been sustained within an organization in the sharing economy may influence economic activity and the relationship between the parties involved. In the first instance, exchange processes offer the possibility of trusting or not trusting the other party. The other party can then decide to trust and invest in order to achieve mutual gains. At this point both parties are put at risk, even though in the final analysis they both benefit through reciprocity rather than not investing in and trusting each other (Berg et al. 1994). Reciprocal behaviour can benefit the community, and that is also a reason for greater reciprocity between the parties, even without personal gain. In their contribution on trust, Mortara and Roberti (2018) outline how young people involved in collaborative consumption distinguish between particularized and generalized trust, emphasizing that a network of repeated exchange relationships is a source of trust. They focus on how users protect themselves from the risks associated with the content and extent of the interaction with strangers with whom they have never had to deal before. Trust mechanisms are common on collaborative consumption platforms in order to minimize the risk of sharing among strangers and to encourage people's engagement with collaborative consumption.

In their chapter, Settifi and Lazzar (2018) outline the role of trust in car sharing. Their case study on 'blablacar' sees trust as an essential component in transport platforms. Trust is regarded as a feeling that depends on users' experiences and changes over time and, although the technological infrastructure of car shar-