

Use and diffusion of sharing economy practices among university students: an explorative research

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1. Introduction

In the last years, both sharing and collaborative consumption (CC) have grown in popularity¹. Researchers shifted their focus from issues related with the ownership of goods to their use.

Owyang and Samuel (2015) point out that collaborative economy is the biggest shift in the business landscape since the advent of the Internet itself; it is a key change, since it affects the dynamics of postmodern identity construction. According to several scholars (Bauman, 2007, Belk, 1988), postmodern society allows social actors to act more creatively and to change the Self-definition mechanisms. As a result, individuals have learned to use the cultural significance of objects both to build their own identity and to realize an original biographical project (Beck, 1992). Moreover, the *possession* of goods/products has become a fundamental factor that enables social actors to incorporate the symbolic meaning of objects in their own *extended self* (Belk, 1988). However, the recent changes in the society, together with the intensifying of the economic crisis, have partially shifted the consumers' attention on the use of an asset, rather than on its ownership.

Consumers more and more frequently engage in sharing activities as renting, lending, trading, bartering, and swapping of goods, services, space or transportation solutions (Möhlmann, 2015). According to Sundararajan (2013, p.2), «if you don't need to own the assets you use, not only do you spend smarter, but your product variety and quality options expand». Owning an asset is no longer mandatory – for a growing number of consumers, using a product or a service when needed is more than enough. In this way, consumers enjoy the freedom of being able to change their mind whenever they want.

Web 2.0 boosted the consolidation of these changes fostering a multiplicity of digital platforms able to accommodate a growing number of exchanges and interactions. Through these online-based communities, consumers have been able to coordinate their activities, developing horizontal and egalitarian models of interaction and using these weak ties as social capital to construct dynamically their consumption social networks (Rosen, La Fontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011).

However, regardless the role played by such emerging socio-technical systems, the underlying paradigm of social action is the most significant change, namely the establishment of a sort of *sharing ethos* joined by a growing number of individuals².

Several factors foster the gradual spread of various forms of sharing economy (and collaborative consumption) such as 1) consumer's increased attention to the environmental impact of their choices; 2) a more cautious attitude in spending (partly as a result of the global financial crisis that hit Western societies); 3) a widespread pro-social sensitivity; 4) the role played by new digital technologies.

Indeed, concern toward the ecological impact positively influences people's attitude towards collaborative consumption; as Möhlmann wrote (2015, pp. 195-196), «sharing solutions are generally considered to have a positive environmental impact compared with non-sharing solutions because the pooling of material goods leads to the increased intensity in the usage of one single product entity. The material required for each episode is reduced, waste is avoided, and overproduction is countered [...]». Often an individually owned product with limited usage is replaced with a shared service, maximizing its utility.

The second element affecting the spread of sharing practices is represented by the economic difficulties that individuals have gone through in recent years. Opting for sustainability and reduction in consumption allows cost savings, but it also means criticizing the overconsumption and the dominant capitalistic model (Böckmann, 2013). Moreover, according to several authors (i.e. Schor, 2014), sharing what you own can result in a supplementary income, since these technological platforms allow people to earn money in ways that had not previously been easily available. Therefore, motivations can range from saving money to

¹ The definition of collaborative consumption utilized in these chapter is based on Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen (2015), who specify it as «the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving or sharing access to good and services, coordinated through community-based online services» (p. 3).

² According to Belk (2014b, p. 7), «in the economy of things, you are identified by what you own – your land, house, car. In the economy of ideas that the web is creating, you are what you share».

earning money, since cost consciousness is moving people away from past form of consumerism toward one of sharing and cooperation (Botsman, & Rogers, 2011).

As regards the attention to sociability and interactions, Nelson and Rademacher (2009) highlighted that community memberships or the aspiration to be part of a community are crucial to practicing collaborative consumption. Indeed, sharing activities convey social and relational meanings ensuring that participants pursue a common goal (Albinsson, & Perera, 2012). This feeling strongly intertwines with the common responsibility towards the environment and the collective well-being giving life to practices of *mindful consumption*. Shet, Sethia, and Srinivas (2011) define such practices as caring and being conscious in thought and behaviour about the implications and consequences of individual and collective consumption. Some of these consumers are, in fact, quite critical toward overconsumption. They engage in sharing activities as an intentional political act and are willing to construct an alternative place to usual market (Albinsson, & Perera, 2012).

Finally, the technological infrastructure plays a significant role facilitating the coordination and interaction among consumers. Indeed, the user-friendliness of the sharing platforms (also as the management of online payments) has become a key driver for the development of the different types of collaborative consumption³. The massive expansion of laptop computers, tablets, and other handheld electronic devices allows users to be constantly connected and promotes exchanges and business transactions.

According to Campbell Mithun's 2012 research, rational or emotional reasons drive consumers engaging in various activities of sharing economy. Saving and practicality are the rational reasons, while, among the emotional benefits, the "generosity to others and myself" emerges, while it let people feel altruistic and part of a community. As Schmitt (1999) wrote, rational benefits reflect products usefulness and quality for the consumers, while emotional benefits concern human emotions. Especially for younger consumers, emotional motivations also include the desire to feel smart and fashionable. According to Möhlmann (2015), young people could engage in collaborative consumption practices to follow an emerging trend and to use innovative and fashionable products and services⁴.

Sharing specific services can also be a rather culturally and socially stimulating experience. As regards hospitality services, e.g. Airbnb or CouchSurfing, promoting cultural experience and understanding among people of a different background emerge as driving motivations to engage users (Lauterbach, Truong, Shah, Adamic, & Arbor, 2009). To recap, interest in innovation, attention to social relations, but also to environmental sustainability, ethics, and vision, which are embedded in the sharing of goods and services, are critical factors in supporting the spread of the sharing economy. These trends are so established that they can outgrow the economic crisis.

As to Italy, a recent research (Ipsos, 2014) reveals that 75% of the population, age between 18 and 64, have some notion of the sharing economy, with a peak of notoriety among the youngest one (18-34). According to respondents these practices are one of the most effective (and handy) responses to the crisis; 11% of the sample declares to be a member of such platforms and about one third of the sample (31%) declares to be interested in such consumption practices. An even more recent study (Capeci, 2015) – on a sample of 1000 individuals representing the Italian population – confirms that young people, age between 18-34, represent the 46% of the users of some sharing service (mostly related to mobility or accommodation services). As some researchers highlighted (Pais & Mainieri, 2015), in Italy the supply of sharing services is still greater than the demand. Except for the platforms for mobility, the majority of Italian sites does not exceed ten thousand users. The limited usage of new communication technologies is one of the biggest barriers to the adoption of sharing services. Indeed, the weight of the digital divide is still relevant especially among the most adult users⁵. Furthermore, the existence of a small number of users restricts significantly the amount of sharing goods, reducing the likelihood of finding the desired product/service on the various platforms. As Botsman and Rogers (2011) stressed, collaborative consumption needs a *critical mass* of users to become self-sustaining. Indeed, to compete with conventional shopping there must be enough choice for all consumers. As the number of people increases, the likelihood of dissatisfied users decreases.

³ According to Schor and Fitzmaurice (2015) it is a real *Technophilia* that distinguishes a substantial part of these connecting consumers.

⁴ Indeed, in a *Harvard Business Review* paper, Lubin and Esty (2010) defined sustainability as a "business megatrend".

⁵ As of December 2015, Audiweb data estimated that in Italy just 24.6% of people in the 55-74 age rank (3,5 million of unique users) access the Internet on an average day through all the detected devices (pc, Smartphone, tablet, TV) <http://www.audiweb.it/news/total-digital-audience-del-mese-di-dicembre-2015/>.

The chapter presents the results of an explorative survey aimed at understanding sharing economy related practices among Italian university students, age between 18 and 24 years. Since young people seem to be critical for such practices, such an age group represents the core target of the future development of sharing economy. A deeper understanding of perception, motivations, and actual practices of sharing economy services should highlight the future trends of collaborative consumption. The main aim of this research is to understand the true motivations behind the sharing economy activities spread in Italy. Practices, perception, and motivations have been explored through a web-based questionnaire (Sills, & Song, 2002) and the sample gathered through a snowball procedure (Handcock, & Gile, 2011).

The chapter structure is the following. The next paragraph illustrates the methodology, the characteristics of the sample and some of the main survey findings. The last section advances some concluding remarks, also indicating the areas of further research. This brief literature review provides the theoretical foundation for the subsequent empirical research.

3. Methodology, sample, and descriptive statistics

The authors have conducted an online quantitative research through the Google Drive platform. The questionnaires have been collected over two months (from April to May 2016). To satisfy authors' aims, the questionnaire 1) gathers information about eventual changes of consumption practices due to the economic crisis; 2) assesses the level of knowledge concerning the sharing economy; 3) verifies the diffusion of the most common sharing economy practices; 4) inquiries about the motivation leading to the decision of using or not using collaborative economy platforms; 5) collects socio-demographic information of the participants and their family. To build the questionnaire authors have referred to the recent studies of Capeci (2015) and Ispos (2014), surveying the diffusion of sharing economy practices among Italian consumers. The gathered data have been analysed by Microsoft Excel and SPSS.

The convenience sample (Coomber, 1997) of 283 respondents has been gathered presenting the research during several classes in four different Italian universities, namely University of Trento (Unitn), IULM University of Milan (IULM), Sapienza University of Rome (Sapienza), and University of L'Aquila (Univaq). Most of the students are attending Communications faculties. The sample was gathered through a snowball procedure (Handcock & Gile, 2011).

The four universities represent North (Trento and Milan) and centre (Rome and L'Aquila) of the country. The choice to focus on these two geographical areas allows researchers to compare the attitude toward collaborative consumption of young people living in parts of the country whose sociocultural development is different. Indeed, in Italy, according to numerous sources (Scarpellini 2011, Istat 2014 and Bella, 1988), consumption indicators point out an inequality among the North, the Center, and the South of the country. Distribution of income and wealth penalize the central and southern regions as is highlighted by the difference (a ratio of more than 2 to 1) in the values of equity between North and South⁶.

The majority of the respondents is female (76%) and, as far as the age is concerned, the two biggest groups are born between 1995-1996 (48%) and 1991-1993 (32.2%). Overall, 70% of the students attend the first level degree and 30% the master degree. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the sample composition according to the different universities and the level of degree.

Table 1 - Students attendance of different universities

Unitn	13.1%
IULM	43.8%
Sapienza	37.8%
Univaq	5.3%
Total	100%

Universe: all respondents.

⁶ On this topic, see <http://agrireregionieuropa.univpm.it/it/content/article/31/36/la-distribuzione-del-benessere-italia-diversita-tra-famiglie-urbane-e-rurali>.

Table 2 - Students attendance of universities (level of degree)

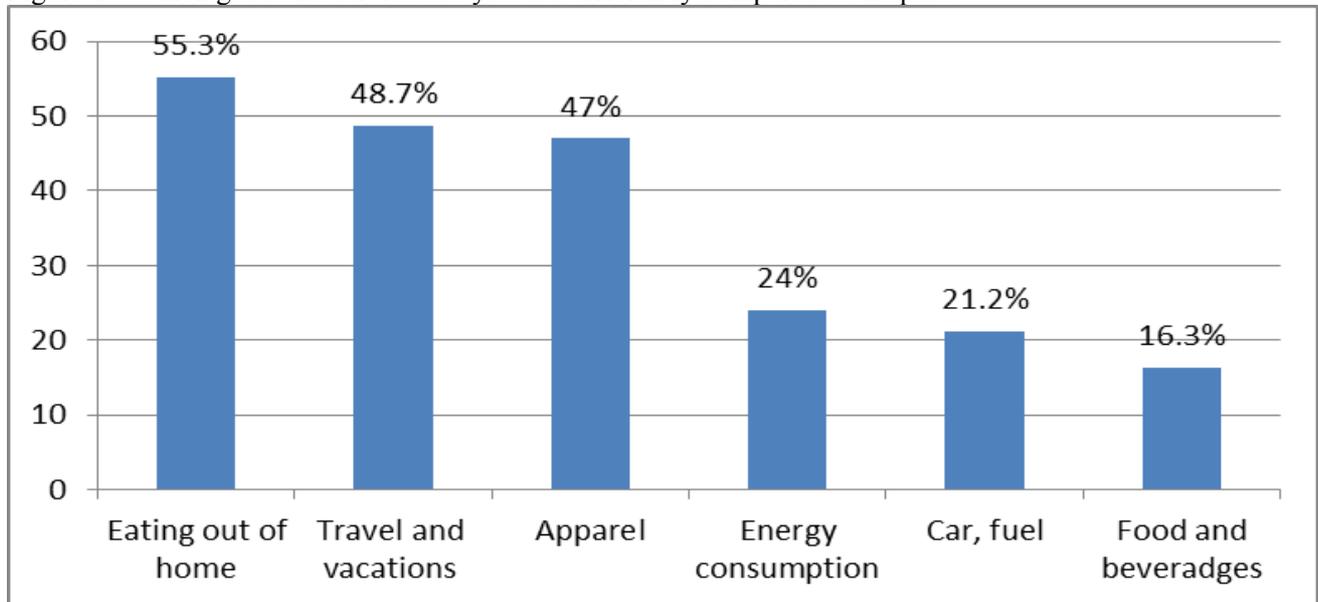
	First level	Master degree	Total
Unitn	0%	100%	100%
IULM	74%	26%	100%
Sapienza	86%	14%	100%
University of L'Aquila	93%	7%	100%

Universe: all respondents.

4. Thinking about Sharing Economy

Since, according to previous researches (Belk 2014a, Ipsos, 2014, Capeci, 2015), the economic crisis of the last years fostered the spreading of sharing economy practices, the first questions of the questionnaire inquire about this topic. 70% of the sample declares that the economic crisis does have changed the life style and some consumption practices. Figure 1 shows that the students have mostly changed practice related to some kind of superfluous consumption. Probably the ones that they have directly pay for.

Figure 1 - Which good and services do you use differently compared to the past?



Universe: all respondents. Multiple answers.

Since sharing economy (SE) is a relatively new phenomenon, the next question assesses the knowledge of this practice among students. 60.1% of the sample declares to have heard of it. More interesting is the decomposition of the sample according to the attended university. Table 3 shows that almost 66% of students declaring to know SE come from Universities that are based in the North of Italy (Trento and Milan), although these two university together represent approximately 57% of the total sample. This gap highlights the typical socio-cultural differences in the various areas of the country, hosting a North traditionally more advanced and evolved and a South-Centre (Malanima & Daniele, 2007) struggling to keep up with European standards – even in the field of consumption modernization.

Table 3 - Knowledge level of Sharing Economy according to attended University

		Which University do you attend?				Total
		Unitn	IULM	SAPIENZA	Univaq	
Did you ever hear about Sharing Economy (or collaborative economy)?	YES	16.5%	49.4%	29.4%	4.7%	100%
	% of Total	60.1%				
	NO	8.0%	35.4%	50.4%	6.2%	100%
	% of Total	39.9%				

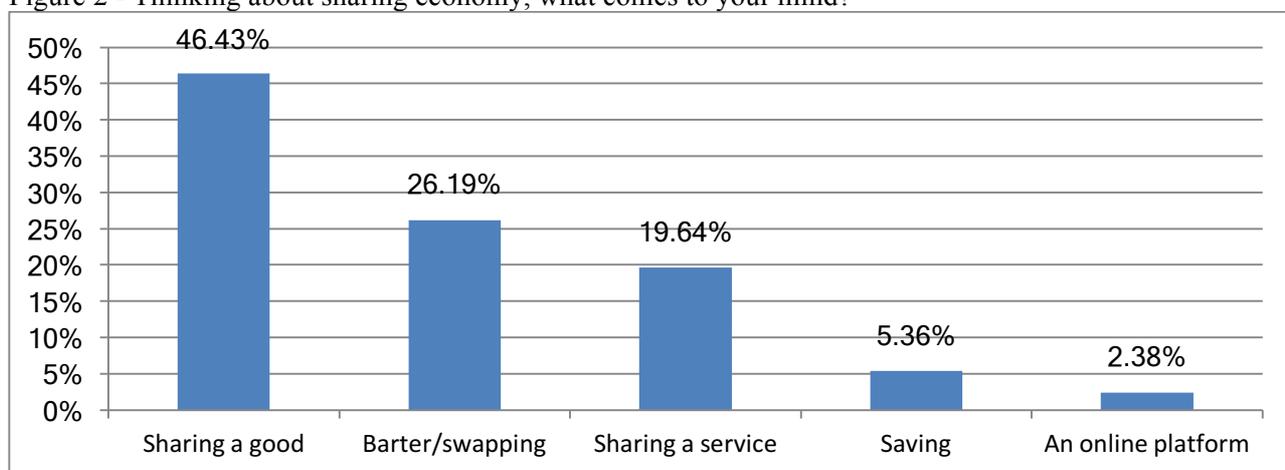
Total Sample		13.1%	43.8%	37.8%	5.3%	100%
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Universe: all respondents.

The direct comparison between the two main cities of the country, Milan and Rome, is equally significant. Despite a similar consistency in the sample, students of Milan manifest a substantially higher level (49.4% vs. 29.4%) of knowledge of sharing economy (Table 3). One of the reason of this gap could be traced in the different awareness of bike sharing – the second best known practice of sharing economy (Figure 3 below). Also thanks to the different urban landscape of the two the cities, bike sharing is a practice much more common in Milan than in Rom.

The following question asks the students to associate SE with one of the five proposed concepts. Almost half of the interviewees chose the idea of sharing of goods. Quite interestingly, the association with “sharing a service” is chosen just by less than 20% of the sample. Only 5.4% of respondents associate SE with saving even if that will be one of the leading motivations of such practices (see Fig. 4 below). Figure 2 ranks all the associations.

Figure 2 - Thinking about sharing economy, what comes to your mind?



Universe: people knowing the SE (n=168).

The intersection between this outcome and the gender of respondents appears quite interesting. Table 4 highlights the polarization between male and female respondents. Female are more prone toward sharing issues while male prefers the idea of saving. The data point out to a female consumption profile closer to sociality and interaction with others, and to a male profile most interested in the economic and instrumental aspects of collaborative practices.

Table 4 - Perception of SE according to gender

		Sex		Total
		M	F	
Thinking about sharing economy what comes to your mind?	Sharing a good	15.2%	84.8%	100%
	Barter/swapping	22.2%	77.8%	100%
	Sharing a service	21.8%	78.2%	100%
	Saving	38.6%	61.4%	100%
	An online platform	25.0%	75.0%	100%
Total Sample		25.0%	75.0%	100%
People knowing the SE		24	126	168

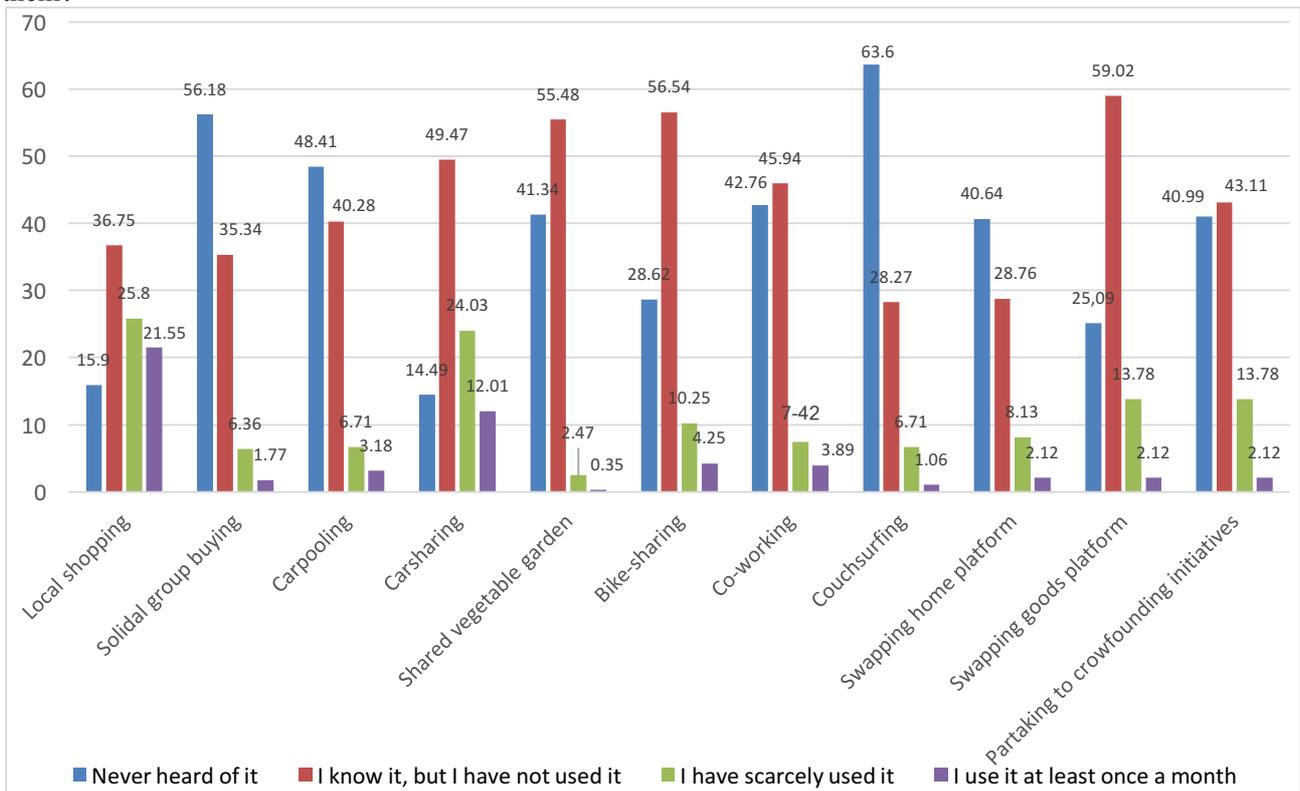
Universe: people knowing the SE (n=168).

The next questionnaire section deals with the actual usage of sharing economy practices. Authors have selected the practices according to a previous Italian survey (Ipsos, 2014) in order to allow some comparison with the national sample.

The next figure shows the level of usage of the different practices. Answers have been collected on a four points scale. According to Figure 3, almost 75% of the sample is aware of car-sharing and local shopping

practices, while 64% of respondents have never heard of couchsurfing. This data confirms Rosen et al. (2011) results, which indicate that the mean age of couchsurfers is 27, thus these individuals are older than the average age of the analysed sample. Moreover, couchsurfing is all about sharing a couch and, probably, university students do not own a couch to share, since they live with their family or share an apartment with other students. Furthermore, almost half of the sample is very young (19-20 years old), hence less prone to travel alone (without family or friends), and probably looking for a more conventional accommodation.

Figure 3 - For each of the following practices, can you tell me if you know them and how often do you use them?



Universe: users of the single practice.

Students use, at least once a month, local shopping (21.55%) and carsharing, which is a distanced second with a percentage of 12.01%. According to Eurisko (2016), in Italy carsharing, along with peer-to-peer accommodation, represents the breakthrough phase of the SE lifecycle, while peer to peer landing and crowdfunding are still a niche. These data partially confirm those provided by Censis (2015) according to which 8.4% of Millennials use bike sharing and car sharing (compared to the 4.1% of the next generational cohort of people between 35-64 years).

Surprisingly, since the BlaBlaCar phenomenon gained a very high media visibility (Cowan, 2015) almost half of the sample does not know carpooling (or ridesharing). Again, the young age of respondents could be the reason why they do not use ridesharing services. The generational cohort influences also the actual use of carpooling and carsharing, which is significantly higher among master degree students (1991-1993 cohorts) compared to first-degree students (1995-1996 cohorts). As of carsharing, among those who said to have occasionally used the service, over 42% is attending a master degree (while the total weight of this cohort on the sample is only of 30%).

As regards local shopping, the more widespread practice, table 5 points out a significant increase within the female universe (more than 10 percentage points) in comparison with the male part of the sample.

A possible explanation for such difference could be the role of caregivers that is still mostly performed by women. Indeed, according to several researchers (e.g. Tanturri, 2011 and de Singly, 1994), in Italy, an obvious gender asymmetry still concerns the division of family tasks. Women are mostly in charge of domestic chores, within a context of gender roles that are particularly stiff and traditional. Thus, as Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick (2013) highlight, women engagement in the family implies also a specific focus

on household consumption and purchases. Actually, women are also much more concerned with products quality, which they are going to provide for the family. Indeed, several studies, in different national contexts, point out the role of women as the strongest supporter of organic food and of the use of non-industrial raw materials. Local shopping guarantees the product quality, which is so important for the female part of the sample.

Table 5 - Local shopping users according to gender

	Non users of Local shopping	Users of Local shopping	Total
Male	60.3%	39.7%	100%
Female	50.2%	49.8%	100%

Universe: all respondents.

Furthermore, according to table 6, local shopping is most widespread among students enrolled in the universities of Trento and L'Aquila, two much smaller cities compared to Rome and Milan. Indeed, more than half of students of the first two universities (respectively 54.1% and 60% of respondents) said to use forms of local shopping. Authors can argue that the territorial proximity with the production site of goods (especially groceries) ensures an ease of access thus enforcing the spreading of the practice (Handy, & Clifton, 2001).

Table 6 - Local shopping users according to attended university

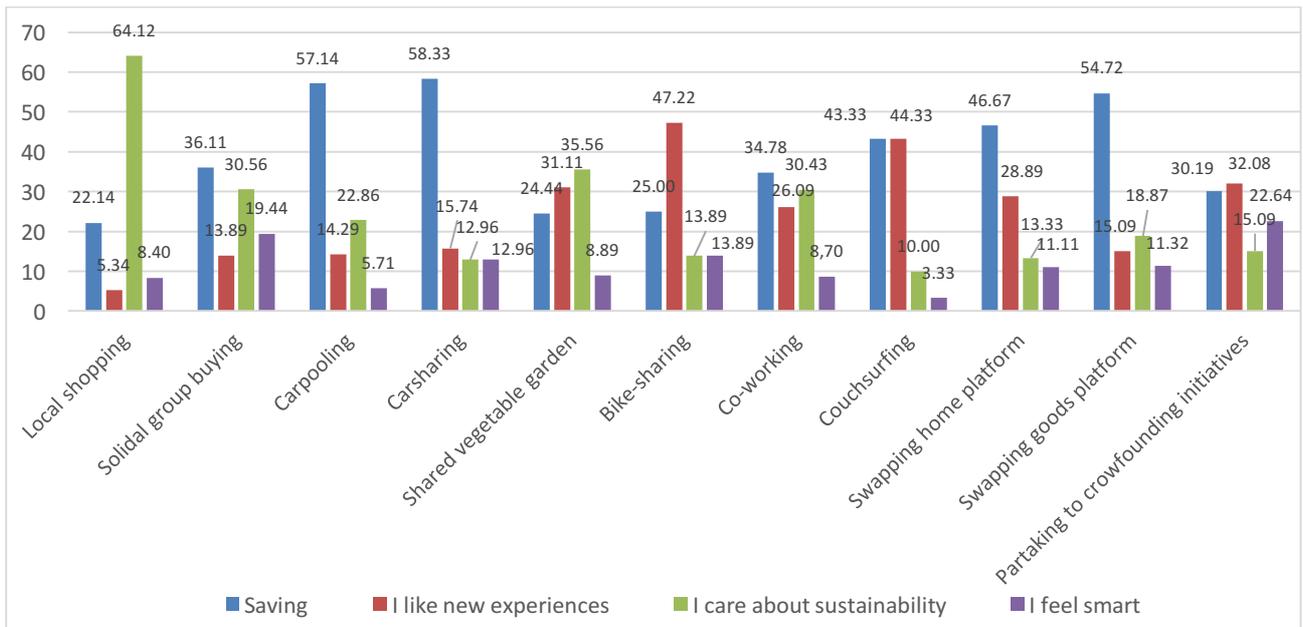
	Non users of Local shopping	Users of Local shopping	Total
Unitn	45.9%	54.1%	100%
IULM	52.4%	47.6%	100%
Sapienza	57.0%	43.0%	100%
Univaq	40.0%	60.0%	100%
Total	52.7%	47.3%	100%

Universe: all respondents.

The next question inquiries about the motivations leading to such practices, which, according to previous researches, have different roots. Capeci's data (2015) underline the economic crisis, thus the need to save money, as a driving force towards such practices. Accordingly, Owyang and Samuel (2015) point out that sharing is saving and, mostly for younger customers, financial savings is one of the top drivers of the collaborative economy.

Among others, Harrison, Newholm and Shaw (2005) highlight the crescent role of ethical concerning as generally driving consumption practices. According to Möhlmann (2015), engaging in collaborative consumption practices could be fashionable for young people; and, obviously, defining one's identity (Paterson, 2009) through consumption is always a core issue. Figure 4 shows the motivations leading to the different practices.

Figure 4 - Thinking about the activities/services that you have already used, can you tell us what is the leading motivation that made you choose them?



Universe: the users of the single practice.

Caring about sustainability and saving are the leading motivations for people engaging in local shopping. Previous researches (Brown et al., 2009; Coley, et al. 2009) confirm that caring for the environment is a leading motive in choosing local shopping, a good choice both the environment and the local community. According to the sample, the need to save represents a second strong motive as table 7 output confirms. This table is obtained by crossing the responses of those who have reduced their expenses for out of home eating with their frequency of local shopping. Table 7 shows that, among those who do not report a reduction of expenses, 41.2% claims to have adopted local shopping practices at least occasionally. This percentage rises of more than 10 points (up to 51.9%) among those choosing to save limiting their out of home eating expenditure.

Table - 7 Reducing out of home eating expenditure by frequency of local shopping

		Local shopping				Total	
		Never heard of it	I know it, but I have not used	I have scarcely used it	I use it at least once a month		
Eating out of home expenses	NO		19.8%	38.9%	21.4%	19.8%	100%
		% of Total	8.9%	17.4%	9.6%	8.9%	44.7%
	YES		12.8%	35.3%	29.5%	22.4%	100%
		% of Total	7.1%	19.5%	16.3%	12.4%	55.3%
Total sample			16.0%	36.9%	25.9%	21.3%	100%

Universe: all respondents.

Moreover, the need to save drives youngsters using car services and swapping platforms. Bikesharing and couchsurfing provide new experiences, although very few interviewers have actually used them (Figure 3). Surprisingly the smart feeling does not appear as a driver for SE practices and this could point out that such trend has now established beyond the fad phase.

6. Conclusions

The paradigmatic shift from owning to sharing is a process that started some years ago. As Rifkin (2014) points out, it is a natural and inevitable feature of the contemporary society along with other exemplary changing. As Levine (2009) stated «sharing is to ownership what the iPod is to the eight-track, what the solar

panel is to the coal mine. Sharing is clean, crisp, urbane, postmodern; owning is dull, selfish, timid, backward».

According to several studies, sharing economy and collaborative consumption relies on internet technologies that allow people to connect and to make better use of goods, skills, and other useful things. Moreover, they allow people to communicate in a peer-to-peer way (Stokes, Clarence, Anderson, & Rinne, 2014). Along with the lessening of the digital divide, the economic crisis of the last years has fueled the diffusion of SE practices, letting people rethink most of their consumption attitude and encouraging a more thoughtful and savvy use of goods and services. In this sense, sharing platforms help consumers to transform their values into behaviors.

As far as Italy is concerned, recent studies (Ipsos, 2014, Capeci, 2015, Eurisko 2016) highlight the proneness of Italian population toward SE practices. The same sources underline a deep gap between the intention to engage in these practices and the actual use of the platforms. Indeed, compared to other European countries, Italy is the country that has one of the lowest level of collaborative form of consumption (Pais & Mainieri, 2015).

All mentioned Italian surveys point out that young adults, between 18 and 34 years old – often labelled as Millennials – are the most engaged group in SE practices. Compared to these findings, the presented study, which focuses on younger individuals, highlights a few significant differences.

University students, age between 20 and 25 years, claim to know SE practices, but their usage is lower than the national average, which is 12% (Pais & Mainieri, 2015). Significantly, both knowledge and usage of couchsurfing (7.8%) and ridesharing (9.8%), the two most famous practices widely discussed by the media system, are lower. As authors have observed, for some practices such as carsharing, adoption rates appear significantly higher among students enrolled in master courses (mostly born between 1991 and 1993). Thus, age confirms once again its relevance.

Furthermore, compared to the overall population, students are more sensitive to cost and sustainability issues. They are less motivated by novelty and the possibility of new experiences (Capeci, 2015).

Thus, if according to Belk (2014a, p. 1599), «it would be folly to ignore sharing and collaborative consumption as alternative ways of consuming and as new business paradigms», the main problem for Italian platforms is reaching a number of users (Botsman & Rogers, 2011) large enough to trigger a virtuous circle (Pais & Mainieri, 2015) and to compete with conventional shopping practices. Indeed, to succeed, these platforms need a huge volume of transactions able to satisfy peoples' requests and to encourage them to come back. Platforms have to communicate their service and to let people understand their meaning. Authors wish for more accessible information and for an increase of communication so to deepen the knowledge of the phenomenon and the availability of the platforms. With this purpose in mind, Bla-Bla Car has already produced two web series (BlaBlaCar Road Movie) in which commercial partners have inserted their product logos (Boroni, 2015).

The media have hotly debated the implications of the sharing economy. The huge success Airbnb, that without owning a single hotel has become the largest hotel chain in the world, has forced competitors to fight back modifying their offer but also changing the law regulation as the New York recent facts testify (Rosenberg, 2016). Among other issues, central to the SE debate appear the question if SE is bringing more paid opportunities to more people, or whether its final effect is the shift of traditionally secure jobs and the creation of a land of part-time, low-paid work. The “dark side” (Bowman, 2016) of this new form of economy is starting to emerge as Uber and Foodora workers complain about exploitation and new regulations should be enforced in order to ensure that both consumers and providers are protected.

Since the main aim of this research is to explore SE practices perception and usage among young people in Italy, it is feasible to conceive further steps that could involve different age groups and people of different countries to allow an international comparison. Moreover, further analysis could analyze the relevance of sociodemographic variables in order to refresh the current notion of SE services typical users

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