

The Luxury of Sharing

Collaborative consumption in Lebanon: Reasons why consumers do and do not engage in sharing practices



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Sharing has become a major trend in many Western countries over the past decade, especially in the USA and in Western Europe. Not only have long existing forms of garden sharing, or apartment sharing witnessed a revival and inspired enthusiasm especially among millennials. The spectrum of tangible and intangible assets being shared is wider than ever ranging from cars, bikes or working spaces to skills, knowledge, time, art and all kinds of data. Furthermore, the reasons why people share, the dimensions of sharing circles as well as the manner of sharing vary significantly. This is reflected by the anything but consistent use of a number of terms describing the phenomenon as 'sharing economy', 'collaborative economy', 'peer economy' or else 'collaborative consumption'. It is fair to say that sharing has become a part of Western consumer culture.

Although differences have been found between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon regarding the acquisition of global consumer culture, the acquisition of such a culture emanating from the West cannot be denied.¹ Thus, the Lebanese consumer culture in comparison with other Middle Eastern countries bears a number of similarities with Western consumerism. This arises the question of whether the trend of sharing, which can be considered as a part of Western consumer culture, has reached Lebanon as well.

The Sharing Economy

As the frequent categorization as 'economy' suggests, the concept of sharing, although inherently contradicting the growth paradigm of liberal market economy, has been ingeniously integrated into the latter. Depending on the broadness of the definition of sharing, whether one includes the vast field of redistribution markets for second hand goods or not, the market share of this economic branch can be substantial. According to a report published by the Brookings Institution India Center, the financial volume of the sharing economy amounted globally to 14 billion US dollar in 2014 and is expected to grow to 335 billion US dollar in 2025.² The very comprehensive underlying definition by Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen understands sharing economy as a 'peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services'.³ reselling of used goods on platforms like *Amazon* or *Ebay* are included in this definition and presumably make up a very large part of the financial volume calculated for 2014. The estimation for 2025 however is 'based on the rapid growth of *Uber* and *Airbnb* as indicative'.⁴

The taxi technology company *Uber* and the online marketplace for apartment renting *Airbnb* are the two flagship companies globalizing the sharing economy. *Airbnb* listings can be found in 191

¹ Cleveland, Laroche and Hallab 2013, 962 et seqq.

³ Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen 2016, 2047

⁴ Yaraghi and Ravi 2017, 3

countries all over the world⁵ and *Uber* operates at least partially in 84 countries⁶. Both start-ups have been founded in the Silicon Valley which is referred to as the place where the sharing economy was born as 'a tech-utopian answer to having too much stuff'⁷. This branch and some of its actors like *Uber* strongly overlap with the so-called 'on-demand economy' which is defined as economic activity that makes use of the latest developments in information and communication technology in order to fulfill consumer demand by immediately provisioning goods and services.⁸ The fact that many activities are often marketed under the label 'sharing'⁹ although they are actually short-term rentals like it is mostly the case in for-profit car-sharing proofs to what extent sharing has become a trend.

Collaborative Consumption

However, the sharing economy represents only a part of the whole sharing movement. Many sharing activities take place beyond the sphere of commercial ventures in the form of bartering, swapping or sharing without monetary compensation. Examples range from community gardening over food sharing to clothes swaps, Couchsurfing and many others. Russel Belk, professor of marketing and expert in consumer culture, defines such activities as 'collaborative consumption', which is 'people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation'.¹⁰ According to Belk, it occupies a middle ground between sharing and marketplace exchange, including elements of both. Although collaborative consumption initiatives also take advantage of the web 2.0 and

its opportunities, they typically remain locally rooted and are mostly for non-profit.

Has the West reinvented the concept of sharing?

The research conducted on collaborative consumption and modern sharing activities focuses solely on Western consumers. However, when collaborative consumption is considered another Western consumer trend that might spread around the world as many others have done before in the course of globalization, the role of cultural particularities determining consumer behavior in countries beyond the West cannot be neglected.

How susceptible are Lebanese consumers to the new sharing trend?

Samir Khalaf, professor of sociology and director of the center for behavioral research at the American University of Beirut reproaches the Lebanese society to have indulged in extravagant consumerism. In his 2012 book 'Lebanon adrift', he illustrates how conspicuous consumption and ostentatious spending assumes three different functions for the Lebanese. First, the access to an ever-changing variety of goods and services serves as a means of distraction from the uncertainties of a life in an environment of political volatility, offering comfort and excitement.¹¹ Second, it constitutes a venue of self-expression and is symptomatic for the 'chronical condition of constant seeking [for meaning and identity] without fulfillment'.¹² Third, he reasons that the closely knit society of Lebanon incites individuals as well as groups of people to outdo one another while seeking to

⁵ Airbnb

⁶ Uber

⁷ Munro 2016

⁸ Jaconi 2013

⁹ Belk 2014, 1597

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Khalaf 2012, 117

¹² Khalaf 2012, 141

enhance their social capital: 'the affectation of the Lebanese to drive Range Rovers, SUMs and three-digit-license-plated limousines with tinted glass, cannot be explained by the utility of the car as a means of transportation. [...] The obsession of the Lebanese with seeking attention has prodded him to extent his ostentatious and ceremonial consumerism to other image-making and branded ventures'.¹³ Moreover, he accuses them of an excessive laissez-faire mindset¹⁴, a short attention span and no valorization for postponed gratification.¹⁵

Ownership tops access

As harsh as Khalaf's critique might seem, a comparatively high significance of material values in the Lebanese culture is confirmed in the *World Values Survey Wave 6* that has been conducted in Lebanon in 2013. The results revealed that 28 per cent of the questioned Lebanese consider themselves 'materialist' whereas in Sweden for instance, a country with a very active sharing community, the percentage is only 7.6.¹⁶ Furthermore, 41.6 per cent of the Lebanese respondents identify with the description of a person who attaches importance to being rich, that is to say having 'a lot of money and expensive things'.¹⁷ Only 6.7 per cent of the Swedish respondents and 5.7 per cent of the US-American respondents felt the same. Less significant but equally noteworthy in that regard is the lower importance that Lebanese respondents accord to thrift: only 24.5 per cent compared to 38.6 per cent of the Swedish and 31.6 of the US-American respondents consider saving money and things as a quality that should be imparted to children.¹⁸ Considering that scholars attribute the most

important driving force for the Western sharing movement to a growing de-ownership-orientation which comes along with a post-material mindset¹⁹ as well as to the sustainability movement²⁰, the supposedly materialist mindset of the Lebanese gives reason to assume that their interest to engage into activities of collaborative consumption might be considerably lower. This gap is certainly also related to cultural differences regarding the importance and perception of status. Displaying wealth is socially more accepted, even expected to a certain degree in Lebanon. In many Western cultures, especially in affluent societies with a narrow gap between poor and wealthy, conspicuous consumption is theoretically affordable for the masses. Displaying wealth in order to stand out from the crowd is often perceived as bragging in these countries.

Carpooling: the social awkwardness of exchanging money between peers

Looking at the streets of Beirut and many other places in Lebanon that are constantly congested with SUVs and Range Rovers often occupied by a single person only, this assumption seems to be easily confirmed. On the first glance, carpooling does not seem to be in the Lebanese mentality, given that people seem to consider being stuck in traffic as a fixed component of their everyday life and do not seem to be anxious to change something about this situation by changing their individual transportation habits. A closer look reveals however, that there is more to the absence of carpooling than the mere infatuation of the Lebanese in their cars. Trust between strangers and 'the social awkwardness of

¹³ Khalaf 2012, 134

¹⁴ Ibid., 212

¹⁵ Ibid., 228

¹⁶ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013f

¹⁷ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013g

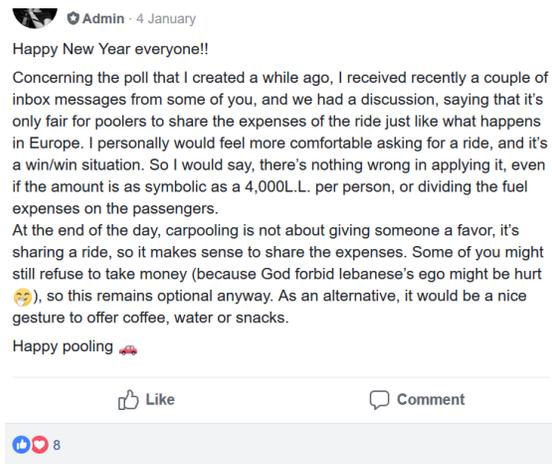
¹⁸ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013d

¹⁹ Belk 2014, 1597

²⁰ Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012, 303; Mansvelt 2008, 111

exchanging money with peers and friends²¹ are key factors explaining why large-scale carpooling like *Blablacar* in Europe does not exist in Lebanon. Sharing costs for the fuel is ‘culturally difficult in Lebanon’ as Mohamad Nabaas and Ralph Khairallah, founders of Lebanon’s first ridesharing app *Carpolo* put it.²² In order to overcome this obstacle, the app launched in 2016 works with a point exchange system and in partnership with *Touch*, the Lebanese mobile operator, which allows frequent users to redeem points for mobile perks. Other than the app, there is also a Facebook group for carpooling on the route between Beirut and Tripoli. However, the concept of this group is closer to organized hitchhiking than to actual carpooling. Being practically as old as the automobile itself, the concept of carpooling classically involves cost sharing for the gas since saving gas was initially the reason why people in the USA and in Europe would share rides in the first place.²³ Although motives for carpooling are more diverse today, saving resources and money are still leading reasons for people to share rides. The Facebook group for carpooling between Beirut and Tripoli however is based on the understanding that people with a car who commute on a regular basis give others who are ‘in need of a ride’ a lift for free. It can be considered systematic gift-giving in order to categorize it among the different forms of collaborative consumption. The repeated efforts of the group administrator to introduce a rule of thumb for at least a symbolic contribution of 4000 Lebanese lira (which is less than three US dollars for an 80 kilometers distance) in order to establish a flatter hierarchy between drivers and passengers have faced repeated resistance, which is illustrated amongst others by this post of

the Facebook group “Carpooling Tripoli – Beirut” administrator:



1 Facebook post of the admin of the group ‘Carpooling Tripoli <--> Beirut’ suggesting the introduction of a symbolic contribution for fuel costs

The two comments inserted below show that some of the members consciously reject the ‘European’ way of carpooling while defending the idea of a Lebanese carpooling concept that tolerates cultural characteristics.

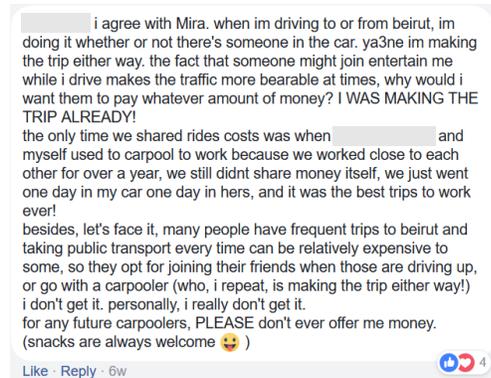


2 Reply of a member of the Facebook group ‘Carpooling Tripoli <--> Beirut’ to the post shown on the left

²¹ Executive Magazine 2016

²² Ibid.

²³ Cozza 2012



3 Reply of another member of the group to the same post shown on the left

Trust between strangers

The second factor that seems to play an important role regarding the limited practice of carpooling is the comparably low level of trust between strangers in Lebanon. The difference in that regard between Lebanese and Swedish or US-Americans as recorded by the *World Values Survey* is considerable: 34 per cent of the Lebanese respondents indicated that they do not at all trust people they meet for the first time while only 16 per cent of the US-Americans and 11 per cent of the Swedish replied in that way.²⁴ Only 10 per cent of the Lebanese respondents think that people can generally be trusted. Both the Swedish (60 per cent) and the US-American respondents (35 per cent) are far more trusting.²⁵ This low level of trust is confirmed in a small sample survey that has been conducted among 10 of the carpooling group's members for the purpose of this article. The fact that the Facebook group is closed (which means that only members can see and write posts) and that only people who are friends or acquaintance with members will be added to the group is considered beneficial by eight of the ten respondents. Similar to the question of whether a contribution should be

²⁴ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013a
²⁵ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013e
²⁶ Botsman and Rogers 2011 // 2010, 75

introduced or not, discussions about accepting or rejecting a growing number of requests issued by strangers who would like to join the group are determined by voices who consider it unsafe to share rides with strangers.



4 Poll about whether strangers should be allowed into the Facebook group 'carpooling Tripoli <--> Beirut'

Trust between strangers is considered a prerequisite for activities of collaborative consumption to gain critical mass²⁶ and a 'central [factor] to the success of the sector'²⁷. 'Critical mass' is a 'sociological term used to describe the existence of enough momentum in a system to make it become self-sustaining'.²⁸ Of course, activities of collaborative consumption in Western countries are not immune to the negative effects of lacking trust between its participants either. A survey conducted among over 850 consumers from the USA and the United Kingdom in 2016 revealed that no interest in sharing with or borrowing from strangers are the two main reasons for people to not participate in a sharing economy service²⁹ and lacking trust in

²⁷ Veridu and The People Who Share 2016, 6
²⁸ Botsman and Rogers 2011 // 2010, 75
²⁹ Veridu and The People Who Share 2016, 7

the person on the other side of the sharing economy transaction was the second reason for people to abandon such a transaction³⁰. It can be assumed that the widespread usage in Western countries of specific online platforms providing peer review mechanisms lowers the inhibition threshold for people to engage into sharing transactions and reinforces trust between strangers.³¹ But there is also reason to believe that the level of trust varies significantly from country to country, from generation to generation and also with regard to the object that is shared, its value and the degree of control that the person providing the object has over it during the sharing activity. In contrast to Lebanese, Germans for instance do not seem to have many reservations about carpooling with strangers which becomes clear when considering the number of 81 Facebook groups with around 400.000 members (approx. 0.5 per cent of the population) for carpooling in different parts of Germany that anyone can join. The closed Facebook group in Lebanon has only 375 members which accounts for approx. 0.008 per cent of the population.

What can explain then that carpooling with strangers for a two hours ride seems to be considered dangerous by many people, as shown in the last comment in figure 4, while sharing a 'service'-taxi with strangers is an indispensable element of everyday life in Beirut and other cities in Lebanon? Does the time of the ride make all the difference? Is it just a matter of habits?

Sharing as a necessity

The fact that women are generally advised to not sit next to the 'service' driver already gives reason to assume that a higher level of trust cannot be

the factor that makes people resort to this means of transport on a daily basis. On the contrary, 'service'-taxis are often cited as a prime example for sharing that is practiced out of necessity.³² Since Beirut does not have public transportation, the only options for transport are private cars, regular taxis, *Uber*, vans operating on a fixed route and 'services'. Vans and 'services' are the least expensive and therefore the only option for many people. Another example for sharing out of necessity are neighbors joining together to share power generators.³³ Considering that there is usually only one generator supplier per street and since many people can neither afford their own generator nor do they have space for it, the lack of freedom of choice and the feeling to depend on a mafia-like generator supplier network are aspects that lead to a negative connotation of sharing in cases like this.

The need to save money or the lack of alternatives is one of two motives for sharing in Lebanon according to Ahmad Sufian Bayram, collaborative economy blogger, founder of Arabshare and Arabic language connector at Ouishare.³⁴ He sees the other motive to share rooted in culture and tradition.

Culturally rooted sharing practices

A number of traditional sharing practices show that the concept of sharing is far from being a Western invention but is also deeply rooted in Arab culture as well as in many other cultures over the world. A well-known example are the *iftar tables* intended for communal fast breaking during Ramadan. Nowadays, they might be more 'imbued with symbolic status' as with the idea of charity and plainness and take the form of 'over-indulgent spectacles', as Khalaf puts it, rather

³⁰ Ibid., 8

³¹ Ibid., 6

³² Bayram 2018; Baz 2018

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bayram 2018

than grounded get-togethers.³⁵ Still, the traditional version is based on everybody's contribution³⁶ which clearly makes it an example of collaborative consumption. Other examples for traditional sharing are the *Jamee'h*, a form of non-interest crowd-lending practiced in a small group of people and *Wakef*, a type of land-sharing formerly practiced in a community or neighborhood which would share the revenue of the sold crop.³⁷ As these examples already suggest, Lebanese share almost exclusively in closed communities like families, friends or neighbors – an assumption that both Bayram and Nelly Baz, Ouishare connector for Beirut, agree on.³⁸

Sharing in and sharing out

To share rather with family members, friends and close acquaintance than with strangers generally is not a Lebanese or Middle-Eastern particularity. As Belk puts it, 'sharing is more likely to take place within family, close kin, and friends than among strangers',³⁹ especially when the act of sharing is bilateral and involves a certain degree of intimacy, a type of sharing that Belk categorizes as 'sharing in'.⁴⁰ In this respect, the basic attitude towards the general concept of sharing is not substantially different in the Western culture and in the Lebanese or Middle Eastern culture. The level of trust between strangers might be lower in Lebanon than in Western countries, but no legitimate conclusions can be drawn from this fact as to the general attitude towards 'sharing in' since this is typically not done with strangers. Belk differentiates between 'sharing in' and 'sharing out', the latter comprising unilateral one-time acts of sharing such as 'providing someone with

spare change, directions, or the time of day'.⁴¹ These acts of sharing are closely linked to norms of politeness and involve strangers.

'Sharing in' is the type of sharing that is relevant for this paper's subject since sharing activities practiced in the realm of collaborative consumption typically involve a higher degree of intimacy than providing a stranger with information such as directions or the time.

If the basic attitude towards 'sharing in' does not account for the gap between Western countries and Lebanon regarding collaborative consumption activities, which other factors do then?

Web 2.0 and the creation of trust networks

'Consumers "circle of sharing" has recently expanded from one entailing primarily family and close friends to a public, communitywide circle facilitated by the Internet and various local and national organizations'.⁴² 'The phenomenon of the sharing economy thus emerges from a number of technological developments that have simplified sharing of both physical and nonphysical goods and services through the availability of various information systems on the Internet'.⁴³ Various scholars point out that the opportunities of freely accessible internet services are a major facilitating factor for the flourishing sharing movement in Western countries. Infrastructural elements such as detailed user profiles, peer review or rating systems, as well as options for tracking borrowed or shared goods allow for very high levels of transparency and create a sense of control for users. Furthermore, online platforms and social

³⁵ Khalaf 2012, 223

³⁶ Bayram 2018

³⁷ Bayram 2018

³⁸ Ibid.; Baz 2018

³⁹ Belk 2014, 1596

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera 2012, 306

⁴³ Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen 2016, 2048

media offer ways to let others know about one's collaborative consumption activities and to gain reputation from like-minded people for this behavior which is proven to be a motivating factor for Western consumers.⁴⁴

Obstacles for collaborative consumption in Lebanon

Although the watchdog organization *Freedom House* rates Lebanon's internet freedom status as only 'partly free' with a score of 46 out of 100 (0 = freest, 100 = least free), censorship and restrictions are unlikely to affect sharing platforms and sharing activities on social media.⁴⁵ However, the lower internet penetration in Lebanon (75.4 per cent in 2017⁴⁶ compared to 85.0 per cent in 2016 in the European Union⁴⁷ and 88.1 per cent in 2017 in North America⁴⁸) is a factor that might have some explanatory power, especially since 'Lebanon suffers from [...] a digital divide between urban and rural areas'⁴⁹ according to the assessment of *Freedom House*. Additionally, e-commerce is not yet widely established in Lebanon, with only 9 per cent of Lebanese internet users being active in it in 2013 and rather for online banking than for online payment.⁵⁰ This is certainly also due to the fact that *PayPal*, the world's leading operator in online payment, has started offering services in Lebanon only later that same year.⁵¹

These are potential obstacles for collaborative consumption activities in Lebanon, as well as the low share of people being covered by insurances. In Bayram's opinion, the fact that their car is not covered by an insurance keeps people who might be interested otherwise in giving other people a

ride or in sharing their car from doing so.⁵² The validity of this argument seems questionable however when considering how willingly many Lebanese make use of valet parking although this service is not insured.

A lack of funding, especially of state support as also pointed out by Bayram⁵³ seems so be a more important obstacle in this regard. Many European non-profit bike rental services for instance are based on state funding.

Assessing the significance of these obstacles remains very hypothetical. Even though a closer look at actually existing activities of collaborative consumption in Lebanon does not necessarily bring clarity in this regard, it reveals that intrinsic motivation to collaboratively consume in order to save resources and protect the environment definitely does not play a role to the same extent as in Western countries.

For profit business ventures in the field of collaborative consumption in Lebanon

Co-working spaces

Most of the publicly accessible collaborative consumption activities in Lebanon are for-profit. One example that can be found in Beirut are co-working spaces like *Antwork* or *The Submarine*. The comparably high number of co-working spaces is certainly due to the lucrateness of renting out desks or parcels in an office by the day in a city with high rents. Moreover, it's the clientele of start-up founders that is attracted by these co-working spaces since they provide both space and infrastructure as well as the opportunity to connect with other founders. Both

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2052

⁴⁵ Freedom House 2017

⁴⁶ Internet World Stats 2017a

⁴⁷ Statista 2018

⁴⁸ Internet World Stats 2017b

⁴⁹ Freedom House 2017

⁵⁰ Redd 2013

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bayram 2018

⁵³ Ibid.

the owner and, assumingly, the users engage in this type of collaborative consumption with the objective to make profit. The incentive is to make business, not to share scarce resources such as space or devices as it is the case with the *Dallas Makerspace* for instance, a non-profit shared community workshop that provides tools and learning resources to the public.⁵⁴

Ride-hailing service *Careem*

Operating in the same principle as *Uber* and therefore being considered its Middle Eastern version⁵⁵ with service offers in 13 countries over the Middle East, North Africa and Asia⁵⁶, the company value of the car booking service *Careem* was estimated at 1.2 billion US dollars in 2017⁵⁷.

Scooter rental system *Loop*

The 'shared fleet' of electric scooters introduced in Beirut in 2016 by the company *Loop Sal* is the first of its kind in the Middle East.⁵⁸ *Loop Sal* is a zone operator of *LoopShare Ltd.*, a globally active company that is also listed at the stock market. For a riding fee of 50 cents per kilometer, the scooters can be picked up and dropped off at 10 stations over Beirut. Although scooters enjoy great popularity in the Beirut traffic, the striking orange rental scooters are hardly seen in the streets which is certainly due to the higher effort related to the low number of stations.

Bike rental system *Bike4All*

Another newly established rental system is *Bike4All*, operated and allegedly fully funded⁵⁹ by the German *nextbike GmbH*.⁶⁰ One year after its launch, there is still only one single station in

Downtown, Beirut, equipped with five bikes. This leaves a long way to go before achieving the goal of setting up 25 stations all over Beirut comprising 500 bikes by 2020.⁶¹ It is therefore rightfully dismissed as a prestige project, especially since its launch was obviously not accompanied by any measures such as establishing bike lanes that would render riding a bike on Beirut's streets less dangerous than is currently the case.⁶²

The carpooling application *Carpolo* already mentioned at the beginning of this article can be considered a more serious venture in that regard but also proves Bayram's point that collaborative consumption is mostly practiced in an elite community in Lebanon. He describes this elite as 'comprised of highly educated people who have an overview of the market and its opportunities'.⁶³ *Carpolo* was piloted at the American University of Beirut and therefore aimed at students as a starting market.⁶⁴ The share of students among its users at the current moment as well as the overall number of users are unknown however.

Still, not all activities of collaborative consumption in Lebanon attract mainly highly educated people. The criteria of a high education might apply for founders of product service systems ('a product is owned by a company or an individual and multiple users share its benefits through a service'⁶⁵), but not necessarily for its participants. *Uber* drivers for instance, are not expected to have a university degree and *Airbnb* hosts primarily need to have an apartment that they can rent rather than a degree. What characterizes participants in collaborative

⁵⁴ Dallas Makerspace

⁵⁵ Shore 2014

⁵⁶ Careem

⁵⁷ Giannikoulis 2017

⁵⁸ Loop Sal

⁵⁹ Fares 2017; Kantara 2017

⁶⁰ Bike For All

⁶¹ Kantara 2017

⁶² Fares 2017

⁶³ Bayram 2018

⁶⁴ Executive Magazine 2016

⁶⁵ Botsman and Rogers 2011 // 2010, 101

consumption activities in Lebanon is rather the motive to save or make money. This is reflected in the high number of redistribution markets in Lebanon, which is one of three different collaborative consumption systems according to the categorization of Botsman and Rogers who differentiate between product service systems, redistribution markets and collaborative lifestyles.⁶⁶ Around 30 different sales groups for second hand items in Lebanon can be found on Facebook, but only three for non-monetary swapping and giving away. The largest of these give-away groups 'lebanon preloved items for free' with 1800 members is closely linked to the idea of charity, since the stated purpose of the group is to provide 'families in need' with second hand children's items.⁶⁷ Public stations for swapping and giving away, another Western trend, are equally inexistent at least in Beirut where one would most likely expect them.

The reason why non-monetary sharing and swapping is not practiced outside closed circles or at least not visibly practiced is not distinctly identifiable. While findings of the *World Values Survey* suggest that a majority of the respondents trust their neighborhood⁶⁸, a study conducted in 2006 in different impoverished communities of Beirut's suburbs found that levels of trust and social capital vary significantly according to the level of ethnic and religious homogeneity as well as the rate of residential mobility.⁶⁹ Regardless of this, the study concluded that 'distrust and social fragmentation were generally prevalent among adolescents living in impoverished suburban communities. Even though social networks, especially the presence of family and relatives,

were strong, instrumental social exchange was relatively scarce.⁷⁰ This shows that living conditions as a whole cannot be neglected as a factor since they have an impact on the level of trust between strangers and presumably also on the general interest in sharing goods or intangibles.

Community gardening as a collaborative lifestyle

Collaborative lifestyles, which Botsman and Rogers define as 'people with similar interests [...] banding together to share and exchange less tangible assets such as time, space, skills and money'⁷¹, can definitely be found in Lebanon. However, they are not primarily based on the incentives of saving resources and connecting with people in order to 'revive neglected forms of social capital [and] regain [...] community'⁷² as it is said to be the case in Western countries. They are often centered around a more specific purpose. *The Food Heritage Foundation* (FHF) for instance aims at preserving and reviving Lebanese local knowledge and traditions around food, in particular the ones of the new generations and of the urban population.⁷³ One of their activities is community gardening. The foundation cooperates with different NGOs that would like to set up a community garden like the Amel Association in the Beirut suburb of Ain el Remmaneh or the Malaak center in Halba, North Lebanon, by providing them with the expertise of their agricultural engineers.⁷⁴ In these cases, the community gardens are available only for the members and target groups of these NGOs. FHF actually also aims at establishing neighborhood

⁶⁶ Ibid., xvi

⁶⁷ Facebook

⁶⁸ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013b

⁶⁹ Khawaja et al. 2006, 1312

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1304

⁷¹ Botsman and Rogers 2011 // 2010, 74

⁷² Ibid., 46

⁷³ The Food Heritage Foundation

⁷⁴ Ibid.

gardens in Beirut but struggles due to the lack of suitable spaces according to the president, Mabelle Chedid. From her experience, it is simply not in the Beirutis' mentality to offer property for community gardening when much more can be gained from it by renting it as a parking lot. For that reason, the foundation's ambitions are currently restrained to support mainly individual families with setting up their own rooftop gardens or vertical gardens. Even though property owners might not see the point of community gardening, many other people do, says Chedid. The foundation receives a lot of inquiries and she is convinced that people would be willing to cultivate a garden even in neighborhoods where people do not necessarily know each other. As soon as they would see the results of their efforts, they would be motivated to keep going. Chedid also thinks that neighborhood gardens would be a great opportunity to connect people since many neighborhoods in Beirut are not as close anymore as they used to be. However, strengthening community cohesion is rather a side product of the garden projects. The main purpose pursued by the foundation as well as by the participants is to enhance food security. High quality of fruits and vegetables is not a given and organic quality not affordable for everybody in Lebanon. Growing their own pesticide free vegetables and saving money therefore has a higher priority than in Western gardening projects where reconnecting with nature and communal activities are more relevant as driving factors.

The example of community gardening seems to reveal that necessity as a motive for collaborative consumption, as suggested by Bayram and Baz, may be relevant even when the people involved are not complete strangers but a neighborhood

or the inhabitants of a building. Can this be explained by Bayram's assessment that people simply 'have other things to worry about' than consuming sustainably by sharing and collaborating?

Is sharing simply no priority?

The importance of environmental awareness and of the need for belonging

The need to belong to a community and to have close relationships to people rather than brands as well as a growing environmental awareness and the desire to consume sustainably are considered major driving factors for the Western sharing movement. In order to shed light on the question of whether the higher priority of other issues is indeed decisive for the lower extent of sharing activities, these two factors will be looked at in more detail in order to conclude this analysis.

The need for belonging to a community in the Lebanese society is difficult to assess. The *World Values Survey* results do not clearly distinguish Lebanon from Western countries with regard to the respondents' self-perception as part of the local community.⁷⁵ Bayram, on the other hand, considers Arab people in general to be well integrated in networks of friends and family and does not believe that connecting with others can be a relevant motive for those people to engage in sharing activities. Although the categorization of Lebanon as a collectivistic society according to Geert Hofstede's dimension paradigm⁷⁶ would confirm Bayram's assessment, it appears likely that a general categorization does the pluralist Lebanese society just as little justice as a general assessment of the level of intra and inter-community trust.

⁷⁵ World Values Survey Wave 6 2013c

⁷⁶ Hofstede Insights

As to environmental awareness among Lebanese consumers, there is some empirical evidence suggesting that environmental concerns might not have a significant impact on consumer behavior. A study by Grace Dagher and Omar Itani conducted in 2014 found that 'Lebanese consumers do not expect their individual green purchasing behaviour to help improve the environmental situation in the country'.⁷⁷ Although this paper examines why Lebanese consumers 'buy environmentally friendly services and products from businesses that engage in environmentally friendly practices'⁷⁸ which is not necessarily collaborative consumption, the perception of their individual behavior as irrelevant can be expected to apply in the field of sharing and collaborative consumption as well. This might then suggest a lower interest in sharing and collaborative consumption. Since there is no further research on environmental awareness of Lebanese consumers, no further empirically based statements can be made in this regard. There are certain habits however that give reason to assume that environmental awareness is not widespread and is unlikely to play a relevant role as a norm that affects consumer behavior in Lebanon. Two examples for such behavior would be the excessive use of plastic bags and of cars for even the shortest distances. It can therefore be assumed that it is not obvious for Lebanese consumers engaging in collaborative consumption activities to gain value and recognition for this behavior from others since they are not conforming to norms.

Conclusion

The analysis of this article has shown that the concept of sharing per se is not at all foreign to Arab culture. Rather, open sharing without

expecting anything in return is still practiced in closed communities as represented by families and networks of friends or close neighbors. Sharing activities that involve strangers arise most likely out of necessity.

In the specific case of Lebanon, activities of sharing and collaborative consumption are far from being as wide spread as in many Western countries even though opportunities offered by the internet and the internet usage (at least in urban areas like Beirut) are comparable to the ones in Western countries. This can be explained by a number of different factors. As suggested by Khalaf and confirmed by the *World Values Survey*, material values are much more pronounced in the Lebanese society, implying a higher level of ownership-orientation. The opposite trend is fueling the collaborative consumption movement in Western countries. A lower level of trust between strangers, a lesser need for belonging caused by the latter on the one hand and by a generally higher level of integration in networks of family and friends on the other hand, as well as less environmental awareness contribute to the fact that sharing and collaborative consumption outside closed circles is practiced either out of need or in order to gain money. The lower degree of environmental awareness is suggested to have an impact in so far as fewer people are expected to engage into activities of collaborative consumption for sustainability reasons, but also in so far as consuming sustainably is not decisive as a community norm. Moreover, the organization of sharing activities can be shaped by cultural particularities like the social awkwardness of exchanging money between peers. Not exchanging money creates hierarchical structures between the person who provides a

⁷⁷ Dagher and Itani 2014, 194

⁷⁸ Ibid., 188

service and the one who uses it and might thus keep an activity from gaining critical mass.

Several structural factors such as the less common use of online payment, a supposedly insufficient insurance coverage and less opportunities for funding of sharing initiatives have also been pointed out. Since they do not seem to have a similar inhibiting effect on the proliferation of other business ventures or sharing activities that are practiced out of necessity, the actual relevance of these factors is not assessable.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that Lebanese consumer attitudes differ significantly from the ones in many Western countries. Sustainable consumption in Western consumer culture is highly political whereas in Lebanon, the activity of consumption in general does not seem to be used as an instrument for political expression.

To consider activities of sharing and collaborative consumption as a luxury reserved to Western consumers describes the issue accurately to some extent. It must be acknowledged that many Lebanese do in fact have other priorities than to think about ways of resource saving collaborative consumption due to a state that fails to provide sufficiently for its citizens and to fight corruption. The systematic sharing of certain goods and services has the potential to alleviate some issues as proven by those activities that are practiced out of necessity. However, it seems that Khalaf has a point when he says that people consume not only to cover their basic needs but also to distract themselves since the access to consumer products is rather constant compared to many inconstant variables in the Lebanese day to day life.

It has to be kept in mind that the age of ‘hyper consumerism’, as Botsman and Rogers call it⁷⁹, in the USA and also in many Western European countries does not date back more than some decades. Environmental friendly and sustainable consumption was not a behavioral norm back then in these countries either. Against this background, it could be suggested that a similar process is yet to be undergone by the Lebanese consumer culture. The recent emergence of several sharing systems like *Carpolo* proves that such a process is already underway.

For the purpose of this paper, interviews were conducted with:

Ahmad Sufian Bayram, collaborative economy blogger, founder of *Arabshare* and Arabic language connector at *Ouishare*, 01-24-2018

Mabelle Chedid, president of *The Food Heritage Foundation*, 01-26-2018

Nelly Baz, *Ouishare* connector for Beirut, 01-31-2018

Furthermore, a small sample survey was conducted in January 2018 among 10 members of the closed Facebook group ‘Carpooling Tripoli <--> Beirut’ examining their motivation and usage habits.

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⁷⁹ Botsman and Rogers 2011 // 2010, 42

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