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**When interchangeability between providers and users makes a difference:**

**The mediating role of social proximity in collaborative services**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the role of interchangeability between service providers and service users in the context of collaborative services (the exchange of services between peers intermediated by an online platform). Based on the construal level theory, our model proposes the influence of interchangeability on trust and, in turn, on intention to participate, through the mediating effect of social proximity. The results of the empirical analysis, an online survey conducted on 222 accommodation rental participants (both hosts and travelers), confirm the mediating role of social proximity. This research extends the literature on collaborative consumption by examining how interchangeability can impact participants' attitude and behavior. It also contributes to the construal level theory by suggesting a new antecedent (i.e., interchangeability) of social proximity. Managerial implications are discussed and, in particular, it is suggested that platforms encourage their users to experience both sides of the exchange in order to impact positively future participation.

**Keywords:** Interchangeability, collaborative services, sharing economy, social distance, trust, construal level theory.

## **1. Introduction**

Many of us have already experienced the new exchange practices often referred to as the sharing economy or collaborative consumption, for example when renting someone else's car or their home, or ride-sharing with a stranger. In fact, several reports on the sharing economy carried out by consulting companies as well as government agencies offer impressive statistics and predict exponential growth in the coming years. For example, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that the global revenue generated by the sharing economy will grow from \$15 billion in 2015 to as much as \$335 billion by 2025 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015). Hence the sharing economy stands out and appears to be expanding rapidly, bringing forth new opportunities, but also new challenges (Lamberton & Rose, 2012). As such, it seems crucial to analyze and question this new phenomenon, in which ownership is replaced by a new paradigm based on access (Belk, 2014; Hartl, Hofmann, & Kirchler, 2016; Lawson, Gleim, Perren, & Hwang, 2016), and develop a better understanding of its underlying mechanisms (Schor, 2016).

The research community only recently started to investigate this new trend more closely and, aside from a few visionary articles written before 2011 (Belk, 2010; Benkler, 2004; Lessig, 2008), most of the academic literature was published after 2013. While research on the topic is still nascent (Benoit, Baker, Bolton, Gruber, & Kandampully, 2017), the interest of researchers in this phenomenon is growing rapidly, as evidenced by the sudden rise of academic articles dedicated to this subject in recent literature (Cheng, 2016; Kumar, Lahiri, & Dogan, 2018). To date, there is still no consensus on shared definitions (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Hawlitschek, Teubner, & Gimpel, 2016); both the sharing economy and collaborative consumption are considered as umbrella concepts that encompass a range of activities (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2016; Schor, 2016). This study focuses on a new form of resource circulation that did

not exist until recently: The exchange of services between individuals (peers) intermediated by an online platform. As such, to delineate our topic clearly and avoid any confusion with other types of practices, we refer to them as *collaborative services* and define them as “the exchange of services between peers, intermediated by an online platform, in which individual service providers offer individual service users temporary access to their under-utilized resources (such as a home or a car).”

In line with recent literature investigating motives for participation in these new forms of exchanges (Aspara & Wittkowski, 2018; Benoit et al., 2017; Hamari et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016), this paper focuses on a distinctive characteristic of collaborative services associated with the interpersonal nature of the exchange relationship among peers, namely the *interchangeability* between service providers and service users, who may one day participate as service providers, but the next day may participate as service users and vice versa. As such our research question is as follows: Does it make a difference to collaborative services participants’ attitude and behavior whether they play both roles or just one?

Based on the literature on trust (Gefen, 2000; ter Huurne, Ronteltap, Corten, & Buskens, 2017), as well as the construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), we posit the influence of interchangeability on customers’ intention to participate through an increase of social proximity, which in turn influences trust. The contributions of this research are as follows: First, interchangeability has been mentioned in several articles (Benoit et al., 2017; Eckhardt et al., 2019; Ertz, Durif, & Arcand, 2018; Scaraboto, 2015) but, to the best of our knowledge, it has never been used in any study, despite the fact that it represents a very special and unique feature of collaborative services. Second, while previous research is predominantly focused on service users (Lawson et al., 2016; Möhlmann, 2015), this paper includes both

service users and service providers, taking into consideration both actors' roles. By doing so, it provides a global stance, accounting for both supply and demand, which are equally important to sustaining these emerging marketplaces (Kumar et al., 2018). Lastly, by relying on the construal level theory, we propose a psychological approach based on a particular dimension – social distance – and as such contribute to literature on psychological distance.

After presenting the theoretical framework, we explain our methodology and the results of our study, conducted on 222 accommodation rental participants. We then discuss the results that confirm our hypothesis and conclude by outlining our theoretical contributions, as well as suggesting managerial implications and future research avenues.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Collaborative services characteristics*

Collaborative services deal with the exchange of services between peers, intermediated by an online platform. They differ from non-ownership services (Wittkowski, Moeller, & Wirtz, 2013), when companies acquire access to an asset through non-ownership, for example when a firm rents a machine for a defined period of time in exchange for a fee. In these instances, the service exchange takes place between two businesses. They also differ from access-based services (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Lawson et al., 2016; Schaefers, Wittkowski, Benoit, & Ferraro, 2016) when, instead of buying and owning, consumers temporarily gain access to goods in exchange for payment. In those cases, exchanges happen between customers and businesses. Finally, within the customer-to-customer (C2C) e-commerce stream of literature, collaborative services represent a distinct area of research as studies have mainly focused on the exchange of products between peers, for example on platforms such as eBay (Standifird, 2001). In these

earlier forms of exchange, individuals buy or sell products to one another. In contrast, collaborative services are based on the exchange of services, hence on access rather than ownership (Aspara & Wittkowski, 2018; Belk, 2014; Lawson et al., 2016).

Collaborative services possess distinctive characteristics. First, compared to other forms of dyadic exchange already well investigated by the literature, such as buyer–seller or customer–brand, collaborative services take place within a triadic framework composed of three actors: the platform, the individual service providers, and the individual service users (Benoit et al., 2017). In this framework, participants (also called peers) can operate in various roles, acting either as a service provider or as a service user, interacting and influencing each other.

Second, as service providers are not employees, they do not represent a company or a brand, but rather act alone, as individuals. As such, the interpersonal relationship between the service provider and the service user during the service encounter is likely to be different from traditional forms of service encounter. The interpersonal nature of relationships between customers in the context of service experiences has already been explored by scholars (Grove & Fisk, 1997; Martin, 1996). For example, Wu (2007) investigates the impact of C2C interactions and customer homogeneity in a tourism service context. Other articles study different contexts for C2C interaction, such as on a cruise (Huang & Hsu, 2010), a train ride, or at the gym (Camelis, Dano, Goudarzi, Hamon, & Llosa, 2013). They also examine the impact of interactions between customers in the case of service failure (Kim & Baker, 2017; Yi & Kim, 2017) or the contagiousness of customer misbehavior in access-based practices (Schaefers et al., 2016). However, interpersonal service encounters between individual service users and individual service providers, also called “stranger sharing” by Schor (2016; p.7), did not exist

before the emergence of collaborative services. As such, it still requires further investigation (Milanova & Maas, 2017).

Third, collaborative services exchanges are based on temporary access to the service providers' goods, such as their home or car. Other studies have described this service as making use of underused or underutilized goods (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017; Piscicelli, Cooper, & Fisher, 2015), idle capacity (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Kumar et al., 2018; Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015), or slack (or even excess) resource capacity (Benkler, 2004; Roos & Hahn, 2017). Because service providers are the owners of those goods, in some instances they may have a specific relationship to them, sometimes even a form of personal attachment (Belk, 2010).

Finally, the ability of service providers and service users to exchange roles is an important and distinctive characteristic of collaborative services: A service provider one day can be a service user the next day. These agents endorsing dual roles have also sometimes been called prosumers (Eckhardt et al., 2019; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), and in this paper we use the term interchangeability to refer to participants acting in both roles.

## *2.2 Interchangeability*

To date, only a handful of articles found in the literature mention interchangeability: Scaraboto (2015, p. 153) refers to “interdependent participants who switch between the roles of consumer and producer,” Ertz et al. (2018, p. 27) point out the “centrality of a two-sided instead of one-sided consumer role,” Kumar et al. (2018, p. 149) describe “service providers [who] can switch roles and become customers.” Finally Eckhardt et al. (2019, p. 7) refer to prosumers taking on “enhanced roles as both providers *and* users of resources.”



In order to explore and delineate the concept, we now propose to discuss several aspects related to interchangeability. First, when acting interchangeably, agents participate as both a service user and a service provider for the same type of service, but each role corresponds to a separate exchange transaction, and for each transaction the resource that is being shared is different. For example, in the case of accommodation rental, a host (service provider) shares their own home with a guest (service user), and as a guest, stays in someone else's property. Hence, even if the type of service is the same, the object or the resource that is being shared when in each role is in fact different (their resource versus someone else's resource).

Second, a variety of different types of exchanges exist, such as sharing accommodations, cars, boats, etc. In some instances, it is possible for a participant to act in one role for a particular type of exchange and act in the other role for another type of exchange. For example, when renting someone else's power drill, as a service user, but participating in ride-sharing as a driver, as the service provider. These cases of asymmetry could have a significant impact on participants' attitudes and/or behaviors, but we do not take them into consideration in this study, as we focus on the same type of exchange.

Third, to act as a service provider, the prerequisite is to own a specific resource in order to be able to share (or rent) it with other users. Hence individuals who do not own these resources do not have the ability to act as service providers: They can only participate as service users. For example, individuals who do not own accommodation are not able to participate as a host and they can only rent someone else's place as a guest.

As collaborative services possess distinct traits that differentiate them from other forms of service – in particular the interchangeability between service providers and service users – there is real value in studying them further, in order to understand their specificities. In fact, Benoit et

al. (2017, p. 226) suggest that one fruitful avenue for future research would be to investigate how acting in both roles shapes participants' expectations. Finally, in this study, our scope is limited to individuals participating in collaborative services and experiencing one role (as a guest or as a host) or both roles (as a guest and as a host), for the same type of exchange (accommodation rental).

### **3. Theoretical framework**

#### *3.1. Interchangeability and trust*

The concept of trust in the marketing literature – and more specifically within relationship marketing studies – is recognized as being central to various forms of relational exchanges (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002). In particular trust, defined by Rousseau et al. (1998, p. 395) as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another,” is crucial wherever uncertainty and dependence exist. It has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on cooperation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust has also been found to be critical in the online environment, where to gain customers' loyalty means to first gain their trust (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000, p. 107). The importance of trust online appears intensified by the absence of physical contact between customers and online firms, and by the lack of touch inherent to online exchanges.

More recently, trust has been considered in literature on the sharing economy and collaborative consumption: Several authors investigating why people engage in the sharing economy propose trust in their model as an antecedent to participation intention (Kim, Yoon, & Zo, 2015; Möhlmann, 2015; Yang, Lee, Lee, Chung, & Koo, 2016). Illustrating the central role of trust in collaborative exchanges, ter Huurne et al. (2017) offer a systematic review of the

literature on trust in the sharing economy, highlighting the need to investigate sellers' (service providers') trust mechanisms, as well as those of the buyers (service users). Hence, within collaborative services, trust has been identified as playing a significant role and being essential to facilitating exchanges between participants.

Our first proposition is that interchangeability may influence participants' trust because when they assume both roles, they experience being a service provider, as well as being a service user. Through these dual and complementary experiences, they are able to learn and familiarize themselves with some of the issues specific to each role, such as the questions and challenges that participants in each position face. Furthermore, playing both roles allows them to identify more easily with their counterparts on a personal level. This identification process can reduce interpersonal barriers and raise comfort levels, and thus contribute to establishing a sense of trust (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). On the other hand, users who participate solely as a service user or as a service provider may have more difficulty understanding their counterparts' motivations or problems. Consequently, they may have fewer concrete expectations, for example regarding their counterparts' behavior. So, interchangeability is a way for participants to produce knowledge based on previous interactions, allowing them to reduce uncertainty. Because one's understanding of another's behavior based on previous interactions and/or experiences is a widely recognized predictor of trust in the literature (Bhattacharjee, 2002; Gefen, 2000), we posit the following hypothesis:

*H1: Interchangeability positively influences trust in peers for collaborative services participants.*

Next, using the construal level theory and the concept of social distance, we intend to shed some new light on collaborative services exchanges and propose an explanation for the underlying mechanisms behind the influence of interchangeability on trust.

### *3.2 The construal level theory and social distance*

Previous articles on the sharing economy and collaborative consumption rely on different theories for their conceptual framework. In particular, several articles take a market-based approach and adopt the social exchange theory (Kumar et al., 2018; Priporas, Stylos, Rahimi, & Vedanthachari, 2017; Tussyadiah, 2016; Wang, Xiang, Yang, & Ma, 2019), but only a few studies have examined the social pattern of collaborative consumption participation (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Perren & Kozinets, 2018). As early as 2004, Benkler (2004) describes a cluster of social practices that form an economic phenomenon and identifies the duality of a phenomenon that combines a pro-social behavior, based on sharing and collaborating, with an economic and market-oriented dimension. In other studies, social benefits are discussed as possible motivators: Perren and Kozinets (2018, p. 23) explore how lateral exchange market platforms create new forms of social connection and experience. Herbert and Collin-Lachaud (2017, p. 48) find that collaborative consumption participants are interested in various degrees of socialization, such as commitment or creating social links. Looking into the literature, it appears that sociality in collaborative exchanges has been explored more conceptually and using qualitative methods, than empirically, hence there is a need for additional empirical studies. Moreover, most of the research is oriented toward service users. We did not find any empirical studies investigating the social dimension and taking into consideration the service providers' perspective. This study aims to appreciate both the users' and providers' perspectives.

Our theoretical framework relies on the construal level theory by Liberman and Trope (2008) and, more specifically, it is based on one dimension of psychological distance (i.e., social distance). The construal level theory introduces the concept of psychological distance, defining it

as “a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here and now” and from reality (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 440). Psychological distance is an umbrella concept composed of four dimensions: Temporal, spatial, hypothetical, and social (Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, & Algom, 2007, p. 610). In particular, social distance is defined by Liberman, Trope, & Wakslak (2007) as how close or distinct the target is from oneself. As such, two different modalities of social distance can be distinguished: Social proximity (when the target is socially close to the self) and social remoteness (when the target is further away from the self). Various types of social distance have been studied, such as self versus others (Trope & Liberman, 2010), similar versus dissimilar (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008), and in-group versus out-group (Liberman et al., 2007). Power (Smith & Trope, 2006), politeness (Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2011), and culture (Spassova & Lee, 2013) are also forms of social distance investigated in the literature. Social distance is arguably the most important of the four dimensions as it relates to the self, and we are immersed in our own feelings, sensations and consciousness all the time (Pronin, 2008).

We believe that social distance is particularly relevant in the context of collaborative services. Here, because service providers and service users are individuals (peers) and not employees of a company, the social distance experienced by participants – how participants relate to each other and perceive themselves with regards to one another – could be crucial. To date, only one other study leverages the construal level theory in the context of collaborative consumption: Sordi et al. (2018) published a conceptual and exploratory article discussing some of the dimensions of psychological distance and their relevance in the context of collaborative exchanges. Their conceptualization of social distance is related to social identity and the reputation of an individual. Our understanding of social distance differs from Sordi et al. (2018)

and is based on the definition by Liviatan et al. (2008): the perceived similarity between the self and other social agents.

According to the construal level theory, the same stimulus – object, event, or person – can be mentally construed at different levels of abstraction (Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2015). Hence, one stimulus can be construed at a high level or at a low level. High-level construals are abstract representations, extracting the central feature of one stimulus. In contrast, low-level construals are concrete representations of a stimulus and highlight detailed and context-specific features (Soderberg et al., 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Several studies developed using the construal level theory framework show that high-level (low-level) construals lead to greater (lesser) perceived psychological distance with the stimulus (Liberman and Trope, 2008).

Participants experiencing both roles as a service provider and a service user (which we call interchangeability) will tend to construe other participants at a concrete level (i.e., low-level construal) because their past experiences give them concrete and detailed information about their counterpart peers. In contrast, participants who never act as a service provider (or service user) will tend to construe service users (or service providers) at a more abstract level (i.e., high-level construal) because their lack of experience gives them little information about their counterpart peers. As participants' attitudes and behaviors regarding more socially close (distant) peers are likely to be based on lower-level (higher-level) construals, we suggest that interchangeability can impact people's responses by changing the way they mentally represent their exchange partners.

Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the level of construal influences perceived social distance (Stephan et al., 2011), where low-level (high-level) construal increases (reduces) perceived social proximity. Social proximity is induced by low-level construal, whereas social

remoteness is induced by high-level construal, hence based on the construal level theory we suggest the following hypothesis:

*H2: Interchangeability positively influences perceived social proximity for collaborative services participants.*

As participants experience higher (lower) levels of social proximity, they feel closer to (remoter from) their counterparts, hence they are more (less) likely to associate and identify with them. In fact, identification processes have already been studied and demonstrated to be an important component in the establishment of trust. For example, identification trust is recognized as one of three different types of trust by Lewicki & Bunker (1995), along with calculus-based and knowledge-based trust. Moreover, it is acknowledged that individuals tend to have a higher level of attraction toward people with attitudes similar to their own, and similarity has been identified as an antecedent of trust, in both management literature (Johnson & Grayson, 2005) and marketing literature (Coulter & Coulter, 2002). Hence, with similarity and identification as two forms of perceived social proximity (Liviatan et al., 2008), we suggest the following hypothesis:

*H3: Perceived social proximity positively influences trust in peers for collaborative services participants.*

In this research we propose that the relationship between interchangeability and trust is not only direct but it may be indirect, and explained by the concept of social distance (Liviatan et al., 2008; Stephan et al., 2011), which was developed in the framework of the construal level theory (Lieberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010). More precisely, as interchangeability could positively influence perceived social proximity (see H2), which in turn would positively

influence trust (see H3), we suggest that interchangeability will influence trust positively, through the mediating effect of perceived social distance. It is also well recognized that a mediation occurs when the indirect effect, shaped by two consecutive relationships, is established (Pieters, 2017; Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). Hence we propose the following hypothesis:

*H4: Perceived social proximity mediates the positive effect of interchangeability on trust for collaborative services participants.*

Finally, trust has also been conceptualized as a key mediator variable influencing satisfaction and long-term orientation (Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1998). According to Pavlou and Gefen (2004), trust can be seen as a confident expectation that produces a positive attitude toward transaction intention. For example, several studies demonstrate that trust in a specific online provider positively influences purchase intentions with the same provider (Gefen, 2000; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Pavlou, 2003). Moreover, previous research on collaborative consumption suggests that trust is an antecedent to peers' participation intentions (Hawlitschek et al., 2016; Yang, Song, Chen, & Xia, 2017). Consequently, in line with the literature, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H5: Trust in peers positively influences participation intention for collaborative services participants.*

The conceptual model guiding our theoretical development is presented in Figure 1. It suggests five hypotheses with four direct paths and one mediation, which is our underlying mechanism to explain the effect of interchangeability on trust, in turn influencing participation intention.



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Include Figure 1 about here  
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#### **4. Methodology and results**

In order to test our hypotheses, we decided to investigate the home rental context, where hosts and travelers participate in accommodation sharing. This collaborative service was chosen because hospitality is among the most popular forms of collaborative consumption and as such it provides a relevant representation of collaborative services behaviors.

##### *4.1 Measurement*

The measurement scales used to evaluate our model come from the literature (see Table 1). Specifically, we used the scale on perceived social proximity (Liviatan et al., 2008; p. 1259), using 7-point Likert scales. The language of the constructs was adjusted to be suitable to the home-rental context, as we replaced the target with either hosts or travelers. Interchangeability was coded as a binary grouping variable, depending on whether respondents experienced one role (Did you participate as the host or the traveler?) or both roles (Did you participate as both?). We did not choose a continuous variable to measure interchangeability because our study does not focus on the number of experiences, but rather investigates whether experiencing both roles makes a difference. The questionnaire was administered in French. To assure linguistic equivalence for the French version, we used back translation. We also added three demographic questions (gender, age, and employment).

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Include Table 1 about here  
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We considered only participants who play both roles for the same type of exchange, in our case hosting guests as a service provider and staying at someone's place as a service user. While we acknowledge that instances of asymmetrical interchangeability exist, when participants experience both roles but for different types of exchanges, in this study we focus on cases of symmetrical interchangeability, for the same type of service, in order to mitigate potential measurement errors caused by aggregating different types of experiences.

#### *4.2 Survey administration*

For this study, data was collected using an online survey to take advantage of multiple benefits, such as flexibility, low administration cost, control of answer order and completion, and ease of data entry and analysis (Evans & Mathur, 2005, 2018). We sought people who had participated at least once in accommodation rental activity, either as the host and/or the traveler. The questionnaire started with a brief introduction to outline the general purpose of the study, the average time of completion, and general rules to follow in order to participate well. Next, we asked a filter question in order to keep only people who have participated in home rental activities via an online web platform, such as Airbnb or HomeAway. Respondents who had participated in one role (host or traveler) or two roles (host and traveler) were retained. The subjects then completed the questionnaire by answering questions about perceived social proximity, trust in peers, participation intention, and socio-demographic questions. Before the

main survey, a pre-test was conducted on eight participants in order to refine the questions and obtain feedback on the structure.

For the main survey, participants were recruited through various means, such as personal networks, postings on social media, and snowball recruiting. A total of 286 individuals started the main survey. Respondents were automatically eliminated when they did not fully complete the survey because this reflects a lack of commitment and study interest. This procedure resulted in a final sample of 222 participants (male = 63; female = 159; *Mage* = 36.5) (see Table 2). Regarding the gender ratio in our sample, several practitioner studies in the travel industry reveal an imbalance skewed toward the female population for both travelers and hosts<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, other empirical articles in the collaborative consumption sector are based on gender-imbalanced samples (Hartl et al., 2016, p. 2759; Lamberton & Rose, 2012, p. 117). Finally, note that further analysis showed no significant differences in terms of gender. The online survey was available for three weeks.

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Include Table 2 about here  
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#### *4.3 Results*

In order to test the hypotheses and assess the conceptual model, we used structured equation modeling with the software AMOS 21. The presentation of the results is organized as follows. First, we examine the common method variance (CMV). Second, we consider the

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the gender split showing an imbalance toward female participants, see: <https://www.hitwise.com/en/2016/10/31/vacation-rental-traffic-skews-female-reflects-growing-desire-for-travel-experiences/> for travelers, and [https://www.airbnb.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Women-Hosts-and-Airbnb\\_Building-a-Global-Community.pdf](https://www.airbnb.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Women-Hosts-and-Airbnb_Building-a-Global-Community.pdf) for hosts.

measurement model in order to assess indicator reliability, construct reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, and the quality of the measurement model's fit. Thirdly, we assess the structural model in order to test our hypotheses and to check the fit between our conceptual model and the data.

#### *4.3.1 Common method variance*

CMV refers to covariance problems attributable to the measurement method rather than to the construct of interest (Demiray & Burnaz, 2019; Spector, Rosen, Richardson, Williams, & Johnson, 2019). As self-reported questionnaires are susceptible to CMV, we performed the most common technique, namely the Harman's one-factor test (Fuller, Simmering, Atinc, Atinc, & Babin, 2016), in order to manage potential CMV problems and rule out their effects.

The results of exploratory factor analysis with all variables show that the first factor accounted for 47.02% of the variance, which is less than the 50% threshold (Fuller et al., 2016; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Moreover, all independent and dependent variables were separated in the survey (Akbar, Mai, & Hoffmann, 2016). We can thus conclude that CMV is not problematic in this study.

#### *4.3.2 Measurement model*

All of the items except one<sup>2</sup> have a loading greater than 0.7 (Kline, 2015), hence indicator reliability is achieved. For both constructs trust and participation intention, composite reliability is greater than 0.7. For perceived social proximity, composite reliability is lower (0.687), but as it

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<sup>2</sup> This one item is PSP2, with a loading of 0.639: "In general, to what extent do you perceive hosts/travelers to be close to you (for example, to be socially close)?" We decided to keep this item for two main reasons. First, the loading is not far from the 0.7 threshold. Second, removing one item from the scale of perceived social proximity would have led to a mono-item scale.

is very close to the minimum value, we consider it acceptable. For each construct, the average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5 (Kline, 2015), consequently we can confirm the convergent validity (see Table 1).

Concerning the discriminant validity, we use two criteria to assess it (Voorhees, Brady, Calantone, & Ramirez, 2016). The first one, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, suggests that the root square of each construct's AVE should be higher than the correlation with any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 3 shows that the discriminant validity is achieved. The second criterion, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT) by Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt (2015), suggests that HTMT should be lower than the threshold of 0.85. Table 4 shows that this is the case. Finally, our results show that the fit index for our measurement model is totally satisfactory ( $\chi^2 = 37.063$  (df=30),  $p = 0.175$ ;  $\chi^2$  adjusted = 1.235; GFI = 0.969; AGFI = 0.942; TLI = 0.992; CFI = 0.995; RMSEA = 0.033; SRMR = 0.032).

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Include Table 3 about here

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Include Table 4 about here

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#### 4.3.3 *Structural model*

First, note that the model explains 4.6% of perceived social proximity's variation, 18% of the trust in peers' variation, and 17% of participation intention's variation (see Figure 2).

Regarding the model fit, our conceptual model matches the data completely ( $\chi^2 = 40.696$  (df

=32),  $p = 0.139$ ;  $\chi^2$  adjusted = 1.272; GFI = 0.966; AGFI = 0.941; TLI = 0.991; CFI = 0.994; RMSEA = 0.035; SRMR = 0.039). Our results show that interchangeability does not have a direct effect on trust ( $\beta = -0.096$ ;  $p = 0.17$ ). Consequently H1, which predicts a positive effect of interchangeability on trust in peers, is rejected. The other results show a significant positive effect of interchangeability ( $\beta = 0.215$  and  $p < 0.01$ ) on perceived social distance, which in turn has a significant effect ( $\beta = 0.437$  and  $p < 0.001$ ) on trust, confirming H2 and H3 respectively. All the results are in Table 5.

The bootstrap test with a minimum of 5,000 resamples offers clear evidence of significant mediation if the 95% confidence intervals do not include the value 0 (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010), indicating that interchangeability has a significant positive indirect effect on trust ( $\beta = 0.094$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; 95% IC: 0.029, 0.18; excluding 0). These results suggest that perceived social proximity totally mediates the effect of interchangeability on trust and consequently, we can validate H4. Finally, our data shows that trust has a significant positive effect on participation intention ( $\beta = 0.413$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and H5 is validated.

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Include Figure 2 about here

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## 5. General discussion

Companies based on the new sharing economy and collaborative consumption business models are quite recent: For example, Airbnb and BlaBlaCar were both founded in 2008. However, their growth has been phenomenal: In just over a decade, the most successful companies already have millions of users across the globe and are valued at several billions of dollars (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015). Similarly, reports from governmental agencies expect the overall revenue generated by the sharing economy and collaborative consumption to continue to grow at a very significant pace in the coming years (Rahim et al., 2017). Despite considerable media coverage, research on the sharing economy and collaborative consumption is only just starting (Benoit et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2018) and our findings contribute to this emergent field.

One of the novelties of collaborative services is that the service experience is provided by an individual, not by a professional. This difference means that the individual service provider and the individual service user can exchange roles: Someone may be a service provider when they share their apartment via Airbnb and switch roles later to become a service user when they rent someone else's home for their next vacation. Our study leverages this distinctive characteristic of collaborative services (the interchangeability between service providers and service users), and aims to include all participants' attitudes and behaviors, service users as well as service suppliers; as such it differs from existing literature. Relying on the construal level theory, we propose a psychological approach based on perceived social proximity between participants.

Results from our study provide empirical evidence for the significant role of interchangeability within collaborative services and its influence on participants' attitude and behavior. Interestingly, the relationship between interchangeability and trust is not partially

mediated by social proximity: Rather, it appears to be fully mediated. Contrary to what we posited initially in our hypothesis, interchangeability does not directly impact trust, but rather it increases social proximity, which in turn positively influences trust. Thus, we are able to propose social proximity as the underlying mechanism that explains the effect of interchangeability on participants' trust and introduce the concept of social distance (proximity) as one of the factors influencing collaborative services participants' attitudes (trust in peers) and behaviors (participation intention). As our results show no direct impact of interchangeability on trust, they suggest that the mere fact of playing both roles and actually knowing from experience what the other participants are going through does not influence the trust we have in them.

Lastly, this research is anchored in the stream of literature on trust and our results confirm its important role within social and economic exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The positive link between attitude and behavior – in our case between trust and participation intention – is also confirmed and in line with the literature (Hamari et al., 2016).

### *5.1 Contributions to the literature on the sharing economy and collaborative consumption*

While prior research is focused on rational decision-making mechanisms, taking a cost–benefit approach and based on theories such as the social exchange theory, our study relies on the construal level theory and as such it proposes a psychological approach to investigate collaborative services participants' attitudes and behaviors.

By focusing on interchangeability, this study contributes to a better understanding of collaborative services participants' motives and decision-making mechanisms. In particular, this article brings a new perspective to this field of research and provides empirical support for the role of interchangeability on trust in peers. While previous qualitative studies found the desire



for social connection to be an important motivation (Herbert & Collin-Lachaud, 2017; Perren & Kozinets, 2018), some empirical studies mitigate those results (Möhlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah, 2015). Our results corroborate what was uncovered by previous qualitative investigations: the significant influence of social proximity on attitudinal (trust in peers), as well as behavioral (participation intention) outcomes.

Furthermore, this study extends the literature on trust in the context of collaborative services exchanges. While in previous research Möhlmann (2015) found that trust has a significant impact on users' satisfaction regarding both accommodation rental and car sharing, one of her hypotheses stating that trust has a positive impact on the likelihood of future participation was rejected. Our results differ from Möhlmann's and confirm previous findings on the role of trust between peers and its positive impact on participation intention (Hawlitschek et al., 2016; Kamal & Chen, 2016). Hence additional research is needed in order to confirm the role of trust in peer-to-peer exchanges, perhaps by using a more granular conceptualization of trust.

Lastly, collaborative services are described by Benoit et al. (2017) using a triadic framework composed of the online platform (1), intermediating individual service providers (2), and individual service users (3). The majority of existing studies on consumer behavior focus on service users (Hamari et al., 2016; Möhlmann, 2015), without taking into consideration service providers. This is most likely due to the fact that service users correspond to the consumers in previous classical models. Our approach differs, as it considers both groups (service providers and service users) as a whole, which makes sense because they are both customers of the platform. It also considers the permeability between groups, which we call interchangeability. By including service users and service providers alike, our approach is more global and takes into account both sides of the marketplace.

## *5.2 Contributions to the construal level theory*

The present work contributes to the construal level theory and to the concept of social distance in several ways. First, our model, built on one of the most successful and influential theories in consumer research (Williams, Stein, & Galguera, 2014), reveals that the construal level theory is a relevant framework to predict consumers' responses in a collaborative services context. Indeed, based on the theory and using our empirical data, we are able to unveil the underlying mechanism (social distance) explaining the effect of interchangeability on trust.

Second, our research enriches the concept of social distance developed within the framework of the construal level theory (Liviatan et al., 2008; Stephan et al., 2011; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Most of the sources of social distance suggested by the construal level theory are related to the variation of different factors and, in particular, the distinction between the in-group versus the out-group, which is dependent on a specific situation. For example, a co-worker may belong to the in-group (the company) or the out-group (the family). The same person could have power over one element (e.g., information), but at the same time have less power over another element (e.g., money). The concept of interchangeability appears to be more stable and robust because it is an objective situation where the consumer plays either one role or two roles and, as such, it is not situation-specific. Thus, interchangeability could be a valid cue of social distance.

Third, this work also contributes to the small but growing literature investigating social distance and trust. Past research has looked into the effect of social distance on interpersonal relations as choices for others (Laran, 2010; Lu, Liu, & Fang, 2016; Tu, Shaw, & Fishbach, 2016), for example with gift-giving (Baskin, Wakslak, Trope, & Novemsky, 2014) or sharing

experiences (Bhargave & Montgomery, 2013). However, we did not find any articles exploring the role of social distance on trust within the construal level theory framework. Hence this research contributes to the social distance and construal level theory literature by showing that in the context of collaborative services, where interpersonal relations are important, perceived social proximity can have a positive influence on trust in peers.

Finally, we collected participants' perceived social proximity for the empirical analysis using the Liviatan et al. scale (2008). While most empirical studies based on social distance rely on experiments for their methodology, they compare two instances of social distance, close (self or close other) versus far (distant other) (Kim et al., 2008; Zhao & Xie, 2011). Our study provides a finer-grained assessment of perceived social distance through a measurement scale.

### *5.3 Practical implications*

Despite the fact that the sharing economy and collaborative consumption are projected to experience exponential growth in the coming years (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015), platforms such as Airbnb and BlaBlaCar still face many challenges if they want to keep attracting new users and retain their current customers. After the early positive trends surrounding the fast emergence of these new business models, collaborative services platforms now have to deal with several challenges, such as tough competition, more careful scrutiny from their users, or even new regulations (Arcidiacono, Gandini, & Pais, 2018), if they want to live up to the potential indicated by their early growth.

Our research sheds light on a possible innovative segmentation and personalization strategy that platforms could implement, which does not exist in traditional forms of exchange. More specifically, based on interchangeability, it is possible to take into consideration that

attitudes and behaviors, trust and participation intention, can vary depending on whether users have experienced both roles or just one. As such, as part of a targeted communication strategy, platforms could consider setting in place different messages and different incentives for both segments: interchangeable and non-interchangeable participants. Furthermore, implementing specific campaigns to promote permeability between both types of participants (service providers and service users) could have several fruitful and interesting benefits. Not only would it increase the overall number of exchanges and transactions for the same number of participants, but these interchangeable customers also appear to have more favorable attitudes and behaviors. In particular, they are more trusting, as well as more likely to participate in future collaborative services exchanges than their counterparts who act as only service providers or service users. Hence platforms should encourage their customers to experience both roles whenever possible by identifying those who have only participated in one role and offering them incentives (such as a free trial transaction, for example) to experience the other role.

Moreover, because our study demonstrates that social proximity has a positive influence on both trust and participation intention, platforms could consider mechanisms other than interchangeability to increase social proximity. For example, Stephan, Liberman, & Trope (2010) show that greater politeness can increase social distance. By promoting a more direct and less formal type of communication between members, it may be possible to reduce the social distance perceived by participants.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

This study has several limitations. First, despite good fit indices and no significant differences in terms of gender, it is based on the analysis of a convenience sample that suffers

from an imbalance skewed toward female respondents, as well as a possible overrepresentation of the student population. Furthermore the data was collected using only French-speaking respondents; while some exchanges are at a local scale (e.g., in the case of ride-sharing), other types of exchanges happen on a global and international level, such as accommodation rental. Social constructs, in our case social distance, are likely to be affected by cultural differences (Lutz & Newlands, 2018). Thus, further research could consider the influence of differences in culture and use a larger and more balanced sample of respondents.

Second, with the data collected we were able to compare two groups: one group of 167 respondents who had only assumed one role – either as a service provider (host) or as a service user (traveler) – and another group of 55 respondents who had assumed both roles, being both a service provider and a service user (see Table A.1 in the Appendix). Despite good fit indices, this asymmetry could be limiting because the two groups are not balanced. A different methodological approach, such as fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (Beynon, Jones, & Pickernell, 2016; Dul, 2016), could possibly provide complementary insights.

Third, we conducted our analysis on one single type of exchange (accommodation rental). Replicating this experiment with other types of exchanges, such as car rental for example, or taking into consideration asymmetrical transactions – when participants assume both roles but for different types of services – would allow us to account for other dimensions, such as product characteristics (their price, the provider's attachment, their intimacy, etc.). The assessment of interchangeability could also be considered as limiting for two reasons: because participants' (in)ability to play both roles is not accounted for, and because we consider interchangeability as a binary variable. Either the participant has experienced both roles and interchangeability is set to 1, or the participant has only experienced one role and interchangeability is set to 0. It is also

possible to consider that, depending on the ratio of experiences in one role versus in the other role, the interchangeability variable could be on a continuum rather than merely binary.

Fourth, we do not consider trust as a multidimensional construct (we conceptualize it as a unidimensional construct). However, trust could be multidimensional, for example with cognitive and affective facets (Johnson & Grayson, 2005). Consequently, it would be interesting to investigate how interchangeability impacts those sub-dimensions. Furthermore, including control variables, such as trust propensity, participants' experience, or the presence of trust mechanisms implemented by the platforms, would allow us to ensure that such variables have no effect.

Lastly, there is a type of collaborative services exchange that is based on swapping. On those platforms, participants can exchange in a symmetrical manner, for example when a family living in Paris swaps their apartment with another family who lives in a house in Los Angeles during a two-week vacation. GuesttoGuest is an example of such a platform (Forno & Garibaldi, 2015). Within those marketplaces, all participants experience both roles and not just one role. It could be interesting to run a comparative analysis of trust and participation intention levels among participants on those platforms with participants on exchange platforms such as Airbnb.

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## Tables and Figures

**Table 1.** Factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) (n = 222)

<b>Constructs</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Measurement items</b>	<b>Loadings</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>Perceived social proximity (PSP)</b>	PSP 1	In general, to what extent do you perceive hosts/travelers to be similar to you (for example, to be people like you)?	0.803	0.687	0.527	Liviatan, Trope & Liberman, 2008
	PSP 2	In general, to what extent do you perceive hosts/travelers to be close to you (for example, to be socially close)?	0.639			
<b>Trust (TR)</b>	TR1	Hosts/travelers are in general reliable.	0.824	0.914	0.727	Pavlou & Gefen, 2004
	TR2	Hosts/travelers are in general dependable.	0.908			
	TR3	Hosts/travelers are in general honest.	0.786			
	TR4	Hosts/travelers are in general trustworthy.	0.887			
<b>Participation intention (INT)</b>	INT1	Given the chance, I predict that I would consider home rental via an online web platform in the future.	0.950	0.940	0.84	Pavlou & Gefen, 2004
	INT2	It is likely that I will actually rent a/my home via an online web platform in the near future.	0.888			
	INT3	Given the opportunity, I intend to rent a/my home via an online web platform.	0.911			

**Table 2.** Socio-demographic sample structure (n = 222)

Socio-demographic variables	Modality	N	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	63	28.4
	Female	159	71.6
<b>Age</b>	18–24	79	35.6
	25–40	48	21.6
	41–55	63	28.4
	56 and above	32	14.4
<b>Job</b>	Crafts or tradesperson	6	2.7
	Blue collar/factory worker	5	2.3
	Office/store employee	8	3.6
	Director, executive	30	13.5
	Manager, scientist	50	22.5
	Student	86	38.7
	Currently unemployed	7	3.2
	Without profession (stay-at-home parent for example)	13	5.9
	Retired	17	7.7

**Table 3.** Correlations and average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct\*

	1	2	3
<b>1. Perceived social proximity (1)</b>	<b>0.527</b> (0.725)		
<b>2. Trust (2)</b>	0.414	<b>0.727</b> (0.852)	
<b>3. Participation intention (3)</b>	0.087	0.416	<b>0.84</b> (0.916)

\* Note: AVE in bold and root square of AVE in parentheses.

**Table 4.** Results of heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) analysis

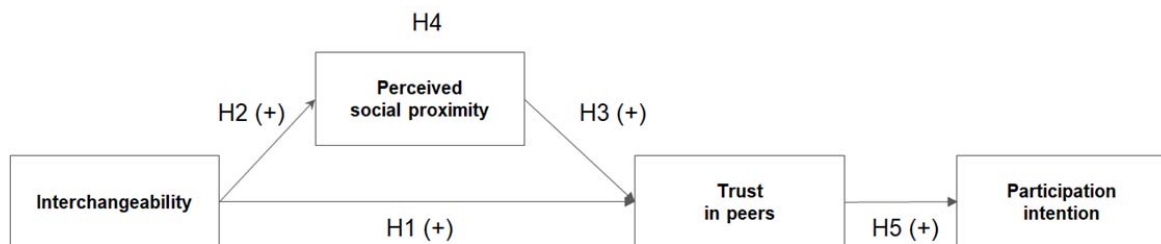
	1	2	3
<b>1. Perceived social proximity (1)</b>			
<b>2. Trust (2)</b>	0.428		
<b>3. Participation intention (3)</b>	0.115	0.407	



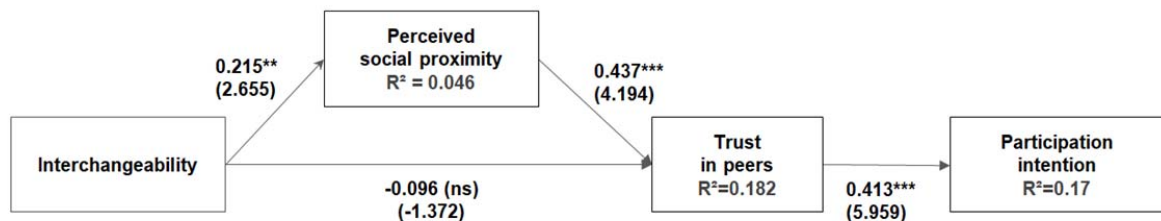
**Table 5.** Test of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Independent variables	Dependent variables	Coefficient standardized	p-value	Results
H1	Interchangeability	→ Trust	- 0.096	$p = 0.17$ (ns)	Not supported
H2	Interchangeability	→ Perceived social proximity	0.215	$p < 0.01$	Supported
H3	Perceived social proximity	→ Trust	0.437	$p < 0.001$	Supported
H4	Interchangeability (via perceived social proximity)	→ Trust	0.094	$p < 0.01$	Supported
H5	Trust	→ Participation intention	0.413	$p < 0.001$	Supported

**Figure 1.** Conceptual model



**Figure 2.** Assessment of structural model (n = 222)



Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; ns = not significant; critical ratio in parentheses.

## Appendix

**Table A.1** Sample structure (n = 222)

	<b>1 role</b>	<b>2 roles</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Hosts</b>	18	40	58
<b>Travelers</b>	149	15	164*
<b>Total</b>	167	55	222

\* For more information on the hosts versus travelers split, see: <https://muchneeded.com/airbnb-statistics/>