

User motivations to participate in sharing initiatives

Investigating the impact of offline meetings on online communities' user motivations to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives

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Master thesis

20 June, 2016

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“Happiness is only real when shared,” McCandless (1996, p. 189).

1. Introduction

Sharing is a process we as human beings value greatly and, thanks to technology, nowadays sharing of goods and services with one another is possible on a global scale. We can share food, our house, car, washing machine, bike, or boat, and access a pool of shared goods that we can swap, rent, or lend. While most of these activities have existed for as long as humankind, the availability of more data about users and things, combined with the network potential of the Internet have allowed physical assets to be consumed as services (The Economist, 2013). This makes sharing easier and better organized, and also enables sharing on a larger scale. This process of sharing goods and services is referred to as the sharing economy, which is continually growing on a large scale and is expected to reach \$335 billion by 2025 (The Sharing Economy, 2015).

The attitudes towards the sharing economy are not only positive, however, it should be acknowledged that it is quite an important development that is impacting many parts of our economy. One industry that is disrupted to a high extent by the sharing economy and is expected to continue to change as people are given numerous choices in the way they travel, is the traveling industry (Euromonitor International, 2013). Secure online payments, geo-locating, as well as various personalization opportunities have all played a critical role in shifting the trends of tourism and traveling in a sharing economy (Euromonitor International, 2013).

The sharing economy as a term did not have a unified definition for a long time, however, a report commissioned by the British government has recently defined the sharing economy as “online platforms that help people share access to assets, resources, time, and skills” (Woskko, 2014, p.14). This definition is precise in its acknowledgement of the presence of virtual platforms and users who are on the supply and demand sides of the products or services they share. The rise of the sharing economy has allowed people to share products instead of buying and owning them, and companies have benefited from this trend by crafting new distribution models (Matzler, Veider, & Kathan, 2015). Emerging as well as already established peer-to-peer platforms have created favorable environments for sharing and collaborative consumption practices. Collaborative consumption constitutes a significant part of the sharing economy and Belk (2013) defines collaborative consumption as “people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (p. 1597). The main difference between sharing and collaborative consumption lies in the involvement of monetary or other, non-monetary compensation involved in these transactions, so that bartering, swapping, and trading are also included,

and free-sharing is excluded (Belk, 2013, p. 1597). This study will delve deeper into the dynamics of collaborative consumption and explore one specific side of it.

1.1 Research problem

The sharing economy has enabled practical and sustainable use of resources while fostering a sense of community (Belk, 2013). This sense of community, however, represents a complex process which takes time and effort to be build and sustained. To accomplish that, Botsman and Rogers (2010) note that collaborative consumption brands invest in their communities from day one, “entwining the reputation of the user and the organization” (p. 245). It is important to note that the dynamic of collaborative communities is not triggered by glossy ads and massive television campaigns, rather users join because their friends have already done it (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). This is why many founders of such online communities invest valuable time in “the first wave of core users” (p. 247), greet them properly, and then introduce them to new members (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Once online communities have reached a critical mass, it gets easier to grow and sustain them, however, this first stage of establishing a functioning community is challenging.

Additionally, two-sided marketplaces experience a great urgency to reach a critical mass on both the supply and demand sides, and attract both providers and consumers so that their business can function (Anderson, 2014). Despite the fact that not much revenue is generated at these initial stages of the building of a community, frequent visitors, new members, and thus, reaching a high number of users within a short period of time is an important success factor for the online community (Leimeister, Sidiras, & Krcmar, 2004). This process of creating a successful peer-to-peer sharing platform with a functioning online community is not an easy step. Actually, reaching scale is the top reason behind the demise of numerous companies (Anderson, 2014). Scaling, explained as a company “not being able to reach a sufficient level of scale to achieve a sustainable business model in the required time,” (Slide 4) is an issue experienced by nearly one fourth of the unsuccessful collaborative consumption companies (Anderson, 2014). This makes scaling the most common reason for failure and, therefore, an issue significant enough to trigger further investigation.

Building a critical mass of users at inception, however, establishes the sustained success of online communities (Raban, Moldovan, & Jones, 2010). There are numerous other issues related to the creation and sustaining of a well-functioning peer-to-peer platforms. In academia, trust (Matzat, 2010), community leadership, and innovation generation (Romero & Molina, 2011), among others, have been pinpointed as areas where improvements can be made for the betterment of online communities. The process of

creating an online community, however, involves the time and effort to build an initial user base that will drive forward a well-functioning community.

Furthermore, there is a link between offline meetings as a determinant for the sustainability of online communities (Lin, 2007; Shen & Cage, 2015; Matzat, 2010). As noted above, users of peer-to-peer platforms join predominantly because their peers have already done so, which makes the direct personal contact between users a vital component of the growth of online communities (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Also, Lin (2007) states that “online social ties among members cannot be sustained without strong offline interactions” (p. 132). One example of a strong presence and connection between offline and online communities is Airbnb.com, a popular community marketplace for users to list and book accommodations internationally (Airbnb.com website). Their approach to create as ubiquitous an offline presence for their community as their online one (Carr, 2014) has led to over 60% of community growth (Berkovics, 2013). By organizing offline meetings, Airbnb.com as an organization has added a human side to their website, while triggering word-of-mouth marketing for community expansion, and receiving valuable feedback from its users (Berkovics, 2013).

On the other hand, Shen and Cage (2015) state that offline meetings decrease the chance of new members to join and become accepted by the current community. Their study, however, is not based on online communities of peer-to-peer platforms and their research is based on already established and functioning communities. These contradictory findings suggest that research on the link between online and offline communities is still in an exploratory phase. An in-depth investigation on the topic is not only academically interesting, but also practically urgent, as the results will be beneficial both for organizations entering the collaborative consumption market, as well as for already established online communities and their expansion.

1.2 Research question

Having lacking or mixed findings on these two vital factors contributing to the sustainability of online communities, more research in the area will be useful. In order to understand the dynamics of attracting users and reaching this first wave of members for an online community, it is important to look into the motivations of users to participate in such a community in the first place. User motivation for participation has been researched in several studies (Hamari, Sjöklint and Ukkonen, 2015; Zhou, 2011; Cheng & Vassileva, 2005), however, none of them explores it in the light of offline meetings as a potentially decisive factor, or specifically during the growth stage of an online community when critical mass is being built. The bulk of research related to peer-to-peer platforms' user motivation is related

to the users' motivation to contribute to the online community and be active in it (Lampe, Wash, Velasquez, & Ozkaya, 2010; Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Cheng & Vassileva, 2005). The motivation to take part in such a community, however, has not been explored in depth. This lack of academic literature on this aspect too makes this thesis relevant because its findings will contribute to existing theory and bring useful knowledge to emerging as well as already functioning platforms.

In order to better explore the impact of offline meetings on users' motivations to participate in online communities, it would be useful to compare organizations in starting and developed stages of community growth. Furthermore, because of the immense diversity of collaborative consumption initiatives ranging from global social networking online communities to knowledge sharing platforms to local food sharing websites, it will be useful to investigate a specific sharing sector rather than aiming at generalizing for this broad range of collaborative activities. Since offline meetings are not an appropriate approach for every online community, focusing on the traveling industry and investigating starting as well as already functioning collaborative consumption initiatives in this area would be appropriate. The traveling field has experienced numerous disruptions as a consequence of the proliferation of collaborative consumption initiatives. More specifically, three key areas related to traveling have been changed as a result of the sharing economy, namely transport, accommodation, and in-destination activities (Euromonitor International, 2013). By investigating traveling initiatives, a focus and an overarching theme for the research will be established, which will allow the comparison of organizations in the same sector with similar but not the same dynamic, thus facilitating the relevancy of findings.

The main aim of this study is to understand the impact of offline meetings as a tool for the growth of peer-to-peer platforms, and to explore offline meetings as a motivation trigger with regards to a collaborative consumption organization's stage of development. Hence, the following research question is formulated:

RQ: In what ways do offline meetings (organized by sharing platforms) in the traveling industry differ in motivating users to participate in their online communities when building a critical mass of users compared to when expanding their already functioning online community?

As it follows from this research question, there are some important concepts which need to be elaborated on in order to produce a worthy answer to it. Firstly, an online community should be defined in order to provide context for this study. Then, critical mass building as an important stage in the development of a collaborative consumption initiative

has to be explained, as well as the factors influencing it. Next, it has to be acknowledged what types of users exist and in what ways the differences among them are valuable in light of this thesis. Also, offline meetings and their relation to successful online community building should be elaborated on, including the various types of impact it has on online communities. One especially prominent aspect of face-to-face meetings and their influence is related to social capital theory and it should be discussed as well. Finally, the motivations of users to participate in online communities need to be addressed, discussing any guiding motivations for this study.

Having an elaborate account of the above mentioned key concepts stemming from the research question will provide a theoretical framework which will guide this thesis. In order to answer the research question, it will be sufficient to consider these concepts. It is necessary to understand the users' motivations to attend offline meetups and participate on collaborative consumption platforms and then compare the results in terms of initiatives' stage of development. Including sub-questions to answer the research question of this thesis is not needed, as these concepts are providing an elaborate picture of the topic and including all relevant aspects to it.

1.3 Social and scientific relevance

Academic literature will be enriched by this study which is aiming at investigating the impact of offline meetups on users' motivations to participate in sharing initiatives since current findings related to these concepts are mixed. For example, Shen and Cage (2015) do not have conclusive findings and recommend conducting additional studies on the impact of offline meetings on online community participation. Another study by Lin (2007) suggests that profit-oriented online communities need to be further researched since he includes only non-profit ones in his study on the role of online and offline features in sustaining virtual communities. Additionally, Raban, Moldovan, and Jones (2010) who study critical mass and online community survival, recommend future research with regards to users' motivation and critical mass building by adding a qualitative dimension by conducting interviews. Furthermore, there is a lack of studies on the link between offline meetings and user motivation to participate in online communities, which makes this research even more relevant. Therefore, the above noted research question is appropriate to be researched with regards to its aim to add knowledge and valuable findings to this area.

Answering this research question would also bring insights for constantly emerging novel start-ups which bring along innovative practices and are struggling with building critical mass. For them, being up-to-date with the dynamics of establishing a well-functioning online community and being aware of users' motivating factors for participation are critical in this initial stage of user-base growth. Sharing initiatives with fully-functioning online communities

can also benefit from the results of this study as they can borrow some takeaways which are proven to work for successful online community building. Besides collaborative consumption organizations, other initiatives with online communities can also benefit from the findings of this study as their industry dynamic or goals might overlap with the desired impact from offline meetups to community building.

1.4 Thesis outline

In order to initiate a study which aims to answer the above laid out research question, firstly, a review of existing literature on the relevant topics is presented in the second chapter. Namely, online communities, critical mass building, user types, offline meetings, social capital theory, and user motivations are elaborated on. Chapter three features an elaborate account of the research method of qualitative interviews, as well as the units of analysis, data collection, and data analysis approach which is used. Next, the results of this thesis are discussed in detail, featuring the main themes which emerge from the study and providing examples of participants' statements. Finally, a discussion and an answer to the research question is presented, including theoretical and societal implications, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter the concepts used in this study in light of previous theory will be discussed. The various concepts related to the above posed research question will be elaborated on, namely in exploring the differences in the impact of offline meetups in motivating users to participate in sharing initiatives which are in the process of building their critical mass of users versus fully-functioning online communities. Therefore, firstly, a definition of online communities will be discussed. Next, critical mass theory will be laid out, bringing up the life cycle stages in the development of an online community and the success factors relevant for its sustainable growth. Then, literature on different user types will be discussed, since acknowledging the different types of members of online communities is important for providing context for the results of the study. This will be followed by a discussion of previous research focusing on offline meetups as a way to enhance the building of successful online communities. Social capital theory will be further discussed within its bridging and bonding divisions, raising also mixed theoretical findings with regards to offline meetings and online communities. Then, existing theory on users' motivation to participate in online communities will be discussed. All these elements of the theoretical framework shed light into what has been studied on the topic so far, and bring an understanding of the relevant concepts, which are eventually used for a formulation of a preliminary conceptual model, and serve as foundation for the topic list that will be used during the interviews.

2.1 Online communities

In order to commence the academic discussion regarding online communities, it is important to define them first. There is no unified definition for online communities in academic literature, however, researchers in the field provide us with the essence of the concept (Wang, Yu, & Fesenmaier, 2002). One of the earliest and regularly cited definitions of a virtual community is coined by Rheingold (1994, p.6), stating that they are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". This initial definition, however, poses some relatively open terms such as "enough people," "long enough," and "sufficient human feeling." Later on, Lee, Vogel and Limayem (2003) formulate a more specific working definition, defining a virtual community based on categorizations and classification systems of previous research on virtual communities. They define a virtual community as "a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built up" (p. 51). Their definition is widely used and quite encompassing, and it can serve as a general,

common reference in this study as to what online communities are. Additionally, it sheds light on the value of a relationship being build and this aspect would be very relevant in the context of a peer-to-peer environment. There is an even more recent one, proposed by a 2013 report, stating that an online community is “a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication” (Center for the Digital Future, 2013, p. 121). This latest definition, however, is more pragmatic and would be less relevant in the current thesis because of the importance of a relationship build-up among the members of collaborative consumption initiatives.

It is important to view online communities in light of a peer-to-peer or sharing environment, where users can become both suppliers and customers. In this environment, a main challenge faced by peer-to-peer business models is related to a lack of trust and familiarity among users in web-based peer-to-peer platforms (Business Innovation Observatory, 2013; Matzat, 2010; Andrews, Preece, & Turoff, 2002). This lack of trust and familiarity among the users is tied to the lack of an established relationship among them. Additionally, as it was previously mentioned, the most common reason for the unsuccessful wellbeing of sharing initiatives is their failure to reach a critical mass of users in order to have a fully functioning online community. This aspect is elaborated on in the next section.

2.2 Critical mass building

In order to build successful online communities, collaborative consumption initiatives need to reach a fully functioning user base both on their supply and demand sides. It should be noted that online communities encounter different challenges and show various patterns of growth (Solomon & Wash, 2014). They evolve, however, following some distinctive life cycle stages and success factors can be developed for the relevant development stages of online communities (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009). Iriberry and Leroy (2009) focus on four life cycle steps in the evolution of a successful online community, namely inception, creation, growth, and maturity.

Inception refers to the forming of a vision for the community and the beginning of user involvement, creation refers to interaction among the initial group of members, growth refers to the joining of new members and the formation of identities and roles, while maturity is related to building trust and relationships among the membership of the community (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009). This life cycle of online communities is repeated with the joining of new users, and thus evolving, while in the cases when communities lose momentum and participation decreases, the community can move from a growth to a death stage. In order to move from growth to mature stage, however, Iriberry and Leroy (2009) suggest that it is important for virtual communities during their growth stage to be “reaching high number of

members within a short period of time” (p. 25), that is to be aiming at reaching a critical mass of users. They add that other success factors during the growth stage of an online community are attracting new members, having growth management, integrating new members, trust building, offline events and meetings, among other factors.

It is important to note here, though, that critical mass building is an important success factor for the life of an online community, and especially for the life of a peer-to-peer community. As previously discussed, the inability of peer-to-peer communities to attract new members, to maintain high participation rates among its users, and, thus, to scale, is the top reason for their failure (Anderson, 2014). This makes critical mass building one of the big challenges collaborative consumption organizations face (Wagner, Kuhndt, Lagomarsino, & Mattar, 2015; Peer Pressure, 2015, Business Innovation Observatory, 2013). Therefore, looking into the motivations of users to participate in sharing communities is especially important.

One important factor for reaching critical mass and building a fully-functioning online community is the diversity of users during the growth stage of a community. Raban, Moldovan, and Jones (2010) conduct a quantitative study on the best conditions that support a virtual community at inception, suggesting that group heterogeneity is the most relevant predictor for community success, although it has not been previously designated as a critical success factor for community sustainability. Solomon and Wash (2014) also indicate that user diversity in the early stages of community building is a significant factor to create a successful community afterwards. These findings on the importance of variety during the process of critical mass building is relevant for the long term sustainability of the community. Power users are insufficient to sustain a community, therefore, new members need to be attracted and different members need to be encouraged to participate on smaller levels (Solomon & Wash, 2014). This last finding leads to the next section from the theoretical framework, namely the section discussing different user types present in online communities.

2.3 User types

The differentiation between distinct types of users that are being represented in various online communities is relevant for this thesis because it is an important concept from the studied topic. And different users will also have different motivations for participating in online sharing services. Acknowledging the types of users will provide the study with context as to the participants' activities in the community and their motivations.

There is not a standard division among different users, however, some studies identify common characteristics among the user types in online communities. Golder and

Donath (2004) state that users' levels of participation vary widely and propose a taxonomy of social roles that can be attributed to the various user types. Based on an understanding of participants' roles and the relationships between these roles, they propose the following user types: celebrity, newbie, lurker, flamer, troll, and ranter. Respectively, the celebrity user type relates to prolific participation with communicative expertise, newbie users lack this communicative competence, lurkers observe the online community activities but do not participate, flamers represent aggressive and hostile users, trolls are masters of "identity deception" (p. 18), while ranters trigger pointless discussions (Golder & Donath, 2004). On the other hand, Chan and Hayes (2010) study user communication roles in discussion forums and summarize eight common user roles: joining conversationalists, popular initiators, taciturns, supporters, elitists, popular participants, grunts, and ignored. These common user roles refer to joining conversationalists as small sets of users with high levels of communication, popular initiators as popular users who initiate threads, taciturns as users with low communication volumes with few users, supporters as users who form the backbone of the forums. Elitists are referred to as users who prefer to have conversations with a very limited set of other users, popular participants as users who are involved with a large percentage of users, grunts as users having low volumes of communication to a few users, and ignored as users who have low percentage of posts replied to (Chan & Hayes, 2010).

The study by Golder and Donath (2004) has a clearer structure and division of identification of user types, however, its identification of social roles is again based on users' participation in forum-like online environments where users can be anonymous in their participation. In the context of a peer-to-peer collaborative consumption platform, however, these user types will be relevant to a smaller extent. In sharing platforms, the users of sharing services differ from other users because they are both on the supply and demand sides of the platforms, and because they are the creators of content. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that the role of the user in sharing initiatives involves a different type of interaction and dynamic, involving activities other than only discussions, for instance, and not offering the possibility for anonymous activity.

Additionally, as users of sharing initiatives are active on both the supply and the demand sides of the platforms, they can be identified as prosumers. Prosumption involves both production and consumption rather than only one or the other, and is relevant in the context of prolific user-generated content environments (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Since peer-to-peer environments are created by user-generated content and the users are both producers and consumers of the products or services shared via a respective platform, they

can be identified as prosumers. Therefore, the users of sharing platforms can be referred to as prosumers.

Furthermore, having in mind Solomon and Wash's (2014) argument about power and non-power users, in the case of prosumers a general division can be established between experienced users and new users, where the tenure and frequency of activities using a sharing platform should be taken into consideration to distinguish between the two. Consequently, for the purposes of this study, two general user types can be identified - experienced users and new users, and this differentiation can serve as a theoretical basis for the formulation of a user concept which will be included in the conceptual model of this thesis. It should be acknowledged that differences in users' motivations to participate in sharing initiatives can still exist within these two general types of users. Nonetheless, this division can provide context to the results of the current study and facilitate the understanding of the motivations different users have to participate in sharing initiatives.

As it has already been established, for the successful development of an online community both building a relationship between the users and diversifying the user-base are important. Offline meetings as one valuable way to solve trust issues and thus build relationships between both new and experiences users are discussed in the next section.

2.4 Offline meetings

A number of studies suggest that there is a strong link between offline meetups and the success of an online community (Lin, 2007; Koh & Kim, 2003; Matzat, 2010; Andrews, Preece, & Turoff, 2002; Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Andrews, 2002; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Cothrel & Williams, 1999). One particular aspect they have in common is related to the notion that face-to-face meetups are improving the social presence of virtual communities. More specifically, computer mediated communication is referred to as having especially low social presence because it is deprived of the physical cues and relational features of face-to-face interaction (Riva & Galimberti, 1998). This idea is also referred to as social capital theory and it is elaborated on in the next section, while a discussion on the impact of offline meetings on the sustainability and growth of online communities is presented below.

Research shows that offline meetings can have an influence on four main aspects of online communities: online community development (Lin, 2007; Koh & Kim, 2003), sense of trust among members (Matzat, 2010; Andrews, Preece, & Turoff, 2002), word-of-mouth communication (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Andrews, 2002; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Cothrel & Williams, 1999), and user diversification (Shen & Cage, 2015; Koh & Kim, 2003). Firstly, offline meeting in general have been reportedly beneficial for the

development of online communities. Lin's (2007) study, based on a survey of 165 community members, reveals three factors determining the sustainability of online communities, namely perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and offline activities. With regard to offline activities, he elaborates that offline communication should be catered to with special attention as it is a critical determinant for the success of an online community. Also, Koh and Kim (2003) analyzed 172 members of 44 online communities in their study and found out that the sense of virtual community is affected by community leaders' enthusiasm, offline events, and enjoyability. A major finding of their research is the critical role of offline meetings in the individual members' sense of virtual community. These findings are telling of the high levels of impact offline meetups have on the development of online communities and the influence they have on individual users. Lin (2007) supports Koh and Kim's (2003) argument that offline events have a positive impact on members' sense of belonging to an online community, adding that they also influence members' intention to use the virtual community. These studies are producing findings which show the importance of offline meetings and their positive impact on the success of online communities.

Another aspect which can be improved as a results of offline interaction among members of virtual communities is the sense of trust among members. For example, Matzat (2010) elaborates on the beneficial power of offline meetings in reducing sociability problems among online communities by building trust and producing collective goods for the whole community. He compares purely virtual communities to mixed communities with both online and offline interactions, finding out that the latter are advantageous in terms of sociability, which represents the opportunities to execute social control via face-to-face meetings. This finding relates to the idea that misbehavior can be detrimental to one's reputation and the possibility for sanctions to such behavior by coordinated action (Matzat, 2010). In this way, being more perceptive of the judgments of their peers, members of communities reduce their uncooperative behavior, thus fostering trust, stabilizing membership, and reducing free-riding in the online community (Matzat, 2010). He also notes that offline interaction does not necessarily need to be fully integrated within online communities, and that not every member of the online community has to participate in offline events in order for the community to experience higher levels of trust and sociability. Additionally, Andrews, Preece, and Turoff (2002) conduct a study on online community needs for mid-life career changers, finding out that they are reluctant to communicate online with users they have not met offline. The subjects of the study are active participants in virtual methods of interaction, however, prefer meeting new people face-to-face before trusting them or sharing private information. These findings are illustrating the value of organizing offline meetups for online community members in terms of building their sense of trust.

Yet another positive outcome of face-to-face events is the resulting word-of-mouth communication which is facilitating the growth of online communities. Iriberry and Leroy (2009) conduct a study related to this topic, whose findings suggests that offline meetings are an important success factor for attracting members as a starting advantage for community building. They elaborate that attracting members via offline clubs and supporting the community through organizing regular real-world meetups are important success factors during the growth stage of online communities. Additionally, Andrews (2002), Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010) and Cothrel and Williams (1999) argue that in order to facilitate growth of online communities, organizations should create offline meetings or events, thus spreading word-of-mouth communication and attracting new members. All these findings are telling in terms of the importance of offline meetings for online community building.

There are, however, studies which take a differing stance on the influence of offline meetups on online community building. For instance, Shen and Cage (2015) conduct a study on offline meetings and their impact on community participation and social capital, finding out that meetups improve attendee's bonding social capital, which is related to the closer and more frequent relationship among similar people, at the expense of bridging social capital, which is referring to loose connections among diverse people. As this finding suggests, this results in a lowered possibility for new members to join a community and find acceptance in it. Also, Koh and Kim (2003) study individual members' sense of virtual community through the dimensions of membership, influence, and immersion. Despite their main finding on the critical role of offline activities for an improved sense of community, they find out that offline events strongly affect the influence and membership aspects, while they do not affect members' full immersion into the communities. Having inconclusive results with regards to the impact of offline events, they recommend future research on the topic. These mixed findings from the studies by Shen and Cage (2015) and Koh and Kim (2003) raise further questions on the influence of offline meetups on online communities and are a major point of relevance of the current study.

It is also important to note that not all online communities need to or have the capacity to organize offline meetings. For example, social networks' online communities are so diverse and globally present, that conducting offline meetings would not be a relevant approach for them. On the other hand, more specialized online communities which are focused on sharing particular types of products or services can benefit from offline meetups because familiarity with other users can build trust and recognition on a local level.

2.5 Social capital theory

Besides the benefits of organizing offline meetings for members of online communities discussed in the section above, such as increased sense of trust among members and facilitated growth of the communities via word-of-mouth communication, social capital is a recurring notion which should be discussed on more detail as this will be helpful in understanding the underlying reasons for the impact of face-to-face meetings on social presence in online communities.

As it was previously noted, social presence theory refers to the notion that offline meetings can improve the low levels of social presence typical for the majority of computer-mediated environments (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Several studies produce findings on supporting this notion. For example, Andrews (2002) highlights the importance of recognition of the difference between relationship building in online communities and face-to-face communities, referring to the presence of physical cues in face-to-face communication, as well as to the influence of norms on individuals' behavior in such settings. Also, Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001) claim the significance of offline communication in explaining community members' embeddedness and the empowerment of relationship-building process of virtual communities. Furthermore, "people who interact online in virtual communities generally got to know each other originally from a face-to-face context, or, if they have not met already, expect that they could encounter each other face-to-face in the future" (Kavanaugh et al., 2005, -). All these findings are supporting the idea that physical communication is increasing the low social presence of computer-mediated environments.

In order to understand in what ways social capital is influencing virtual communities, it should be noted that social capital is divided into two major categories, namely bridging and bonding, where bridging social capital is based on loose ties that connect diverse people, and bonding social capital represents closer and more frequent connections among similar people (Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006). As it was mentioned in the previous section, Shen and Cage (2015) suggest that offline meetups improve bonding social capital at the expense of bridging social capital, however, their study is based on the data from a forum, so it will be useful to explore other areas as well. On the other hand, Putnam (2000) suggests that bridging social capital is under threat because computer-mediated communication among virtual communities' members is based on specific shared interests among users. He proposes real-world interactions as a solution to this issue, further emphasizing on the importance of physical proximity in reinforcing developing social connections. These suggestions overlap with Koh and Kim's (2003) findings, which reveal that strong ties among members of online communities cannot be sustained without physical cues. These findings

with regards to social capital theory are valuable for this study as social presence is reportedly influenced to a high extent by offline meetups.

As it can be observed from the results of the above noted studies, social capital theory is related to the value of physical cues (Andrews, 2002), the significance of face-to-face meetings to relationship-building processes in virtual communities (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001), as well as to the bridging and bonding dynamics among users of online communities (Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006; Shen & Cage, 2015). These findings are important for this thesis and will be taken into account since social capital theory is an overarching concept of online communities, offline meetups, and critical mass building. Furthermore, bridging and bonding social capital will be investigated in this study as existing findings are inconclusive. Thus, a valuable layer of knowledge will be explored, aiming to understand users' motivations to participate in online communities, which are discussed below.

2.6 User motivations

In order to explore the dynamics of creation and development of a sustained online community, it will be useful to also investigate the motivations of users to join peer-to-peer platforms for collaborative consumption, both in emerging and in functioning online communities. It is important to note that academic literature on individual motivations makes a general division between them as intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors, where intrinsic motivation refers to activities inherently interesting, satisfying, or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation is linked to activities which lead to separable outcomes and instrumental value (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, extrinsic motivation can be related both to personal choices and to compliance with external control (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This distinction between the two types of motivations is based on self-determination theory, where different goals or reasons give rise to actions. There are numerous studies on users' motivations, however, below is a discussion of the research relevant to the topic of this study.

To begin with, Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen (2015) state that motives for participation in collaborative consumption online communities include sustainability, activity enjoyment, reputation, and economic gains, adding that positive attitudes towards such activities do not always turn into action. This study finds out that "perceived sustainability is an important factor in the formation of positive attitudes towards CC (collaborative consumption), but economic benefits are a stronger motivator for intentions to participate in CC" (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2015, p. 9). Another finding of this study suggests that enjoyment is an important factor for attitude formation and use intentions. Therefore, including enjoyability and sustainability as intrinsic motivating factors, and economic gain as

an extrinsic motivating factor, will represent relevant elements to guide the current research. Since sustainability has been conceptualized as intrinsic motivating factor by Nov, Naaman, and Ye (2010) and by Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen (2015), this study too will refer to it in this manner.

Additionally, other studies explore the motivations behind contributing to free initiatives such as open source projects (Oreg & Nov, 2008) and information sharing (Nov, Naaman, & Ye, 2010), referring to reputation as a valuable motivation for active participation. Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen (2015), however, find out that reputation does not significantly affect users' attitude or behavioral intention to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives. Since their study is specifically based on collaborative consumption initiatives, their finding is significant, meaning that including reputation would not be relevant for this study as well.

On the other hand, Zhou (2011) adds to existing academic literature which is focused primarily on the effects of user motivations such as trust, commitment, and perceived usefulness, by investigating the effects of social processes such as identification, compliance, and internalization on user behavior. His results suggest that the collaborative environment of online communities affects the members' participation behavior also in terms of members' identification, related to social identity, and internalization, related to group norm. Zhou (2011) recommends facilitating user participation through identification and internalization processes. Therefore, including these two social aspects as extrinsic motivating factors in this study would be relevant in light of the importance of social processes in collaborative consumption communities and the impact offline meeting have on online communities.

Another motivation for participation which is relevant and valuable for the current study is related to the commitment of users to the communities they are part of. Commitment, or obligation to the community, is an intrinsic motivating factor which has been studied before as a motivation for sharing information goods online (Nov, Naaman, & Ye, 2010). The study by Nov, Naaman, and Ye (2010) reveals mixed findings on the motivation of commitment, thus advising for future research related to this motivating factor, emphasizing on its intersection with members' experience in the community.

These findings are valuable for this research because collaborative consumption environments are quite often designed for members to use ratings, reviews, and other data exemplifying the length and success level of activities. This can create a sharing culture which favors members who have a record at the expense of new members. This aspect is also relevant on an organizational level, where emerging collaborative consumption

initiatives lack such record and are at an initial stage of development, while already functioning communities have a community with numerous members with tenure. Therefore, adding commitment, and bearing in mind users' tenure in a community as an additional intrinsic motivating factor, would be relevant for this study. For instance, understanding the trust levels of participants with regards to other peers' experience with the sharing platforms they are members of will add an interesting aspect to the commitment motivation.

The above laid out findings shed light into the types of motivation members of online communities have to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives. Three intrinsic motivating factors, namely enjoyment, sustainability, and commitment, and three extrinsic motivating factors, those being economic gains, identification, and internalization, were discussed. These main motivating factors for participating in online communities will guide the current study. As there are no studies focused on the impact of offline meetings on user motivation to participate in online communities, the above mentioned six motivations will serve as a direction of this study, however, will not be used in a too directive way.

2.7 Conceptual model

The above discussed theoretical framework serves as a scientific basis on which new exploratory knowledge will be built on by answering the research question of this thesis. This study aims at investigating the impact of offline meetings on users' motivations to participate in peer-to-peer platform online communities. And the theoretical framework represents a building block for the creation of a conceptual model for the operationalization of concepts for this study.

The key components from the theoretical framework that are included in the conceptual model start with taking into consideration offline meetings organized by sharing initiatives from the traveling industry since their impact will be researched. As discussed, numerous studies explore the impact of offline communities on successful online community building (Lin, 2007; Koh & Kim, 2003; Matzat, 2010; Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Andrews, 2002; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Cothrel & Williams, 1999; Andrews, Preece, & Turoff, 2002). However, some produce mixed findings in this area (Shen & Cage, 2015; Koh & Kim; 2003), thus making the current study relevant.

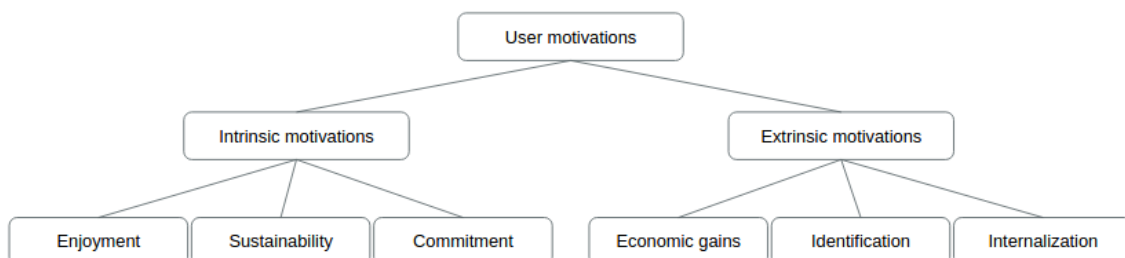
Furthermore, offline meetings and critical mass building are key success factors during the growth stage of an online community (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009). Critical mass building, though, is a major challenge collaborative consumption initiatives face (Wagner, Kuhndt, Lagomarsino, & Mattar, 2015; Peer Pressure, 2015, Business Innovation Observatory, 2013). Therefore, for the purposes of producing relevant results, organizations' stage of development – in the process of reaching a critical mass of users, or already having

a functioning online community, follows as the two stages of development that will be compared.

Another important success factor, however, that alleviates the difficulties in building a critical mass of users for an online community or expanding an already functioning one is diversification of users (Raban, Moldovan, & Jones, 2010; Solomon & Wash, 2014). Acknowledging the different user types comprising an online community is an additional step towards the understanding of users' motivations. Two general types are identified the purposes of this model: new and experienced user types. This division will be helpful in identifying the users' experience within the online communities in terms of length and frequency of participation in it, thus bringing context to the findings.

Finally, six elements related to the specific environment of online collaborative consumption communities trace the intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors for participation in online communities. The final list consists of three intrinsic motivating factors - enjoyment, sustainability, and commitment (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2015; Nov, Naaman, & Ye, 2010), and three extrinsic motivating factors - economic gains, identification, and internalization (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2015; Zhou, 2011). This selection represents an indication of the most relevant motivations with regards to a virtual collaborative consumption environment, and will therefore be used as a guiding model of the users' motivations to participate in sharing initiatives. A visual preview of the conceptual model with regards to users' motivations is presented in Figure 1 below. It will be used for the next part of the thesis, the research methods part, and more specifically for the creation of a topic list for the qualitative interviews which will be employed as a research method. The model will not be used in a quantitative or too directive way as the aim of this study is to understand a topic which has not been explored in depth before.

Figure 1. User motivations to participate in online communities.



3. Methodology

This section sheds light into the research methods used for the current study which is intended to answer the research question as to how offline meetups organized by sharing initiatives impact the motivations of users' to participate in these sharing platforms. To do that, first, an overview of the research design is presented. Then, more detailed information on interviews as a most suitable qualitative research method for this thesis is included, followed by an operationalization of the theoretical concepts into the topic list of the interviews (the whole topic list is added in Appendix A). Afterwards, the unit of analysis are described as well as the way the four initiatives included in this thesis were selected. Next, the data collection is elaborated on, and finally, the analysis of data is described.

3.1 Research design

To investigate the impact of offline meetings on online communities' user motivation to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives, a qualitative research method is the most suitable. According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), a qualitative research method is appropriate when there is a need for further investigation of the link between two or more concepts. Furthermore, qualitative research is not rigidly structured, but rather a dynamic and interpretive approach appropriate for exploring unknown insights of human behavior (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This open and flexible nature of qualitative research makes it suitable for investigating the inner experiences of participants, how meanings are formed, as well as to explore areas not fully researched (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All these characteristics make a qualitative research approach best for this study which aims to explore and understand the impact of offline meetups, and eventually derive common themes and patterns of behavior in terms of users' motivations to participate in sharing initiatives as influenced by offline meetings.

More specifically, a qualitative research method in the form of semi-structured interviews is the most useful method for answering the research question of this thesis. Interviews are an appropriate method to study the research question because they are useful when detailed information regarding people's behaviors is needed, or when new issues should be investigated in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006). A more elaborate description of interviews as a research method and why it is suitable for this thesis is provided in the next section.

3.2 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews are a suitable research method for exploring the impact of offline meetings on online communities' user motivation to participate in collaborative consumption organizations because interviews are predominantly used when the

experiences of the respondents are subject to investigation and understanding (Kvale, 2008). Qualitative interviews are a research method which reproduces a process through which knowledge is constructed in normal human interaction (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Additionally, conducting interviews is appropriate because they are useful when a thorough account of a person's thoughts and behaviors is explored, or when a new issue or aspect is investigated in depth (Boyce & Neale, 2006). In both cases, interviews are a valid method for this thesis as understanding users' thoughts and behaviors is important for answering the research question, and the aspect of looking into offline meetups as an online community building technique is new. It should also be noted that one of the strengths of in-depth interviews lies in their suitability for exploring in detail the experiences and motives of others, and thus seeing their perspective (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). They allow respondents to convey their own view in their words, thus producing meaning of central themes relevant to answering the research question (Kvale, 2008). This makes qualitative interviews the most suitable research method to answer the research question of this thesis.

The qualitative interviews used for this thesis are semi-structured as they are most suitable for understanding complex information and allowing participants to share their feelings and attitudes freely. Open-ended questions are predominantly used in the interviews so that more detailed and enriched responses can be obtained from the respondents.

3.3 Operationalization

In order to study the impact of offline meetups on online communities' user motivations to participate in sharing initiatives, a detailed topic list was developed to guide the interviews (Appendix A). It was created based on the core elements from the conceptual framework discussed in the previous chapter. More specifically, the concepts from Figure 1 included in the theoretical chapter are used as a starting point for the data analysis. For instance, the concept of commitment was referred to as obligation to the community that the members of sharing platforms might have. Also, the concept of identification was referred to as of whether participants are socially identifying themselves with the sharing platform or its online community. Internalization, on the other hand, was referred to as adhering to group norm or gaining awareness of the practices of the sharing initiative's membership.

For a better understanding of users' motivations to attend offline meetups and participate in the sharing initiatives' online communities, an exercise was included in the interviews. It consisted of four stages, where interviewees were first asked to write down their motivations to attend the meetings, then to arrange them in a descending order starting from the most important one for them. Then, they were presented with the six intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as discussed in the theoretical framework, and were asked if any of those are also relevant for them. Finally, the participants were asked to rearrange all of the

motivations relevant for them in terms of importance. This exercise allowed a better understanding of their motivations to attend offline meetups and participate on the sharing platforms, thus facilitating a more precise answer to the research question.

Besides the six intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as presented in the conceptual model, questions referring to user type identification and social capital theory were also included in the topic list. To identify the user types of participants, questions related to the frequency of usage and tenure in the online communities of the collaborative consumption initiatives were asked. Bridging and bonding social capital were investigated as questions related to users' behavior with regards to communicating about the initiatives were included, as well as to their participation styles in it. Including these theoretical concepts in the topic list for conducting the interviews facilitated the production of relevant data which was analyzed in the open coding stage of the analysis of the interviews.

3.4 Units of analysis

Members of selected organizations who have attended offline meetings are the units of analysis of this study. With the help of ShareNL, the Dutch knowledge and network platform for the sharing economy, four peer-to-peer initiatives in the traveling sector organizing offline meetups were selected. Important criteria for selection of the initiatives included having collaborative consumption organizations in the traveling industry which are organizing offline events for their members. Furthermore, two of them had to be in their growth stage of online community development, and two in their mature stage. The experience and network of ShareNL in the field was also beneficial for the process of selecting and contacting relevant organizations. Also, ShareNL provided some details of contact persons for several organizations, who were able to provide contacts of some of their members who attend their offline meetings. Other participants were reached out to on an individual basis. For example, individual invitations were sent out via Meetup.com to members who have registered for attending offline meetups by sharing initiatives. Another way of soliciting interviewees was attending an offline meetup by a sharing organization and inviting participants during the event. After reaching out to the interviewees, scheduling of interviews, and conducting of the interviews followed.

Having selected four organizations with at least two respondents each instead of 10-15 respondents from different platforms allows a deeper look into the specific case of each of the four organizations and thus enables relation of the results with this particular case. Also, having only one respondent from an organization can produce biased results because of the personal experience shared by only one participant. On the other hand, studying only one organization can limit the explorative and comparative nature of this thesis. Therefore,

focusing on four organizations presents the most sensible and relevant choice for this thesis, also taking into consideration the scope of this thesis and the time availability for completion.

The conditions that are taken into consideration for selecting the four initiatives are first, that the platforms have both providers and consumers as their online community, second, the organizations have offline events such as meetups, conferences, workshops, thematic events, or other face-to-face activities, and third, the organizations are part of the traveling industry. Additionally, the cases are divided into two parts, one consisting of platforms in their initial stages of growth, the other including already mature, fully-sustainable peer-to-peer platforms. This allows a comparison between offline meetings' influence on motivating users from developing platforms compared to motivating users from developed ones.

It is also important to note that as this study aims at exploring the impact of offline meetings on users' motivations to participate in online communities, it looks into peer-to-peer platforms which do organize offline meetings for their online communities and study them critically. Based on previous theory on offline meetings, it is assumed that offline meetings have an impact on online communities, so all four selected initiatives are organizing such meetups, instead of including platforms which do not, for checking if offline meetings have an influence on user motivations to participate. Therefore, this study aims at understanding in what ways offline meetups influence user motivations to participate, rather than if they do.

The four initiatives which were selected for this study are presented below.

3.4.1 SnappCar

SnappCar () is a car sharing platform which was established in 2012 in the Netherlands and is currently expanding its presence in other Western European countries. As their community manager shared, the initiative has an operating user base, however, they are still building their critical mass of users in the Netherlands while expanding in other regions. Currently, SnappCar is organizing offline events for its users on a weekly basis, with prospects of changing this strategy because of low interest rates from attendees. Their meetings are organized in various cafes in Amsterdam in order to build awareness for the platform on a local level, to make themselves available to the users, to receive feedback, to show that they care, and to build a relationship with their users. SnappCar was selected as one of the sharing initiatives in this study as it is a good example of a collaborative consumption platform in the process of building a critical mass of users, as well as because it is related to the traveling industry, and more specifically, to the mobility side of traveling.

3.4.2 Spinlister

Spinlister () is an international bike, surfboard, and snowboard sharing platform which was established in the United States in 2012. As their Portland, Oregon, USA representative shared, Spinlister is also in a process of building its critical mass of users while expanding its user base internationally. The organization has been organizing offline events in the past, however, has not continued to organize them on a regular basis with their last one happened in 2015. This platform was selected as one of the four initiatives in this thesis as it is a good international example of a sharing organization which is still growing and building its critical mass of users, as well as because it has been organizing offline events. Furthermore, it is part of the traveling industry which makes it also relevant for this study.

3.4.3 Home Exchange

Home Exchange () is a home sharing organization which started in 1992 in the United States as a printed catalog of homes which people could exchange and eventually developed into a multinational sharing platform. It has users in 150 countries and since it has a developed, fully-functioning online community, is identified as a mature platform which is expanding rather than building its initial critical mass of users. Home Exchange is an organization experienced in organizing offline events in various countries according to ShareNL, and is therefore an appropriate initiative for this study. Additionally, it organizes meetups in the Netherlands on a regular basis.

3.4.4 GuestToGuest

GuestToGuest (), similarly to Home Exchange, is an international home sharing platform. It was established in 2011 in France and has users from 187 countries, with fully-functioning member-base, therefore also identified as a mature online community. This case was selected as relevant developed platform in the traveling industry, which is organizing offline events for its users. More specifically, GuestToGuest has created an Ambassador program in which active and interested members can join, and thus aid the development of the online community by providing them with advice, as well as by organizing events. This is an interesting way of making use of offline meetups for community building and, therefore, an interesting initiative for this thesis.

Hence, a few general characteristics of each one of the 13 interviewees are collected to provide additional context to the results. For instance, the average age of the interviewees is 51 years old and eleven out of 13 interviewees are male, while two of them are female. Additionally, the interviewees have various occupational backgrounds and there are

representatives from six countries of origin. A comprehensive overview of the identifying characteristics of all 13 interviewees is provided in Appendix B. It includes information on participants' name, age, gender, country of origin, occupation, and platform they are members of.

3.5 Data collection

Interviewees are members of these four organizations who have attended an offline meeting organized by the respective organization they are members of. They were contacted either via the support of the respective organizations' contact persons who were referred to by ShareNL, or directly while attending an offline meeting. Thirteen interviews were conducted with members from the four organizations, with each interview lasting between 25 and 60 minutes. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in cafes, seven were conducted via Skype, one via phone, and two via email. All interviews were recorded with the respondent's permission and afterwards transcribed as accurate verbatim transcribing allowed later analysis.

3.6 Data analysis

The data was analyzed via a thematic analysis because this research tool allows flexibility and can provide a rich and detailed, at the same time complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 6). It is further recommended when studies on under-researched areas are conducted, as well as when respondents' views are not known, which is the case with exploring the impact of offline meetups on online community building among sharing platforms. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2008) state that thematic analysis provides an account on a specific theme, group of themes, or area of interest within the data, which is useful in the comparison between collaborative consumption platforms in the initial phase of building an online community and those with an already fully-functioning one. This thesis follows an inductive cyclic process, meaning that it progresses from the specific to the general. The analysis consists of segmenting the data and reassembling them so that findings can emerge (Boeije, 2010). To facilitate and improve the analysis of collected interviews, the qualitative data analysis software tool Atlas.ti was used.

The thematic analysis followed the six steps explained below (Braun & Clarke, 2008):

1. Familiarizing with the data

This phase included immersion into the collected data, active reading, searching for meanings, patterns, etc. Making notes and writing down ideas for coding were initiated in

this stage too. Transcribing served as an additional way to familiarize with the data. It is referred to as interpretative act where meanings can be created, instead of as a mechanical one. A detailed verbatim account of the data was transcribed in a manner as close and “true” to the original as possible.

2. Generating initial codes

This phase involved the organization of data into meaningful groups. The created codes identified semantic or latent features in the data that are interesting and relevant. The codes were created in the software program Atlas.ti, which provided a systematic view of the data. Additionally, memos and various color pens served as aiding materials to write down initial pattern recognition. This systematic work through the data set formed the initial themes/patterns. Some examples of the initial coding process are included in Appendix C.

3. Searching for themes

After coding all the data, focus was transferred to the overarching themes emerging from the extensive list of codes. Some codes were included into the main themes, other into sub-themes, and yet others were disregarded.

4. Reviewing themes

This phase consisted of a refinement of the themes, where a “thematic map” was created to ascertain that the themes are relevant for the data set, and to ensure all data is coded and nothing is missed in previous stages. The thematic map is presented as Appendix D of this thesis.

5. Defining and naming themes

In this stage, the essence of each theme was captured to best define the respective theme.

6. Producing the results

This phase included the writing of the thematic analysis, which includes its merit and validity. The analysis provides a concise, logical, non-repetitive, coherent, and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes.

3.7 Reliability and validity

This thesis is aiming at providing as reliable as possible a study on the impact of offline meetups on user' motivations to participate in sharing initiatives. It should be taken into consideration that this study is employing a qualitative research approach and the

methods used in it are not as precise as they would be in a quantitative study. Nonetheless, its credibility is ensured by a transparent and comprehensive description of the research design. Also, the data collection and analysis are conducted in an open and structured manner to ensure reliable results. The software program Atlas.ti has also been helpful in better identifying patterns, organizing the data, and preventing the analysis from any omissions that might have occurred otherwise. The reliability of the results of this study is further supported by a discussion of the research context and central concepts, and their implications with regards to the results.

Additionally, the validity of this thesis is ensured by embedding the central concepts in an interview topic list. As Raban, Moldovan, and Jones (2010) state, research by employing qualitative interviews for studying users' motivations and critical mass building is recommended. Their study serves as an inspiration to the current thesis and is building on its validity. Thus, the complex topic of sharing initiatives' user motivations as influenced by offline meetups is explored.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter was initiated with a discussion of employing qualitative method as the most appropriate research method for the open and interpretive nature of its topic (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Secondly, in-depth interviews as the most suitable way to explore thoroughly the motives and experiences of people were discussed. Thirdly, the operationalization of the theoretical concepts with regards to interview data was presented. Next, the units of analysis and their selection were elaborated on, providing details on each included in the study platform. Namely, the four initiatives are SnappCar, Spinlister, Home Exchange, and GuestToGuest, and thirteen interviews with members of these platforms were conducted. Following a transcription of all interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted as this type of analysis can provide a rich and comprehensive, at the same time complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Lastly, the thesis' reliability and validity were discussed with regards to the quality of this study's results. The next chapter will delve into the results and present the findings of this thesis.

4. Results

In this chapter, results of the current study are discussed in detail. Firstly, a description of the four initiatives' specific characteristics are briefly described as the way they operate brings context to the consequent findings of the analysis. Then, the user types represented among the interviewees are laid out, shedding light on the types of members attending meetups organized by sharing platforms. Thirdly, the results of the analysis of the interview data is presented, being guided by sensitizing concepts as described in the theoretical framework chapter. Since the topic with regards to the impact of offline meetups has not been explored before, new themes besides the sensitizing concepts emerge, thus enriching the understanding of users' motivations to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives with regards to the influence of meetings organized by the initiatives. Therefore, five main themes are identified, those being (1) social motivation, (2) trust motivation, (3) economic motivation, (4) learning motivation, and (5) pragmatic motivation. These five main themes are developed on the basis of three initial themes with 18 subthemes, consisting of 70 codes from the initial coding stage. They were refined and reworked to cover the main themes of this study. These five themes feature subthemes which provide an elaborate account on the various kinds of motivations users show with regards to offline meetups. The results also refer to previous theoretical findings and discuss any patterns or highlights that emerge.

4.1 Characteristic of the initiatives

It is important to elaborate on some specifics of the four initiatives selected for this study. These differences should be made clear in order to better answer the research question afterwards as to what differences exist between the impact of offline meetups' impact on motivating online participation between sharing initiatives' online communities in the process of building critical mass and such which have already fully-functioning communities. It should be noted that although all four of the initiatives are related to the traveling industry, they have differences that are worth mentioning in light of the analysis of this thesis. Firstly, two of them, SnappCar and Spinlister, are part of the mobility side of traveling, and the other two, Home Exchange and GuestToGuest, are part of the tourism side of traveling. Secondly, the mobility-related platforms entail renting and lending of bikes or cars, respectively, while the tourism-related platforms entail home exchanging. Thirdly, the mobility-related initiatives hold a more pragmatic value to the members of these platforms, while the tourism-related initiatives also show an idealistic value as the swapping activities between users involve an ideological understanding of the meaning of sharing.

The specifics of the four initiatives are briefly discussed below. These brief

descriptions differ from the general descriptions of each initiative in the previous chapter as the explanations below provide an overview of the way the platforms operate. The descriptions in the Methods chapter, on the other hand, discuss the initiatives with regards to their establishment, stage of development, and offline meetings characteristics. The functionality specifics which enable users to share via these sharing platforms are discussed below as this is relevant for the context of the results of this study.

4.1.1 SnappCar

SnappCar is a car sharing peer-to-peer platform which allows participation for both car renters and car lenders. Car renters need to create a profile with uploaded and approved driver's license, can send requests to car owners, and, once accepted, make a payment and rent a car. Car lenders also need to create a profile, upload a driver's license or ID, as well as go through a final verification via Facebook or via paying 1 cent. In order to register their car for renting, lenders need to fill in their license plate, adding any additional information as they please. Price and free mileage are adjustable with the assistance of SnappCar.

4.1.2 Spinlister

Spinlister is a ride sharing peer-to-peer platform which features availability of bikes, surfboards, and snowboards. It enables renters to request a date and time they need a ride for, and message owners for additional information. Once the ride is confirmed, a payment follows. Lenders need to upload photos and details of their bikes, surfboards, or snowboards, and have Spinlister publish it on the platform. Once the rental is complete, Spinlister transfers a payment to lenders.

4.1.3 Home Exchange

Home Exchange is a peer-to-peer sharing platform which enables its users to swap their homes and live like locals during their travels. Members of the platform need to add a listing featuring their house or apartment, send and receive inquiries, and arrange exchanges with other members. Using the platform costs 130 euro per year and no additional payments are made by the members exchanging their homes.

4.1.4 GuestToGuest

GuestToGuest is a peer-to-peer sharing platform which also allows its members to exchange their houses or apartments while traveling. GuestToGuest, however, offers a social network possibility for its users as well as a GuestPoints system possibility, through which members can exchange homes non-reciprocally, thus allowing them to travel on dates more suitable for them. GuestToGuest members can join for free and do not have financial

obligations as members and exchangers, unless they prefer to add additional features to their membership.

4.2 Characteristics of the interviewees

As it has been acknowledged in the theoretical framework chapter, the users in peer-to-peer sharing environments can be identified as prosumers, or both producers and consumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Furthermore, two main types of such users are identified, namely new and experienced users. In this thesis, each of these two types of users has been represented by at least one new user and at least one experienced user from each initiative included in the study. The participation of these two types of users can be explained on the one hand by the willingness of experienced members who attend offline events to share their experiences with other members, and on the other hand by new members' willingness to learn from experienced members. Details on the division between new and experienced members of the sharing platforms is provided below.

4.2.1 New/inexperienced users

New users has been the most common type of user represented in this study. Six out of 13 interviewees have been identified as new members in the community of the respective initiatives. To be identified as such, they all lack significant experience on the particular platform they are using due to their early stage of involvement with the initiative. The identification of an interviewee as the one type of user or the other has been based on the usage times or requests, the usage period on the platform, as well any additional comments made by the interviewee. A quote illustrating a new user type is provided below:

“We heard some experiences from others and because we were very new, very new and I think we have had only one or two small home exchanges, one weekend in Antwerp and one week in Stockholm, so we were not very experienced yet. And then it's good to hear from others, how they're dealing with it and it helped.” - Rainier, Home Exchange

As this quote shows, the user has used the platform before but for short periods of time and does not consider himself experienced yet, therefore, he is identified as a new user. It should also be mentioned that two of the interviewees have been identified as new users at the time of their attendance of the meetups organized by the sharing platform, however, one year later full of active participation, they identify themselves as very active members with expertise, who will take the role of experienced members at the next meetup they attend. For the purposes of this study, they will be identified as both new and experienced users because the interviews exhibit valuable findings which relate to their motivations as new members as well as their current motivations as experienced members.

4.2.2 Experienced users

Experienced users have been the second most common type of users represented in this study. Five out of 13 interviewees are identified as users with prolific participation and communicative expertise. Those users are mostly long term members of the initiatives, active participants in their online communities, as well as experts in the dynamics of sharing. A quote which illustrates the long-term and active membership of experienced members is provided below:

“I've been doing that for quite a while, I can't really remember... I've got a whole pile of SnappCar forms going back to I think it's 2012.” - Frank, SnappCar

As it can be observed, this user is stating that he has been using the platform for a few years already and has collected a number of forms, which is showing that he is also active user. Some users of this type have not had a long tenure within the respective initiative, however, they have been very active for the period of time of their membership, which identifies them as experienced members. An overview of all user types with regards to their participation frequency and period of usage is provided in Table 1 below.

Name	Platform	Activity type	Usage (renting/ lending request)	Usage (period)	User type
Jan Willem	SnappCar	Renting	2-3 requests	1 year	New
Frank	SnappCar	Renting and lending	Many requests	4 years	Experienced
Balasz	SnappCar	Renting and lending	Not yet	3 months	New
Soul	Spinlister	Lending	2-3 requests	1-2 years	New
Jim	Spinlister	Renting	1-2 requests	4 years	New
Tim	Spinlister	Lending	Many requests	2-3 years	Experienced
Pim	Home Exchange	Swapping	25 requests	15 years	Experienced
Ruud	Home Exchange	Swapping	12 requests	4 years	Experienced
Marlijn	Home Exchange	Swapping	10 requests	1 year	New/ Experienced

Rainier	Home Exchange	Swapping	10 requests	1 year	New/ Experienced
Ronald	Home Exchange	Swapping	1 request	1 year	New
Etienne	GuestToGuest	Swapping	7 requests	3 years	Experienced
David	GuestToGuest	Swapping	1-2 requests	1 year	New

Table 1. Overview of user types.

Having identified the user types of all participants provides a better context for the results of this thesis. Furthermore, the five main themes which emerge as a result of this study are important as they represent the categories of analysis and the main findings in terms of types of motivations of users to participate in sharing platforms.

As it was described in the methodology section, the interview process included an exercise, which asked participants to enlist their motivations to attend the meetups and participate in the online communities of the platforms, then proposed six intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to participate in the online communities, and asked them if they find any of them relevant for them too. Finally, the interviewees were asked to rearrange all of these motivation in a descending order, starting from the most important one for them. This exercise allowed the study to not only understand what were their motivations but also to observe the motivations which were most relevant for the interviewees. As the participants were asked to put an order to all of their motivations to attend the meetups and to participate in the platforms, the result produced valuable findings as to what impact the offline meetups have on their motivations to participate in the sharing initiatives' online communities. As an outcome of this exercise, besides the sensitizing concept discussed in the theoretical framework, some new motivations were found, thus adding to the existing knowledge on this topic. The produced results were positively impacted by the willingness of the interviewees to share their attitudes, insights, and motivations to attend offline meetings and to participate on the platforms, this providing an elaborate picture of the topic of this study.

4.3 Social motivation

The first main theme which emerged during the analysis of the interview data is related to the social motivations of users to attend the offline meetups organized by the sharing initiatives they are members of. All 13 interviewees indicated this was an important motivation for them to attend meetings and to participate in the online communities of the collaborative consumption initiatives. This makes the social motivation an overarching

motivation as it was present in various forms in all interviews. It is also the most important motivation for participants to attend meeting and participate online, as ordered in terms of importance by the interviewees.

As a result, five main sub-themes of this first large social motivation emerged: (1) sharing, (2) curiosity, (3) community commitment, (4) social identification, and (5) enjoyment. Those five subthemes are related to the major social theme as they all represent various aspects of it. The first two subthemes – sharing and curiosity were not mentioned previously in literature, however, have been present in most of the interviews. The sharing subtheme has been especially emphasized upon by the interviewees both in terms of sharing their own experiences and learning about others'. The other three subthemes - commitment, social identification, and enjoyment which were included in the conceptual model of this thesis, were also identified. Among them, community commitment was the most prominent subtheme, while enjoyment was the least prominent one. The five sub-themes are discussed in more detail below.

4.3.1 Sharing

One especially important subtheme which emerged from the social theme is related to users' sharing motivation to attend offline meetings and participate in the online communities of the collaborative consumption initiatives. For instance, sharing as an inherent part of the interviewees' participation in the initiatives was emphasized upon. The quote below is illustrating this idea:

“It's good that, that your house is used by others and you use others' house, instead of staying alone.” - Ronald, Home Exchange

As it can be observed from this quote, sharing as an idealistic idea is appreciated by participants of collaborative consumption initiatives. Besides sharing as part of users' participation in the organizations, sharing was also referred to as a positive feeling which users are willing to transpire in a broader sense. All 13 interviewees identified meeting other people and sharing experiences to have been a motivation for them to attend the meetups, while 11 of them have placed this motivation in the top three motivations to attend the offline meetups organized by the initiatives. This idea of sharing as members of the community can be observed in the quote below:

“And we like to share that feeling. Not only our house, but also that you are a member of the community.” - Rainier, Home Exchange

As this participant states, communicating the feeling of sharing and being part of the sharing community is a motivation for participation. More than half of the participants expressed such willingness to share the feeling of being part of a collaborative community. This idea was also expressed by their interest and participation in other sharing initiatives.

Another aspect of this sharing subtheme is related to sharing as part of the meetups where participants had the chance to share stories, experience, and ideas. A quote illustrates this idea:

“I think it brings people together and there's a need to share, I think. Whether it be cars, or meals, or just attention sharing, the fact that you... I live in a neighborhood with quite a few old people who, well, they don't see many other people, they don't have jobs to go to, they might have children, but they moved away. So there's not many, many people to have interesting discussions with, or to talk to. So that's, that's actually that was a motive, yeah.” - Frank, SnappCar

As this quote shows, sharing is also an important motivation to attend the offline meetups organized by the sharing initiatives. This feeling of sharing with other members of the sharing initiatives was appreciated by most of the participants. All these different sides of the idea of sharing the interviewees have expressed makes the sharing motivation a recurring motif in all interviews and an integral part of their motivation to attend offline meetups and to participate in the initiatives' online communities. This adds an ideological aspect to the results as the majority of the participants have expressed such a motivation. Furthermore, this finding is in line with social presence theory and the fact that face-to-face meetings improve the inherently low social presence of computer-mediated environments (Lombard & Ditton, 1997).

4.3.2 Curiosity

Another subtheme of the prevailing social motivation theme is related to an aspect which a number of interviewees were extensively willing to talk about. This common motivation was expressed via the participants' curiosity – curiosity in meeting other members, equals, people with the same interests as theirs, in exchanging ideas with open-minded people, in hearing stories from more experienced people, or in sharing stories. A quote below is illustrative of this idea:

“My motivation curiosity is basically that covers everything because I need to... I just want to be involved and meet other people with sort of similar ideas about how to change the world, how to change a little bit of well, whatever they are doing. [...] And that's definitely a very important reason for me to attend.” - Frank, SnappCar

As this quote shows, the curiosity of participants is not related to one thing only. Four interviewees have identified it as a separate motivation, one of them placing it as the most important motivation to attend a meetup. Curiosity in general was extensively mentioned throughout the interviews. Even if some of the interviewees did not identify curiosity as a direct motivation to attend the meetups, they mentioned it as a curiosity to meet other people, or to go to the location where the event was happening, or to learn more about the sharing community.

Another aspect of this curiosity subtheme is related to the participants' curiosity to learn about the specifics of the sharing platforms. This particular aspect was shared by inexperienced users as they were still unacquainted with the functionalities and possibilities the sharing platforms. A quote which is exemplary of this side of the curiosity motivation is provided below:

“The platform specifications... it was something that was curious to me because they have multiple choices for renting a car, they have this place to insert a coupon for discount. I wanted to see how to search better, I wanted to see different types of cars. And when you go through the registry and search, and policies, insurances, you know, you're scanning your ID to get on the platform... And in the end you just go there and want to get a car, and I wanted to see how... what is the best way, what is the fastest way to get a car.” – Balasz, SnappCar

As it can be observed, the offline meetups represent an opportunity to participants to learn about the platform more quickly and efficiently. This curiosity subtheme which is a nuance of the social motivation was not previously mentioned in literature and is, therefore, adding knowledge to the topic of this thesis.

4.3.3 Community commitment

The intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivations to attend meetups and participate in collaborative consumption initiatives have been discussed in detail in the theoretical chapter of this thesis. Three intrinsic motivating factors, those being enjoyment, sustainability, and commitment, and three extrinsic motivating factors, namely economic gains, identification, and internalization, were elaborated on and have guided the interview collection process. The results of this study discuss every single one of these motivations in light of the larger theme they are part of.

Community commitment is an intrinsic motivation to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives and is discussed as the first subtheme of the large social motivation theme. It is important to note here that the motivations of users to attend offline meetups overlap with their motivations to be part of the online communities of the sharing initiatives.

The division between the two is artificial as there is no strict line separating the two, rather these motivations overlap on numerous levels. During the exercise part of the interviews, two of the interviewees were initially unsure if any of the six theoretical motivations are relevant for them, explaining that these six motivations are very relevant for their usage of the platform, rather than for attending a meetup. After discussing the theoretical motivations, however, all interviewees found at least two of them relevant for them to both attend the offline meetings and to participate in the online communities of the initiatives. Furthermore, all of them have intertwined their motivations to attend the offline meetups and to be part of the online communities as the two are inherently tied.

With regards to commitment, this motivation has been the most common intrinsic motivation for the interviewees. Not only did eight of them place it as a motivation, but half of those eight interviewees also placed it among the top four most important motivations to attend a meetup organized by a sharing platform and to participate in the initiatives' online community. Below is a statement which grasps the feeling of commitment interviewees have expressed:

“I met nice people I'm in contact with since then [the meetup]. I'm more and more motivated to help GuestToGuest's development.” - Etienne, GuestToGuest

Both interviewees who are members of GuestToGuest have expressed a high motivation to help the community of the initiative, to a large part because one of them is currently an Ambassador of the initiative, and the other member is becoming an Ambassador after the meetup, which helped him make this decision. They have explained that being Ambassadors brings them recognition within the team of the initiative, reciprocal sense of trust, and also some perks such as being a premium member, and having free meals occasionally. The feeling of recognition can further be attributed to a sense of status within the initiative and its community.

Besides this heightened sense of status part of the community commitment motivation, several experienced users have reported that they are spreading the word for the initiatives' communities. One of the interviewees who is also an Ambassador of GuestToGuest describes the purpose of the offline meetup he organized on behalf of GuestToGuest in the following way:

“The purpose of setting up this offline meetup was to meet members in real, to answer their questions, to make a cool night in a bar in a great mood. Moreover, it was an opportunity for communication for the website: a local journalist came to make a summary for an information free newspaper.” - Etienne, GuestToGuest

This quote is shedding light on the actual experience a successful offline meetup represents and is telling about the communication approach which has been selected as appropriate for it. Some other interviewees who have been motivated by commitment have expressed this commitment not as much as an obligation to the community, but rather as a belonging to it. A few of them have revealed that they have written blog posts, given interviews, contributed to publications with materials related to their traveling via the respective initiatives they are members of. The statement below is representing this activity:

“It [the meetup] motivated me also after our Las Vegas trip to write a blog for the Home Exchange platform... on how we lived like locals in Las Vegas.” - Ruud, Home Exchange

This statement is illustrating how experienced members are committed to the initiative's community by spreading the word for it. This word-of-mouth communication has also been made evident as the members have expressed their willingness to share their stories and experiences related to the platforms with their friends and family, as well as to aid the branding of the initiatives in a way. Another member admits he puts Spinlister caps on his bikes as a third communication approach through which he is stating his commitment to the sharing platform he is a member of:

“I've decided to go with this platform and this brand, you know. I might as well be up front about it and try to help them as much as possible so that, you know, it's mutually beneficial. So, you know, for instance, I put Spinlister caps on my rental bikes.” - Tim, Spinlister

As this quote as well as the ones provided above it confirm, the word-of-mouth and the more personal approach with regards to communication about the collaborative consumption initiatives is a way of commitment by experienced members, and it has been another recurring social motivation. This finding is confirming the arguments of Andrews (2002), Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner (2010), and Cothrel and Williams (1999) that offline meetups aid spreading word-of-mouth communication and, thus, attracting new members.

Popularizing sharing initiatives is also reportedly different from marketing other types of services. Eleven out of 13 interviewees admit that they have either shared the fact that they are going to attend or that they already attended an offline meetup by a sharing platform with friends and family, or via social media, many of them both. Many interviewees also state that they have learned about the platforms via friends and word-of-mouth communication. On the other hand, a running motif in the interviews has been the displeasure with traditional marketing practices, with traditional traveling activities, and with

consumerism. Members have shared their appreciation of special and personal attitude. A statement which illustrated this preference is provided below:

“Now, with the new founder, it's changing a little bit to new economic things and more marketing which annoys me a little. All the mails I get, and I get already so many mails from the members by invitations and also the mails I'm not addressing... the best ten cities in the world, the best ten spas, the best this, the best that... And that's really annoying.” - Pim, Home Exchange

As it can be observed, this interviewee is referring to marketing practices as “annoying”, and she is not the only one who noted this aspect. Three other members have expressed their negative attitude towards consumerism as well. It is also in line with the previously discussed specificity of sharing initiatives that traditional marketing approaches are not suitable for popularizing them, but rather word-of-mouth communication is (Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

New users have referred to commitment as a motivation which they were willing to develop. For example, three new users stated that they did not have a feeling of community before attending the meetup, however, after the meetup and after using the platform, they feel they would be willing to attend meetups again and one of their motivations would be community commitment. The quote below illustrates this aspect:

“It wasn't a motivation for me because I didn't know the community yet. [...] You had before to know what the community is. And now when we're experienced a lot with Home Exchange and we had this meetup, and we had other contact with Corinne, then, it could be possible that this would be for next meetup a point of importance to go.” - Rainier, Home Exchange

As it can be observed, the community commitment motivation is affected to a high extent by offline meetups among new users. Experienced users, on the other hand, reported that their commitment has been affected to a small extent, with these users saying that they are already committed, or that their commitment has been affected by the meetup to a small extent.

Another aspect of the community commitment motivation of participants has been the trust in new versus experienced members of the initiatives they are members of. The majority of interviewees reported that the sharing experience is based on a feeling of confidence which is based on different parts of the online profiles of the users, as well as the established communication between the two parties. Thus, most participants stated that they are willing to trust new users, with two participants stating that they prefer to share with

experienced users with more reviews. This finding can be related to the findings by Nov, Naaman, and Ye (2010) who emphasize on the importance of researching tenure and community commitment further, in order to understand if members with record are being favored at the expense of new users.

Additionally, it should also be acknowledged that the feeling of a community was not shared by all interviewees. Two interviewees stated that they do not feel there is a community as the contact between members occurs on an individual base, and that overall, between the entire membership of the community, there is no connection. These interviewees, however, emphasized on the personal approach and person-to-person communication between exchangers or renters, reporting on relationships being established as an outcome. Therefore, despite their statements that they do not feel there is a community, the fact that they are building relationships with other members of the platforms is revealing that there is an online community, as it follows by the definition of an online community by Lee, Vogel and Limayem (2003).

4.3.4 Social identification

Social identification is an extrinsic motivation, which, in contrast to the intrinsic motivation community commitment, has not be as ubiquitous a motivation for interviewees. Nevertheless, it has been identified as a motivation by six interviewees, both new and experienced users, and only one of those six participants have placed social identification as one of the top three motivations in terms of importance. A statement regarding this social identification motivation to attend offline meetups and participate in the sharing communities of the platforms is laid out below:

“I would say social identification, yes, that would probably be me because, yes, I definitely want people to consider, sort of, well, becoming part of this new movement... and you are part of that.” - Frank, SnappCar

As it can be observed, the social identification motivation is also related to the idealistic idea of sharing and being part of this manner of living. Additionally, experienced users in particular had been motivated to a high extent to share their stories and provide new members with advice. Some have expressed a motivation in terms of learning from the stories of yet other experienced members, however, most of the experienced users have been motivated in the first place to help new members in their participation with the initiative. A quote which is exemplary for this type of social identification motivations is added below:

“It is nice to give some, to answer questions of new members, but also to guide them or to help them to avoid negative experiences. [...] And that can make them more enthusiastic

also, or secure, or to coach them to listen to their intuition - if it's not OK for you, then stop it. Don't be too polite always, or read between the lines, or... nice tips what you can do or what people have done for us, which we love so much.” - Pim, Home Exchange

This quote shows that experienced members are identifying themselves with the initiative and serve as an inspiration to new members. Experienced users had another motivation to meet other members and share experiences. All five experienced participants said that they have been motivated to attend the events also because meeting others with similar interests is inspiring to them. A quote illustrating this motivation is featured below:

“I just go there to... well, to taste enthusiasm and be inspired by people who have, sort of, similar ideas about the sharing economy. And it's, I'm never disappointed so...” - Frank, SnappCar

As this quote shows, the interest and enthusiasm that motivates experienced users is also related to sharing ideas about the sharing economy in general, and getting inspiration from like-minded people. This interest has been exhibited by several new users as well, who are looking for learning opportunities with regards to sharing economy initiatives. This social motivation can be explained by the fact that two of the initiatives included in this study – Spinlister and Home Exchange – have organized offline events within the umbrella theme of discussions about the sharing economy. Home Exchange has also organized offline events together with other sharing initiatives, again, within the topic of discussing the sharing economy, therefore, the identification of interviewees within the larger sharing notion can be explained by this topic of the meetups.

4.3.5 Enjoyment

Another social motivation and an intrinsic one – enjoyment – has been identified as a motivation for the interviewees to attend the meetups and participate in sharing initiatives by seven participants. In contrast with the previously discussed intrinsic motivation, commitment, however, enjoyment has been placed mostly at last places of importance as a motivation. Several interviewees referred to this motivation as predominantly a motivation to participate in the initiative, to travel, and share. With regards to offline meetups and enjoyment as a motivation, the quote below illustrates participants' attitude towards enjoyment:

“Meeting the equals is always fun and after the official part of the meetup with a bit of wine, the stories come. The first thing you hear is the most... the funny stories of how you do things in different countries, or how you find your return to your own house. After the first

Home Exchange, those are the tricks on the pick, if I express it correctly, but that's the bonus of the meetup." - Ruud, Home Exchange

As it can be observed, this interviewee relates his joyous experience using the platform and the attendance of meetups as a positive emotion being passed on. Experienced user type members have stated that they have enjoyed sharing stories and giving advice to new members.

4.4 Trust motivation

The second theme which emerged is related to establishing trust within the initiatives. This theme is also an especially important one as it is related to building successful online communities by having users feel more connected and more engaged with the sharing initiatives. Two subthemes within this trust motivation emerged – (1) connecting to the initiative and (2) increasing engagement. The first subtheme of connecting to the initiative is related to building trust with the collaborative consumption organizations via meeting the staff and founders of the initiatives. This subtheme has been central and most important for the trust theme as numerous members have reported higher levels of trust for the initiatives after attending the offline meetups. The second subtheme of this trust motivation, namely increasing engagement, has been observed in several interviews. As participants have stated, attending the offline meetups have increased their trust with the initiatives, and as a result, their engagement with the sharing platforms increased as well. Details with regards to each of the two subthemes of the trust motivation theme are discussed below.

4.4.1 Connecting to the initiative

The first subtheme, connecting to the initiative, is represented by the motivation of participants to meet the staff and founders of the initiatives. Again, differences do occur in the motivations of new members and experienced members. For instance, several new members have answered that going to an event organized by the initiative has helped them trust the company more, put a face to it, and better understand the company culture. The quote below shows one example of such a statement from a new user attending a meetup:

"I wanted to see what SnappCar is, the people who represent the company, who is behind the face of the platform." - Balasz, SnappCar

As it can be observed from the above quote, new users were interested in learning more about the initiatives and putting a "face" on its online presence. Other new users have referred to this motivation as getting "a sense of what the company culture is" (Soul, Spinlister). Also, four participants have acknowledged their interest in hearing more about the stage of development of the initiatives, and the meetups as a way to understand this.

Another interest, which was especially evident from the answers of users of Spinlister and Home Exchange, is the motivation to attend meetups in order to meet the founders of each platform. This result can also be explained by the fact that these two platforms have organized meetups with their founders present. Besides the interest in the team, the interest to meet the founders was expressed with much excitement. A statement which is telling of the nature of this motivation is below:

“Ed Kushin was the founder and he was very easy to talk to, and he was a very trustful man, so in this kind of organizations like Home Exchange, which are so big, it is so unique that you can meet the founder. So that is why it touched me and that is why it's so important.” - Pim, Home Exchange

This quote reveals the importance of meeting the staff and especially the founder of Home Exchange. It should be noted that he, as a representation of the initiative, is referred to as a “trustful man” which is also illustrative of the relationship this member has with the initiative itself. Other members have expressed their motivation to meet the founders as a general interest to find out about what motivated them to establish such companies, as a way to receive expert advice from them with regards to traveling, as a way to have a nice evening in good company. This interpersonal contact is also expressed via a connection between country representatives and members. And a statement which illustrates this is included below:

“I don't feel very connected to the platform, I feel connected to Corinne, who is the... I think each country has a contact person. We have a lot of email contact and I like very much meeting her in real.” - Marlijn, Home Exchange

Three of the interviewees, specifically from Home Exchange, including the interviewee cited above, have mentioned that they have a good relationship with the representative of the platform for the Netherlands, and this is the way they feel connected with the initiative. Meeting the contact persons face-to-face has also been noted as a positive and motivating factor for attending the meetups. Furthermore, the meetups have been referred to as important because they allow members to receive personal attention and a chance to have their role in giving their opinion in person.

Furthermore, trust and confidence have been mentioned several times both in statements related to the offline meetups, as well to users' participation on the platforms in general. Confidence has been referred to by four Home Exchange members as a valuable feeling members should have when swapping homes, and two of them revealed that they learned about it while attending a meetup and meeting more experienced members. On the

other hand, trust towards other members has reportedly increased after attending an offline event. Trust towards the initiatives has also been increased according to three other interviewees:

“It [the meetup] gave me a good feeling. [...] It was very useful because I think that many sites are fraud or scam, or whatever, so it's good to see what's a good site and what's not a good site. Especially when I went to the meeting, I got a trustful feeling about it.” - Ronald, Home Exchange

As this quote shows, the offline meetups have increased the feeling of trust towards the initiative. This finding is corresponding to Matzat's (2010) study which shows that offline meetings build trust among an initiative's user base. Additionally, this finding relates to Iriberry and Leroy's (2009) finding that offline meetups are a valuable success factor for attracting new members in the process of community building.

Furthermore, an appreciation of meeting people face-to-face has been a repetitive notion which interviewees emphasized upon. The following statement is illustrating this aspect of their motivations to attend offline meetups and respectively to participate in the online communities of the initiatives:

“I mean, you meet them, and you kind of realize they really are people behind these webshots, you know. I mean, it's a little bit disembodied, you know, doing these apps and what not. You have no idea if there's anyone there or the whole thing's just automated.” - Tim, Spinlister

As it can be observed, this interviewee is valuing the face-to-face meeting of other members as well. The recurring appreciation of interviewees of the face-to-face aspect of offline meetings with both initiatives' staff and members is related to the findings of Andrews, Preece, and Turoff (2002) and Andrews (2002) who highlight the importance of face-to-face meetings and their value for the interaction within online communities. This face-to-face aspect of this thesis is also linked to the finding by Koh and Kim (2003) in arguing that offline meetups have a critical role in increasing the individual members' sense of an online community.

4.4.2 Increasing engagement

The second subtheme of the trust motivation is related to an increased engagement with the platforms. The influence of the offline meetups has been discussed at large throughout the interviews. The offline meetings meant different things to interviewees, however, the results are an increased engagement with the platform as a result of the

improved trust after the meetups. For example, for new users, attending the event resulted in their decision to participate in the initiatives as whole, or has increased their engagement with the platforms. The quote below illustrated this tendency:

“It was after the meeting, I felt more engaged with the platform. I went to observe some of the functionalities that I didn't know about before.” - Balasz, SnappCar

As it can be observed, this new user has experienced higher levels of trust with the platform and an increased level of engagement after the meetup. This finding is in line with Lin's (2007) study which states that offline meetings influence the members' intentions to use the virtual community. The statement below illustrates another outcome of the meetings which inspired community activity:

“By being part of a team and being recognized. The site is something virtual but meetup is quite concrete.” - David, GuestToGuest

This interviewee is referring to the offline meetup as a feasible way to have him recognized within the online community of the platform. Experienced members, on the other hand, report that they have felt reassurance as a result of attending the meetups. These results are in line with Koh and Kim's (2003) argument that offline meetups positively impact members' sense of belonging to the initiatives' online communities, while also influencing their intentions to use these online communities.

It is interesting to note that none of the results from this study are in line with Shen and Cage's (2015) findings that offline meetups improve the attendee's bonding social capital at the expense of building bridging social capital, resulting in lower chance for new members to join and find acceptance in the community. As a matter of fact, the results from the current study show that new members have an increased sense of belonging to the initiatives' communities, while experienced members mostly feel the same level of commitment to the communities. This discrepancy in findings can be explained by the different types of communities that are studied - Shen and Cage (2015) study an online community of a forum, where members have expressed their interest in a given topic. The dynamic of collaborative consumption initiatives, however, is different and this might explain the differences in findings with regards to the impact of offline meetups between the two studies.

4.5 Economic motivation

The third theme which emerged is related to the economic aspect of sharing. This theme was prominent for a significant number of participants. Two subthemes emerged as a

result – (1) economic gains and (2) business opportunities. The first subtheme, economic gains, was more important as it was a motivation for most of the interviewees. On the other hand, business opportunities was a motivation for only a few of the participants, however, it was not previously mentioned in literature and is an interesting finding of this thesis. Each one of the two subthemes is discussed in detail below.

4.5.1 Economic gains

The last extrinsic motivation to participate in the online communities of the sharing initiatives, economic gains, has been the most common of all motivations provided in the third part of the exercise during the interviews. It has also been the most important motivation for three interviewees and among the top three motivations to attend the meetups organized by the initiatives, and to participate in those initiatives as a whole. This result confirms the findings from the study by Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen (2015) which states that economic gains are a strong motivator for intentions to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives. A typical statement related to the importance of economic gains in the participation of members in sharing initiatives is included below:

“The reason to become a member of Home Exchange, is because we don't have the money to travel as we like to, to visit our son as a start. [...] The zero-budget way of having contact with people, it's... I just like to exchange, yeah, it was the number one to start being a member.” - Marlijn, Home Exchange

As it can be seen, the primary motivation to join the initiative for this member, as well as for several others as they stated, is to afford more frequent traveling with low budget. This motivation has been discussed predominantly with regards to the interviewees' participation in the initiatives, rather than as a motivation for them to attend the meetups in particular. As previously noted, this finding relates to the obscure boundary between online and offline participation of sharing initiatives' members. However, offline meetups have also been mentioned with regards to economic gains as a motivation in terms of learning more about commissions and insurance policies of the platforms as this is related to pricing and budget. Two interviewees have also mentioned that they have received coupons for discounts during the meetings and have referred to those as economic gains.

4.5.2 Business opportunities

Another economic motivation, which has been predominantly identified by members of Spinlister, is the chance to attend the meetups and look for business opportunities. Two users of Spinlister have admitted that their primary motivation to attend the meetups has

been to look for business opportunities and to network. One of them, as it can be seen below, reveals his motivation to network and look for potential clients:

“My second motivation was a personal business motivation to meet colleagues who were interested in the sharing economy who would help me with my business and clients who might be interested in my services. [...] I'm an attorney and part of my practice involves helping small businesses implement sharing alternatives. So I'm interested in talking to businesses who might be clients, who might be referrals, who might be interested in talking about how I might help improve my services to meet their needs.” - Jim, Spinlister

This quote is illustrative of the business opportunities subtheme as it elaborates on the motivation as a personal business motivation. The other Spinlister member who had a business motivation discussed the fact that he is running an at-home bike rental business via Spinlister, and during the interview, revealed that he views the other members as competition. His motivation to attend the meetups is further strengthened by the chance to learn tricks and tips for better placing his bikes for attracting more renters.

Furthermore, two other interviewees, one from Spinlister and one from Home Exchange, have showed their interest in working for the initiatives. The quote below is illustrative:

“I, it definitely got me interested in, you know, in listing my bike and also I thought about, I think I may have applied for a job with them actually afterwards. I was like, oh, this seems like a cool company to work for so I was like, you know, looking for, for job opportunities with them too.” - Soul, Spinlister

As the quote shows, after getting acquainted with the initiatives' teams and culture, this interviewee was also motivated to work for the company. By attending the meetups and participating in the online communities of the two platforms, these members have exhibited economic motivations as their interest is in business opportunities with the initiatives. This motivation is also in line with Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen's (2015) study which finds that economic gains are a strong motivation for intentions to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives, and it is interesting to note another aspect of what it holds as a motivation for attending offline meetings.

Yet another business motivation exclusively for the interviewees from Spinlister has been their motivation to earn financial gains. The statement below illustrates this motivation:

“I guess learning more about how to make a good listing and what kinds of, you know, prices or offerings are, you know, are working, you know, that's definitely a part of it. It would be great to earn, yeah earn extra money from renting my bike more.” - Soul, Spinlister

As this quote shows, the Spinlister as a platform is also perceived as a way of earning money. This aspect of the business opportunities subtheme has been a motivation overall for three interviewees.

4.6 Learning motivation

The fourth motivation which emerged is a learning motivation. This was not as prominent a motivation as the big social theme or the trust or economic motivations. Yet again, several participants identified a learning motivation and two subthemes are presenting the two main aspects of this learning motivation theme – (1) group norm, or internalization, and (2) environmental sustainability. Both subthemes of the learning motivation were not referred to as especially significant motivations, however, interviewees discussed aspects of these subthemes which are telling about their motivations. Both subthemes are discussed in detail below.

4.6.1 Group norm/ internalization

Group norm is another extrinsic motivation which was brought to the attention of the interviewees. It was placed among the top three motivations by two new users, and one experienced user identified it as a motivation as well. This comes to say that only three out of 13 interviewees said that they are motivated by group norm to attend meetups and participate in the online communities. It should be noted that group norm refers to the internalization process of members in the community, and with regards to offline meetups, group norm would also refer to the received advice and information shared by experienced members to new members. Many participants, however, referred to group norms as irrelevant for them because they like to undertake more individualistic approach toward things. A statement showing this attitude towards group norm is below:

“I guess it's just, it seems like everyone has their own reason for being involved so I didn't feel like I wanted to, you know, follow the, you know, particular way of doing things, like I didn't, you know, have my own approach to handle things.” - Soul, Spinlister

As this quote illustrates, the interviewee is not willing to follow the example of others, therefore, is not considering group norm as a motivation for him.

On the other hand, the results show that the internalization motivation is related to the user type of attendees. More specifically, new users without much experience using the

sharing platforms and little participation in the online communities of the initiatives are predominantly motivated to attend the meetups in order to seek information, advice, tips, suggestions, experiences, and stories from other, more experienced members. The new users have referred to their motivation with regards to group norms as a way to learn from experienced members, to receive advice, and tips for using the platform. The statement below is representative:

“I wanted to see how other people... the best way to get most of the platform services, how the people behave, how they rent, what they look for... this is what motivated me too.” - Balasz, SnappCar

This interviewee is expressing his motivation to learn about the practices of the initiative's membership, thus, to understand its group norm. It is also interesting to note that many of the interviewees who did not identify group norm as a motivation for them to attend the meetups and participate in the initiatives' online communities, however, made statements which clearly show that they have been motivated by group norm. A quote from a member who is strongly opposed to group norm, but states his motivation and benefit from it during the meetup, is presented below:

“For instance, I lowered my price when I talk to some other people on Spinlister and we are talking just... cause when they first started, Spinlister kind of unrealistically set a high price on how much they thought they could get for the bike rentals. And the reality is just lower. And, you know, that's something I learned at the meetup.” - Tim, Spinlister

These conflicting results can be explained by the phrasing of this motivation, as a norm and as conforming to the rules of others. Nevertheless, despite the fact that only three of all 13 interviewees have identified group norm as a motivation, the other interviewees' willingness to learn about the experiences of other members of their communities is telling with regards to their motivation to adopt best practices within those communities. This finding with regards to the learning motivation is also related to the most widely exhibited motivation, namely the social motivation which was discussed first.

4.6.2 Environmental sustainability

Sustainability is the third intrinsic motivation which was covered throughout the interviews, and although some interviewees have not identified it as a direct motivation to attend the meetup organized by the initiative they are members of, or in their motivation to participate in the online community, all of them have expressed an affiliation to it in one way or another. Six out of 13 interviewees have identified environmental sustainability as a motivation for them to participate in the online communities of the platforms. Of the other

seven interviewees, two have referred to themselves as environmentally conscious and having sustainability as a general reason for them to participate in the collaborative consumption initiatives. Four of the interviewees have stated that they do not perceive the initiatives as sustainable because they do not think about this, or because the initiatives are a practical tool for them to exchange experiences, or because traveling has increased as a result of the popularity of such sharing platforms, and sustainability therefore is not relevant for them. Their attitude regarding sustainability and the sharing initiatives can be described as skeptical. A statement which illustrates the sustainability motivation for the largest number of participants have identified can be observed below:

“It was useful in finding out who's interested in the sharing economy in Portland and learning what people mean when they talk about the sharing economy.” - Jim, Spinlister

As it can be observed, this participant, as well as several other ones, have expressed their learning motivation with regards to sustainability via an interest in discussions about the sharing economy. Two of the platforms have also organized their meetups under the larger theme of having a discussion about the sharing economy. As it was previously mentioned, both Spinlister and Home Exchange have organized such events and the interviewees have shared that they were motivated to attend the events in order to learn more about the sharing economy, about the possibilities it offers, as well as to exchange ideas and inspiration with other members on the topic. It should be noted though, that sustainability is the only intrinsic or extrinsic motivation which is not present among the top three motivations of participants to attend the meetups and participate in the initiatives, therefore, can be identified as least important to them.

4.7 Pragmatic motivation

The last motivation to attend offline meetings organized by sharing initiatives which has emerged from this study is more practical in comparison to the rest. Similarly to the previously discussed learning motivation, this theme was not as prominent as the first three, however, it had its significance as well. Namely, four participants out of 13 have been motivated to attend the meetups because of the location of these events. An illustrative statement regarding this motivation is provided below:

“It was an opportunity to, to talk to people, which was in Amsterdam and was just about within half hour for me. So it was a good opportunity to join other people.” - Ronald, Home Exchange

As is can be observed, the attendee is attracted by the physical proximity of the gathering, which is an important motivation for him to attend. In fact, this interviewee has

placed location as a most important motivation for him to attend the meetup. The nearby place where a meetup has been organized by the initiatives has also motivated some interviewees to join the initiatives:

“Well it [the meetup] is next to the neighborhood and I thought, yeah, that's a good idea to start with them.” - Jan Willem, SnappCar

As this participant notes, the location where the offline meetup has been organized was a motivation for him to become part of the sharing initiative. This finding is in line with Lin's (2007) finding that offline meetups influence the intentions of members to use the online communities.

Another aspect of the pragmatic motivation is the availability of a free drink and/ or snack at the event. This practical reason has been included as a motivation by a couple of users of Spinlister to attend the meetups, and four other interviewees have mentioned that they are pleased with the fact that there is availability of a free drink and/or snack at the meetups. A statement which describes this motivation is added below:

“It definitely helps to know, you know, if I'm going to bike 20 minutes to a meetup around, you know, dinnertime, it's nice to know there's gonna be something to, you know, to drink or eat when I get there. You know, that definitely helps you with the, you know... it gives me a little bit of a push to make the effort to get out and attend.” - Soul, Spinlister

This quote is telling of the practical gratification of the physical effort to go to the meetup and the additional motivation to attend.

4.8 Initiatives' development stage

As it was noted in the research design of this study, two of the included initiatives, namely SnappCar and Spinlister, are in their growing stage of online community development where they are still building their critical mass of users. The other two initiatives, Home Exchange and GuestToGuest, are in their mature stage of development, where their online communities are fully-functioning. The differences between the two types of organizations on the basis of the produced results of this thesis are discussed below.

4.8.1 Growing initiatives

The interviewees in this study who are members of the collaborative consumption initiatives which are in the process of building a critical mass of users - SnappCar and Spinlister, referred to some drawbacks of the offline meetups they attended. For example, a couple of the interviewees who are members of SnappCar noted that the quality and

takeaways from the meetings they have attended would be improved if the attendance levels were higher. The statement below illustrates this idea:

“I was hoping that a few more people would attend but, yes, it's nice even if there aren't that many people; there's always something to... some ideas to get across, or inspirations to be shared, yeah... yeah. - Frank, SnappCar

As it can be observed, the participant is satisfied with his attendance of the offline meetup organized by the sharing initiative, however, notes that his hopes were for meeting more members. Besides the value participants placed on higher attendance levels, some of them noted that the meetings are not organized on a regular basis. More specifically, two of the interviewees from Spinlister noted that they would appreciate attending more offline meetings organized by the sharing platform, however, have not heard of any meetings for a long period of time. The quote below illustrates this characteristic:

“Sam, who organized all these meetups... I haven't seen him for quite a while, he hasn't done it for a while. He hasn't done it for over a year now. So there haven't been any meetups for quite a while and a kind of miss them actually. [...] I'd like to see them happen again.” - Tim, Spinlister

This participant expresses his willingness to attend more meetups and as he further elaborated, this is a way for him to get an update on the initiative's developments. The other Spinlister interviewee mention that his connection with the initiative lasted for a brief time after attending the offline event, as well as that he is also interested in attending more such meetings. These statements are telling about the necessity for regular organization of offline meetings.

These low attendance rates and irregularly organized offline meetups can be explained by growing organizations' lack of significant experience in organizing such events. Iriberry and Leroy (2009), however, emphasize on the importance of organizing regular offline events in order to facilitate the growth of online communities. Therefore, growing initiatives can build on these points as well as adopt some of the characteristics of the mature initiatives with already fully-developed online communities which are discussed below.

4.8.2 Mature initiatives

The main identifying aspect of Home Exchange and GuestToGuest as mature, fully-functioning sharing platforms is related to the especially well utilized word-of-mouth communication for the initiatives. As it was also noted earlier, experienced members of Home Exchange who are attending their meetings are being asked about writing blog posts,

or participating in documentaries or similar publishing materials with regards to their experiences with the sharing initiatives. A quote which is exemplary of this idea is provided below:

“They ask us sometimes for information and if they need something for a blog or for, for a newspaper... [...] or for a documentary about Home Exchange. Then I can always help them if they want to have the boat there... you know?” - Pim, Home Exchange

As this interviewee notes, she is willing to help the sharing organization and share her experiences or even her boat with the broader public. Another interviewee from GuestToGuest also supports the communication for the initiative, however, by participating as an Ambassador. His activities as an Ambassador of the collaborative consumption platform are described via a quote below:

“I made online invitations through Facebook, mail to friends, etc. I also talk about it offline: colleagues, I've put flyers in shops I usually go to, family, etc.” - Etienne, GuestToGuest

It can be observed from this statement that this interviewee is active in spreading the word-of-mouth for the GuestToGuest community and is utilizing various channels to do that. Both soliciting experienced members and having Ambassador programs, by Home Exchange and GuestToGuest respectively, is in line with the previously discussed positive value of creating offline meetups and spreading word-of-mouth communication (Andrews, 2002; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Cothrel & Williams, 1999). By holding offline events, sharing initiatives aid spreading word-of-mouth communication and attracting new members, thus ensuring the success of their online communities.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter discussed in detail the results from the current study. More specifically, the five main themes which emerged were elaborated on – (1) social motivation, (2) trust motivation, (3) economic motivation, (4) learning motivation, and (5) pragmatic motivation. The social motivation has emerged as an important theme as all interviewees have emphasized on this motivation of theirs, also showing that they feel committed to the sharing initiatives' online communities. Trust motivation has also emerged as a valuable finding of this study as the participants have reported their positive attitude towards meeting the platforms' teams and founders, thus better connecting to the platforms. Another important motivation has turned out to be the economic motivation, with an interesting finding regarding some interviewees' motivation to explore business opportunities. The fourth motivation is a learning motivation with respect to the online communities' group norm, as well as to sustainability. Lastly, a pragmatic motivation has also been presented.

Additionally, as a results of the exercise included in the data collection process, it was made clear which motivations are most important to the participants. For instance, the social motivation was most important of all themes, with sharing and curiosity being the two subthemes which were mentioned by interviewees in the first, open stage of the exercise where participants were asked about their motivations to attend offline meetups. After bringing to their attention the six intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, the most prominent social motivation from those has been community commitment. Another especially prominent motivation for interviewees to attend the meetups has been the trust motivation and more specifically connecting to the initiative. Furthermore, after bringing to the attention of the interviewees the list of theoretical motivations, economic gains has been identified as a top motivation as well.

In addition to the five themes and the results from the exercise, some differences between the two user types emerged. For instance, the results showed high levels of commitment of experienced users to aid the development of the sharing communities by spreading worthy word-of-mouth communication for the initiatives. Also, the results revealed that new members experienced an increased sense of trust and connection to the initiatives as a result of attending offline meetups.

Besides the important recognition between the two main types of users who participate in sharing initiatives, differences between the initiatives in the process of building a critical mass of users and the initiatives with fully-functioning online communities emerged. The participants who are members of growing initiatives noted that the offline meetings they attended have lower than expected attendance rates, as well as that the offline events are not organized on a regular basis. The interviewees from the mature organizations, on the other hand, talked about the various types of word-of-mouth communication they are involved in producing for the sharing initiatives. These main differences between the growing and mature collaborative consumption organizations are illustrating what actions growing platforms can initiate in order to build successful online communities in the future. All of the above noted valuable findings have emerged and they will serve to answer the research question of this thesis in the following chapter.

5. Discussion

This final chapter will provide an answer to the research question of this thesis, namely in finding out how offline meetings organized by sharing platforms in the traveling industry differ in motivating users to participate in their online communities when building a critical mass of users compared to when expanding their already functioning online community. Firstly, a brief summary of the main findings of this research will be presented, thus answering the research question of this thesis. Then, a discussion of the results and their meaning for theory will be presented. Thirdly, the more practical implications of the results will be discussed, including some recommendations for sharing services. Lastly, the limitations, strengths, and suggestions for future research will be elaborated on.

5.1 Answering the research question

This thesis explores the impact of offline meetups on users' motivations to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives in the traveling sector, while comparing organizations in their growing and mature stages of online community development. As a result, a large social motivation for both growing and mature organizations emerged, revealing that sharing and curiosity are valuable motivations for users to attend offline meetups. Additionally, community commitment and especially word-of-mouth communication by experienced members emerged as a motivation which mature initiatives are utilizing to an especially higher extent in comparison to growing initiatives. Another important theme which emerged is a trust motivation. More specifically, trust towards both growing and mature sharing initiatives as participants have experienced higher levels of connection with the platforms' staff and founders while attending the meetups and have increased their engagement with the platforms after the events. The third important theme which emerged is an economic motivation, featuring an economic gains and business opportunities motivations. Besides these three main motivations, two other motivations emerged, namely a learning and a pragmatic motivation. Furthermore, an important finding of this thesis is related to the increased diversification of the membership of sharing initiatives as a result of offline meetups. On the other hand, another main difference between growing and sharing initiatives is related to the low attendance and irregular organization of offline events by growing sharing initiatives in comparison to mature ones.

Various elements were explored in depth in order to provide context to the topic of research. For instance, the user types which were represented in the membership of the sharing platforms were defined as new/ inexperienced and experienced. Then, offline meetings and their impact on the motivations of users to participate in sharing platforms were elaborated on, noting their influence with regards to the growth of online communities.

A conceptual model with common user motivations to participate in online communities guided the data collection stage. Furthermore, it was noted that building a well-functioning user-base is a crucial process for the success of sharing initiatives. Critical mass building was also discussed as a growth stage in online community building, thus providing context for the comparison between two initiatives in the process of building a critical mass of users and two initiatives with already fully-functioning online communities. Thirteen interviews from these four selected sharing platform were conducted with members who have attended meetups organized by the platforms, thus yielding results which are illustrating the significantly positive impact of offline meetups on online community building.

5.2 Theoretical implications

To answer the research question, firstly, the motivations of users to participate in sharing initiatives were explored in light of the impact of the offline meetings they have attended. As a result, a major finding of this thesis is related to the social motivations of members to attend offline meetups and participate in the online communities of sharing initiatives. Numerous previous studies suggest, social capital does get improved via a face-to-face communication among online communities' members (Lin, 2007; Koh & Kim, 2003; Riva & Galimberti, 1998; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Andrews, 2002; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001; Kavanaugh et al., 2005). The results from this study are in line with this previous research, while also pointing out some interesting aspects of this main social motivation. More specifically, the curiosity of participants to meet other people and their evident willingness to share experiences, stories, and other information were recurring motifs of the social motivation to attend offline meetups and participate in online communities. These two sharing and curiosity subthemes of the large social motivation theme have added to the understanding of how offline meetups impact users' motivations for participation.

Community commitment as an intrinsic motivation and another subtheme of the important social motivation has been a recurring topic for the interviewees. It is interesting to note that both new and experienced participants identified commitment as a motivation, with experienced members even more enthusiastic to support the communities they are part of. Furthermore, experienced participants have been spreading the word for the initiatives, thus aiding word-of-mouth communication, which, according to previous theory (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Andrews, 2002; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Cothrel & Williams, 1999), helps attracting new members in the online communities. This finding, as well as some remarks from the participants during the interviews, are also confirming Botsman and Rogers' (2010) claims that traditional marketing practices are not appropriate for collaborative consumption organizations and that word-of-mouth communication is best.

It is also interesting to elaborate on this finding as not all interviewees have expressed that they feel part of a community within the respective initiative they are members of. Instead, most participants have showed that they feel as part of the general sharing community, as well as that they have established strong relationships with specific other members of the community with which they have rented, or lent, or swapped products or services. This is an interesting side of the understanding of community for members of sharing initiatives and it adds knowledge to Belk's (2013) statement that sharing organizations are fostering a strong sense of community. This finding also enriches the understanding of an online community with regards to its definition which is focused on the process of building a feeling of personal relationship (Rheingold, 1994).

Social identification and enjoyment as parts of the social motivations have been exhibited as motivating factors for the interviewees. It is worthy to note that the overarching social motivation theme was present both in the responses of members of SnappCar and Spinlister as initiatives in the process of building a critical mass of users, and of members of Home Exchange and GuestToGuest as initiatives with fully-functioning communities. Therefore, offline meetups are increasing the levels of social capital within both growing and mature sharing initiatives and are thus beneficial.

Another finding which is in line with the previously discussed theory is related to the increased sense of trust among members of sharing initiatives. As Matzat (2010) and Andrews, Preece, and Turoff (2002) suggest, offline meetups are beneficial in that they are building trust within the community. This study confirms their findings, however, an interesting addition which the results show is that the members' trust towards the initiatives is even highly affected in a positive light. The connection both new and experienced members have established or strengthened with the organizations were made clear in that they feel especially close to the staff and founders of the initiatives. Attending the offline meetings and seeing them face-to-face was noted to be important for members in building this relationship. This finding is in line with Koh and Kim's (2003) study which suggests that offline meetings increase the individual membership' sense of an online community. This leads to the next finding of this thesis, namely that this feeling of trust, strengthened relationships, and enhanced connection between the participants and the initiatives have engendered higher levels of engagement within the platforms.

As a result of the findings with regards to community commitment and trust between participants and sharing initiatives, the findings from this study contradict the outcomes of Shen and Cage's (2015) study which states that offline meetings improve attendee's bonding social capital at the expense of creating bridging social capital, resulting in a lower chance

for new members to join in and find acceptance in the community. The results of this thesis show that bonding social capital, or the closer and more frequent connections between similar people (Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006) are not affected to such an extent by offline events as is bridging social capital, or the loose ties among diverse people. This is an especially important finding of this thesis in light of the collaborative consumption context of the organizations and the highly positive impact of offline meetups on bringing social capital, therefore, on attracting new members in the online communities of sharing initiatives. Furthermore, this finding is very relevant for initiatives in the process of building their critical mass of users as user diversity, or group heterogeneity, is crucial in the early stages of development of an online community and a most crucial success factor for community sustainability (Raban, Moldovan, & Jones, 2010; Solomon & Wash, 2014).

Besides the valuable social and trust motivations which were observed in the results of this thesis, another important motivation – an economic motivation emerged. On the one hand, the results align with previous theory by confirming the findings from the study by Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen (2015) which argues that economic gains are a powerful motivator for participation in collaborative consumption initiatives. This motivation was affected to a small extent by offline meetups, however, another related motivation emerged, that is a business motivation. Several of the interviewees, and all participants from Spinlister, noted that they are interested either in networking with other members of the platforms, or in applying for jobs with the organizations. This business opportunities motivation was not mentioned in previous literature, and is therefore a valuable finding of this thesis.

The next motivation which emerged is related to learning about the group norm within the online communities and about the sharing economy as a whole. These findings can be linked to the community commitment motivation, however, they have formed a separate theme because the participants have showed that a major purpose they had by attending offline meetups was to obtain information, therefore, the learning motivation is different from the social one. The findings with regard to this motivation align with the theoretical discussion related to these motivations, adding that participants prefer an individualistic approach towards using the platforms, however, are willing to learn about the norms and to adhere to them. Additionally, the interest in sustainability is not directly related to the specific platforms interviewees are members of, but to sustainable initiatives and the sharing economy as a whole.

Lastly, a pragmatic motivation emerged as a factor for participants in this study to attend offline meetups organized by the four selected sharing initiatives. The location of the offline events was identified as a motivation for several members to attend, both because of

the historical significance of the building where the meeting was held and because of the proximity, and therefore low level of effort needed to attend the meetups. The availability of a free drink or snack was also identified as a motivation by a few interviewees. This pragmatic motivation was not mentioned in previous theory and is, therefore, adding knowledge with regards to the motivations of members of sharing initiatives to attend offline meetings.

Understanding these results with regards to collaborative consumption organizations' user motivations to participate in offline events and in their online communities was necessary in order to compare the impact of offline events on motivations for participation of users from still growing initiatives and from mature ones. The results show that the impact of offline meetups on users' motivations to participate in online communities is high and positive both with regards to growing online communities still in the process of building critical mass, and to fully-functioning, mature communities.

There are, however, some differences between growing and mature communities too. For example, there is a difference between SnappCar and Spinlister as growing communities, and Home Exchange and GuestToGuest as mature communities, can be observed in the feeling of experience with offline meetups among the latter, mature organizations. The growing platforms, on the other hand, have showed that they are not organizing such events on a regular basis as some participants from Spinlister, for example, have noted that they would be willing to attend some events but the platform have not organized such recently. Furthermore, some participants of SnappCar have mentioned that they would be more satisfied with attending those meetups with more members present, as the attendance rate was low. The participants who are members of mature organizations, namely from Home Exchange and GuestToGuest, have not mentioned such observations and have been even more positively impacted by the offline meetups they have attended. These results are telling of growing initiatives' need for organizing more frequent offline events with higher attendance rates.

Another significant difference between the growing and the mature organizations and the offline meetups they organize is related to the emphasis on word-of-mouth communication for the organizations by experienced members from Home Exchange and GuestToGuest. Most of the experienced members have expressed that they are taking actions to spread the word for the organizations they are members of via giving interviews, or writing blog posts, or inviting journalists to the offline events. In contrast, only one of the experienced members from growing communities have noted that he is helping brand visibility by placing Spinlister bike caps on his bikes. This difference can be attributed to the

experience of Home Exchange and GuestToGuest in approaching and working with experienced members for an improved media presence.

These distinctive outcomes can be explained by the experience of the organizations with mature, fully-sustainable online communities in organizing offline events, however, growing initiatives can learn valuable insights from these findings. Some recommendations based on the findings of this thesis are presented below.

5.3 Recommendations for sharing initiatives

Besides the above noted theoretical implications, this thesis also poses some implications for sharing organizations. As it was established, offline meetups are beneficial both for growing and for mature sharing organizations, and the positive impact of such meetings is increased once they are organized on larger scale and more frequent basis. Furthermore, offline events organized by collaborative consumption initiatives represent an opportunity for improving word-of-mouth communication for the online communities, which experienced members in particular can aid. This value in word-of-mouth communication should be utilized especially by growing initiatives as the results of this study shows they make use of it to a much smaller degree in comparison to mature initiatives. Furthermore, offline meetups are an opportunity for sharing organizations to either grow or expand their communities, as those meetups are increasing the bridging social capital of their online communities, enhancing the levels of trust between their user base and the platforms, as well as the levels of engagement with it.

All these findings can be useful for various collaborative consumption initiatives, either still in the process of building a critical mass of users, or expanding their current user base. More specifically, ShareNL, as an organization which connects such sharing initiatives and supports them, can make use of these findings by making it available to sharing initiatives, which can gain insights and act in their best interest.

One particular recommendation which can be shared with collaborative consumption initiatives is that offline events are highly beneficial for improving the bridging social capital of online communities and that growing organizations in particular should organize offline meetings at various locations to attract new members. In this way, the diversity of their communities will be increased, which is a valuable step in the process of building critical mass for a successful and sustained future online community.

Secondly, sharing initiatives should organize offline events on a regular basis as members perceive this an opportunity to get updates for the development of the initiatives as well as to feel more connected to them. As one interviewee from Spinlister noted, he got

connected to the initiative after the meetup but only briefly as there were no follow ups and more events organized by the initiative. Furthermore, sharing organizations need to strive at higher attendance levels and various kinds of follow-ups as this will further increase the motivations of their members to attend their events. Having frequent offline events with high attendance levels and post-event follow-ups is especially important for growing initiatives as the results showed they missed on these points.

Thirdly, sharing organizations should tap into the word-of-mouth communication of their communities by investing more into offline meetups and the strong positive feedback experienced members can transpire. GuestToGuest, for example, has showed to be utilizing this potential by facilitating an Ambassador program, where its more experienced members are both helping the development of the online community by organizing offline events, and by spreading word-of-mouth communication for it. Home Exchange members also discusses their active involvement in speaking positively about the initiative, as well as getting their traveling stories published. The growing initiatives, however, did not exhibit such active involvement of its members for word-of-mouth communication, therefore, it is highly recommended for them to develop this aspect.

Lastly, one of the findings on this research is related to a practical motivation of members of sharing platforms to attend offline meetings. Both events' location and the availability of a free drink or snack were noted as factors contributing to the decision of members to attend the meetings. A recommendation by one experienced member also suggested adding another practical motivation that organization can create, namely having experts show both new and experienced members how to create and improve their profiles on the platforms. In this way, the experienced members would have a tangible takeaway from their contributions at the meetups. All these recommendations for sharing organizations can help them build successful online communities by optimizing their offline events strategy.

5.4 Future directions and conclusion

As the above noted recommendations can be especially beneficial for sharing initiatives, it should be acknowledged that these findings are not applicable to all online communities, as well as to not all online communities in the sharing economy. The participants are members of sharing initiatives from the traveling/mobility industry which organize offline meetings, and it should be acknowledged that the dynamics of this specific industry might not be relevant for online communities which have differing purposes. This is a limitation of the current study, however, it also provides context to its findings and provides a more elaborate understanding of the impact of offline meetups on users' motivations to participate in collaborative consumption initiatives. Future research can focus on exploring

other industries and the impact of offline meetups on their online communities. This will produce outcomes which will be applicable to more industries in the sharing economy, and the findings will be beneficial for a wider range of initiatives.

Additionally, it should be acknowledged that the participants in this study are mostly active participants in the online communities of the platforms they are members of. Despite that fact that a couple of them noted that they are not actively using the platform they are members of, namely Spinlister, the participants were mostly willing to participate. As they have already attended an offline meetup, they can be identified as more active and already participating on various levels in the communities than other users. This is a shortcoming of the research as it is focused on exploring the impact of offline meetups on members who have already attended one. In order to improve future research on the topic, studies can focus on less active members and the reasons they are not willing to attend an offline meetup organized by a sharing initiative.

This thesis has also produced valuable and relevant findings with regards to the impact of offline meetings on users' motivations to participate in collaborative consumption organizations. Most importantly, firstly, it established the beneficial impact of offline meetups with regards to increasing bridging social capital in online sharing communities by diversifying them. Secondly, it produced a different nuance to the discussed theoretical concept of trust as the findings of this thesis are related to building a strong connection and feeling of trust between the sharing initiatives and their users, rather than between users themselves as theory suggested. Thirdly, some motivations which were not present in literature on this topic emerged, those being a learning, business, and pragmatic motivations to attend offline meetups. And lastly, two main differences between the impact of offline meetups organized by sharing initiatives in the process of building a critical mass of users and such with fully-functioning user bases were found. One difference is related to the less frequent and less attended events growing initiatives are organizing, the other main difference is related to the smaller-scale utilization of offline meetups for word-of-mouth communication for the benefit of the organizations by growing initiatives. These findings add knowledge to the previous theory on this topic and can be used for the benefit of both growing and mature sharing initiatives to build successful and sustained online communities.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Interview topic list

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Sub Topic</i>	<i>Questions</i>
Warm-up Questions	Introduction	How did you learn about the “...” platform?
Online community participation	User type identification	Since when do you use “...”? Do you consider yourself to be an active user? How often?
		What activities does your participation entail? Could you provide some examples of this?
		Do you normally participate as mostly renting products/services, mostly lending them, or both?
Offline meetups (OM)	Introduction	Is this the first OM by “...” that you're attending? If yes: Was it useful to you? Do you intend to go to more such OM? If no: What are your usual expectations from such OM?
	Bridging social capital	How did you hear about the OM organized by “...”?
		Did you tell other people that you have attended OM by “...”? Or have you shared somehow that you did? If yes: Did you share it online or offline? Can you provide some examples?
	Bonding social capital	Do OM affect your participation in the “...” online community? If yes: Would you provide any examples of how it affects it? If no: Why not?
		Do you feel more connected to the sharing initiative after attending one of their meetups? In what way?
		Do you feel more connected to the platform's community after attending one of their meetups? E.g. Do you feel that you trust better the other members of “...” by attending OM?
OM and motivating factors for online participation	Introduction	What are your motivations to go to this OM? How does this OM motivate you to participate on the platforms' online community?
<i>The following exercise consists of four parts and is aimed at identifying the motivations of the interviewees to attend OM and to participate in the online communities of the platforms.</i>		
	Exercise Part 1	Please write down on these post-it notes your motivations to

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		attend "...”s OM.
	Exercise Part 2	Please arrange the motivations you just wrote down in a descending order, starting with the most important one and ending with the least important one.
	Exercise Part 3	I'd also like to bring to your attention some common motivations of users to join such meetups – enjoyment, sustainability, obligation to the community, economic gains, social identity, group norm. Are any of them relevant also to you?
	Exercise Part 4	If so, would you please rearrange all the motivations relevant to you in a descending order, starting with the most important one and ending with the least important one.
<i>The following six intrinsic and extrinsic motivations will be elaborated on, based on their selection/ not selection in the exercise above. Any additional motivations besides these six ones will be elaborated on as well.</i>		
	Intrinsic: enjoyment	Does attending "...”s OM make your participation in their online community more enjoyable? If yes: How? Can you provide some examples? If no: Why not?
		Which part of attending OM organized by "...” do you like the most? Does it improve your online participation too?
	Intrinsic: Sustainability	Does attending "...”s OM make you feel you're contributing to a more sustainable environment by consuming less? If yes: How? Can you provide some examples? If no: Why not?
	Intrinsic: Commitment (obligation to the community)	Does attending "...”s OM make you feel more committed to the members of its online community? If yes: How? Can you provide some examples? If not: Why not?
		Do you tend to trust members of "...” with more reviews/ more records/ longer membership/ longer tenure on the platform more? Would you favor a member with reviews over a new members with no experience on the platform? Do offline meetups make you more connected to new members too?
	Extrinsic: Economic gains	Does attending "...”s OM make your expectations for profits from the platform higher?
		Would you be attending "...”s OM if the platform did not offer possibilities for profit?
	Extrinsic: Identification (social identity)	Does attending "...”s OM facilitate your identification with the platform and its online community? If yes: What makes it so? How?

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		If no: Why not?
	Extrinsic: Internalization (group norm)	Does attending "..."'s OM make you more aware of the practices of its membership? Do you feel more aware of the norms that are already established by the community?
		Do you tend to adhere to these practices as you learn about them at OM?
	Other motivations	Are there any additional aspects/ reasons for attending "..."'s OM that affect your online participation?
End		Are there any aspects as a whole that we haven't covered but you'd like to note?
		Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B: Identifying characteristics of all interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Occupation	Platform
Frank	57	Male	The Netherlands	IT consultant	SnappCar
Jan Willem	68	Male	The Netherlands	Retired Dutch teacher	SnappCar
Balasz	31	Male	Hungary	Trader	SnappCar
Soul	29	Male	USA, Oregon	Freelance writer	Spinlister
Jim	41	Male	USA, Oregon	Attorney	Spinlister
Tim	54	Male	USA, Oregon	Small business owner	Spinlister
Pim	58	Female	The Netherlands	Colorist	Home Exchange
Ruud	52	Male	The Netherlands	Self-employed	Home Exchange
Marlijn	59	Female	The Netherlands	Visual artist	Home Exchange
Rainier	67	Male	The Netherlands	Retired	Home Exchange
Ronald	73	Male	The Netherlands	Retired architect	Home Exchange
Etienne	32	Male	France	Primary teacher	GuestToGuest
David	41	Male	France	Designer	GuestToGuest

Appendix C: Sample initial codes

Name	Grounded
✘ Ambassador activities	13
✘ Attitude towards OM	18
✘ Budget/ price	20
✘ Business opportunities/ networking	20
✘ Community commitment	28
✘ Confidence	8
✘ Cultural sharing	1
✘ Curiosity	18
✘ Differentiation between OM and platform usage motivations	3
✘ Economic gains	43
✘ Enjoyment	17
✘ Env. sustainability	34
✘ Exchange ideas about the sharing economy	35
✘ Free drink/ snack/ meal	10
✘ Future OM recommendations	11
✘ Gift certificates, bonus codes at OM	1
✘ Group norm	21
✘ Had many answered questions	3

Appendix D: Thematic map

