

# Dissecting the sharing paradigm: A case-study research of rural Japan

Author: Gabriele Ninivaggi  
Supervisor: Stefan Brehm



## ABSTRACT

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The sharing economy emerged in the last decade as an innovative business model in response to economic fallout, societal distress, and surging awareness over the devastating effects of the climate crisis. It pledges to repudiate mass consumption in favour of a democratization of access to common resources.

This thesis seeks to dissect how the Japanese government has employed the sharing economy—and the theoretical basis at its foundation, the sharing paradigm—as a potential solution for salient socio-economic challenges faced by rural Japan. By adopting a case-study approach—examining the municipalities of Yuzawa City, Shimabara City and Taku City—this paper aims to assess how the sharing paradigm is depicted as a viable alternative to existing modes of rural revitalization. Through the utilization of discursive framing, this study examines how the sharing paradigm is depicted in its diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frameworks against the backdrop of a socio-technical transition.

The findings suggest the existence of persisting contradictions within the sharing paradigm, its lack of consistency, and its agenda-driven element. The paradigm fails to establish a viable alternative able to address the challenges affecting rural Japan, and often falls back on conventional yardsticks of economic performance and cost-benefit maximization.

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## KEYWORDS

Sharing economy, Rural economy, Socio-technical transition, Revitalization Policy, Innovation, Rural Japan, Framing, Sharing paradigm

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I have been aware of the difficulties of writing a Masters' thesis in the midst of a global pandemic from a very early stage of this research. I will forever regret having missed the chance to conduct fieldwork on the ground and wear the clothes of the researcher hunting for cues and correlations (where I may not have even found any).

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	6
FIGURES AND PICTURES	7
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND	8
1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	10
1.3 RESEARCH POSITIONING AND DISPOSITION	10
1.4 PHRASEOLOGY	11
1.4.1 “SHARING XYZ”: A BREAKDOWN	11
1.4.2 THE JAPANESE PARADIGM OF <i>JIJO</i> , <i>KŌJO</i> , <i>KYŌJO</i>	12
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 DEFINING THE SHARING ECONOMY	14
2.2 THE ORIGINS OF THE SHARING ECONOMY	15
2.3 CRITIQUES OF THE SHARING ECONOMY	17
2.4 THE SHARING ECONOMY IN JAPAN	17
2.5 HISTORY OF RURAL REVITALIZATION POLICIES IN JAPAN	18
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 DISCURSIVE FRAMING	21
3.1.1 FRAMING SOCIO-TECHNICAL TRANSITION	22
3.1.2 THE MULTILEVEL PERSPECTIVE	23
3.2 A PROGNOSTIC SUB-FRAME: THE SHARING CITY	24
3.3 FRAMING POLICY OUTCOME	26
<b>4. METHODS</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN	27
4.1.1 ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES	28
4.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	28
4.3 DATA COLLECTION	29
4.4 SHORTCOMINGS, ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND REFLEXIVITY	31
<b>5. CASE-STUDIES</b>	<b>33</b>
5.1 YUZAWA CITY	33
5.2 SHIMABARA CITY	35
5.3 TAKU CITY	37
<b>6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1 DIAGNOSTIC FRAMEWORK	40
6.1.1. DIAGNOSTIC SUB-FRAME: ISSUES FACED BY THE REGIME	40
6.1.2 DIAGNOSTIC SUB-FRAME: CONFLICT REGIME-NICHE	43

6.2 PROGNOSTIC FRAMEWORK	45
6.3 MOTIVATIONAL FRAMEWORK	50
6.3.1 OBJECTIVE DIMENSION OF SUCCESS: GOAL-ATTAINMENT	51
6.3.2 SUBJECTIVE DIMENSION OF SUCCESS: INTERPRETATION	52
<b>7. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>53</b>
APPENDIX I	56
APPENDIX II	57
REFERENCES	60

## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

B2C	Business to Consumer
CIO	Chief Information Officer
FPNR	Fundamental Plan for National Resilience
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IoT	Internet of Things
JPY	Japanese Yen
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
MIC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
METI	Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry
MLIT	Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism
MLP	Multi-Level Perspective
NPO	Non-Profit Organization
OJT	On-the-Job Training
PA	Public Administration
P2P	Peer-To-Peer
SEAJ	Sharing Economy Association Japan

## FIGURES AND PICTURES

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Figure 1: a scheme of the Multi-Level perspective. Adapted from Geels (2002).

Figure 2: a scheme of the overarching, primary and secondary frames utilized in this thesis

Picture 1: the traditional Tanabata Edo Festival in Yuzawa City. Photo courtesy of Yuzawa City.

Picture 2: a view of Shimabara Castle. Photo courtesy of Shimabara City.

Picture 3: The Local Sharing Centre in Taku City. Photo courtesy of Taku City.

### **A note on translation**

A great majority of the material employed in this thesis has been translated from Japanese into English by the author, for sake of clarity and practical convenience in the analysis. Many expressions and official names employed in the literature review and the subsequent analysis lack an established corresponding term in the English language, and were therefore translated into English at the author's discretion, upon consultation with bilingual interlocutors.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

The sharing economy emerged as an innovative business model in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008/9. It sprung forth from various factors such as economic fallout, deep-seated societal divisions and socio-economic inequalities, coupled with increasing awareness over the disastrous effects of the climate crisis. The sharing economy—together with the sharing paradigm, the theoretical construct at its basis—fundamentally questions the practical foundations of modern societies, pledging for a radical rethinking of the way individuals perceive their institutionalized roles within society and the modes of their interactions. The sharing paradigm puts forward a radical alternative to existing patterns of production and consumption. It aspires to bring about a cultural and socio-economic revolution by empowering individuals; democratizing access to existing resources; and putting the community, rather than capital, back at the centre of society. Oftentimes though, it fails to fulfil its revolutionary promises and to advance a consistent alternative to the existing capitalist paradigm at the basis of modern societies.

From 2016 onwards, the Japanese government has taken a proactive stance towards the promotion of the sharing economy as a potential solution for critical issues faced by rural municipalities across the country. It has progressively laid the groundwork for the advancement of small-scale sharing projects tailored to the local needs of rural municipalities. Rural Japan, hamstrung by long-standing socio-economic challenges, such as lack of employment opportunities and economic stasis, low female labour force participation, and decaying socio-economic infrastructure, appears to be the perfect fit for the sharing paradigm. A sizable excess in underutilized assets, a largely healthy ageing population and severe economic downturn together create the necessary conditions to implement the sharing paradigm (Ichikawa, 2016; 2018; MIC, 2017; Noda et al., 2018).

In early 2017, the Office for the Promotion of the Sharing Economy (シェアリングエコノミー促進室) was set up as part of the IT Strategy Office, under the aegis of the CIO (Chief Information Officer), a governmental body in charge of promoting management transformation and digitalization across the public administration (PA). The CIO responds directly to the Chief



Cabinet Secretariat for its operations (CIO, 2019; IT Strategy Office, 2019).

The aforementioned Office is in charge of the promotion of the sharing economy and functions as an intermediary between companies and local municipalities on one side, and the central government on the other. It aims to advance autonomous rulemaking to ensure safety and reliability and reduce legal ambiguities. It provides information and consultation services, sets the guidelines for the promotion of sharing services and publishes a yearly report called 'Share-Nippon', displaying the best practices of municipalities implementing the sharing economy across the country. In 2017 it began nominating 'sharing-economy champions', professionals in charge of the promotion of the sharing economy among local actors (CIO, *ibid*; IT Strategy Office, *ibid.*).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) has incorporated the sharing economy as part of its advancement of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and Internet of Things (IoT) reticulation in local municipalities, offering subsidies to back the implementation of IoT technologies and facilitate regional public-private partnerships (MIC, *ibid.*). Lastly, the Cabinet Office has been pursuing the implementation of sharing-services in local municipalities through a system of grants for the 'Promotion of Rural Revitalization' (Cabinet Office, 2018).

In 2014-2015 the publication of a series of reports, widely known as the Masuda Report, shocked Japan and became a matter of hot-contested debate in the media (Masuda, 2015 cited in Chang, 2018: 97). The report classified approximately 900 local governments in Japan as *shōmetsukanōtoshi* (municipalities at risk of extinction), uncovering the downright failure of all revitalization policies promulgated until that point. In 2014, approximately 85% of rural municipalities were facing shrinkage, as the number of women in reproductive age had been declining severely for many decades (Coates, 2019). The ratio of population over the age of 64 in Depopulated Areas—areas defined according to a number of criteria including the ratio of population decrease in the period from 1960 to 1995—reached 36.6% in 2015. Local tax revenues account only for 13.9% of the total revenues, a figure significantly lower than the national average standing at 34% (MIC, 2021).

Japan has been at the verge of what has been defined as a 'second demographic transition', a trend characterized by sub-replacement fertility rates and ageing population, especially in rural

areas (Traphagan, 2018). According to MIC data, the Depopulated Areas occupy over 60% of national land, while hosting only 8% of the total population (MIC, 2017). Rural municipalities have been facing a wide range of consequences from demographic shrinkage, including difficulties in the provision of services, weaker social cohesion, and lack of employment (Chang, *ibid*).

## **1.2 Research questions**

The primary research question guiding this research, together with the related sub-questions, are presented as follows:

*Does the sharing paradigm represent a viable alternative to the existing policies of revitalization enacted in rural Japan?*

Three sub-questions have emerged during the analysis:

- *How has the sharing-economy sector developed in Japan thus far?*
- *How is the sharing-city model applied to the context of rural Japan?*
- *In what ways has the sharing economy been framed as a potential solution to key socio-economic challenges faced by rural Japan?*

## **1.3 Research positioning and disposition**

This research aims to fill the gap in the extant literature by taking a closer look at the concrete implementation of sharing projects in rural municipalities, and verifying how the sharing economy is presented as a possible solution to overcome structural issues besieging those municipalities. As in-depth research on single case-studies remains relatively scarce, this study seeks to offer a blueprint for a comprehensive analysis of the motivations and propositions behind the emergence of the sharing paradigm and its viability as a practicable solution in contrast with past policies of rural revitalization. The sharing economy will be visualized as a niche, an innovative segment questioning the validity of the incumbent regime and striving to subvert it. By adopting the theoretical approach of discursive framing, this study will uncover the most salient components of the rhetoric employed by proponents of the sharing economy to enforce their narrative vis-à-vis the existing regime. The tension between the relational and

the commercial element inherent in the sharing paradigm leaves room for equivocacy and hampers a proper understanding of the specificity of the paradigm. An in-depth examination of the pivotal motives behind the sharing propositions will uncover existing contradictions within the sharing paradigm and its inherent agenda-driven essence. The analysis will expose the lack of consistency of the sharing paradigm and its failure in proposing a full-fledged alternative to existing modes of rural revitalization.

This research contributes to the field of Asian Studies by analyzing a global phenomenon in a local, rural Japanese context. It thus provides a crucially *glocal* perspective on a phenomenon of contemporary relevance. Adopting a qualitative and area-studies approach to the topic of analysis enabled the researcher to shed light on the empirical implementation of a highly theorized topic and offer a blueprint for subsequent studies. As countries espouse global paradigms in different ways, and relate to market mechanisms in different fashions, the cultural particularity of the topic constituted a critical element in the analysis.

The next subsection will present an explanation of the key terminology employed in this thesis. The ensuing chapter will review the existing literature on the sharing economy, delve into its primary critiques, and introduce an abbreviated summary of rural revitalization policies in Japan. Chapter 3 will illustrate the theoretical framework guiding the research. Chapter 4 will describe the methodological approach employed in the analysis and will be followed by Chapter 5, presenting a synopsis of the findings related to the case studies. Chapter 6 will present an analysis of the findings. Chapter 7 will conclude this thesis with a series of critical remarks on the sharing paradigm.

## **1.4 Phraseology**

This chapter briefly maps out the rationale behind the terminology employed in this thesis.

### **1.4.1 “Sharing XYZ”: A Breakdown**

The lack of a univocal definition and an established consensus over what “sharing” actually entails generates significant confusion and disagreement among practitioners. Over ten years after its inception, the topic remains a matter of contested debate in academia. However, despite

its inherently contested nature, the expression *sharing economy* is by far the most widely used in academic and media discourse. This research utilizes this expression in reference to the innovative business model proposing the relinquishment of ownership of tangible and intangible assets in favour of shared access to resources. Hence, at least on a theoretical level, the sharing economy retains considerable potential for disruption, as it rejects existing patterns of production and consumption embedded in the capitalist framework. The sharing economy takes shape in accessibility-based systems, where consumers are more oriented towards securing one-time temporary rights to access resources, rather than owning them, for instance through business models such as “collaborative consumption” and “P2P (Peer To Peer) renting” (Business Innovation Observatory, 2013). However, the ensuing sections of this thesis will demonstrate how the concept is still extremely blurred and how it often fails to live up to the expectations it generates.

The expression *sharing paradigm*, as observed by Cheng, is often deployed in the process of conceptualisation of sharing as a theoretical construct (Cheng, 2016). More than the mere economic connotation, the expression *sharing paradigm* denotes the entire tool of societal values at the basis of the sharing economy. Therefore, the *sharing paradigm* could be regarded as the theoretical foundation, at the basis of the sharing economy, a conceptual framework providing the epistemological tools essential to comprehend the core tenets of the sharing economy.

The expression *sharing service* will be employed in reference to practical modes of provision of specific offices within the framework of the sharing economy. The term *sharing company* refers to a private firm active in the sale of *sharing services* in the market. Given the small size of the Japanese sharing economy, in this study sharing company will mostly indicate Japanese small-medium firms which emerged in the last decade and primarily operate in the domestic market. A comprehensive explanation of the *sharing city* expression will be provided in the theoretical framework section.

#### **1.4.2 The Japanese paradigm of *jijo*, *kōjo*, *kyōjo***

The three notions of *jijo* (自助, self help), *kōjo* (公助, public aid) and *kyōjo* (共助, mutual aid) constitute three dimensions of a policy framework often employed in the sector of disaster

preparedness in Japan—sometimes described as “Japan’s secret of resilience” (Lewis, 2020). Etymologically, they share the last character—助, *tasukeru* which refers to notions of aid and support—and respectively refer to self help (*jijo*), understood as helping oneself and surviving by oneself, without the needs of others; public aid (*kōjo*), as in rescue and support from the central, prefectural and local governments; and mutual aid (*kyōjo*), framed as mutual support and aid within the community (Kitagawa, 2016; Yoshikawa, 2020). No scientific publication has ever spelled out an exact definition of these three dimensions, but the general understanding suggests that they are highly intertwined and assume a complementary role in the process of social provision and construction of socio-economic safety nets. Attitudes towards this paradigm are strictly connected to aspects such as political affiliation, trust in public institutions, and individual opinions with regards to the role of the state in the provision of services to the individual (Oshima, 2020).

Although an in-depth discussion of this paradigm lies beyond the scope of this thesis, by virtue of its topical focus this research will touch on the ways in which the supposedly innovative notion of the sharing paradigm comes into play in this Japanese cultural context.

In recent years, the realms of application of the *jijo-kōjo-kyōjo* paradigm have expanded from a narrower focus on disaster preparedness to welfare and social policy, especially in relation to the role of the state in the provision of public services (Kitagawa, *ibid*). Sakamoto contends that, compared to other major world economies, Japan witnesses relatively low levels of trust towards public and mutual aid and an overwhelming reliance on self help. This pitfall is reflected in the citizens’ scarce interest in politics and in the functioning of public institutions, and in a deep-seated resistance towards initiatives of mutual aid (Sakamoto, 2019).

The concept of self help has been increasingly gaining prominence since the early 1980s, when Japan slowly opened up to globally prevailing trends of neoliberalism—primarily by enacting hefty cuts in welfare spending. The newly gained relevance of self help and mutual aid as *substitutes* rather than *supplements* for public aid manifested itself in 1995, on occasion of the Great Hanshin Earthquake. The late and flawed response of the authorities to the disaster provoked widespread criticism among the population and strengthened the conviction towards the importance of individual actions and social cohesion vis-à-vis reliance on the state. In the aftermath of the disaster, the legal framework of disaster prevention was modified in favour of

higher recognition of individual responsibility against the background of a retrenchment of public aid (Mitsui, 2011; Satomi, 2013). This trend has continued unabated in the last two decades: conservative leaders, including current Prime Minister Suga, have emphasized the significance of self help and mutual aid as a justification for shrinking public aid, which is conceived as the least desirable option—to be employed only in case of extreme need (Kitagawa, *ibid.*; Yoshikawa, *ibid.*).

The *jijo-kōjo-kyōjo* paradigm will be revisited later in the analysis, wherein the alleged role of the sharing paradigm in the provision of public services in Japan will be examined along with its positioning within the *jijo-kōjo-kyōjo* paradigm.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The ensuing chapter will review the existing literature on the sharing paradigm to provide an overarching context to the findings. It will also illustrate the most relevant critiques to the sharing economy and elucidate its implementation in Japan.

### **2.1 Defining the sharing economy**

It seems a herculean task to provide an accurate definition of the sharing economy, considering the great challenges encountered in its conceptualisation and definition (Frenken et al., 2015).

The very expression “sharing economy” is often contested, given that sometimes “there often isn’t much sharing going on” (Greenhouse, 2016). Accordingly, expressions such as “collaborative consumption”, “peer-to-peer economy”, and “crowd-based capitalism” are deemed more suitable as they do not imply the altruistic element associated with the word “sharing”. Rinne contends how the expression “sharing economy” is more of a spectrum than a fixed expression and affirms that this sector will at some point simply become part of the economy without needing any special terminology (Rinne, 2017). Reisch instead draws attention to the relevance of culture in the definition: as culture shapes individual and organizational behaviour, the sharing paradigm adjusts to different geographical settings, thus straddling different disciplines and embracing a plurality of practices, from mechanisms strictly embedded in the market economy to practices closer to the gift-economy (Reisch and

Thøgersen, 2015). In that regard, Marukawa stresses the importance of the level of economic development of a society in its definition of the sharing economy: a developing country must, out of necessity, define the sharing economy in a different way, as the basis of its economy differs from that of a developed one (Marukawa, 2017: 66).

Acquier characterizes the sharing economy as an umbrella construct, i.e. a broad concept defying strict categorization and endowed with a broad scope. He affirms that researchers have often defied the looseness of the concept by offering more narrow definitions, which, however, end up being too specific and failing to acknowledge a variety of theoretical and practical components (Acquier, Daudigeos and Pinkse, 2017). All in all, before delving into any more detailed explanation, it is crucial to grasp the highly contested conceptual and practical nature of the sharing economy and acknowledge the inherent tensions within the field. At the same time, for sake of clarity and consistency, it is important to provide a holistic definition of the sharing economy.

The sharing economy can be roughly defined as an economic sector based on the exchange of services and possessions—both tangible and intangible—through online platforms and encompassing both for-profit and nonprofit economic initiatives (Belk, 2014; Codagnone, Biagi and Abadie, 2016; Hu, 2019). Importantly, the aforementioned online platforms do not own the assets they handle, but rather “provide the actual services to consumers, using crowdsourced ratings and reputational data to facilitate exchange” (Schor and Fitzmaurice, 2017: 1). This sector is rapidly diversifying: from more conventional sectors such as lodging or mobility, it now encompasses a diverse range of services (Cherry and Pidgeon, 2018). The ensuing section will explore the origins of this business model.

## **2.2 The origins of the sharing economy**

The sharing economy gradually emerged in the early 2010s as the direct consequence of a diverse range of socio-economic factors. Sharing has been the basic form of distribution since prehistoric times and has always fostered solidarity between communities (Price, 1975 cited in Martin, 2016). However, the rise of mass production and mass consumption, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the proliferation of neoliberalism, has contributed to the rise of individualism and ubiquitous commercialization and exacerbated existing socio-economic

inequalities (Stemler, 2017). The sharing economy promises to bring this to an end and restore democratization to the processes and concepts of consumption and property, empowering individuals and enabling them to utilize their excess resources in different capacities. It bears the potential of driving economic development while fostering social cohesion and potentially reducing human impact on the environment (Stemler, *ibid.*).

Published in the immediate aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, Botsman and Rogers' "What's mine is yours: the rise of collaborative consumption" had a considerable impact on the nascent theorization on the sharing economy (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Botsman's notion of "collaborative consumption" is built on ideals of idling capacity and beliefs in commons, employed as the foundation of a new business model encouraging maximization, monetization and shared access to tangible and intangible dormant assets. The rapid expansion of Social Networks (SNS) and the evolution in ICT and IoT technologies are paving the way towards a complete restructuring of conceptions of property, consumption, and interpersonal relationships (Gansky, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). Botsman envisions a world where reputation, built through systems of peer-reviews driven by online platforms, would become "[our] most valuable asset" (Botsman and Rogers., *ibid.*; Botsman, 2015).

Sundararajan defines the sharing economy as an innovative framework existing in the continuum between gift economies and market economies. He argues that the sharing economy will disrupt the existing model of employment, create the potential for great conflict with the existing sectors, and give rise to "crowd-based capitalism", where workers will enhance their potential as micro-entrepreneurs and alter their relation with capital (Belk, 2014; Sundararajan, 2016). The sharing economy is depicted as a "harbinger for the post-work society and path to ecologically sustainable capitalism" (Scholz, 2014). The contemporary increase in density of urban areas fostered a growing necessity of sharing rather than owning—and the rapid evolution of technologies provided a tailwind for the development of the sharing paradigm (Długosz-Stroetges, 2014; Gansky, 2010; Bernardi, 2018a; Shareable, 2018).



## 2.3 Critiques of the sharing economy

If, on one hand, proponents of the sharing economy extol the virtues of the sharing paradigm as the basis for a more equal society, critics have pointed out some crucial contradictions of the paradigm both on a theoretical and practical level.

Firstly, many argue that the sharing economy's crusade towards the efficient use of resources is centred around conventional ideas of economic opportunity embedded in the market economy (Martin, 2016). The sharing economy is accused of aggravating monetization, marketization, and financialization of our everyday lives (Schor, 2017b; Slee, 2014). In this regard, other scholars have lambasted the rhetoric advanced by sharing platforms as nothing more than a niche business logic which parallels the advent of industrial capitalism with its reliance on a key commodity, data, and its ultimate aim of disrupting of the existing system (Grabher and König, 2020; Martin, *ibid.*; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Secondly, the sharing economy has been accused of constituting an incoherent form of innovation, as it falls short of correcting the imbalances caused by market failures (Stemler, *ibid.*). Morozov has repeatedly questioned the element of altruism inherent in the sharing paradigm, defining it as “neoliberalism on steroids”, a new sugar-coated form of neoliberal exploitation and the erosion of workers' rights, furtherly exacerbating labour precarization (Morozov, 2013; Murofushi, 2019). The drive for further deregulation and alleged unsuccess in self-regulation on the side of the major sharing companies are often at the centre of the critiques to the sharing economy (Malhotra and Van Alstyne, 2014; Slee, 2015). Sharing platforms often end up exclusively exacerbating existing inequalities and benefiting the top quintile of society, who already possesses financial and human capital, instead of redistributing profit horizontally across all societal ranks (Schor et al., 2016)

Lastly, some critiques have been directed at the deleterious effect of single businesses in the context of the sharing economy, and concentrate on the two most widely-famous success stories of the sector: Airbnb and Uber. Specifically, these critiques address Airbnb-induced gentrification, generated by the company's exploitation of regulatory loopholes, and its pernicious impact on the housing market (Monroe, 2014; Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018); and

Uber's fiscal evasion and ferocious gouging practices in price-setting (O'Keefe, 2015; Biddle, 2013).

## **2.4 The sharing economy in Japan**

The sharing economy is defined by the MIC as an “activity that revitalizes the economy by making the assets owned by individuals available to other individuals through online matching platforms” (MIC, 2017).

An important role in the promotion of the sharing economy in the country has been played by the Sharing Economy Association Japan (SEAJ). The Association was established in 2016 to raise awareness regarding the sharing economy by cooperating with both the public and private sectors in rulemaking towards the solution of societal challenges. The association classifies the sector into five main sub-categories: object-sharing, space-sharing, transportation-sharing, money-sharing and skill-sharing (SEAJ, 2021).

The sharing economy seems to suit the needs of developed economies more than those of developing ones, since in the former, the abundance of physical assets creates favourable conditions for maximization and generates new sources of income for individuals and society as a whole (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Marukawa, 2017; Yoneta, 2020). Hence, the opportunities offered by the sharing economy to an affluent society like Japan become apparent: the possibility to monetize underutilised assets and implement P2P services among citizens could bring significant lifeblood to rural communities and complement the services offered by rural administrations (MIC, 2018; Noda et al., 2018).

In the past five years, the market size of the sharing economy in Japan has been constantly increasing. A report published by the Cabinet Office in 2018 estimated that the entire value of the sector in Japan hovered around 470-525 billion JPY in 2016, slightly less than a GDP percentage point (Marukawa, *ibid.*; Cabinet Office, 2018; Yamasawa, 2018). In late 2020, the SEAJ released a statement showing that in 2020 the market share of this sector had expanded to 2 trillion JPY, thus quadrupling its value in approximately five years (PR Times, 2020).

Nevertheless, the sector still lags behind in comparison to other major economies such as the United States or China. Already in 2016, the size of China's national sharing economy market exceeded PwC's projection of the size of the global sharing economy in 2025; it seems apparent that China has embraced the sharing paradigm to a large extent, especially in the mobility sector (Marukawa, *ibid.*; PwC, 2016). However, it is essential to consider that these figures constitute mere estimates and are therefore prone to display some inconsistencies; even more so considering the inherent character of the sharing economy which, as stated earlier, defies any attempt of rigorous categorization (Yamasawa, *ibid.*).

Building on Martin's proposition, Marukawa posits that the main reason why the sharing economy is still lagging behind in Japan is to be found in the country's socio-economic structure and the political leverage of the existing regime; that is, the extant network of relationships at the basis of Japan's political economy, an expression of what Noguchi calls the "barrier of vested interests" (Marukawa, *ibid.*; Martin, 2016; Noguchi, 2019; *The Economist*, 2018). Matsui shows how the hospitality and the taxi industry have strenuously opposed the expansion of Airbnb and Uber, respectively, by lobbying heavily to exert their leverage on the policy-making process. In the initial stages of expansion of the sharing economy, the Abe government seemed to take a pro-deregulation stance and welcomed the entry of foreign sharing businesses in Japan. However, at a later stage, the pressure from the existing vested interests prevailed and laws hindering the growth of sharing companies were enforced. Again, strict regulation is considered one of the key obstacles for the expansion of the sharing paradigm in Japan (Altura et al., 2020; Matsui, 2019). Besides, Nakamura shows how there is considerable consumer resistance towards P2P sharing services for a number of reasons: anxiety over contact with strangers, low reliability of sharing services, and lack of insurance and support in case of accident *inter alia* (Nakamura, Abe and Mizunoya, 2021; PwC, 2020).

However, as elucidated in Chapter 1.1, the Japanese government has been taking a proactive role in the advancement of the sharing paradigm in the context of rural Japan. The next subsection will briefly review the history of revitalization policies enacted by the Japanese government.

## 2.5 History of rural revitalization policies in Japan

*“Economically, socially and politically rural Japan seems to be in free fall”* (Coates, 2019).

The government tried to address depopulation as early as in the late 1960s. The expression *kasō* (depopulation) appeared in official documents for the first time in 1966 and the first law attempting to counteract it was enforced in 1969 (Odagiri, 2017). The main policy actions, from the Comprehensive National Plans (CNP) to the most recent Fundamental Plan for National Resilience (FPNR), were centred on cycles of advancement of hardware projects. The central government sets some KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and allocates funds according to the level of achievements of single municipalities (Chang, 2018). Particularly, the latest FPNR, part of the framework of the so-called “local Abenomics”, had three main areas of focus:

- financial support, through subsidies programs to virtuous municipalities as determined by the central government,
- human resource support, by way of the establishment of regional revitalisation and internship programs and the facilitation of urban-rural exchange, and
- information support, through the provision of data in cooperation with private stakeholders.

In order to apply for the funds, local governments are required to implement initiatives in harmony with the guidelines delineated by the central government. This top-down approach, coupled with an over-emphasis on KPIs and selection-concentration, have been described as the primary shortfalls of these programs (Chiavacci and Hommerich, 2017; Yamashita and Kanai, 2015).

The sharing economy appears to be the latest initiative in the process of informatization and digitalization of rural economies in a national effort from the central government to reduce the urban-rural gap. From the initiative “E-Japan” in the early 2000s to the use of public-private data in IoT implementation and the sharing economy, this top-down, centrally led approach has barely changed—despite little success (Tabata, 2020).

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will illustrate the rationale behind the choice of employing framing as an overarching blueprint for the analysis. The potential conflict between an incumbent regime and an incoming niche will be introduced within the Multi-Level Perspective. The next section will delve into the concrete implementation of the sharing paradigm—by way of the sharing city—and the framing of outcomes of sharing-based policies.

#### 3.1 Discursive framing

Snow defines a frame as “an interpretative schemata that signifies the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of action in one’s present and past environment” (Snow and Benford, 1992: 137). The process of framing is explained as the buildup of a distinct identity bound to a specific ideological toolset and tied to a larger political and social discourse. It is through the *modus operandi* of framing that specific stakeholders, in deliberate competition with others, strive to marshal consensus and mobilize action towards a set of predetermined goals (Snow et al., 1986).

Steinberg argues that framing has often been depicted as a conceptual bridge between socio-psychological and resource mobilization, but the pivotal importance of language has often been disregarded (Steinberg, 1998). In his works, Steinberg emphasizes how discourse—understood as the production of meaning—plays a great role in framing as a “dynamic and often conflict-riven process tied to particular socio-historical contexts and patterns of interaction” (ibid.: 862). Steinberg affirms that collective actors make use of discourse to mobilize consensus and convey their desired messages.

Discursive framing theory contends that words are not perceived as mere labels, but rather as powerful conveyors of ideological positions and dialogic interactions (ibid: 852). As framing becomes a means for different ideologies to emancipate and distinguish themselves, discourse is employed to acquire power and construct hegemony. In this context, and particularly in times of acute weakness of incumbent structures, a potential conflict between dominant and emerging structures often emerges (Steinberg, ibid.).

On the basis of these assumptions, this thesis adopts the theoretical approach of discursive framing by analyzing how the sharing paradigm is employed by an emerging niche to challenge the dominance of the incumbent regime against the backdrop of a transition in the socio-technical system. The ensuing section will map out the lineaments of the aforementioned socio-technical systems in the field of transition research.

### **3.1.1 Framing socio-technological transition**

Martin explores the transition of socio-technical systems and transformative processes undergone by societies on their paths toward sustainability (Martin, 2016). Socio-technical systems are understood as clusters of elements—including technology, user practices, markets, cultural meanings and infrastructures—created, reproduced, and refined by specific social groups with distinct vested interests, problem perceptions, values, and preferences (Geels, 2005: 446). Each socio-technical system is tied to a distinct set of beliefs embedded in the dominant economic, political and social milieu (Geels, 2014).

In this context, the sharing paradigm, due to its innovative attitude towards ownership and consumption, stands in direct antithesis to the current socio-technical system. At least on a theoretical level, some cardinal postulates of the sharing paradigm, such as the predilection for shared-access over individual ownership, could potentially pose a great threat to the modes of the existing capitalist institutions. (Slee, 2015).

However, in its practical implementation things slightly differ, as sharing services often end up taking forms akin to those provided in already existing frameworks, failing to provide any real element of novelty. The tensions and contradictions inherent in the sharing paradigm will be addressed in the last chapter of this thesis, after a comprehensive analysis of the findings.

The potential conflict between the sharing niche and the existing regimes takes place against the backdrop of a transition in the socio-technical system. The existing field of transition research often employs the model of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), which will be discussed in the ensuing chapter.

### 3.1.2 The Multi-Level Perspective (MLP)

Visually represented as a nested hierarchy, the MLP constitutes a theoretical model widely used in the field of transition research. This model, combining elements from the fields of evolutionary economics, originating from the tradition of Nelson (Nelson and Winter, 1977), and technology studies, conceptually envisions a three-tier system built on the embeddedness of technology into society and asserts that transitions occur when the structures interact with each other (Kemp, Schot and Hogma, 1998; Martin, *ibid.*; Geels, 2002). As shown in Figure 1, the MLP delineates three layers:

1. a *landscape* at the macro-level: the exogenous layer of society, consisting of slow-changing sociocultural values and structural trends,
2. a *regime* at the meso-level, consisting of the set of prevailing socio-technical rules and norms, accounting for the stability of the entire system and encompassing material infrastructures, and
3. a *niche* at the micro-level: the protected locus at the edge of the regime where innovation takes place.

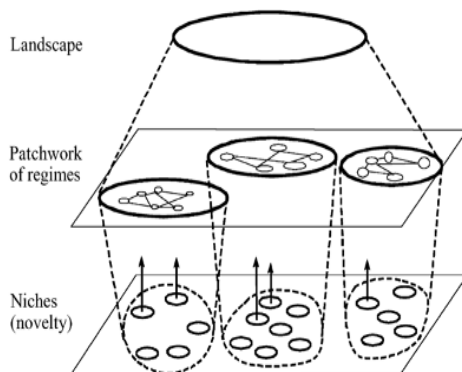


Figure 1: a scheme of the Multi-Level perspective. Adapted from Geels (2002)

The regime's ultimate aim coincides with the protection of the extant order and resistance against transition. Yet as the niche, which necessitates shielding and nurturing in the first stage, progressively accumulates power, a competitive relationship is set in motion (Smith and Raven, 2010). Geels contends that the transformative shifts that accompany a socio-technical transition spring from an ensemble of processes occurring simultaneously at different levels of the MLP.

The dynamics of tension between niche and regime come about in a highly politicized environment, where collective actors belonging to the regime form alliances with the ruling class and exert their leverage on the policy-making process; simultaneously, niche actors resort to lobbying, media promotion and network expansion to enhance their public recognition (Geels, 2014). The MLP thus becomes the scene for a conflict between regime and niche where both actors “advance a particular framing of a system and its dynamics, and suggest particular ways in which these should develop or transform to bring about a particular set of outcomes” (Hermwille, 2015: 9). Specifically, Geels posits that niche sectors primarily employ three sub-frames within the system-framing process (Geels, 2014; Martin, 2016):

- a *diagnostic* frame, identifying problems faced by the regime and mapping the conflict
- a *prognostic* frame, advancing solutions to these issues in the form of regime remodulation or niche innovation
- a *motivational* frame, promoting action to address the problems

This study lies on the assumption that the sharing paradigm assumes the role of the incumbent niche within the MLP and seeks to mobilize consensus, advancing a specific discourse vis-à-vis the incumbent regime. After a careful diagnosis of the shortcomings of the regime, the sharing paradigm is advanced as a prognostic frame, a one-fits-all solution to address issues affecting the existing regime. The next section will illustrate how the sharing city model has been intended as the utmost expression of the prognostic framework by the sharing niche.

### **3.2 A prognostic sub-frame: the sharing city**

The sharing city model has received considerable scholarly attention in the last decade, as many cities across the globe have adopted the sharing paradigm to address key concerns of urban governance (Bernardi and Diamantini, 2018; Finck and Ranchordas, 2016). In this study, the sharing city is employed as a leading example of the prognostic frame advanced by the sharing niche. Here is a comprehensive definition of the sharing niche:

*“A city where the commons dominates. There are three main ways to manage resources, through government, markets and the commons. The commons is the space where citizens self-provision with minimal reliance on market or government. There is no central intermediary*



*between peers thus it's a resource management regime that is more democratic, resilient, and resistant to corruption''* (Gorenflo, 2014 cited in Długosz-Stroetges, 2014).

Vith et al. delineate four main framings for the sharing city: 'societal endangerment' paired with 'societal enhancement' and 'market disruption' coupled with 'ecological transition' (Vith et al., 2019). These dichotomies prove that for city governments, the sharing model comes with both challenges and opportunities: the frame of *societal endangerment*—represented by the necessity of the authorities to safeguard public interest and associated with regulation—is opposed to the promise of *societal enhancement* in the form of macro-economic growth and the provision of public goods. On the other hand, the frame of *market disruption*, framing the sharing economy as a threat to the existing business interests, is coupled by aspirations for an *ecological transition*, attainable by way of a strategy of information and promotion of issues of sharing and sustainability (Vith et al., *ibid*; Gori, Parcu and Stasi, 2015).

A comprehensive critique on the sharing city has yet to be formulated. In fact, most of the accounts tend to emphasize its potential in the solution of critical issues affecting urban areas, in line with the positive frames of *societal enhancement* and *ecological transition* put forward by Vith. In explaining the reasons behind the emergence of the sharing city, McLaren draws a connection to underlying forms of socio-cultural sharing which have always been a distinctive feature of communal living both in urban and rural contexts. However, the rise of competitive individualism and growing commercialization has provoked a destabilization of human identities and ruled out alternative ways of living, exacerbating social and spatial inequalities and injustices (McLaren and Agyeman, 2015: 13).

The sharing city is often depicted as "more of a mindset, than a thing"—a participatory process based on ideals of civil abundance, empathy, solidarity and social networks. However, yet again the sharing city is not framed as an intrinsically anti-capitalist model, as "many forms of contemporary sharing are being mainstreamed by conventional capitalist business" (McLaren, *ibid.*; Agyeman and McLaren, 2017; Shareable, 2018).

The sharing paradigm is often employed by the sharing niche in an effort to extend its leverage into processes of policy-making—hence the necessity of assessing the outcome of these policies in an ex-post analysis. The next section will introduce the theory of framing policy

outcome, in relation to the motivational frame employed in the promotion of the sharing paradigm.

### **3.3 Framing policy outcome**

This study is fully grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist approach, positing that reality is what social actors make of it. In examining how outcomes of sharing-services in rural Japan are framed, this thesis adopts the theoretical assumptions outlined by McConnell under the denomination of ‘policy success heuristic’ (McConnell, 2010a; McConnell, 2010b).

The literature on policy outcome has tackled the subject from a myriad of different perspectives, ranging from policy evaluation to public value and good practices (Miller, 2007; Moore, 1995). Departing from previous studies on the topic, McConnell describes policy as a diversified entity composed of three different strands: *process* (how societies and political actors make choices in the public interest), *programs* (what governments concretely enact) and *politics* (the political repercussions of governmental actions).

Combining the rationalist strand of policy evaluations with a constructivist approach emphasizing interpretation and meaning, McConnell argues that “a policy is successful insofar as it achieves the goals its proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and or/support is virtually universal” (McConnell, 2010a: 351). McConnell’s policy success heuristic merges an objective view of success, framed as attainment of the predetermined goals, with a subjective perspective, which instead portrays success as a matter of pure interpretation.

The other central aspect of McConnell’s policy success heuristic lies in its multi-sided approach to the analysis of policy outcome. Recognizing the existence of many levels in between “unblemished success” and “abysmal failure”, McConnell posits that, as policy outcomes do not always have tidy results, “divergent outcomes may occur within one particular realm or there can be different outcomes across the process, program and political dimensions of policy” (McConnell, *ibid*: 357). That is, success at the process stage does not necessarily entail success at the program stage, or in turn success at the program stage is no guarantee of success at the politics stage. On the whole, McConnell contends that the assessment of the outcome of a

policy requires a careful and nuanced analysis of all the contradictions, tensions and trade-offs inherent in the processes of policy making and policy-enacting.

## **4. METHODS**

The ensuing chapter, after briefly presenting the research design and the ontological and epistemological stances, will illustrate the rationale behind the choice of employing discourse analysis. This will be followed by a discussion of the data-collection process; the last subsection puts forward the main shortcomings of this work and a discussion on issues of positionality and reflexivity.

### **4.1 Research Design**

The research design is defined as the overarching superstructure that provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2012: 46). This study is centred around the framing of the sharing paradigm as a potential solution to salient socio-economic challenges faced by rural municipalities across Japan. By employing the analytical tools of framing, the findings will firstly present the current state of the sharing economy in Japan and its conflict with the existing socio-technical regime. Next, scrutiny of the primary propositions put forward by proponents of the sharing economy in the context of rural Japan will be presented, ensued by an assessment of the framing of their outcome.

Considering the relatively narrow focus of this research, a study of qualitative nature was deemed suitable from an early stage of the research process. In particular, case-study research was selected for its specific focus and its context-based standpoint (Farquhar, 2012). Case-study research often embraces both primary and secondary sources; therefore, the researcher is able to offer a more robust foundation for the analysis through triangulation and support arguments for their contribution to knowledge (Creswell, 2007). This research utilizes three cases to provide grounded evidence on the ongoing implementation of sharing projects in three different settings and assess their outcome as depicted by the respondents. The next section will map out the ontological and epistemological stances behind this study.

### **4.1.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stances**

Social research holds an inherent constructivist element, as reality is conceived as produced by social interaction and shaped by social actors (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011). In a constructivist perspective, particular emphasis is put on the active involvement of human agency in the process of reality construction (Bryman, *ibid.*; Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, *ibid.*). Thus, a case-study analysis implies that human agency strongly influences how reality is perceived and framed by different actors. Accordingly, this research positions itself ontologically in the constructionist field.

As for the epistemological stance, this thesis embraces interpretivism, an approach positing that the researcher ought to maintain a reflective stance about the implications of their position with regard to the object of their research (Bryman, *ibid.*: 32). Moreover, since this study is built on the theoretical approach of framing, subjective interests and personal interpretations of reality retain a decisive leverage on the research outcome. Hence, adopting an interpretative approach entails that the research is fully grounded into human action and presents several levels of human interpretation (Bryman, *ibid.*: 30). Given the relevance assumed by human interpretation and language, discourse analysis was chosen as the key methodological approach for the analysis.

### **4.2 Methodological approach: Discourse Analysis**

As a methodological approach, discourse analysis owes greatly to the work of the French semiologist Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1977). After Foucault's groundbreaking contribution to the field, many different approaches emerged and currently there is no universal agreement over a univocal definition of discourse analysis. Rather, it is often defined as an umbrella term indicating a diverse range of analytical toolsets, from speech-act theory to semiotics (Gill, 2000: 173). The common component of these strands is a rejection of the idea that language is simply a means of reflecting and describing the world. On the contrary, discourse analysis rests on the strong assumption of the precarious state of language and meaning, perceived as entities originating out of interrelated bodies of text (Gill, *ibid.*). Discourse analysis is understood as a "methodology for analyzing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretive and constructivist" (Hardy, Phillips and Harley, 2004: 19).

Discourse analysis encompasses a great multitude of methodological approaches. This study will primarily take on a narrative-focused approach, as opposed to a language-focused approach. The assumption was that a syntactic focus would be too bound by the individual speech styles of the small pool of respondents and would not sufficiently reflect the broader societal manifestations of the enforced narratives that this thesis sought to uncover. That is, behind this approach lies the supposition of the power of discourse as a schema to subjectively frame reality and mobilize action in order to reach a predetermined outcome.

In this thesis, the methodological approach of discourse analysis is paired with the theoretical perspectives of sub- and system-framing, which exist under the overarching structure of discursive framing. In the previous chapter, a link between the theoretical sub-strands, utilised to answer the three research sub-questions, was established. This thesis highlights the importance of context-based interpretation and discourse utilised by business and social-innovation groups to advance their interests. The next section will provide a synopsis of the data-collection process.

### **4.3 Data collection**

After an initial screening of the over 130 examples of sharing cities listed in the official website of the SEAJ (SEAJ, 2020), six main municipalities were identified. These six examples stood out because of their marked engagement and long-standing commitment to the sharing economy, the diversity of their sharing offers and the presence of a conspicuous number of reports on their activities. After a second phase of reviewing, three municipalities— all officially designated as “sharing cities” in a joint ceremony hosted by the SEAJ in November 2016—were shortlisted and finally selected: Shimabara City, Taku City, and Yuzawa City.

This study refers to these three municipalities alternatively as “rural” or “local” municipalities, as they are all located in peripheral prefectures. A literal English translation of the Japanese terminology—地方自治体, *chiho jichitai*—would result in cumbersome ‘local self-government bodies’, which, for practicality, was discarded as terminology. The word “rural” often evokes imagery associated with agriculture; this would not be totally inaccurate for the chosen municipalities except for Shimabara, where the primary sector employs only 15% of

the entire workforce (Shimabara City, 2010). All in all, as a matter of consistency—and taking into account the strong ambiguity associated with the term ‘regional’—in this study the adjectives ‘rural’ and ‘local’ were preferred over the more orthodox ‘regional’.

The three selected municipalities share some key features in their economic and demographic structures. First, their declining population is lower than fifty thousand units. Second, the ageing ratio of their population is higher than the national average, which in 2019 stood at 28% (World Bank, 2019). Third, and most importantly, these cities showed a remarkable interest in the implementation of the sharing economy from a very early stage—to the extent that they could be regarded as trailblazers. Rapidity and diversity characterize their engagement with their sharing offers: the cities are promoting the sharing paradigm in a broad variety of realms, from touristic revitalization to the societal advancement of women and employment creation. Last but not least, the presence of several reports on their activities allowed the possibility to combine primary and secondary resources, enabling the researcher to yield a more accurate and nuanced account of the sharing projects.

This thesis employs a combination of different materials: semi-structured interviews (6) coupled with the analysis of reports (7) related to each of the three selected cases (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for details on the material).

Five of the six interviews were conducted in a virtual setting, making use of video telephony software programs such as Skype and Zoom, whereas the remaining interview was conducted via email. Three interviewees out of six were later re-contacted by the author and kindly provided the pictures displayed in the ensuing chapter.

In the first stage of data collection, two professors with extensive research on the sharing economy in Japan and abroad were contacted to acquire some foundational knowledge on the topic and its concrete implementation in Japan (Respondents 1 and 2); in the second phase, a member of the SEAJ with a year-long experience in the promotion of the sharing paradigm was interviewed (Respondent 3). Finally, three local public servants personally involved in the implementation of the sharing-projects, each from one of the selected municipalities, were interviewed to acquire a deeper understanding of the implementation process (Respondents 4,5 and 6).

The interviews were conducted in Japanese and recorded. Later, to avoid any major misunderstanding and facilitate the analysis, the transcripts, together with the reports, were translated from Japanese to English and analyzed through the qualitative data software NVivo. The findings were dissected through an inductive approach: this entails that the codes remain true to the generated data and that categories emerge spontaneously from the text (Skjott Linneberg et al., 2019). In a preliminary phase, the codes were directly extracted from the data, often using terms used by the interviewees themselves. From line-by-line coding, the analysis evolved to a second cycle when higher abstraction was reached, and patterns began emerging in the text. The main categories, filtered through the theoretical approach of framing, will be presented in the findings chapter.

A similar method was employed in the analysis of the reports. Six reports from various sources were analyzed and integrated with the interview transcripts; ranging from governmental agencies to research centres, the reports were selected from a wide pool of different sources. However, given that they all depict the sharing paradigm in a relatively positive light, the assumption was that they could easily be integrated with the interviews [appendix 2]. For this reason, the methodological approach of discourse analysis was maintained, and the emergent categories were incorporated with the primary categories from the analysis of the transcript.

#### **4.4 Shortcomings, Ethical Considerations, and Reflexivity**

The study was conducted entirely in a foreign language for the researcher. It is therefore essential to point out the impact that potential distortions and misinterpretations might have exerted on the research outcome.

This research was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the Master's Programme in Asian Studies throughout the entire research process. Particularly, in semi-structured interviewing, the emphasis lies on the relation and the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale, 1996). While the situation gives room for digressions and follow-up questions, the interviewer must acknowledge some key challenges, such as the potential intrusion of personal biases, unexpected behaviour from the interviewee, or lack of tact in dealing with sensitive issues (Bryman, *ibid.*: 475). The researcher must assume an unbiased

perspective and strive to maintain a critical eye on the chosen topic, at the cost of dissenting from the respondents' views.

The choice of employing framing and discourse analysis required the researcher to put greater effort toward the critical assessment of the findings. Additionally, the small-scale focus of the study could be regarded as a potential limitation: as this thesis claims to provide an overall assessment of the implementation of sharing services, the risk of failing to provide a representative case in fact exists, and limits the external validity of the research.

As far as issues of positionality and reflexivity are concerned, it is crucial to reiterate the importance of self-reflection and awareness of the researcher's own role as a Western researcher operating in a non-Western context. The power component inherent in the interpersonal relationships between the interviewees and interviewer became almost a tangible feature during the interviews; the wide chasm between a young Western researcher and non-Western professionals with years-long professional experiences in the research, promotion and implementation of the sharing economy constituted an ever-present element throughout the entire research.

In the specific case of this research, paramount differences in cultural and socio-economic background between the interviewer and the interviewee alike should be explicitly spelled out. Operating outside of one's own cultural milieu bears some concrete challenges that should be overcome to reach higher significance with one's work. The awareness of being a Western researcher operating in a non-Western context has largely shaped the analysis. In addition, the relative novelty of the research exposed the findings to possible misconceptions and misinterpretations, given the absence of previous work that could be employed as a reference.

Last but not least, issues of subjectivity in knowledge production, together with spatial and temporal components, occupy a pivotal role in the research process (Sultana, 2007). Specifically, the temporal component gains particular relevance in the context of a research, entirely conducted in the middle of a global pandemic. As already mentioned in the literature-review section, the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic heavily hit the sharing-economy sector, dampening general enthusiasm and curtailing the possibility of further expansion in the future. It is likely that had this research been carried out even in the recent past, it would have yielded fairly different results.



## 5. CASE STUDIES

This section provides some relevant background information to the three municipalities analyzed in this thesis. It proceeds with a short introduction to the cities, their main problems, their involvement with the sharing economy, and the outcome of their policies. A more holistic and critical analysis of the findings will be presented in the next section.

### 5.1 Yuzawa City (湯沢市)



**Picture 1:** the traditional Tanabata Edoro Festival in Yuzawa City. Photo courtesy of Yuzawa City.

Bordering Yamagata and Miyagi Prefectures, the city of Yuzawa represents the gateway to Akita Prefecture in north-western Japan. The municipality of Yuzawa was created as a result of the merging of four local villages in 2005, in line with the trend of municipal dissolution and merging carried out across Japan in the early 2000s. Yuzawa's most prominent industry is agriculture, but snowy and rigid winters make it impossible to grow crops all year long. As of February 2021, Yuzawa has a population of 43,237, approximately 40% of which is aged sixty-five or older (Yuzawa City). The population peaked in 1955 and has been declining ever since, making Yuzawa a forerunner in the nationwide trend of an ageing and decreasing population.

If these trends continue unabated, Yuzawa is going to lose another third of its population by 2040. Aiming to support child-rearing generations, Yuzawa has been running a public nursery school called 'Family Support Centre' (FCS). However, shortcomings have soon emerged: the

Centre has limited opening hours and its employees are ageing. On top of that, in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the unemployment rate in Yuzawa skyrocketed and the ratio of job offers to applicants was the lowest in the entirety of Akita Prefecture. Specifically, given the impossibility of crop cultivation during the winter, farmers are often left jobless and income-less. Similar patterns have surfaced among people involved in elderly care or childcare, who often have little to do with their spare time.

These were the primary reasons why Yuzawa City decided to adopt the sharing paradigm. The encounter between the sharing economy and Yuzawa Municipality occurred thanks to a contact between the municipality and a member of the SEAJ. After discussing the issues that the city of Yuzawa was facing, the two parties reached an agreement on the local exploration of the sharing paradigm, made possible thanks to the utilisation of funds from the MIC.

Yuzawa is currently implementing five different sharing services: beginning first with the introduction of *crowdsourcing*—launched to open up new possibilities for citizens out of the labour market—the city soon added *space-sharing* as a way to make full use of public and private idle facilities. As a third service, Yuzawa experimented with *childcare sharing* to make up for the shortfalls of its publicly run service and alleviate the burden on child-rearing women by fostering their active participation in society. Next, the city introduced *park-sharing*. In addition, the city tried to implement yet another form of space-sharing, leasing out conference and meeting rooms of the city hall to private companies; all the necessary procedures could be carried out online, thus easing the burden on the municipal administration. All these services were implemented after the city had signed agreements with private sharing companies headquartered in Tokyo, with the mediation of governmental agencies, such as the Office for the Promotion of the Sharing Economy.

Yuzawa's success as a sharing city is framed as the result of a first-mover advantage, coupled with great initiative on the part of the local government. On the other hand, the city encountered some difficulties in the promotion of the sharing-paradigm: instability in the effective income earned by share workers added up to a low usage of child-care sharing services. Furthermore, “there is widespread resistance among the population towards the expression ‘sharing economy’ itself, which is perceived as foreign and unrelatable” (Respondent 4). The city has tried to overcome these hurdles by expanding its PR operations, organizing workshops

targeting potential users, and advocating an indigenization of the sharing concept by linking it to old practices of socio-cultural sharing, which were commonplace in rural Japan.

## 5.2 Shimabara City (島原市)



**Picture 2:** a view of Shimabara Castle. Photo courtesy of Shimabara City.

The city of Shimabara is located at the south-eastern tip of Nagasaki Prefecture on the southern island of Kyushu. It is endowed with a storied cultural and architectural heritage, encompassing the old Shimabara castle (Picture II), hot springs, and lush nature. For this reason, Shimabara has traditionally been a popular tourist destination.

As of December 2020, Shimabara City had a population of 44,380, and the ratio of inhabitants aged sixty-five or over accounted for over 30% of its total (Shimabara City). Tourism flourished until the early 1990s, when the eruption of Mount Unzen, an active volcanic group in close proximity to the city, caused the death of forty-three people and a drastic decline in the number of tourists (SEAJ). Despite its considerable touristic potential, the city lacked a unitary and effective strategy to sustain the industry, as “four different associations were entrusted with everything ranging from promotion to marketing and implementation” (Respondent 6). Overall, the main issue that Shimabara City faced was the revitalization of the tourism sector—which was itself related to the necessities of boosting the city’s revenues.

To address these issues, in October 2015 the city launched the ‘Shimabara City Comprehensive Strategy for City/People/Employment Creation’, a local initiative aimed at promoting the economic revitalization of the area. As a part of that programme, the four tourism organizations

were merged into one single entity — “The Shimabara Tourism Bureau”— in charge of touristic promotion, management of touristic facilities and merchandising. In the process of setting up a unified strategy for their tourism industry, Shimabara entered into contact with a private company engaged in the promotion of space-sharing. It was through the connection with this company that Shimabara was introduced to the SEAJ, and thus began its involvement with the sharing economy.

The city concretely applied the sharing paradigm mainly in two sectors: tourism promotion and childcare sharing. In relation to the former, the city has attempted to make full use of its existing resources by leasing public spaces and touristic landmarks—such as Shimabara Castle—to private citizens for the organization of events and entertainment activities in the form of ‘tour-packages’. The city has thus taken a proactive role in the roll-out of promotion campaigns to attract visitors from other prefectures. Shimabara made use of the grants offered by the MIC to lay the foundation for a childcare sharing service, which was implemented with the aim of reducing burdens on child-rearing women and fostering the buildup of stronger social cohesion among the populace.

Given the increasingly severe outlook on the city’s finances, the city had “the necessity to secure the provision of grants from governmental agencies or ministries” (Respondent 6) — often coupled with the partnership with private sharing companies. For its childcare-sharing program, Shimabara utilized grants only for the first year and later entrusted the continuation of the service solely to the organizational and administrative work of private citizens.

On one hand, the Shimabara Tourism Bureau has taken the lead in the touristic revitalization and achieved significant results. However, the municipal childcare-sharing service has struggled to take off. Given the low number of users, from a cost-benefit perspective, the results have not matched the expectations.

### 5.3 Taku City (多久市)



**Picture 3:** The Local Sharing Centre in Taku City. Photo courtesy of Taku City.

The city of Taku is located in the middle of Saga Prefecture on the southern island of Kyushu. It gained the status of independent municipality in 1954 after the merging of several different municipalities in the region. Although Taku's key industry is agriculture, the city once prospered as a coal-mining town; however, after the closure of the last mine in 1972, the population began decreasing dramatically.

As of December 2020, Taku had a population of 18, 223, of which over 33% is aged sixty-five or older. In the past three decades, the city has lost over 24% of its entire population and the outflow of population shows no indication of slowing (Taku City). One of the main motives behind the implementation of the sharing economy lies in the necessity of promoting the societal advancement of women occupied with child-rearing or elderly care and the reintegration of citizens who have been out of the labour market. In addition, the possibility of creating content for tourism purposes, while also making use of underutilised assets such as citizens' time and skills, was perceived as potentially beneficial for the city's coffers as well.

Therefore, in March 2016, just a few months after the SEAJ was established, Taku City received the 'Regional Revitalisation Acceleration Grant' from the Cabinet Office, and decided to implement the sharing paradigm in the provision of services to the community. The first service Taku implemented was crowdsourcing: with the aid of the local NPO "Social Business

Value” and the partnership with a sharing company operating in crowd sourcing, Taku City set up a container shop called “Local Sharing Centre” (Picture 3), which functions as an intermediary between private companies and shared workers. Its main tasks comprise primarily the organisation of workshops to spread the word about the sharing economy, as well as the hosting of seminars to brush up citizens’ skills and pave the way for the relocation of private companies from urban areas to Taku. The Centre works as a small-scale hub, connecting workers with companies, offering business counselling services, and promoting network-building and economic revitalisation in the region. The second initiative Taku implemented sprung forth from its collaboration with a Tokyo-based company offering services such as online content creation for touristic purposes. Although tourism has never been a central industry for Taku, the city saw potential in the use of technology to promote local traditions and customs to a wider audience through the creation of online content.

Thanks to the implementation of the aforementioned services, “Taku City has gained a solid reputation as a pioneering municipality” (Respondent 5); this had a significant impact on Taku’s economy, boosting its revenues and name recognition across the country. However, it seems that these initiatives have been losing significant momentum in the past two years: for instance, the progressive reduction of available jobs offered by the “Local Sharing Centre” has constituted considerable obstacles for a further expansion of crowdsourcing. Although the city managed to reap enough revenues to sustain its services, “the lack of consistent funding from the central government has put these projects in jeopardy for the next few years” (Respondent 5). Frictions between the municipality and the NPO have emerged. On top of that, the COVID-19 global pandemic has further reduced the space for local exchange and halted most of the sharing services. Overall, there are still opportunities for cooperation with the sharing companies, but the path leading to the firm establishment of these activities in the city’s economic tissue is still long.

## 6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter will examine how the sharing paradigm is framed as a potentially innovative framework to address structural imbalances inherent in the existing socio-technical regime. In doing so, it will employ the framework elaborated on by Martin (Martin, 2016) with its three sub-frames:

- diagnostic frame: employed to describe the problems faced by the regime and the conflict between the regime and niche against the backdrop of a socio-ecological transition
- prognostic frame: utilised to advance solutions in the form of niche innovation
- motivational frame: applied to establish concrete evidence of project implementation and offer a rationale for greater engagement with the sharing paradigm

Although a discussion of the validity of the sharing paradigm per se lies beyond the scope of this paper, its potential as an innovative framework to address salient socio-economic challenges faced by rural Japan will be examined. Specifically, in attempting to answer the overarching research question, the alleged attributes of novelty and distinctiveness of a niche technology will be scrutinized, so as to assess whether the sharing paradigm constitutes a consistent and viable alternative to existing policies of rural revitalization.

The next section will present the frame-coding employed in the analysis.

### PRIMARY AND SECONDARY FRAMES

Table 1 shows the comprehensive results of the frame-coding process. After an initial phase of explorative coding and identification of the main themes at a line level, the second phase of the framing process consisted of data-reduction and identification of common patterns into *secondary frames*. The secondary frames were successively grouped under *primary frames*, sub-frames elaborated with the aid of the *overarching frames* offered by Martin's theoretical framework. The result is a three-tier analytical framework which encompasses three different stages of utilization of the sharing paradigm: the diagnostic framework juxtaposes the sharing

paradigm to the existing regime in an *ex-ante* phase before its actual implementation; the prognostic framework comes into play at the moment of implementation; the motivational framework emerges in the *ex-post* analysis, when the reasons behind the alleged success of the paradigm are analysed and the rationale for further engagement is put forward.

<u>Overarching frame</u>	<u>Primary frame</u>	<u>Secondary frame</u>
Diagnostic framework	Diagnostic 1: issues faced by the regime  Diagnostic 2: conflict regime-niche	economic fallout institutional inertia societal crisis  political leverage market disruption
Prognostic framework	Prognostic: sharing as an innovative framework	societal enhancement women's empowerment economic incentive technological incentive
Motivational framework	Motivational 1: success as goal-attainment  Motivational 2: success as interpretation	openness and receptivity reputation benefit  diversification of economic activities geographical expansion

Figure 2: scheme of the frames used in the analysis.

## 6.1. Diagnostic framework

This section will provide an in-depth analysis of the two main primary frames and therefore analyse how the sharing niche identifies issues inherent in the existing socio-technical regime and how the latter strongly opposes the affirmation of the sharing paradigm as a dominant framework.

### 6.1.1 Diagnostic sub-frame 1: issues faced by the regime

Respondents frame the origins of the sharing economy as the response to salient structural and systemic shortcomings that have been left unaddressed by the existing regime and have



hampered its proper functioning. In the context of rural Japan, three prominent sub-themes, coinciding with structural issues faced by the regime, have emerged in the analysis: economic fallout, institutional inertia and societal crisis.

### *Economic fallout*

The dire financial circumstances of local governments in Japan appear as one of the most consistent frames in the findings, as local governments have been facing an extremely troubled financial situation at least for the past four decades.

In fact, in the decades following the burst of the economic bubble<sup>1</sup>, local administrators in rural Japan have consistently been facing a severe state of financial distress. They were increasingly forced to rely on subsidies from ministries or governmental agencies, such as the MIC or the METI, as the accelerating trend of depopulation acutely diminished their fiscal revenues.

The economic downturns caused by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 further jeopardized the stability of local municipalities' coffers and provoked a spike of the unemployment rate in the regions, especially in areas highly dependent on manufacturing. Respondent 4 affirms: "Excluding mandatory fixed costs such as property rent, local governments, faced with dwindling tax revenues, are left with only ten percent of their total budget utilisable for the implementation of new services". As governmental policies thus far have failed to staunch depopulation and industrial withering, in the eyes of all respondents, if no concrete action is taken to reverse the current course of decline, future prospects for rural Japan appear quite bleak.

Given the dire situation of local governments, the prevailing *kōjo* dimension—public aid—is formulated as obsolete; austerity policies to cut on welfare spending have largely demonstrated that public institutions consider themselves no longer the sole entity bearing the responsibility for the provision of services to the community. The necessity of enforcing the notion of self help (*jijo*)—which seems to perfectly fit into the basic neoliberal paradigm of a "smaller government"—warrants a progressive retrenchment of the state's role in favour of the alleged

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<sup>1</sup> The economic bubble refers to the period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, when the Japanese economy experienced an asset (stocks and real estate) price bubble, which burst in 1991, thus generating a decade-long stagnation period often referred to as 'The Lost Decade'.

re-establishment of mutual support within the community framework—after decades of dependence on overarching public or private organizations.

### *Institutional inertia*

The conduct of local governments is characterized mostly negatively by respondents—the bureaucratic inertia of the various tiers of local and central institutions in Japan emerged as one of the most frequent frames in the analysis. Several respondents lambasted the apparatus of regional and municipal governments, which they regard as “idle and entirely lacking an entrepreneurial mindset” (Respondent 3). In the past few decades, as local governments have increased their financial dependence on central governments, public servants have “failed to develop a sense of urgency towards the worsening realities around them” (Respondent 2). This sharp critique extends to the central government which, as shown by its response to the current COVID-19 crisis<sup>2</sup>, “tends to solve arising issues by adopting short-term solutions, such as distributing money, rather than addressing these deficiencies directly to the core” (Respondent 3).

On top of that, local civil servants are often criticized for their low levels of abilities in IT management. Although they are regarded to be the ones having the most accurate knowledge of the issues affecting their region, “their inability to devise innovative solutions to address these issues” is often specified (Respondent 2).

### *Societal crisis*

The Japanese postwar economic miracle has been widely interpreted (especially among Western scholars) as the direct consequence of a precise socio-economic model characterized by the dominance of private companies in the provision of services to the individual, rigid socio-economic hierarchies, lifetime employment, and consensus-based decision-making. Due to decades-long economic stagnation, a rapidly ageing society and dire socio-political immobilism, a company-centred lifestyle is framed as an anachronistic model, unsuitable for the looming challenges awaiting Japan and today's hyper-globalized world. “Individual lives

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<sup>2</sup> In the spring of 2020, the Japanese government apportioned a one-off cash payment of 100,000 (approx. 940 USD) to every resident in the country as a relief package to sustain consumption and tackle the economic fallout precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kyodo News, 2020)

are constrained by the logic and plans of public and private organizations, for instance through customs such as periodic hiring<sup>3</sup> (Respondent 3). The over-reliance on public and private supra-structural organisations is framed as an obstacle for individuals, impeding them to achieve self-fulfillment and acquire satisfactory standards of living. In addition, rapidly changing gender roles expectations have furtherly exposed the necessity of a swift change towards the development of an innovative social infrastructure able to address these issues in earnest.

The next section will elucidate the conflict between the sharing niche and the incumbent regime.

### **6.1.2 Diagnostic sub-frame 2: conflict between niche and regime**

On a theoretical level, the sharing paradigm possesses disruptive potential to bring about significant changes in the market, stimulating demand for new goods and services outside of the current market framework. However, according to the respondents, in Japan the existing regime has deployed all the resources at its disposal to oppose the rise of the sharing niche, capitalizing on its strong ties with the political élite and lobbying for ad-hoc legislation shielding its businesses. In this regard, two secondary frames have been identified: *political leverage* and *market disruption*.

#### *Political leverage*

The Japanized expression ‘silver democracy’ (シルバー民主主義, *shirubā minshushugi*) (Respondent 3) could be translated as ‘gerontocracy’ in English. That is, an overarching socio-political structure prioritizing the vested interests of elder generations and the entrenched benefits of established business to the detriment of innovation and younger generations. In Japan, this socio-political structure is founded on strong ties between big business, political actors wielding great leverage on the policy-making process and the bureaucracy (the notorious *iron triangle*, often recurring in manuals describing the Japanese economic miracle of the latter half of the twentieth century). Thanks to these collusive ties, big business acquires the capability of exerting considerable influence in the law-making process and lobbying for favourable legislation. The ill-fated course of action of global sharing companies such as Uber

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<sup>3</sup> Since the post-war period, Japanese companies have established the practice of hiring new graduates all at once—usually at the beginning of the fiscal year in April—and employing them simultaneously.

and Airbnb—which have met with aggressive opposition from the taxi and hospitality industries respectively—clearly demonstrate how “regime actors strive with all the necessary means to prevent the sharing niche from advancing its own business-model” (Respondent 1).

According to the respondents, regime actors hamper the full-fledged development of the sharing niche by putting up rigorous legal barriers to protect their interests: for instance, the “Private House Lodging Business Act<sup>4</sup>” could be considered an emblematic example of how “the government hindered the development of the shared-accomodation business, by introducing strict regulations, and allowing each municipality to enact its own regulation” (Respondent 1). The complexity of the bureaucratic apparatus and the legal hurdle—with local governments often constrained by intricate laws on land use or land ownership—greatly reduce the support for small markets and lead to “the establishment of a generally innovation non-conducive environment” (Respondent 2). Furthermore, “it is highly unlikely that any political party would turn powerful industries such as hospitality or mobility into political enemies” (Respondent 1).

### *Market disruption*

The frame of market disruption stems from the hard climate of competition between the existing sector and the sharing economy. “Although their business models might considerably differ, their target and their services often overlap” (Respondent 1). Whereas in Japan no sharing business has taken off to the extent that it has disrupted the existing sector, examples from abroad—such as bike sharing in China or Airbnb’s impact on the hospitality industry in Europe or in the USA—have instilled a sense of worry towards the harmful impact of the sharing economy on existing business and consumption practices. These fears have in turn established a higher psychological hurdle toward the utilization of sharing services. Japanese people are framed as “overly risk-averse” (Respondent 5) and overly sensitive to the handling of personal data. This element feeds into the relatively low levels of recognition for the sharing economy among the Japanese population: “an ageing, risk-averse population—often used to high-quality B2C services—will be less likely to become sharing-enthusiastic” (Respondent 1)

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<sup>4</sup> The Private Lodging Business Act was enforced by the Japanese government as a law to set some rules to control the spread of ‘private lodging’ (services such as Airbnb) in order to secure standards of hygiene and public order (MIT, 2017).

### *Preliminary conclusions on the diagnostic frame*

An analysis of the diagnostic frame suggests that the sharing niche is inclined to problematize a plethora of aspects of the existing socio-technical regime, ranging from its outdated socio-economic arrangements to the collusive ties between business and economic elites and the inertia of its bureaucratic machine. Local public servants are criticized for their indolence and their failure in adapting to new realities of financial constraints and limited resources and developing an entrepreneurial mindset. Although the sharing economy has gained considerable momentum in the past decade in Japan, it has never reached the prominence seen in countries such as the United States or China. The key reasons behind this state of backwardness are found in the strong opposition put up by the existing structures within the regime, coupled with ingrained resistance at a grassroots level. In the face of this antagonism, the sharing niche puts forward an allegedly innovative scheme that, built on core principles of democratized access to resources and individual empowerment, defies the existing modes of service provision. The next section will map out the main pillars of the prognostic framework advanced by relevant proponents of the sharing economy and its key shortcomings.

## **6.2. Prognostic framework: sharing as an innovative solution**

The Geels model shows that, after identifying the key issues faced by the regime, the niche advances a new socio-economic paradigm with the hope of setting off a transition in the socio-technical system. In Japan, stakeholders of the sharing economy often call for a radical shift not just on the economic structure of society, but on the very role of individuals in society. The following section will introduce the most recurrent frames in relation to the implementation of sharing-projects, by way of the framework of the sharing city.

### *Societal enhancement*

The sharing economy embraces an exceptionally broad range of different economic activities and practices. All respondents agreed on the existence of an underlying socio-cultural sharing at the very foundation of all rural communities in Japan—known in Japanese with the expression お裾分け, *osusowake*. In the past, rural communities used to share condiments and cooking ingredients—such as soy sauce and spices—among the neighbourhood, and social

cohesion used to be extremely stronger. Moreover, “in Japan a sense of respect towards things has always been present, but it has never been formalized as a business” (Respondent 2). The sharing economy pledges to bring back that original spirit of solidarity with the aid of platform technology. But its propositions often appear inconsistent and contradictory on a both theoretical and a practical level.

Services such as crowdsourcing or childcare sharing are framed as tangible solutions to resolve long-standing issues of employment, since they carry the potential of bringing concrete benefits to a wide pool of people providing them with the necessary incentive to acquire new skills or monetize their time. Municipal share-centres, where people currently out of employment or occupied in elderly care or childcare can acquire new skills, bear the potential to provide jobseekers with on-the-job Training (OJT), thus favouring their re-integration among the active population.

These opportunities of remote working and skill acquisition are framed as direct responses to the central role occupied by companies in the existing regime. The flexibility guaranteed to shared workers allows them to experiment with a working style free from time and space constraints. On top of that, the sharing paradigm pledges to bring the community back at the centre of modern societies: sharing is conceived as “an infrastructure allowing all individuals to support each other without relying on the companies’ help” (Respondent 3). The socio-cultural components of the sharing paradigm, together with an enhanced role of the individual, are framed as essential conditions for the construction of a more resilient and fair society.

Stronger social cohesion becomes useful in case of natural disasters when all services provided by public or private organisations come to a halt. In a country particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, the creation of a scheme of mutual cooperation between citizens is framed as a pivotal aspect of the sharing paradigm. Referring back to the *jijo-kōjo-kyōjo* paradigm, the sharing economy endorses a shift to *jijo* (self help), vowing to put the individuals back at the centre of society, and eventually fostering *kyōjo* (mutual aid) as the ultimate ideal framework for future society.

Here emerges the first apparent contradiction inherent in the social proposition of the sharing paradigm. On the one hand, the sharing paradigm seeks to empower individuals allowing them to capitalize and monetize their existing skills and time, and emancipate from supra-structural

organizations. At the same time however, it underscores the need to buttress social cohesion in the name of a democratized access to common resources.

A renewed emphasis on the potential hidden in individual empowerment openly defies the aspiration to strengthen communal ties and resume the enhanced role of communities. In this regard, the sharing economy's stance towards public and private organization appears slightly ambiguous. The rejection of any form of public aid, or support from the state whatsoever, does not correspond with the development of an innovative paradigm which truly questions the *modus operandi* of the existing regime. The sharing paradigm fails to provide a consistent alternative to the socio-technological system currently in place, as the “*societal crisis*” diagnostic framework does not seem to bear any significant relevance or feasibility. Overall, the lack of a consistent stance and an indisputable positioning in the *jijo-kōjo-kyōjo* paradigm appears to be one of the most significant shortfalls of the sharing paradigm. This aspect will be resumed in the final chapter.

#### *Women's empowerment*

A further sub-element within the *societal-enhancement* frame consists of the empowerment of women through the sharing paradigm. The creation of employment through practices of crowdsourcing is often framed as a way to contribute to the emancipation of women, especially in rural contexts. Partnering with companies that offer services such as childcare or sharing platforms for housekeeping-services, municipalities seek to promote the advancement of women primarily by reducing their share of household chores and encouraging them to play a more active role in society. These services are framed as “a way to actively contribute to women's self-realization and bring about a real change in a traditionally male-dominated society” (Respondent 5). Offering opportunities for acquiring concrete skills is seen by respondents as a direct way for women to monetize their untapped potential and boost their personal incomes.

In this regard too, the sharing paradigm seems to lack the attributes of a truly innovative niche, as it approaches the issue at stake—low female labour force participation—in a cosmetic fashion, without tackling its core causes in earnest. Practices of crowdsourcing, while doubtlessly providing women with higher disposable incomes and partially contributing to their independence and self-realization, do not establish the necessary conditions for the creation of stable employment, or even attempt to foster a highly needed renegotiation of

gender norms across society. In other words, they do not address deep-seated issues of gender inequality ingrained in Japanese society, but rather offer a stopgap solution in the short-term. Here again the sharing economy clearly lacks the attributes of a consistent niche fully able to reverse the existing regime. The ensuing section will elaborate on the economic motive as an integral pillar of the sharing paradigm.

### *Economic motive*

“The key to boost revenues, while promoting a sustainable transition, lies in the monetization of existing assets—both tangible and intangible”, says Respondent 4. Affluent societies such as Japan are not faced with the need to create new products to be sold in an already saturated market. On the contrary, crippled by an ageing population and sluggish economic growth, their challenge is “how to fully utilise underused assets already in the market” (Respondent 1). The economic incentive appears apparent for local administrators, who, in times of severe financial distress, could turn to their existing assets for the implementation of innovative services. Projects such as space-sharing or crowdsourcing enable local governments to address the increasingly diversifying needs of their communities by offering them a ‘plus-alpha’—a Japanese expression equivalent to the English *plus x*, used to indicate an extra added-value; something that is not part of the original plan, but that could potentially increase citizens’ satisfaction towards the quality of public services (Respondent 5).

Local governments in Japan could build up their services “on already existing platforms without earmarking any considerable amounts of resources for the initial stages, as the technology is often already present in the market” (Respondent 2). As initial costs of implementation remain limited and management operations are carried out by the sharing companies, the implementation of sharing services is framed as a win-win situation for both parties. In addition, the presence of intermediate organisations, such as local NPOs or local touristic agencies, facilitates coordination with private sharing companies that otherwise would obtain very little advantage in scaling their operations in rural areas hamstrung by depopulation and economic stasis. As these sharing companies often provide municipalities with the technology necessary to set up these businesses, the following section will explain the technological incentive inherent in the sharing paradigm.

As elucidated in the previous section, most sharing projects, after an initial phase of enthusiasm, failed to match up the expectations they generated, especially in terms of their alleged financial



benefit. It appears increasingly hard for local municipalities to become able to fully sustain themselves financially and halt their dependence on ministerial subsidies for the implementation and promotion of sharing projects. In all three municipalities, after an inchoate ascending curve, the sharing projects seem to have lost momentum in recent years.

### *Technological incentive*

In Japan, the low degree of digitalisation of PA is identified as one of the core causes of the low inclination toward innovation of local governments. The decades-long effort from the Japanese government to promote digitalisation in the PA sector bore little results. In this context, the sharing economy, mostly operating by way of online platforms, offers yet another possibility for the implementation of technology to match supply and demand in real-time, thus increasing customer satisfaction in the name of efficiency. The use of technology to advance the design of resilient and sustainable rural communities is framed as a possible way for local governments to depart from their original state of lethargy by adopting the latest technologies originating in metropolitan areas.

The sharing economy promises to advance digitalization and the technological literacy of administrators both at a central and local level. However, as demonstrated in the previous case studies, local administrators assume a rather marginal role in the process of implementation of platform technologies. As the majority of sharing projects were carried out by the sharing companies themselves, oftentimes in partnership with central government public servants, local governments benefit from the technology spur in a rather passive and tangential way. Innovation is not created at the municipal level, but elsewhere, and only at a second stage is transferred to the municipalities, often as a poorly understood blackbox. Here again, the sharing paradigm fails to address the diagnosed issues of *institutional inertia*; even if local governments show a certain degree of proactiveness and initiative, they are forced to maintain an over-reliance on central institutions for their technological development and their finances. The top-down approach characterising previous initiatives of rural revitalization has not changed.

### *Preliminary conclusions on the prognostic frame*

With its emphasis on monetary maximization of underutilized resources, the respondents consistently frame the sharing paradigm as an opportunity to capitalize on existing assets, eliminating the need for considerable expenditures from the municipality, and at the same time fostering stronger social cohesion among the community.

The findings show that, in mapping out the key elements of the prognostic framework, each respondent tends to underscore different aspects of the sharing paradigm. It is noteworthy to remark that respondent 3, a leading figure of the SEAJ heavily involved in the promotion of the sharing economy at various levels, puts greater emphasis on the aspects of *societal enhancement*, allegedly inherent in the sharing paradigm. On the other hand, respondents 4, 5 and 6, employed as public servants in local municipalities, all seem to predominantly prioritize the *economic motive* over the alleged *societal enhancement*. In fact, they show only a moderate involvement in the alleged social benefits of the sharing economy, rather stressing the possibilities of economic return and lower financial burden. This inconsistency epitomizes the agenda-driven nature of the sharing economy, as different stakeholders strive to promote a specific position and message utilising the same medium. With a framework as blurry and contested as the sharing economy, the absence of a univocal definition and predetermined, clear-cut boundaries enables different actors to carry out their own agendas and initiatives through the sharing paradigm.

In essence, in the context of rural Japan there appears to be considerable discrepancy between the theoretical formulation of the sharing paradigm, its alleged opposition to the existing socio-technical system, and its actual implementation in practice. In fact, if the diagnosis spells out deep shortfalls and inadequacies of the socio-economic system currently in place, the prognosis fails to address them in earnest and propose a consistent and viable alternative that could subvert the system currently in place. The necessity to monetize existing assets in fact falls on conventional notions of economic opportunity, embedded in the market economy. Moreover, the inherent tension between the relational/communal element and the commercial element casts some doubts over the inherent altruistic nature of the sharing model, hampering its functionality as a coherent alternative. The contradictions emerging in between the existing frames prove that the prognostic framework denominated by the sharing paradigm lacks the attributes of a true alternative that could significantly challenge the existing regime.

### **6.3 Motivational framework: policy-outcome analysis**

The theoretical framework of the policy-success heuristic will be deployed to assess how the implementation of the sharing paradigm has been framed by the respondents. Specifically, this subsection will expound the link between the model advanced in the prognostic framework and the need of upholding the prognosis to gain support of relevant groups and promote greater engagement with the sharing paradigm. By delineating both an objective and a subjective

element in the definition of success, the framework of the policy-success heuristic facilitates a more nuanced analysis of the contradictions inherent in a black-and-white assessment of policy outcome.

### **6.3.1. Motivational sub-frame 1: success as goal-attainment**

The implementation of the sharing services through the sharing-city framework seeks to resolve specific challenges affecting the regime and furnish a prompt response to the increasingly diversifying needs of the citizens.

#### *Openness and receptivity*

There is vast consensus among respondents over “the considerable socio-economic benefits that the exposure to innovative practices such as crowdsourcing has given to [the cities’] populations” (Respondent 4). Given their relatively small size, it is quite hard to imagine higher scalability of these services, but it appears that these practices all resulted in higher citizen satisfaction towards the provision of municipal services and expectations for future improvements of their standard of living. By establishing a profitable collaboration with private sharing companies, local governments demonstrated that it is possible to offer high-quality safety nets to the citizens through a public framework—without any significant expenses in the implementation (Respondent 6). The cities of Taku and Yuzawa have shown outstanding results in the implementation of sharing services, as “practices of crowdsourcing and remote working have taken roots among the cities’ populations” (Respondents 4; Respondent 5).

#### *Reputation benefit*

The pioneering municipalities that have implemented sharing projects have gradually gained a reputation as trailblazers and experienced a significant boost in their popularity across the country. “The sharing economy provided the opportunity to small, relatively-unknown rural cities [such as Taku and Yuzawa] to brand themselves and raise their name recognition” (Respondent 4; Respondent 5). A continuous activity of promotion and advertising, coupled with the organization of explanatory workshops, has fostered the understanding of the sharing economy and greatly contributed to the framed success of these projects. When the three cities of Taku, Yuzawa and Shimabara were nominated as ‘sharing cities’ in November 2016, they received great media attention. In turn, being in the spotlight lifted their revenues from the touristic sector, as an increasing number of people started studying and visiting them. In

addition, increased opportunities for exchange, and openness to new trends and technologies, have been largely framed as beneficial for the cities.

### **6.3.2. Motivational sub-frame 2: success as interpretation**

The next section will illustrate the subjective dimension of success. When framing the reasons behind the alleged success of certain sharing initiatives, respondents have identified two primary reasons: the diversification of economic activities and their geographical expansions.

#### *Diversification of economic activities*

The most successful projects have witnessed the simultaneous implementation of different projects stretching across a diverse pool of realms: employment creation, touristic revitalization, space-sharing, and support to women among others. This “allows greater opportunities of exposure to diverse ways of thinking and higher profitability” (Respondent 2; Respondent 4). A diversification of the services offered by the community is framed as a great advantage for the local municipalities, as they can strengthen their partnerships with private sharing companies and expand their name recognition as sharing cities.

#### *Geographical expansion*

Not only are the municipalities “encouraged to diversify their offers and expand their collaboration with sharing companies, but they also ought to explore possibilities for cooperation with other municipalities in their region or across the country” (Respondent 2). This movement towards geographical expansion—relying on the aid of intermediate organisations or large private companies—fits into the notion of abandonment of the ‘full-set model’, or the idea that local governments are able to maintain and conduct all activities related to the provision of public services on their own (a model that, according to the respondents, in the past often led to failures and misspending of public-funds). By augmenting their activities with existing networks provided by big Japanese companies, local governments have the opportunity to establish networks of sharing cities and strengthen their prominence vis-a-vis urban areas.

### *Preliminary conclusions on the motivational frame*

The motivational framework is established by the sharing niche to promote greater engagement with its key propositions and builds on a two-tier examination of alleged objective and subjective dimensions. Here again, an in-depth analysis of the way respondents frame policy-outcome again demonstrates a great level of in-between-frames discrepancy. Respondents frame the success of their initiatives in a rather utilitarian way, as reaching pre-determined goals and maximizing benefits over costs, rather than supposedly reaching stronger social cohesion and fostering social cohesion among the communities.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Each theme touched upon in the previous sections, from economic sustainability to gender equality and social policy, could be addressed as an entire topic in and of itself. Furthermore, there is space for a greater production of empirical studies on single cases of sharing projects involving local users. However, for reasons of practicality, users of sharing services were not involved in this study. This should be considered as a limitation of this study.

The three research sub questions were addressed in the previous section and laid the groundwork to answer the main research question. This chapter will provide some final remarks on the sharing-economy model as presented by the respondents.

As already hinted at in the preliminary conclusions on the three overarching frames, this thesis concludes that the sharing paradigm, as presented by respondents, does not constitute a viable alternative to existing modes of revitalization enacted in rural Japan. Its socio-economic propositions are not deemed to represent a consistent, innovative, and viable alternative in the realms of public management and service provision.

Firstly, an in-depth analysis of the social propositions advanced by the sharing paradigm denotes a significant level of ideological ambiguity and contradiction. Its proponents postulate that its avoidance of any sort of support from the state in the form of public aid (*kōjo*) could be compensated by individual enhancement through self help (*jijo*) and the re-establishment of mutual aid (*kyōjo*). These two notions appear contradictory. If, on one hand, the sharing paradigm decries the dependence of individuals from structural organizations—in the

paradigm's eyes, an obsolete model—then on the other it pledges to restore social cohesion and communal governance at a local level. The proposition of individual empowerment, practically implemented in the promotion of freelance/irregular employment and allowing individuals to capitalize their existing skills, appears to benefit only the top quintile of society, already in possession of economic, human and social capital. Overall, sharing as a social infrastructure appears closer to neoliberal paradigms of self-responsibility than to any consistent alternative founded on grassroots, socially just paradigms of societal development. As it is presented by respondents, sharing seems to represent the latest tool developed by central authorities under the guise of a groundbreaking shift to people-oriented policy, to conceal the downright failure of previous programs of revitalization. As shown by the relatively low degree of recognition among the general public, it appears unlikely that the paradigm will permeate across large strata of the Japanese society.

Secondly, from an economic perspective, the constant tension between the relational/altruistic and the market dimension inherent in sharing hinders any consistent attempt to put forward an alternative to existing modes of economic revitalization. As long as logics of marketization, profits and scalability remain ingrained in the sharing paradigm, it could not be appraised as a viable alternative to the current public-management framework. Its stakeholder-driven component and its reliance on key structures of the existing regime— such as, for instance, big conglomerates' networks for the expansion of sharing services— clearly demonstrate a lack of consistency in the socio-economic propositions embedded in the sharing paradigm.

Thirdly, in the shape in which it is delineated by respondents, sharing appears to constitute a cosmetic, as opposed to structural, solution to the predicaments faced by rural Japan. That is, the sharing paradigm seems to treat the symptoms rather than the problem. Monetization allows municipalities to reap revenues from dormant resources and experiment with innovative models of socio-economic development. Hence, the short-term concrete benefits of the implementation of sharing services seem apparent. However, as shown with the *women empowerment and technological incentive* frameworks, the sharing paradigm does not truly challenge the core tenets of the existing system. It does not represent a panacea to the diseases affecting rural Japan—economically, it does not provide a continuous source of revenues for local governments; neither does it address the root cause of persisting gender inequality. Technologically, it fails to lay the groundwork for a full-fledged regional technological

development. Overall, it does not question the top-down, central-led approach taken so far and accordingly cannot be regarded as an alternative to existing policies of rural revitalization.

A single panacea for all the tough challenges affecting rural Japan does not arise out of the blue. Complex and multifaceted issues spanning across economic, social and political dimensions can seldom be tackled by a standardized framework, as it is often formulated by the proponents of the sharing economy. A change of course in the top-down, central-led approach adopted thus far seems essential to save rural Japan from an inexorable decline.

A bottom-up approach, where local units have an effective say in policy-making process, could harmoniously accommodate central requests for control over the governance and the day-to-day necessities of local administrators. A coordinated effort between central and local authorities taking into account the necessities of local stakeholders, in line with the subsidiarity principle of coordination of policies between national and sub-national actors, might offer a valid toolset useful in tackling these complex societal issues.

But, it goes without saying, Rome was not built in a day.

# APPENDIX I

## LIST OF EXAMINED REPORTS

Title of the Report (Japanese)	Title of the Report (English)	Publication Date	Author(s)
シェアニッポン 2019	“Share Japan 2019”	March 2019	Office for the Promotion of the Sharing Economy
シェアニッポン 2020	“Share Japan 2020”	March 2020	Office for the Promotion of the Sharing Economy
中国地域におけるシェアリングエコノミー復興方策検査	“Report on the sharing economy recovery policy in the Chūgoku region”	March 2020	Chūgoku Region Regional Creation Research Centre
多久市シェアリングエコノミーの活用について	“About the implementation of the sharing economy in Taku City”	August 2017	Taku City
シェアリングエコノミーに未来を託す湯沢市	“Yuzawa City entrusting the future to the sharing economy”	Autumn 2019	Intercultural Academy of Municipalities
シェアリングエコノミーによる協働の町づくり・秋田県湯沢市の取り組みから	“Regional collaborative development through the sharing economy- A study of Yuzawa City, Akita Prefecture”	September 2018	Hokkaido Development Association Japan
シェアリングエコノミーで解決する自治体課題に関する調査研究報告	Research report on the regional issues solved through the sharing economy	March 2020	The Institute for Tokyo Municipal Research



## APPENDIX II

The following questionnaires were employed in the six interviews conducted for this research. The interviewees were divided into three main groups: those who had conducted extensive research on the sharing economy, those who had actively engaged in the promotion of the sharing economy, and those who had taken an active role in the implementation of the sharing paradigm in the local municipalities in question. The questionnaires presented here were translated into English by the author and simplified for sake of clarity.

### QUESTIONNAIRE 1/3

1. How would you define the sharing economy? What are the main distinctive features of the sharing economy?

- What impact does the sharing economy have on the existing sector?
- What impact does the sharing economy have on consumption patterns?
- What other aspects should be considered when defining the sharing paradigm? E.g. cultural features, stage of economic development

2. What is the current situation of the sharing paradigm in Japan?

- What were the main obstacles to the expansion of the sharing paradigm in Japan?
- How does the potential conflict between the regime and the niche manifest itself in Japan?

3. How is the Japanese government positioning itself in the advancement of the sharing paradigm in rural Japan?

- What are the reasons behind Japan's focus on the implementation of the sharing paradigm in a rural context?

4. In what ways can the sharing paradigm be successfully applied to the context of rural Japan?

- What are the main obstacles which can arise in the implementation of the sharing paradigm in Japan?
- How does the interplay between private and public stakeholders unfold in rural Japan?

5. In what ways can the sharing paradigm bear any concrete benefit to the socio-economic development of rural Japan?

- How could the framework currently in place be optimized to the benefit of rural municipalities?

### QUESTIONNAIRE 2/3

1. How were you acquainted with the concept of ‘sharing’?
2. What is the current situation of the sharing economy in Japan?
  - How has the sharing-economy sector developed so far?
  - What impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the expansion of the sharing economy?
3. What were the main obstacles to the expansion of the sharing paradigm in Japan?
  - What are the main differences you noticed in comparison with other foreign countries?
4. The sharing economy has been heavily criticized for several reasons, including the exacerbation of socioeconomic inequality and labour precariousness, its illusory promise of a technology-led social revolution, the birth of a race to the bottom in the labour market. How would you respond to these critiques?
  - Is there room for any improvement in the way the sharing platforms have acted so far?
5. What are the advantages of implementing the sharing paradigm in the context of rural Japan?
  - Which issues could be addressed through the introduction of the sharing paradigm in Japan?
6. What is the role of the central government in the promotion of the sharing economy in rural Japan?
  - How does the interplay between central government, local government and sharing companies occur in the implementation of sharing services in Japan?

### QUESTIONNAIRE 3/3

1. How would you define a sharing city?
  - What are the main benefits originating for citizens through the implementation of the sharing-city model?

2. How was your municipality acquainted with the sharing economy?
  - What are the main issues that could be addressed through the implementation of the sharing economy?
3. Which sharing services is your municipality currently implementing?
  - What were the main difficulties your municipality needed to face in the promotion of the sharing economy? How did you address them?
4. What do you think it is necessary to successfully implement the sharing economy at a municipality level?
  - Do you think that your municipality could be considered a successful example of a sharing-municipality?
  - Is there anything that other municipalities could learn from your example? Is there any point you would like to stress?
5. Do you think that the sharing economy represents a viable solution for rural municipalities from a financial perspective?
6. What is the role of the main actors— central government, local governments, sharing companies and big business conglomerates— in the promotion and implementation of the sharing economy?

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