

## Article

# The Importance of the Sharing Economy in Improving the Quality of Life and Social Integration of Local Communities on the Example of Virtual Groups

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**Abstract:** The main objective of the article was to demonstrate and prove the role of the sharing economy in integrating local communities as well as in improving the quality of life of urban residents. The sharing economy is an alternative model of consumption entered around an access to given goods without the need to possess it. The concept fits excellently into the ideas that are at the core of the social economy. Internet groups operating in the area of the sharing economy were analysed for the purpose of the article. Their members either live in or have other bonds with Krakow. They are usually focused around issues important for local communities. In the research, a triangulation method was used, involving a desk analysis as well as a passive observation and a covered participative observation. Such choice of methods allowed for the topic of the impact that the sharing economy has on the integration and the quality of life of urban residents to be analysed. The research confirmed that the sharing economy; as a form of social innovation; influences the improvement of the quality of life. Online groups integrate local communities and have a significant impact on the quality of life of city residents (T1; T2; T3; T4). The bilateral nature of dependency between the sharing economy and the quality of life was noticed. Firstly; the sharing economy affects the shape and quality of the product or service that is the subject of the transaction. It is also crucial to create a general “ambience of a site” in the internet group; which supports and stimulates satisfaction of the needs related to the sense of individuality; authenticity and community. On the other hand; the sharing economy affects the satisfaction of residents through economic; psychological; political and social impacts as well as individual ones; related to, e.g., the development of creativity and the acquisition of new skills



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## 1. Introduction

A sharing economy is an alternative consumption model but also one of a form taken by social innovation. The concept fits excellently into the ideas that are at the core of the social economy and refers to the activity taken for public benefit, which assumes the dominance of social effects over the endeavours towards maximising profits. It contains core elements of social innovation, such as novelty, the effectiveness and fulfilment of social needs and the improvement of society's ability to act [1–3]. Its important objective is to “actively seek and exploit opportunities to solve social problems” [4]. The great importance of the sharing economy in the sustainable development of the city, and thus, in the cost-effective management of limited resources, as well as in environmental protection, should also be emphasized. Certainly, the sharing economy plays an important role in the integration of local communities operating within the city and cooperating in the field of sharing goods and services. Furthermore, the sharing economy is an important trend, particularly in terms of developing the components of the quality of life.

Analysis of the subject's literature showed that issues related to the impact of sharing economy on quality of life [5] are relatively rarely discussed. The authors usually focus on the impact of the sharing economy on sustainable development [6–9] or a development of smart cities [10,11] and a directly related rapid technological and technological development. Similarly, it is extremely difficult to find research on the sharing economy or quality of life using qualitative methods. After all, it is the qualitative research that gives the opportunity to deepen the subject and seems to be the most appropriate in the study of quality of life, especially in the context of perceived higher-level needs. The above observations and the identified gap provided the basis for further research.

The aim of the article is to demonstrate the impact of the sharing economy on improving the quality of life of users of urban spaces, as well as the integration of local communities. The internet groups active in specific identified areas of the sharing economy were researched. Groups were diagnosed on the basis of a passive observation and covert participative observation. In the analyses, proprietary research tools were used, developed on the basis of the methodological literature. The research confirmed that the sharing economy, as a form of social innovation, influences the improvement of the quality of life. Online groups integrate local communities and have a significant impact on the quality of life of city residents (T1, T2, T3, T4).

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Assumptions

### 2.1. *The Concept of the Sharing Economy*

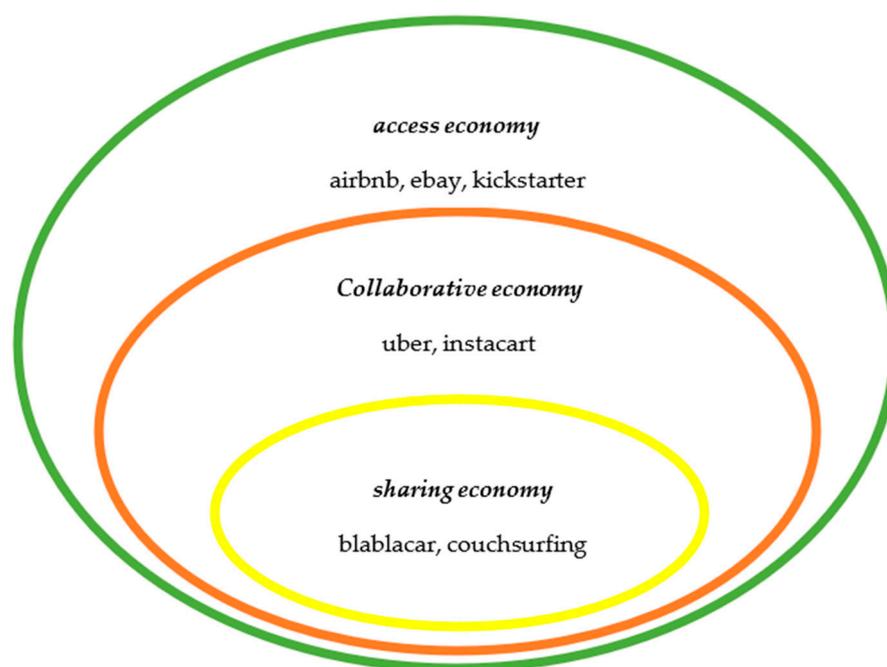
The mechanism of sharing is not a new one, because exchange between people has always existed, reflecting social relations and consolidating cultural practices [12]. Sharing resources with strangers is a new aspect of the sharing economy [13]. Therefore, it goes beyond the circle of family members, friends or neighbours. At the same time, the risk of sharing is increasing, which attempts to minimise online platforms with a system of evaluation and reputation [14].

In the literature on the subject, many terms describing the sharing economy are used interchangeably, such as sharing economy, sharing, mesh, peer-to-peer economy [15], collaborative economy [16], access economy [17], collaborative consumption [18] or gig economy [19]. However, they cannot be treated as synonyms, as each of them corresponds to different methods of interaction [20]. It should be assumed that the sharing economy fits into the broader context of the platform economy and collaborative consumption. It is characterised by the following three key features: consumer relations (C2C), temporary access and physical resources.

The literature contains many inconsistencies in defining the term. It is generally assumed that sharing is mostly rental, leasing, letting, barter agreements and an exchange of goods. It is based on people's propensity to work together, share their time and assets and, perhaps, reciprocating by offering tangible and intangible compensation.

The concept of access economy introduced by G. M. Eckhardt and F. Bardhi [21] contributed to the further clarification and more close specification of such terms as sharing economy, collaborative economy and peer economy (collaborative economy, peer economy) and the determination of their interdependencies. (Figure 1).

Access economy is the broadest term, and it is a community-based economy based on decentralised network markets, built in bottom-up processes and by-passing traditional go-betweens and agents. Collaborative economy is a slightly narrower notion within the access economy concept. It expands the concept of a sharing economy, with an important role played by business entities charging for access to their resources and not offering them only based on a joint/shared consumption principle. Here, an important role is played by the intermediaries who are often profit-oriented. The narrower of the notions discussed in the paper that is, at the same time, contained in both the above-mentioned concepts, is a sharing economy. It is based on sharing available or not fully used resources and services, for or without a charge, directly from private individuals. The community plays an important role in a sharing economy, while the role of intermediaries is reduced [22,23].



**Figure 1.** Sharing economy in a broader context. Source: own study based on [23].

## 2.2. Sharing Economy—Its Genesis and Essence

The term “sharing economy” was first used in 1978 by American professors M. Felson and J.L. Spaeth in an article devoted to renting cars to other persons [24], to be later popularised by a management consultant, R. Algara, in 2007 [25]. The research conducted by R. Botsman and R. Rogers as well as their monograph published in 2010 [18], in which they attempted to prove that collaborative consumption was a long-term revolution in contemporary consumers’ behaviours, largely contributed to promoting the concept. Similarly, publications by L. Gansky [26] and research by F. Bardhi and G.M. Eckhardt [27] and J. Bainbridge [28] confirmed a change in the attitudes of some contemporary consumers consisting of giving up ownership of many goods in favour of renting them.

The dominant approach in scientific studies is that the sharing economy is an alternative consumption model that places access to a given good in the centre without the necessity to have it [27,29–32]. Temporary access is the basis for sharing that enables a more efficient use of resources. The profound social change in this area and the accompanying digital revolution meant that possessed goods ceased to be treated as a reflection of the identity of the individual, which may indicate entering an era of post-ownership [29,33–35]. The trust between users and the reputation built on the internet are also important [13], as well as a new social quality created between complete strangers [29,36]. The role of new technologies is also emphasized, as they significantly reduce transaction costs, make it possible to share previously unavailable resources [12,35–37] and create a network of connections between individual market participants [26]. Issues related to legal regulations that do not keep up with the new emerging technologies and their possibilities are also raised with an increasing frequency [13,36,38,39]. Researchers also point to the great potential of the sharing economy in terms of a more efficient use of resources and sustainable development [40].

The collaborative economy comprises three categories of participants, namely, service providers sharing their goods, resources, time or skills—these may be individuals offering peers or professional service providers (professional service providers); consumers of the abovementioned services/resources and intermediaries—linking and facilitating user-friendly providers through the online platform (cooperation platforms) [41].

The areas for sharing resources are very diverse. The key sectors and examples of platforms have been presented in the table (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Some of the key sectors of the sharing economy.

Sector	Sharing Area	Examples of Platforms
Mobility and transportation	Ride sharing Ride sourcing Ride splitting	Blablacar Lyft Uber
	Vehicle sharing (cars, bikes, boats, jets, etc.)	Zipcar, Autosshare
Spaces	Accommodation Workspace Storage space Recreational space	Airbnb, Couchsurfing Wework, Sharedesk MakeSpace, Spaceout 596 Acres
	Skills/talent	Taskrabbit, DogVacay Upwork, Crowdspring
Financing	Money Lending Crowdfunding Insurance	LendingClub, Prosper Kickstarter, gofundme Friendsurance, insPeer
	Health	Cohealo Crowdmed, dr on demand
Utilities	Telecommunications Information Energy	Fon, Open Garden OpenDataSoft Gridmates, Trec
	General goods	Used/unused goods Loaner products
Food	Meals	EarWith, Sharecity, Mealsharing
Learning	Peer-to-peer learning Open courses	P2P, skillshare, sharing academy Courser, khanacademy

Source: Ref. [15].

### 2.3. The Impact of the Sharing Economy on Urban Functions

A growing concentration of people and, thus, of resources (capital: physical, human, organization, technology, knowledge, information) and the resulting problems related to mobility, create needs and favourable conditions for the development of the sharing economy [42,43].

The impact of the sharing economy on cities can be identified in the following three main spheres: social, economic and environmental (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Sharing economy and the area of its impact on a city.

Area of Impact		
Social	Economic	Environmental
Social capital	Real property market	Urban mobility (reduction in CO <sub>2</sub> emissions) Redistribution of goods
Social bonds	Tourism	
Mutual assistance of residents	Hotel (hospitality) services	
Social integration	Entrepreneurial activity	

Source: Own study.

One of the most developed areas of the sharing economy is shared mobility, which includes both sharing vehicles (cars, scooters, bicycles, electric scooters) and rides. The importance of urbanisation for the development of the economy of sharing in the mobility sector is presented, inter alia, in studies by B. Cohen and J. Kietzmann [44]. Moreover, the available options of ad hoc journeys, especially in the city, significantly alter the way travellers/commuters use the means of transport and establish connections between them [45]. Transport decisions of urban users can consist of both shifts from private to shared transport, as well as from public transport to shared transport [46].

From the perspective of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to the atmosphere and the associated environmental benefits, in terms of effectiveness, it is clearly more effective to integrate shared journeys with public transport (e.g., city bike, rail transport, electric city buses). Shared mobility has a positive effect on both travel conditions and the reduction in the number of private cars used in urban spaces. Research conducted in five cities located in Canada and the USA showed an improvement in the speed and comfort of travel for users, a reduction in travel costs, a reduction in the number of kilometres travelled, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (by 4–18% in the surveyed cities), as well as a reduction in the number of cars in the surveyed cities by 28 thousand vehicles [47].

There is no doubt that the sharing economy also significantly affects transformations in tourism and consumer behaviour in this area [48]. There is a noticeable increase in the supply of accommodation places and the development of the market for accommodation in private properties. On the other hand, some economic disadvantages of that can also be observed. An example of this is the segment of cheaper hotel services, where the dominance of the Airbnb platform resulted in a significant reduction in the revenues of other entities [49]. Additionally, the growing popularity of Airbnb has a negative impact on the functioning of local communities. The perceivable nuisance results from the high rotation of tenants, which increases the sense of danger and negative attitudes among permanent residents of city districts. The most common reason for the irritation of permanent residents is the use of competitive public resources by tourists (e.g., parking spaces), as well as the lack of care for common resources [50].

The impact of the sharing economy on the real estate market is due to the high popularity of accommodation sharing platforms. This results in both an increase in the demand for real property (its purchase and subsequent rental via an Airbnb platform), as well as an increase in the supply of accommodation offers. An increased demand leads to an increase in the sale and rental prices of apartments in popular locations.

The sharing economy also contributes to stimulating and developing entrepreneurial behaviour among city dwellers. They are most often manifested in the provision of real estate maintenance services, such as cleaning, gardening, swimming pool maintenance, etc. [51,52]. Another manifestation of entrepreneurship within the sharing economy is certainly the sharing of cars, apartments, houses, gardens and tools by their owners on specific online platforms and charging appropriate fees for it. Social benefits can be also achieved when relations are coined among strangers, potentially transforming into more permanent interactions [53–55]. Some manifestations of the sharing economy generate social benefits such as social assistance and integration. Members of network communities share their knowledge and skills (timebanks), as well as possessed goods (food, flowers, toys, clothes, etc.). Increasingly, the importance of ownership is diminishing in favour of the accumulation of experiences [56].

Seul is an example of a city that has fully applied the sharing economy. The city has an impressive IT infrastructure (the fastest internet in the world, available for free), many programs based on the sharing economy and large-scale car sharing projects among residents. Amsterdam is the best illustration of the sharing economy city in Europe. In 2015, this city was named the first sharing city in Europe and is based, among others, on systems such as Peerby or Snappcar. It has also a developed digital infrastructure. Another European city that deploys the sharing economy tools is Berlin. Its residents may use the world's most developed public car network. Paris is another city that thrives on the sharing economy. The city has the most developed bike rentals and car sharing systems [57].

The sharing economy is also present in Poland. The most popular are services such as Blablacar—an online platform for sharing car trips, Vinted—a website for selling used clothing and accessories, Couchsurfing—a website based on the sharing economy for finding free accommodation around the world, or Airbnb—an online platform for short-term real property rentals. Three Polish cities (Kraków, Warsaw, Wrocław) have also implemented a city car-sharing car rental system, encompassing a network of self-service car rentals for several minutes, hours or even days. The main purpose of introducing this

system is to convince residents to give up owning their own cars, which will significantly contribute to reducing air pollution and improving the quality of life of residents. The introduction of car-sharing also significantly reduces the need for parking spaces. This is of great importance due to the time spent looking for a parking space as well as the protection of public spaces and monuments [58].

The above considerations confirm the great importance of the sharing economy in the sustainable development of the city, and thus, in the cost-effective management of limited resources, as well as in environmental protection. Certainly, the sharing economy also plays an important role in the integration of local communities operating within the city and cooperating in the field of sharing goods and services. Internet platforms are a key tool used by the participants of the sharing economy. In particular, it is because of the use of social platforms and virtual groups that are formed or created by users. Their members (also those who are users of urban space) exchange knowledge and are active in a number of areas related to the sharing of goods and services. These efforts strengthen mutual ties and integrate local communities [59]. Further to the above, the two following theses may be put forward:

**Thesis 1 (T1).** *Internet groups operating within the sharing economy play an important role in creating social bonds and integrating local communities in the city.*

**Thesis 2 (T2).** *Internet groups operating within the sharing economy play an important role in the recirculation of goods, and thus, significantly contribute to the protection of the natural environment in the city.*

#### 2.4. The Impact of the Sharing Economy on Improving the Quality of Life of Local Communities

The perception of quality by people varies and depends on many social and economic factors that determine the nature (character) of a location (city/town). Above all, however, it depends on the desired level of meeting the needs of a higher and lower order, resulting directly from individual expectations, objectives and opportunities available. Ultimately, it is they who play a decisive role in determining the factors affecting quality of life. An individual chooses a set of needs necessary for them in a given place and time; therefore, the level of satisfaction of needs will be individual for everyone [60–62]. The quality of life is “a set of spatial-environmental, production and cultural factors that make up the reality in which a person lives” [63] (p. 79). The very determination of one’s own situation and position is made in the face of commonly shared and communicated norms and values that result from a deeper cultural, social and economic context (Figure 2).

Subjective quality of life is a set (vector) of assessments of objective qualitative facts (assessments of the degree of satisfaction with various objective forms of satisfying human needs) characterizing various aspects of human life and derived from a psychological scale. Subjective quality of life is, therefore, a multidimensional assessment of an individual’s present life in the cultural context that concerns them and the values that they profess. It is primarily an expression of well-being in its physical, mental and spiritual aspects [64]. Thus, this quality of life is the value (assessment) of the preference function defined on objective qualitative states, that is as follows:

$$J_s = f(J_o) = f([X_1, X_2, \dots]) \quad (1)$$

where

$J_s$ —subjective quality of life;

$J_o$ —objective quality of life and;

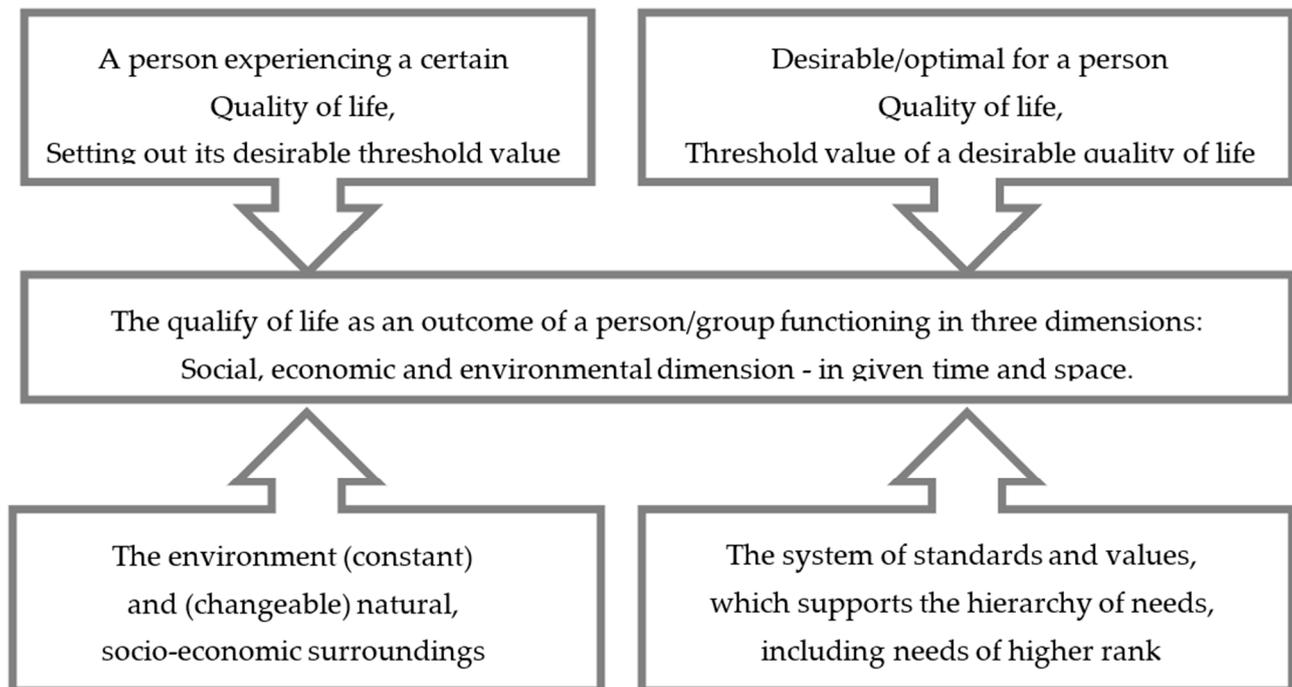
$X_1, X_2, \dots$ —objective qualitative conditions.

The sharing economy is an important trend, in particular in terms of developing the components of the quality of life; however, the role it plays in shaping sustainable consumption is still unknown and can only potentially be described as significant [65]. One can also reflect on the sense of individual changes [66], i.e., the so-called importance of individual responsibility, because in the light of sustainable consumption, the most desirable are social

changes involving a wide participation of society. The sharing economy may make such changes possible as, in a special way, thanks to modern media, it engages the society in new forms of cooperation. Based on the above, the following theses were formulated:

**Thesis 3 (T3).** *The behaviour of members of internet groups in the area of sharing economy, as those resulting from the willingness to satisfy higher-order needs, significantly influences the improvement of the quality of life of local communities.*

**Thesis 4 (T4).** *The sharing economy has a significant impact on improving the quality of life of urban residents.*



**Figure 2.** Quality of life across the urban policy objectives and measures. Source: own study.

### 3. Materials and Methods

Between February and April 2021, direct research was carried out, consisting in observing 76 internet groups created on Facebook and Instagram, operating in the area of sharing economy and associating people of all ages, living in Krakow or in some way related to this city. The research used the triangulation method that included the analysis of the literature on the subject of the functioning of virtual communities in the area of sharing economy, the impact of the sharing economy on the integration of local communities and the quality of life of the population in the city, as well as passive observation and participant hidden observation. Such choice of methods and, in particular, use of the qualitative methods, allowing for researching subjective phenomena that are difficult to measure in quantitative terms, allowed for the topic of the impact that the sharing economy has on the integration and the quality of life of urban residents to be analysed.

Note that online platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, also referred to as social networking sites, are used for the ordinary exchange of information. As part of the services provided by the administrators of this type of platforms, there are no specific features that would indicate a relationship with the sharing economy. However, they can be used by users to collaborate and to realize the values considered constitutive of the sharing economy. In addition, it is observed with increasing frequency that platform administrators from the sharing area create profiles on social networking sites. They are then complementary to the main activity, delivering the information and using the communication function with the users of a given platform. Virtual groups are also set up by people using the platform

offer, providing a space for the exchange of knowledge and experience related to the use of the platform.

Relatively often, groups created in the virtual world (also those from the area of the sharing economy) connect people living in a specific real space and focus on the problems of these local communities. Groups can bring together residents of an entire city (Kraków się dzieli/Is Sharing), as well as residents of districts (Aktywne Łagiewniki), housing estates (Os. Na Stoku) and even specific blocks of flats (Osiedle Botanika) or people living somewhere else, in another location, but somehow related to a certain space or area. Typically, the information is included in the group's name. Such groups tend to be private, with members accepted by an administrator. This diversity of intentions to create virtual groups leading to the introduction of sharing economy activities in real life as well as their relationship with real space and a measurable impact on its functioning, contributed to the decision to start the empirical research. The main goal of the research was to investigate whether virtual groups, operating in the area of the sharing economy, integrate local communities and significantly affect the quality of life of city residents, and thus, confirm the four theses put forward at the beginning (T1, T2, T3, T4).

The starting point for conducting qualitative observations was to analyse the various stages of preparation and conduct of the observations. The research procedure included the following stages: development of the observation concept, selection of the place of observation, design of a research tool, training of supporting researchers, obtaining consent to conduct observations in the studied space, carrying out preliminary observations, conducting the actual research and analysing the research results (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Stages of the empirical research based on observation applied as a research method.

No.	Research Stages	Specification
1.	Developing the concept of observation	An analysis of the literature on the subject, development of the research concept, formulation of the goal and research questions, specification of research areas in the sharing economy space within which the research is conducted (transport, real estate, gastronomy, finance, exchange of goods and knowledge, time/skills banks).
2.	Selecting the place/location of the observation	The place of observation was virtual space—social networks (Facebook, Instagram).
3.	Designing a research tool	A unified sheet enabling the structured characterisation of the virtual groups studied was used to measure the observed phenomena. It contained some detailed instructions for both passive observation and covert participative observation.
4.	Training supporting researchers	Selected students at economic universities acting as supporting researchers. They were trained and equipped with a unified research sheet and a detailed procedure for the proper conduct of passive and covert participative observation in a virtual environment.
5.	Obtaining consent to conduct observations in the studied space	The procedure for obtaining consent to conduct an observation comprised the following three stages: (1). Notifying one's intention/willingness to become a member of a selected internet group, (2). acceptance of the group regulations by the researcher, (3). Admittance by the administrator to the researched virtual group.
6.	Initial observations	Conducting the observation of several selected internet groups in order to verify the correctness of the research tool.
7.	Conducting proper research—passive observation and then covert participative observation	Focused on passive and covert participative observation (narrowing down the research to selected groups based on the adopted criteria)—consisting of the following stages: searching for virtual groups within designated areas, the researcher's enrolment in selected groups, detailed analysis of information regarding the groups found (year of establishment, the number of members, the level of members' activity—the number of posts per day, the subject of the posts), selection of groups with the highest intensity of activity, falling within the selected topic, passive observation of selected groups, active observation of groups consisting in placing minimum of 3 posts in the observed groups and stimulating discussion for about a week, additionally commenting on the statements of other group members.

Source: Own study.

The key point at the stage of developing the concept of planned empirical research was to specify the main research areas in the sharing economy space, which were to be covered by further research. In the course of an in-depth analysis of the literature on the subject, such areas as transport, real estate, gastronomy, finance, exchange of goods and knowledge and time/skills banks were specified. The empirical research began with searching for virtual groups functioning within such social networks as Facebook and Instagram, which are thematically located in the specified research areas and associated with both the inhabitants of Krakow as well as people emotionally or in business related to this city. The aforementioned groups were searched primarily through the use of keywords adequate for individual research areas and locations in real space (Krakow, city districts, individual housing estates, etc.), as well as using the snowball method (subsequent groups recommended by members of the already observed groups virtual). At this stage, a total of 277 virtually active groups were found. A detailed analysis of the information on the selected groups (year of establishment, number of members, real space with which group members identify), an assessment of the activity level of the members, as well as the subject of posted posts allowed for the selection of 76 groups with the highest intensity of activity (a minimum of 3 posts a day, what made it possible to obtain valuable data) within the chosen topic, whose members identified with Krakow or a specific space within the city limits of Krakow. Selected groups were subjected to passive observation, and in the next stage, to active observation, which involved stimulating discussion and commenting on the statements of other group members.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Sharing Economy and Integration of Local Communities and Environmental Protection

The analysis of social groups operating in cyberspace while connecting members of a given local community, from the perspective of five elements/criteria of observation (organization of time and space, objects, social actors, interactions, events) allowed for their in-depth characterisation (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Characteristics of virtual groups operating within the sharing economy, and at the same time connecting members of a specific local community.

Observation Elements/Criteria	Specification of Observed Sharing Economy-Based Virtual Groups
Organisation of time and space	<p>What characterizes the way meetings are organized from the perspective of their time and space?            Members of the observed virtual groups meet in cyberspace; it is possible to post and comment on other people's statements at a convenient time</p>
Objects	<p>What is the location and access to objects—meeting venues?            Virtual groups operating on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, etc., gathering people related to a specific territory, e.g., city, district, housing estate. They are usually linked by emotional attachment and involvement in the life of the local community, the willingness to share knowledge, memories, access to information about events, but also common interests, passions, or economic reasons, etc.            In the virtual world, there are the following two categories of space: public space available to every user of the social platform, and private—administrator's approval is required; in both cases it is usually necessary to accept the group's regulations.            Further to the implementation of their goals, members of selected groups also meet in the real world, e.g., undertaking joint initiatives for the local community, social meetings, as well as exchanging goods, giving items back for a fee, joint use or lending fixed assets to other group members. Then, the availability of space and the manner of its use is regulated by the current arrangements of both parties to the transaction.</p>

Table 4. Cont.

Observation Elements/Criteria	Specification of Observed Sharing Economy-Based Virtual Groups
Social actors	<p>What unique features may be attributed to the observed community as a whole? What differentiates the analysed community from other communities of the same type?</p> <p>Members of selected, analysed groups in cyberspace are a local community that does not necessarily integrate representatives who are only residents of a given territory—they can also be people living thousands of kilometres from a given place “in the real world”, and only related to it sentimentally, professionally, in business, etc., moreover, sharing common interests and passions, committed, open to others, willing to constantly develop and learn, characterized by a very broad, and in many cases, even unique knowledge in a given area (e.g., plant care, hair care, macrame, etc.) divisive, entrepreneurial, opportunity-seeking, social activists—actively involved in the life of a given community.</p> <p>The feature that distinguishes members of the community of these groups may also be commitment to the goal.</p>
Interactions	<p>How do the actions and behaviour of community members affect the development of the community and its environment in cyberspace, but also in the real world?</p> <p>Some verbal and non-verbal behaviours in cyberspace are difficult or impossible to register, mainly due to the difficult or complete absence of face-to-face contact. The observer must, therefore, be ready to “read between the lines”, to recognize—with the use of phrases, words, punctuation marks, emoticons, etc.—the emotions of individual members of a given community, which they will provide, about the level of involvement of these people in a specific matter or problem, openness to certain issues, opinions, etc.</p> <p>The specificity of the area in which groups operate may require a relatively intensive interaction between its members in the virtual world, a high level of activity within the group, or relatively frequent meetings in the real world in order to implement the group’s statutory objectives.</p>
Events	<p>Do events have a positive or negative impact on the development of the community itself in cyberspace and do they have an impact on changes made in real space?</p> <p>Events taking place in cyberspace usually take the form of an exchange of views, opinions or knowledge. This is why they have a positive impact on members of a given community.</p> <p>Real-life meetings may bring benefits to both parties of an exchange, they may also affect the development of a local community or beneficial transformations in the infrastructural area.</p>

Source: Own study.

The use of both passive observation and active observation in the research consisting in stimulating the activity of group members made it possible to identify the topics discussed in discussions (also regarding a specific real space, its functioning, assessment of the current situation, including satisfaction or dissatisfaction, planned projects), the nature of the activities undertaken, the subject (things, information, services) of the exchange, the nature of the exchange (for profit, non-profit). The collected research material allowed for the classification of groups from the perspective of sectors/areas within which they operate (Table 5).

Table 5. Virtual sharing economy groups acting in support for integration of the local communities.

Sector/Area	Specification	Examples of Social Groups
Mobility and transportation	Sharing travel costs, sharing vehicles, using a common vehicle base (cars, bicycles, motorbikes, electric scooters) and specific online platforms or online groups within social networks contribute to reducing travel costs, protecting the environment by reducing CO <sub>2</sub> emissions and reducing the number of vehicles in the city, and also give tangible social benefits thanks to establishing relationships between strangers that can turn into more lasting interactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Krakow–Warsaw trips</li> <li>• Zakopane- Kraków, Kraków-Zakopane trips</li> <li>• BlaBlaCar Kraków—FB fanpage</li> <li>• Podróże małe i duże: Kraków -&gt; Gorlice; Gorlice -&gt; Kraków trips</li> </ul>
Spaces	Sharing spaces where you can work or pursue a hobby; short-term rental (or exchange) of houses, flats, rooms; sharing living space.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wytwórnia Kraków</li> <li>• Coworking offers Kraków</li> <li>• Couchsurfing Kraków</li> <li>• Cohousing Kraków</li> </ul>

Table 5. Cont.

Sector/Area	Specification	Examples of Social Groups
Learning/skills/talent	Sharing knowledge and skills (timabanks)—learning foreign languages, playing instruments, sewing, macrame, decoupage and other skills, knowledge of beauty, medicine, associating creative people, mutual support and inspiration from the things that members create, communication as part of an internet group, but also online or real-world meetings related to sharing knowledge, skills and talents, the currency here is time, non-profit nature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Psychologists' Science Club at Krakow University of Economics</li> <li>Personal Development Science Club</li> <li>Language Exchange Club Krakow</li> <li>TANDEM Kraków</li> <li>Tennis w Krakowie—Springpartners</li> </ul>
Financing	Support through financing new business ventures, support for the sick and in need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kraków Miastem Startupów (Krakow the City of Start-ups)</li> </ul>
General goods	Sharing of possessed goods (books, toys, clothes, sports equipment, medical equipment, plants, etc.), barter exchange, donation for free or for a fee, non-profit character prevails, communication within the internet group, but also meetings in the real world related to the physical exchange of goods.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kraków/Nowa Huta się dzieli/Is Sharing</li> <li>Roślinny Kraków—Małopolska Region—exchange/sale/collecting PLANTS</li> <li>Krakow clothes—sell/buy/give away</li> <li>IKEA BAZAR—KRAKÓW sell/give for free/exchange</li> </ul>
Food Meals	Sharing food—eating, sharing, preparing culinary meetings—exchanging knowledge, recipes, the opportunity to taste original dishes from around the world, bearing only the cost of ingredients used in cooking. Co-financing organic farming of vegetables/fruit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dzielimy się jedzeniem! Food sharing Kraków</li> <li>Toogoodtogo Kraków</li> <li>Jedlingi w Krakowie by Have a Bite Kraków</li> <li>Wawelska kooperatywa spożywcza</li> </ul>
Social activism/certain communities (at the district councils, parishes, students' clubs)	Exchange of knowledge about the functioning of the district/parish/university, worldview discussions, taking actions to improve life, introducing amenities (e.g., a neighbourhood library, a football pitch, a mini park, an outdoor gym, trips integrating the community, etc.).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Widzialna ręka Kraków</li> <li>Bronowice. Jestem stąd (I am a local)</li> <li>WOLA JUSTOWSKA jako autonomiczne Państwo-Miasto.</li> <li>Akademik Sióstr Urszulanek (St. Ursula's Sisters Dorm)</li> </ul>

Source: Own study.

The analysis of the empirical material confirmed that the sharing economy-based internet groups play an important role in creating social bonds and integrating local communities in the city. People living in a specific place, by subscribing to a selected group (whose name contains a reference to this space), at the outset, in some way, declare their interest in a given space. Further activity within the group usually contributes to making new acquaintances and deepening the existing ones. Solidarity is awakened, a sense of responsibility, community and willingness to act for the good of the community—“so that everyone can live better”.

The research also confirmed the truth of thesis two (T2), according to which internet groups operating within the sharing economy play an important role in the recirculation of goods, and thus, significantly contribute to environmental protection—reducing air pollution as well as protecting public space (Table 5).

#### 4.2. Sharing Economy and the Quality of Life of Urban Local Communities

One may be tempted to say that the sharing economy can significantly improve the quality of human life. Certainly, an important economic aspect of the sharing economy affecting the quality of life is optimised consumption of one's assets. Owners may generate additional profit by offering one's room, flat, house, care, etc. for use without making costly investments. “Statistically, 96% of passenger cars are idle at all times, unused by

their owners. Only 2.7% of cars travel from point A to point B at any time, while 75% of this group carries the driver only. In simplified terms, it can, therefore, be assumed that the consumption of assets such as passenger cars owned by Poles is as low as 1%, which is an obvious waste" [67]. The possibility of the better use of the available resources leads to an increase in material well-being, which has a direct impact on the quality of an individual's life.

E. Pol and S. Ville [68] emphasise the role of social innovation in the improvement of the quality of life. The authors distinguish the micro-quality of life (quality of life in relation to individual people) and the macro-quality of life (quality of life in relation to a group of people). The economic function of the sharing economy concerns both the quality of life of individuals and entire communities. People using the sharing economy and active in virtual groups have the opportunity to generate financial benefits. For example, tourism, within the sharing economy, based on the local community may be a more sustainable form of development than conventional mass tourism, because it allows this community to become independent from external influences and the hegemony of tour operators. [69].

Contrary to the economic effects, the impact of the sharing economy on the development of local communities, the improvement of the quality of life of their members, which, despite their diversity, can be quantified, and the highly satisfied needs related to the sense of individuality, authenticity and community used in the context of co-consumption, is an important element significantly contributing to the improvement in the quality of human life. Additionally, increasing a person's ability to share serves to counteract the problem of social exclusion and increase the creativity of the individual. In co-consumption, new roles are created (e.g., in certain situations, private persons become entrepreneurs).

Similarly, a sharing economy takes into account the rules of sustainable development. In addition to economic and social rationality, its positive impact on the environment is assumed, i.e., compliance with ecological goals. Co-consumption is considered environmentally friendly as it reduces the need for new products. Local communities feel more connected with the natural environment in which they exist. The local community has more knowledge and a sense of belonging to the environment.

Emancipation in the economic sphere brings financial benefits to residents and entire local communities. Emancipation in the psychological sphere is expressed in an increase in self-esteem and a sense of pride in the local culture, knowledge, tradition, resources and natural values. It also contributes to shaping the proper perception of themselves by the inhabitants (self-image). Emancipation in the social sphere allows for the maintenance of social balance and leads to cooperation and initiatives in the field of, inter alia, improving the condition of local infrastructure and services. Signs of emancipation in the political sphere are manifested in the system of representative democracy, through which residents can express their opinions and concerns about development initiatives (Table 6). The research results confirm that the behaviour of members of internet groups in the area of a sharing economy, as those resulting from the willingness to satisfy higher-order needs, significantly influences the improvement of the quality of life of local communities.

**Table 6.** Spheres of emancipation of local communities resulting from involvement in activities within the sharing economy.

Sphere	Signs of Emancipation	Quotes from SM Users:
Economic	Sharing economy creates opportunities for entrepreneurial individuals. Crowdfunding in crowdfunding groups may make it possible to start one's business. Offering one's housing/living space or a vehicle may represent an additional source of income. Tourism generates financial benefits. Money goes to all residents. The condition of the local infrastructure and services improves.	"[ . . . ] We have some of the investment funds but we still need more, and we would like to kick it off. We're presenting it in this group because we believe that there are some people here who want to help, who believe in karma." (A collection organized to collect the missing amount, to replenish the money already invested, needed to open your own clothing store with good quality clothes that convey a message. The target amount is 3000.00 PLN). "We are a group of friends who is creating a mobile app. The app will be used for ordering alcohol to parties, at home parties, etc. With our app, you will be able to order your favourite alcohol and snacks in 3 moves. Please support us." (The target amount is 150,000.00 PLN).

Table 6. Cont.

Sphere	Signs of Emancipation	Quotes from SM Users:
Psychological	Mutual support of community members in difficult situations; the self-esteem of the local community increases thanks to the external recognition of the value and uniqueness of its culture, natural resources and traditional wisdom. Growing self-confidence leads the local population to seek opportunities for further education and professional development. Taking up a job and earning income contributes to an increase in the social status of the disadvantaged part of the society, for example women and youth.	<p>“I was there last week! Highly recommended, a great place”. “ Thank you very much for the great time we had, excellent wine, snacks, unique ambiance”.</p> <p>“Owing to a perfectly working collaboration systems we offer free neighbourhood delivery, it’s worth to reactivate!”</p> <p>“I think that as long as we follow the principle of “selfless, neighbourly help”, everything is ok here. It is known that it is impossible to replace/return all items that are posted on the group, but this does not mean that the group does not care on promoting the idea of zero-waste. On the contrary, I believe that it helps to reduce the carbon footprint and help many of those who are in need”.</p> <p>“1. Don’t panic 2. Wait until they speak 3. Don’t you dare to cancel his reservation”.</p>
Social—relations (Establishing strong interpersonal relations, finding new friends)	The sharing economy is conducive to maintaining and strengthening social balance. Bottom-up initiatives improve the coherence of the local community.	<p>“Hi, this time I am addressing this post to our FEMALE NEIGHBOURS: do we have any new moms here? By counting prams, we pass when strolling around we believe that there should be quite a few in here! I thought that it would be worthwhile to join forces. Let’s do it online for starters. I thought it would be great to talk about a good route when taking your child for a walk in a pram, exchange opinions on the crèches in the neighbourhood or sites with child attractions. And, when the pandemic eases out, we may try and meet live as well. It’s easier and less stress to do things together! So, I am starting this online group—a small community of moms from our neighbourhood. It would be great to build it together! DM me or write under this post if you’d like to join it.”</p> <p>“Anyone in for a round of basketball”?</p>
Social—local (Connection to the place of residence, promoting local products and firms)	Joint grassroots initiatives of the local community (e.g., Civic Budget) contribute to the improvement of the condition of local infrastructure and services (creation of pocket parks, community centres, construction of a sports field or pavement).	<p>“ . . . This year’s district will once again be fantastically represented in the Civic Budget. First of all, we, the inhabitants of Krakow, broke the record when it comes to the number of projects entered into the system and the counter stopped at -&gt; 1043! Secondly, our district (XVII) came third in Krakow with 58 projects!!!”</p> <p>“Home-grown veggies! Place orders for unwashed, fresh and healthy home-grown veggies!”</p>
Political	The political structure of the local community is a representative forum through which residents express their concerns and pose questions about development initiatives in a given local space. Entities initiating and implementing investments consult groups and units of the local community and give them the opportunity to be represented in decision-making bodies.	<p>“If there are people here who would like to join the board of residents of communities C and D, please contact the administrator or MD me.”</p> <p>“Don’t wait for councillors or politicians and take matters into your own hands! Based on several years of experience, I have written a guide for Residents on how to fight for the affairs of your immediate and further neighbourhood without relying on the mercy of politicians.”</p> <p>“ . . . we return to the proceedings of our civic draft resolution—the appeal of the Local Parliament regarding the development of the high-speed agglomeration railway to Łęg and the Large Railway Bypass of Kraków.”</p> <p>“In 2018, Jacek Majchrowski promised to renovate 70 streets in Nowa Huta District to mark the 70th anniversary of the district. Since it has been ages ago, I have addressed him with a formal question on this matter, demanding acceleration of its delivery. The mayor responded....”</p>

Source: own study based on [70].

## 5. Conclusions and Discussion

Analysis of the subject's literature showed that issues related to the impact of a sharing economy on quality of life are relatively rarely discussed. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to find research on the sharing economy or quality of life using qualitative methods. Therefore, internet groups active in the area of the sharing economy were researched. Their members either live in Krakow or have emotional or business links with the city. The application of qualitative methods allowed for learning more on how internet groups operate. In the analyses, proprietary research tools were used. As part of passive observation, a historical analysis of the existing posts was made, the topics most often discussed on forums, relations between group members or activities were identified. On the other hand, a covert participative observation allowed us to enter into direct relations with respondents and learn about the motives behind their activities. When using this method, the researcher hides "their true identity and pretends to play a different role" [71] (p. 33). Covert participant observation can be virtuous in many ways, providing access to otherwise unavailable data [72,73] alongside opportunities to interpret and understand these data first-hand [74,75]. It also reduces the risk of disturbing or inhibiting participants' natural behaviour [76]. Employing covert observers enables researchers to avoid contaminating the environment and the behaviours they are attempting to observe [77,78].

The research confirmed the significant impact of the sharing economy on the improvement of the city's functioning, both in terms of creating social bonds and integrating local communities in the city, as well as environmental protection. Shared mobility has a positive effect on both travel conditions and the reduction in the number of private cars used in an urban space. This is reflected in the reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to the atmosphere, but also in a significant reduction in the need for parking spaces and the protection of public spaces [79]. The sharing economy also significantly influences changes in tourism and consumer behaviour in this area [58]. In addition, members of network communities share knowledge, skills (timabanks), as well as possessed goods. There are also visible social benefits manifested in establishing relationships between strangers that can turn into more lasting interactions, as well as mutual help and social integration.

The sharing economy is also of great importance in improving the quality of life of local communities in the city. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by modern media, it engages the public in new forms of cooperation. The highly satisfied needs related to the sense of individuality, authenticity and community, used in the context of co-consumption, significantly contributes to the improvement of the quality of human life. In addition, due to the fact that co-consumption is considered environmentally friendly, local communities feel more connected to the natural environment in which they exist when reducing the demand for new products [29,80–82].

Similarly, a bilateral nature of dependency between the sharing economy and the quality of life was noticed. On the one hand, the sharing economy affects the shape and quality of the product or service that is the subject of the transaction. This is accompanied by a special "atmosphere of the place" in the internet group, favouring, *inter alia*, meeting the needs related to the sense of individuality, authenticity and community. On the other hand, the sharing economy affects the satisfaction of residents through economic, psychological, political and social impacts (establishing deep interpersonal relationships and gaining friends, and those related to the place of residence) as well as individual ones, related to, e.g., the development of creativity and gaining new skills [83–86].

In 2011, "TIME" recognised the sharing economy as one of "10 ideas that will change the world" [87]. It can be perceived as a disruptive innovation (characterised by the ability to completely replace existing solutions with new ones with greater efficiency and a higher quality of operation) and social innovation, as it aims at the harmonious coexistence of the economy, the environment and society. It challenges environmental pollution and the extensive consumption of natural resources.

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