

# Beyond Uber and Airbnb: The Social Economy of Collaborative Consumption

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## Abstract

The growing collaborative consumption movement has evolved significantly in the age of Web 2.0. While much of the research has focused on its economic aspects, there are also practices that have gone largely unnoticed. This article illustrates the range of these practices by proposing a typology that accounts for the various currencies exchanged and digital technologies used to promote sharing of goods and services. This article focuses on the social aspects of the collaborative consumption movement to construct a full picture of the concept. It presents a case study of an Australian grassroots community group, MamaBake, which promotes the communal cooking and sharing of meals between mothers, and shows that even non-monetary currencies, such as the shared norms of reciprocity used by MamaBake, can be stigmatizing under certain circumstances. In doing so, it imagines alternative manifestations of the collaborative consumption movement that go beyond market orientation and instead focuses on promoting soft, non-economic values.

## Keywords

collaborative consumption, social economy, alternative currency, connective action, MamaBake

## Introduction

Collaborative consumption has become a buzzword in recent years, with journalists and academics alike noting the proliferation of activities falling under this broad banner. However, most of the research on collaborative consumption to date has focused on its impacts on the economy (Belk, 2014; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2014), consumer behavior (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Cheetham, 2009), different types of marketplaces (Albinsson & Perera, 2009, 2012; Cherrier, 2009), or downshifting (Black & Cherrier, 2010). Recently profiled by a journalist as a “tech-utopian answer to having too much stuff” (Munro, 2016), much of the criticism aimed at the concept has similarly addressed the shortcomings of the practice from an economic point of view (Rushkoff, 2016; Slee, 2016). As such, there has been limited research on collaborative consumption in settings where its justification is not based on environmental sustainability or downshifting or, alternatively, practiced as a form of resistance toward the capitalist economic model.

This article investigates collaborative consumption in an Australian community-based, big batch cooking group for mothers, MamaBake. MamaBake differs from the previously researched forms of collaborative consumption in a key way. The collaborative aspect of the activity is a tool that is used to bring people together with the aim of improving the lives

of mothers, while simultaneously discursively challenging the underlying societal and institutional structures that promote the traditional model of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Its focus on the underlying soft, non-economic values provides an insight into the collaborative aspects currently absent from the extant literature. As Gibson-Graham (2008) notes, many alternative economies face a credibility problem, regardless of the value they create. This research provides an in-depth insight into a group that mainly functions outside the market sphere and shows its potential to improve the social conditions of mothers. Given the focus on the social level, this research takes a mixed-methods approach in order to go beyond the macro level of analysis from the data available online and to provide in-depth observations about the people who participate in the MamaBake group.

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Despite the differences in both the practical application and the theoretical framing of the collaborative consumption concept, there is little doubt about the significance of social media in enabling the rapid growth and spread of such initiatives. However, as Couldry (2012, p. xiv) argues, it is important to note what all people, and not just the technophilic elite, are doing with media, as it is in the everyday media practice that we find out how the media relates to society and the world. The MamaBakers are predominantly a group of mothers who connect both online and offline in order to ease their domestic workload. This article illustrates the way in which mothers of young children can utilize the technologies available to them in their everyday lives. In discussing the role played by digital technology in facilitating MamaBake's mission to move the act of cooking for one's family from the private sphere into a communal environment, this article moves beyond the dichotomy between individual and collective action, focusing instead on the underlying connective action logic. Overall, this article contributes to the literature on collaborative consumption by underscoring the range of practices that go beyond the market orientation and the types of agencies mobilized by this mediated form of action.

This article begins by briefly examining the theoretical approaches to collaborative consumption. It discusses the criticism directed at the concept and demonstrates its limited nature due to its narrow economic focus. This article then develops a typology and adds another dimension to it: a focus upon collaborative consumption run and practiced by everyday people, completely outside any large-scale institutions or, alternatively, government intervention or assistance. The second, most substantive, section demonstrates how MamaBake creates a space for collaborative consumption outside the economic framework. It shows how the movement operates through an implicit ideology and pragmatic organizational structure. The underlying connective action logic is also discussed. This article concludes by noting that while the social dimensions of the collaborative consumption movement are significant and need to be explored, it is also important not to create a false division between the economic models and the social forms of the practice, as the former is always a necessary feature of the society and the latter cannot take place in a vacuum isolated from the first.

## The Many Faces of Collaboration: From Neoliberal Economies to the Social

### *Defining Collaborative Consumption*

In recent years, collaborative consumption has become a common term, with initiatives such as Airbnb (accommodation) and Uber (taxi services) building large international networks and challenging services historically offered by more traditional businesses. These two, while arguably the ones with the biggest impact, are just an example of the many initiatives falling under this broad banner. Other examples,

depending on the definitions used, include initiatives focused on directly sharing or donating unwanted items within local communities (TuShare and Freecycle); sharing goods such as tools, which might otherwise only be used sporadically (OpenShed); or even connecting those wanting to grow vegetables with people who have spare land (Landshare).

Albinsson and Perera (2012, p. 303) suggest that this rise of alternative, often more responsible, forms of consumption and disposition practices may be linked to the increased awareness of the negative effects of overconsumption, although Schor (2014) points out that the environmental footprints of the practice are complicated. Other motivators to engage in collaborative consumptions include the novelty of the new technologies, the desire to increase social connections—which, ironically enough, is sometimes negated by the technologies enabling remote access—and the commitment to social transformation. Overall, the evidence for the movement's ability to create social capital is mixed, and at their worst, they can also reproduce class, gender, and racial hierarchies. With such range of initiatives, providing an accurate definition of the concept proves to be challenging (Belk, 2014).

While the use of the concept of collaborative consumption has surged since the late 2000s, the idea itself is not new. As early as 1978, Felson and Spaeth (1978, p. 614) used the term to describe events in which people were consuming goods while engaging in joint activities. The problem with their definition lies with the open-ended boundaries, as, by default, it would include activities such as having a beer with friends while watching sports, thus reducing the utility of the term. Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen (2016), however, define the sharing economy as “an umbrella concept that encompasses several ICT developments and technologies, among other [collaborative consumption], which endorses sharing the consumption of goods and services through *online* platforms” (p. 1, emphasis in original). They further define it as “the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing access to good and services, coordinated through community-based online services” (Hamari et al., 2016, p. 3). Similarly, Botsman and Rogers (2010, p. xv) describe the concept as “traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting and swapping.”

Belk (2014, p. 1597), however, puts stricter parameters on the term, arguing that collaborative consumption is “people coordinating acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation,” which includes bartering, trading, and swapping and receiving non-monetary compensation. His definition excludes sites such as CouchSurfing, which prohibits asking for compensation, and gifting or giving, involving a permanent transfer of ownership, as is the case with TuShare and Freecycle. Belk (2014) notes that collaborative consumption occupies a middle ground between sharing and marketplace exchange, with elements of both. Regardless of the types of goods and services offered, it seems generally acknowledged that collaborative

consumption is concerned with providing access—often on a temporary basis—to goods and services, as opposed to ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Another dimension, however, is worth adding in this definition, which has to do with “stranger sharing.” Historically, sharing was mostly limited to close social networks, whereas today’s sharing is marked by connecting with people with whom one has no previous connections, often in intimate settings, such as sharing a home or car with others, thus entailing a higher degree of risk (Schor, 2014, p. 7).

As is obvious from the definitions above, much of the discussion to date has been market-focused. This is further exacerbated by the collaborative consumption movement’s potential for enormous economic impacts, for good or ill (see Minifie & Wiltshire, 2016). As noted by Minifie and Wiltshire (2016), collaborative consumption has been criticized for “risking work standards, consumer safety and local amenity, and eroding the tax base.” These concerns have been echoed in the print media, with concerns being raised about the possibility that instead of creating true peer-to-peer services, businesses such as Uber are creating new middle men in the form of unregulated global giants, extending free market practices into previously regulated areas of lives and thus falling in the paradigm of the predatory neoliberal system (Munro, 2016).

Contemporary neoliberalism, as Palley (2005) notes, emphasizes the efficiency of market competition, the role of individuals in determining economic outcomes, and the rhetoric of free, deregulated markets independent of the governments while shunning the idea of collective economics. Furthermore, it suggests that institutions of social protection and trade unions can lower well-being by interfering with the process (Palley, 2005). In this context, we also need to briefly consider the role of the individual in the process of collaborative consumption in order not to overextend the claims regarding its separation from the market practices. Much has been written about the nature of collective action, and in particular the levels of contribution from the individuals based on the assumed benefits gained from the transaction, and the subsequent “free rider” problem (Ostrom, 2014). Most notably, Olson (1965) refuted the idea that individuals with common interests would be able to pursue joint welfare, a position which has been since challenged in much of the empirical research (Ostrom, 2014). However, as Ostrom (2014) notes, the temptation to free ride is a universal problem, with most long surviving, self-organized resource governance regimes investing resources into monitoring each other so as to reduce the likelihood of it occurring. She argues that the presence of social norms is necessary for collective action to succeed, since those seeking individual gains in the marketplace cannot overcome the free rider temptation (Ostrom, 2014). As such, in non-market settings, individuals who adopt social norms consistent with cooperation can overcome obstacles and improve the longevity of the practice, but in order to do

so, they need to establish the trustworthiness and reliability of the other participants (Ostrom, 2014).

### *Expanding the Scope—Developing the Typology*

The criticism directed at the marketplace aspects of the practice is naturally warranted and should be subjected to a thorough investigation. The concern here, however, is that at present, the perception of collaborative consumption is firmly embedded in the movements of the market arena, thus downplaying the diversity of the movement. Indeed, the fact that the term “sharing economy” is often used interchangeably with collaborative consumption is telling. While other initiatives have also gained visibility in the media, they are rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny as the initiatives with direct financial impacts, or they are seen as embodying more noble values than those initiatives operating for profit.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the mainstream narratives of collaborative consumption are lopsided, lacking the nuances which the movement exhibits.

Adopting a broader view, Gibson-Graham (2008, p. 2) offers one of the most compelling arguments for the need for academics to take into account “diverse economies” and highlight the new spaces for economic alternatives. Reflecting on the works of Butler (1993), Law and Urry (2004), and Callon (2006), she notes the performative orientation to knowledge and argues that to change our understanding is to change the world, and as such, the discourse of difference itself contributes to an economic innovation. At the same time, Gibson-Graham (2008, p. 5) notes the credibility issues much of the alternative economies face, with many doubting their ability to drive change, even though the marginal or alternative economic practices “account for more hours worked and/or more value produced, than the capitalist sector,” with feminist analysts in particular having demonstrated the significance of non-market transactions and unpaid household work to economic activity over the past two decades. Schwartz Cowan (1983) observed how the family has become the perfect little consumption unit, where the unpaid labor of women at home provide the economic incentives for private ownership of the tools required for domestic labor, over communal services such as commercial laundry services, and in turn contributing to the individualistic and gendered notion of domestic labor.

However, there are emerging practices of collaborative consumption that underscore the actual collaborative aspect, rather than the often profit-driven consumption model. Table 1 demonstrates some of the nuances of the practices within the collaborative consumption movement. This typology illustrates the diversity of collaborative consumption practices and the ways in which they utilize digital technologies while providing examples drawn from collaborative consumption initiatives operating in Australia. Naturally, when moving away from the market and its impacts toward

**Table 1.** Various Manifestations of the Collaborative Consumption Movement.

Type of collaborative consumption	Description	Currency	Use of digital technologies	Examples
Market	Often operated by large multinationals; profit-oriented	Money	Apps; one-way communication except for feedback mechanism	Airbnb; Uber
Government	Community programs; volunteering; government enabled or assisted	Services	Online membership; central website repository	Timebanking
Advocacy	Community programs; run by individuals or groups; ideologically driven, for example, environmentalism	Products and services	Email lists; social media; two-way communication	BarterEconomy Canberra; Freecycle; Tushare
Social	Run by individuals; promote social cooperation	Products; services; values; time	Some or all of the following: central repository, two-way communication on social media, apps	MamaBake; Bakesw@p

the social spectrum, where social norms often form a crucial part of the transaction, the research methods to capture the different aspects will vary greatly. This research combines an analysis of the online platform with a direct engagement with the field and the MamaBake participants in order to establish a fuller picture of the group.

Table 1 divides the collaborative consumption movement into four broad categories, each with its distinctive characteristics: market, government, advocacy, and social. While the categories tend to overlap, this categorization illustrates the range of initiatives that fall under the broad banner of collaborative consumption.

**Market.** This is the best-known category of collaborative consumption. Businesses in this category are based on traditional extractive economic models, with the purpose of creating value for the shareholders. Examples include large multinationals such as Airbnb (peer-to-peer accommodation) and Uber (taxi services). On the surface at least, they appear to increase the autonomy of the workers and consumer power, but the risks include the current lack of regulation and the reduced financial security of the workers. The role of the Internet and Web 2.0 in enabling these businesses has been well acknowledged (Belk, 2014; Hamari et al., 2016; Labrecque, von Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013). Much of their use of digital technologies is done through mobile applications, and the user communication is limited to the feedback mechanisms—which form a crucial part of these services—provided by the platform. At this level, technical knowledge is required in order to develop the appropriate applications, and the distribution is often accompanied by professional marketing campaigns.

**Government.** Community programs promoting softer values run by, or receiving funding from, the government fall under this category. These initiatives still have one central organizing body, but the service transactions include time and skills,

traded on a quid pro quo basis, promoting mutual reciprocity on a larger scale. Timebanking is one example, provided by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Communities ([timebanking.com.au](http://timebanking.com.au)). Timebanking uses digital technology to organize participation, but it lacks the discursive peer-to-peer interaction associated with social media platforms. While a thorough criticism of this practice is outside the scope of this article, two points ought to be considered: The shifting of services traditionally associated with a state-provided social safety-net raises questions about neoliberal fragmentation and the increasing responsibility individuals are given for their own well-being. Second, the ethics of “helping others” could be challenged, when the act of helping is at least partly done under the impression that the helper will also gain equal benefits from the transaction.

**Advocacy.** As noted above, advocacy has played a significant part in the growing success of the collaborative consumption movement, with downshifting and environmental concerns featuring strongly in many of the collaborative consumption initiatives. This category includes community programs run by groups or individuals, which do not have any direct links to the government. Examples include various products and produce swap groups, such as BarterEconomy Canberra, and lifestyle-related groups linked to downsizing, such as the OpenShed. These groups trade products and services and utilize social media heavily, with platforms such as Facebook enabling even non-technical users to easily create their own “marketplace” online. The level of involvement from the group administrators varies, but, quite commonly, they provide the basic parameters and the site, which enables the transaction, leaving the actual organization to the participants when it suits them.

**Social.** Finally, the aspect of collaborative consumption which has received the least attention to date are groups which bear many similarities with those in the advocacy category, but



utilize the concept of collaboration to further social causes, rather than being linked to a single ideology. These groups are often run by individuals, and the currencies they utilize can extend beyond products and services, to more abstract constructs such as shared values and free time. Examples of these groups include groups such as MamaBake and BakeSw@p. Like the advocacy-based groups, these groups utilize social and other forms of digital media heavily, and participation is often characterized by what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) termed connective action, that is, democratic mobilization enabled by technologically networked publics. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2013), contemporary participation is characterized by personal action frames, as opposed to the ideology or class-based collective action frames traditionally utilized in collective action. In their view, communication functions as an organizational structure, resulting in loosely connected interpersonal networks, without central organization. As such, Bennett and Segerberg's work builds on the significant body of literature emphasizing the importance of engagement norms, over the traditional duty-based norms (see, for example, Bang, 2009; Norris, 2011). This was also reflected in one of the few investigations to date on what motivates people to participate in collaborative consumption. Hamari et al.'s (2016) analysis showed that participation is motivated by factors such as sustainability, enjoyment of the activity, and economic gain, with enjoyment being the strongest determinant.

This brief overview demonstrates the diversity of the practice and shows that the criticism regarding its financial impacts only captures the market orientation. It is important to understand collaborative consumption in this manner to surface various manifestations of the movement. While each section of the table warrants a full investigation, the focus of this article is on the social level, as it is the aspect which to date has received the least attention. The next section illustrates the social aspect of the collaborative consumption movement with an analysis of an Australian community group for mothers, MamaBake.

## **MamaBake: Putting the Social Into Collaborative Consumption**

### *Introducing MamaBake*

The MamaBake group was listed as one of the pioneers of the collaborative consumption movement in early 2011 (Anderson, 2011). The group was founded by Michelle Shearer in early 2010 in NSW, Australia. The basic idea behind the initiative is very simple: Mothers get together to cook big batch meals together, which are then shared among the participants so that everyone will go home with several home-cooked meals. The idea was born when Shearer's friend spontaneously brought her dinner, so that she would not have to cook that night. As a mother herself, Shearer had noticed women's disproportionate share of the domestic

duties, the lack of support infrastructure available for mothers, as well as the increasing competitiveness and judgmental atmosphere among parents, and she wanted to find a way to bring back community support. Initially, she used the concept with her group of friends, but as the word of mouth spread, she created the Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/MamaBakeHQ](http://www.facebook.com/MamaBakeHQ)) and subsequently the website which features a large database for recipes and blog posts among other things: [www.mamabake.com](http://www.mamabake.com), and the idea started rapidly gaining attention from both the public and the media.

In 2015, MamaBake utilized several online platforms to spread its message, including Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter. By August 2015, it had nearly 25,000 followers on Facebook (Facebook accessed 15 August 2015). Its online platforms assist people with finding other mothers with whom to MamaBake, and they also provide practical hints, tips, and support for both MamaBake-specific topics, as well as for those related to general parenting and food. MamaBake is not centrally organized. It does not organize the local groups for participants; rather, it acts as the repository of information, which is shared among the users who drive the formation of their own MamaBake groups. Partially for this reason, it is impossible to establish how many actual participants and MamaBake groups there are at any given time. The number of Facebook followers provides a rough indication of interest, but it does not capture the number of people who actually MamaBake.

### *Capturing the MamaBake Group*

Mixed methods for data collection were used to characterize MamaBake's collaborative nature. First, participant observation was used on the group's Facebook page, as well as in real-life MamaBake groups in Canberra, Australia. Facebook, indeed, represents a "walled garden"—it can "illuminate internal debates of contemporary mobilization, although going beyond public profiles of groups and well-known activists and entering inner circles is not always possible" (Mosca, 2014, p. 401). The researcher attended six separate MamaBake cooking sessions, organized at the participants' homes. Of these, the first two were not participant observation in the real methodological sense since the participation preceded studying the group (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014). However, they functioned to familiarize the researcher with the field and to establish close connections with the MamaBake participants, thus enabling future observations. Furthermore, they assisted with narrowing down the focus of the observation to the symbolic dimension of the event—who attends and who does not, what are the group dynamics—as well as highlighting some of the private, otherwise invisible aspects of the MamaBake group (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014). The session length varied from 2 to 5 hr, and they took place every 3–5 weeks, allowing the researcher the time to reflect on the observations in between. Each session had between four and six participants, predominately White and aged between 24 and 45 years.

Some participants met each other for the first time in the MamaBake session, while others had established weak ties at parenting groups prior to organizing a session together. Having under-school-age children provided commonality for the participants. In addition, all participants were on maternity leave, employed outside of the home part-time, or stay-at-home parents. Since the sessions included actual hands on labor in the form of cooking in which the researcher took part, all notes and observations were recorded after the session. Such closeness with the group also necessitated continuous reflexivity. Participant observation was complemented by a content analysis of both the Facebook page and the MamaBake website over a 2-year period, and the content was coded thematically. This analysis is complemented by an in-depth, semi-structured interview with the founder of the group, Michelle Shearer, in person (July 2013). Attending MamaBake cooking sessions as a participant, as well as conducting a face-to-face interview, enabled access to the “inner circles” of the group. Finally, a survey ( $n = 40$ ) was posted on the MamaBake’s Facebook feed to capture the views of some of the participants. The survey combined both open-ended and closed questions, and the responses were coded thematically. Responses which reflected more than one category were coded under all relevant themes, so a particular response could simultaneously be in more than one category. A link to the survey was also tweeted at the same time. The combination of methods enabled the blending of online and offline elements.

While recent years has seen a surge in food-sharing applications online, and in particular for smartphone applications (see, for example, BakeSw@p application and website for baking and sharing lunch box snacks, and HomeCooked application for purchasing “take away” from home cooks in your area), MamaBake was the first group in Australia to popularize the concept. It has proved its longevity by being in operation for over 6 years and, as such, provides rich data for the investigation. MamaBake is an exemplar of how collaborative consumption can create a space for new political economy, outside the traditional capitalist model, by providing support networks for food sharing.

### *MamaBake as a Form of Collaborative Consumption*

**Values-Oriented Goals.** The clearest difference between MamaBake and the likes of Airbnb and Uber is its values—rather than profit-oriented goals. One of the key aims of MamaBake is to liberate mothers from the disproportionate amount of chores they perform at home through collaborative cooking as a workaround. Such an approach benefits the participants but provides very little tangible rewards for the founder and the administrators of the group. That is not to underplay the importance of the activity, since Shearer’s personal experience of lacking support networks and the gendered nature of domestic labor is also reflected in the national statistics. In

Australia, the gender question is still very relevant, as, according to the latest “The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia” (HILDA)<sup>2</sup> survey, women still carry the main responsibility for housework, regardless of their employment status or income. In households where women are the main breadwinners, they do around 21.5 hr of housework a week, while men do around 17.5 hr (Jericho, 2014). The imbalance is more pronounced when childcare hours are included: In households with women as the main breadwinners, men spend 13 hr a week caring for their children, compared to women’s 22.5 hr. When all three components—paid work, housework, and childcare—are combined, in households where men and women earn equal amounts, men do around 71 hr in total, while women end up doing around 93 hr (Jericho, 2014).

Such statistics become even more revealing, when observed in light of Schwartz Cowan’s (1984) research on the industrialization’s impact on housework. She notes that while home is often an idealized space, imagined as the industrialization’s “other,” in reality, the industrialization has occurred just as rapidly within our homes. While housework differs from market work in that it is unpaid labor, performed in isolated workplaces, and by unspecialized workers, the similarities between the two are also significant: It utilizes nonhuman energy sources, making it dependent on a network or social and economic institutions, and it is marked by alienation from the tools that make the labor possible (Cowan, 1984). Schwartz Cowan argues that the “technological and social systems for doing housework had been constructed with the expectation that the people engaged in them would be full-time housewives,” and the gendered notions of housework would maintain the status of women as homemakers for generations to come (Cowan, 1984, p. 213). Given the investments already made in the existing technologies, and the sacred feelings associated with domestic life, technologies, she argues, may never evolve so as to make life easier for the working life and mother.

While all manifestations of collaborative consumption are likely to share the desire to reach as many people as possible, and expand their audiences in order to build their empires, MamaBake aims to do so because it believes it can contribute to the overall well-being of mothers and, as such, to the overall social cohesion of families. In contrast, businesses such as Uber promise a fairer marketplace with more variety for the consumers, but as noted before, such promises have also been associated with significant risks to the society as a whole, with the main beneficiary being the conglomerate behind the initiative.

**Currency.** As the typology of the different manifestations of the collaborative consumption movement illustrates, the currencies these practices use are often something other than money, with services and product swaps featuring significantly. While MamaBaking involves both a product—the ready cooked meals—and service—the cooking itself—it

also adds an intangible dimension to the process. The “currency” the MamaBakers gain from this, and articulated as one of the key aims of the movement, is free time for themselves and access to a community of other mothers. Contra Belk’s (2014) conceptualization of collaborative consumption, which emphasized the role of compensation, in the case of MamaBake, the norms of the exchange are at least as important as the swapping of the meals itself. The survey responses reflected this, with “food” and “community” being the most commonly mentioned themes for “What does MamaBake mean to you?” “Support,” “fun,” and “free time” also received several mentions. Similar results were obtained from the multiple-choice question, which asked, “Why do you MamaBake?” Here, half of the respondents noted that they did it because they wanted “to build a community of like-minded parents,” with the same number selecting “So I don’t have to cook dinner every night.” Almost as popular were “Because it’s enjoyable,” “To do something productive with my friends,” and “I love cooking.” When asked about the most important aspect of a real-life MamaBake session, “friendship” and “community building” were the most significant factors, while food was the most important factor for only four respondents.

The notion of community is repeated frequently on the MamaBake’s online sites, highlighting the benefits to individual mothers:

Once you’re part of a MamaBake group, you are very much on somebody else’s radar when you need back up. We’ve had mums get help from other mums with moving house, cleaning bees and meal care packages when a mama is sick or has recently birthed. The MamaBake concept offers mothers many in-real-life positive benefits. (*How to host a MamaBake session*, Mamabake.com, accessed August 2015)

MamaBake participants are brought together by shared norms of reciprocity, goodwill to those experiencing hardship or who have recently given birth, and a recognition of the hard work that goes with motherhood. When probed about this during the personal interview, the founder noted that the important aspect of doing this publicly was to highlight the behavior and thus give women the permission to receive help without the immediacy of reciprocation. However, she also suggested that the idea of reciprocity was innate to many mothers. When she was given the gift of a home-cooked meal, it had given her freedom that she did not have much of at the time as a mother of two young children, and she immediately wanted to reciprocate and “cancel the transaction” (Shearer, personal interview, July 2013). This prompted her to devise a concept that would allow everyone to have this freedom. MamaBake’s popularity indicates the idea’s resonance with a lot of women.

Like Ostrom (2014), Hamari et al. (2016) postulate a worst-case scenario for collaborative consumption: some the “free rider” problem. The MamaBake group does not appear

to be at risk of this happening. While group transactions do not involve monetary compensation, the sharing of the meals is based on immediate reciprocity. Anyone who participates in a MamaBake session is, in most circumstances, expected to contribute by cooking a big batch meal to be shared among the participants. Although helping out those in need is a strong factor in the movement, this usually occurs for a limited period of time and under special circumstances. In this vein, the founder described in an online interview the movement’s best moment thus far:

putting a shout out on the MamaBake Facebook wall for a number of Mothers who hit Struggle Town in a major way (surgery, nervous breakdowns . . .) and seeing how Mothers in their area rallied and organised weeks and weeks of meals and cleaning so the Mother could recover. MamaBake came into its own in those weeks. ([www.collaborativeconsumption.com](http://www.collaborativeconsumption.com), accessed March 2015)

While the movement does not include an exchange of cash per se, the actual act of MamaBaking includes a financial aspect and sometimes can be a site of contention among the participants. The MamaBake group itself puts forward the idea that money should not be an issue:

We know this sounds counter intuitive but don’t think about cost. What you’ll find is that once you start, MamaBake is something you will do again and again and that everything just works out, expense wise, over a period of time. One week you’ll be able to knock up a big batch Moroccan Lamb Harira the next it might be the humble dahl.

There is a silent agreement when you start MamaBaking that you make what you can when you can and that you give (at some point) the same as you receive. (<http://mamabake.com/faq/>, accessed March 2015)

However, this approach was not accepted unanimously by the survey respondents. When asked whether they had encountered any issues while MamaBaking, the following responses were elicited:

- “Inequity in meals. The same meal being given over and over.”
- “Quantities, it was awkward when we didn’t have enough.”
- “The organization is time-consuming and the effort exerted to cook large meals sometimes does not pay off.”
- “Swapping meals of near value—some put little effort in and others a lot.”

This shows that while mostly focusing on the soft, communal values, the currency can also be stigmatizing at the same time under certain circumstances. The sharing that MamaBake promotes creates a new political economy, in

which the sharing creates not only social ties but also physical products in the form of home-cooked meals. Responses illustrate how participants trade their time and effort during the process of organizing and cooking a large meal. This may lead to expectations about the product they will receive as an exchange. While the MamaBake's approach treats the intangible act of sharing itself as the key aspect of the process, for some participants, the product itself is more important. It also shows that seeking individual gains and having social norms are not mutually exclusive, in that while individuals are willing to put in the effort to further communal well-being, they also expect to be rewarded for it, which has obvious resonance with Ostrom's (2014) work.

Furthermore, as noted by a participant in a MamaBake session, given the fact that the actual MamaBaking is done in the participants' homes, it by default includes a high level of intimacy and consequently also higher level of risks as noted by Schor (2014), in particular for those who have found their group online. As such, a high level of trust—both from food safety and overall safety perspective—is necessary in order to be able to participate. Doing the cooking together may alleviate some of the food safety concerns, given that the participants are able to monitor each other during the process. The fact that the participants have small children may also provide a sense of security. In addition, while it contains elements of “stranger sharing” (Schor, 2014), in the case of MamaBake, the community building often begins online, with the active social media pages providing a platform to connect prior to getting together in real life.

As a final note regarding money, it should be noted that the movement has attempted to generate some profit through the website to stay viable, but these have been completely voluntary in nature and have not impacted the individuals' ability to participate in MamaBake in any way. The paid features have been optional extras. For example, joining the MamaBake movement is free, but to receive a full access to all the recipes on the website, they charge a nominal fee of US\$19.90/year.

*It Is Sustained by Connective Logic.* MamaBake enables like-minded mothers to connect online to create real-life support groups. Unlike environmental groups which subscribe to the collaborative consumption logic, the MamaBake participants are largely like-minded for pragmatic, rather than ideological, reasons. This lack of explicit ideology lowers the threshold for participation. However, that is not to say that it is completely free from ideology. To start with, Michelle Shearer's articulated goal has definite feminist undertones, with her recognizing the disproportionate burden of housework that was falling on women and devising a strategy so that women would have more time to spend on things they find more enjoyable.

Similarly, as noted before, much of the collaborative consumption activity is based on the ideology of downshifting or simplifying life, as well as the desire to live

more environmentally sustainably. While the core act of MamaBaking—small local groups cooking together—does not directly reflect these ideas, over time, the online content, both on the website and the various social media sites, has more explicitly referenced these values. For example, in 2014, MamaBake did a series of blog posts under the pseudonym “Frugal Frannie,” with topics ranging from food, to school supplies, home remedies, relationships, and doing craft on a budget (mamabake.com, accessed August 2015). The point here, however, is that by not committing to a single ideology, as in the case of collaborative consumption for advocacy, MamaBake is able to use a diverse range of action frames and, thus, attract a wider range of participants than a single groups based on a single ideology. This is, of course, made easier by the very nature of social media, which enables the frequent posting of memes and other short messages, thus providing varied content, often in a light-hearted manner.

This is also reflected in the real-life cooking groups, with Shearer quick to point out the autonomy of the MamaBake groups: “I don't give them that much guidance because if they are established groups, they get it, they are doing it. There's no message here [The MamaBake HQ], they're *doing* the message” (Shearer, July 2013, my emphasis). She further highlighted this as a central aspect of the whole MamaBake movement: “. . . we just want to give people resources to go out and do it themselves. We are not trying to create a big homogenous mass. We want them to go out there and start thinking.” On that same token, such horizontal structure may also reduce the accountability of the community group behind the initiative. Since there are no formal memberships, should something go wrong during a MamaBake session, all the risks, whether perceived or real, are firmly associated with the individual participants.

To an extent, this personalized logic has the capacity to bridge the gap between the personal and the collective. Despite the fact that food, in general, is a highly political topic in terms of production, distribution, and consumption (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008), it is hard to think of any topic that could be more quickly dismissed as belonging to the “private” sphere than cooking dinner for your family. However, as Giddens (1994, p. 17) notes, the democratic power of self-help groups comes from their ability to open up spaces for public dialogue where there previously were none, or they were suffocated by traditional practices, a notion which has obvious resonance with MamaBake. In addition, so as not to overstate the distinction between the traditional economy models and the social forms of the practice, it is important to note that, in the case of MamaBake, the collaboration is a response to the lack of adequate social support structures for mothers. The sole reason the movement exists is because women, and in particular mothers, are burdened by the unequal sharing of the domestic labor, and the high cost of childcare, as noted by some of the survey respondents, has the potential to keep women confined in the domestic shackles.



As a final note, we ought to revisit Schwartz Cowan's (1984) argument that technology and housework are intertwined. MamaBakers use technology to broaden their social networks and to help them cope with their domestic workloads. While social networking tools are not developed to ease domestic labor, MamaBakers use them in a manner which ends up reinforcing the gendered division of labor. That the individuals gain social capital in the process is certain, but whether it has the potential to drive change on a larger scale remains unclear.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the need to pay attention to the different varieties of collaborative consumption. The first part mapped the various manifestations of the movement beyond the well-known profit-driven models. This article then explored new ways of being social, which are not easily counted or tracked and which do not constitute an automatic source of economic value to either the founder of the movement or the participants. This is significant because it shows not only the possibilities of collaborative consumption but also its limits. While it can be a space apart from neoliberalism and conceptualize alternative social arrangements, such as big batch baking, it also occurs primarily because social welfare has been privatized, and domestic work is still largely gendered, requiring mothers to find alternative ways of supporting themselves. It is not accidental that MamaBake originated and gained most popularity in Australia, where social support is limited. There are certainly aspects of the collaborative consumption movement, and in particular the ideological and social forms promoting grassroots activism and communal values in general, which should be viewed as positive in an era often characterized as individualistic and profit driven. However, we should also exercise caution and not overexaggerate its separation from the traditional market approaches, as it is always taking place as a response to the wider societal constructs. It is hard to imagine groups such as MamaBake taking off in Scandinavian countries for example, where the social support is generally provided by the state, and individuals are not as reliant on themselves and their immediate communities.

As a final note, it is important to consider a fuller picture of collaborative consumption, one which points at collaborative consumption as a dynamic practice and allows to imagine alternative social arrangements. These include using different currencies which go beyond products and services into intangible benefits such as time and a sense of community, as well as the shared norms of the exchange. It shows the multiple ways in which people can organize socially without a shared ideology or a collective goal. This is a prominent feature of social media technologies, which enable people to create wide connective personalized networks around issues important to them. While recognizing the boundaries set by the broader structural context of politics

and neoliberalism, the values that drive the new manifestations of social practice provide a much more positive general outlook to the society as a whole than the narrow focus on the market practices would allow on their own.

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## Notes

1. The concept of Timebanking, for instance, was recently uncritically presented as “the real sharing economy” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Browne, 2016, emphasis mine).
2. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey is an Australian Government initiated and funded survey, designed and managed by Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne. It is a household-based panel study, which began in 2011, and it collects information about economic and subjective well-being, labor market dynamics, and family dynamics (<https://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/>).

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