

Imaginarities of Ownership and Sustainability

A Corpus-Assisted Study

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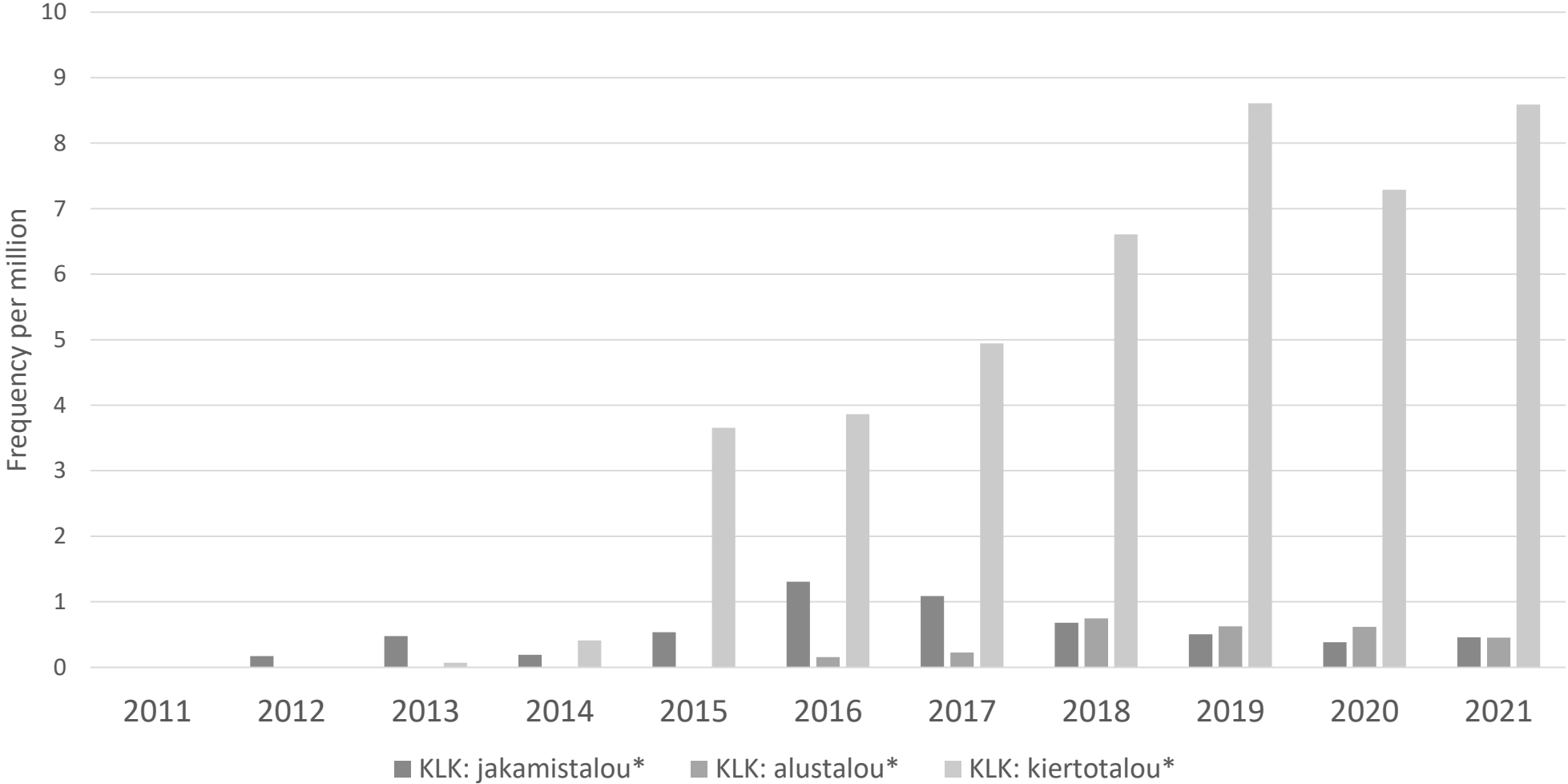
University of Vaasa, communication studies

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Introduction

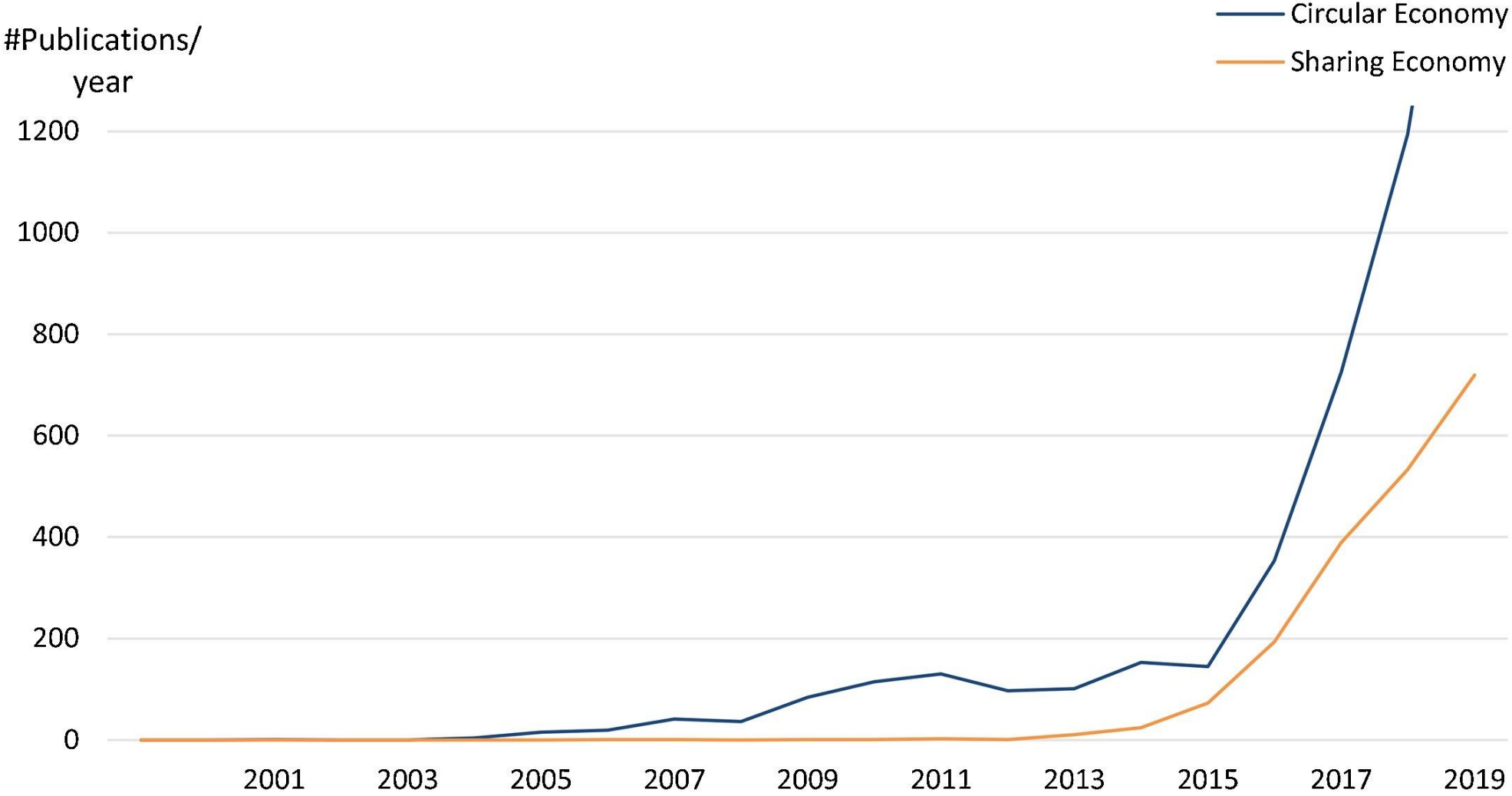
- Discourses that suggest that new forms of the economy are emerging
 - *sharing economy (SE), platform economy, circular economy (CE)*
 - “SE and CE are considered ‘new’ types of economies that have the potential to overhaul the dominant mass production systems and business practices with more resource-efficient alternatives” (Henry et al., 2021)
 - Traditional forms and meanings of ownership are being reassessed?
- Changing economic imaginaries (Taylor, 2002; Sum & Jessop, 2013; Beckert, 2016)?
 - how imaginaries of ownership are shaped in these discourses of economic transformation in relation to, for example, traditional cultural meanings of ownership and imaginaries of sustainability
- Finnish corpus
- Paper submitted to a Finnish edited book on the cultures of ownership (eds. Hirsto, Kuusela, Porttikivi & Venäläinen)

Trendy concepts (in Finnish newspapers)



And academic publications

(According to Henry et al., 2021)



Concepts of economic transformation

- Lack of definitional consensus, unclear and misleading use (relating to SE see e.g. Eskelinen & Kumpuniemi, 2017)
- The **sharing economy** - an economic logic in which goods and services are “shared”, usually by means of some kind of technological platform (-> “**platform economy**”), with the aim of optimising the use of society’s under-utilised resources. (e.g. Muñoz & Cohen, 2017)
- The **circular economy** - a regenerative economic system, where the efficiency of resource use is approached from a more explicitly environmental perspective, taking into account the stages of production, use and acquisition/recycling of materials. (e.g. Kirchherr ym., 2023)
- CE and SE concepts share notable links (Henry et al., 2021)
 - Expected to play significant roles in future sustainability paradigms (Henry et al., 2021)
 - “One of the strongest claims for the sharing economy was that it would reduce ecological degradation” (Schor, 2021)
 - Shared goals: stewardship instead of ownership, resource efficiency (Schwanholz & Leipold, 2020)
 - SE can be seen as part of CE (“re-use”) (Schwanholz & Leipold, 2020)

Empirical approach

- Corpus consisting of texts from traditional media and public social media that mention either *circular economy*, *sharing economy* or *platform economy* as well as *ownership*
- In Finnish, from years 2015–2023
- The final corpus contains a total of 1,303 texts, with 425,722 running words
- Corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) approach
 1. Corpus-driven methods:
 - a) *keywords* (words typical of this corpus)
 - b) *n-grams* (recurring groups of words)
 2. *Collocates* as needed (words that typically occur near each other)
 3. Qualitative analysis of *concordances* as needed

Keywords

- Keyword analysis compares the frequency of all words in the target corpus to those in a (usually larger or more general) reference corpus
- I used the keyword tool in Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014)
- Reference corpus: the Finnish Web 2014 (fiTenTen14), approx. 1.4 billion words of Finnish used on the internet
- Classified the first 100 keywords (according to the statistical measure *Simple Maths*, Kilgarriff, 2009) into thematic categories
 - The categories (excluding words used to compile the corpus): *economy* (subcategories: *general, technology, actors, products and services*), *society* (subcategories: *general and actors*), *doings and needs, change, other*

Keywords

	<u>Toimijat</u>	<u>Muutos,</u> <u>tulevaisuus</u>	<u>Yhteiskunta</u>	<u>Talous</u>
	hallitus		suomi	palvelu
	valtio	uusi	julkinen	yrittäjä
<u>Ympäristö</u>	kuluttaja	muutos	verotus	talous
kestää	sitra	tulevaisuus	liikenne	yhtiö
kierrättää	omistaja	tavoite	kaupunki	omistaa
kehitys	toimija	sija (sijaan/sijasta)	suomalainen	kulutus
päästö	toimitusjohtaja	mahdollisuus	maailma	euro
jäte	<u>Tekemiset</u>	ratkaisu	eu	prosentti
energia	käyttö	kehittää	yhteiskunta	materiaali
kierrätys	jakaminen	luoda	arki	miljoona
ympäristö	vuokraaminen	muuttua	vero	kasvu
ilmastonmuutos	liikkuminen	mahdollistaa	hyvinvointi	data
<u>Tavarat</u>	vuokrata	edistää		teknologia
auto	hyödyntää	vähentää		kasvaa
tavara	tarjota	uudenlainen		liiketoiminta
tuote	rakentaa			arvo
vene	lähettää			raha
				digitaalinen
				miljardi
				investointi
				alusta
				taloudellinen
				resurssi

N-grams

- Many terms: n-grams, word clusters, lexical bundles, etc. (e.g. Stubbs, 2007; Baker, 2023)
- Continuous string of n words where $n > 1$, not necessarily a meaningful or grammatical unit
- determined using frequency (with some cut-off point)
- corpus-*driven* method
- I looked first at 2-6-grams
- Then 2-grams containing the string “omist”, i.e. the words *omistaminen* (ownership) or *omistaa* (to own) in different forms
- 2-grams where
 - a genitive modifier appears before ownership
 - ownership in genitive before another word

Grouping helps with interpretation and presenting findings

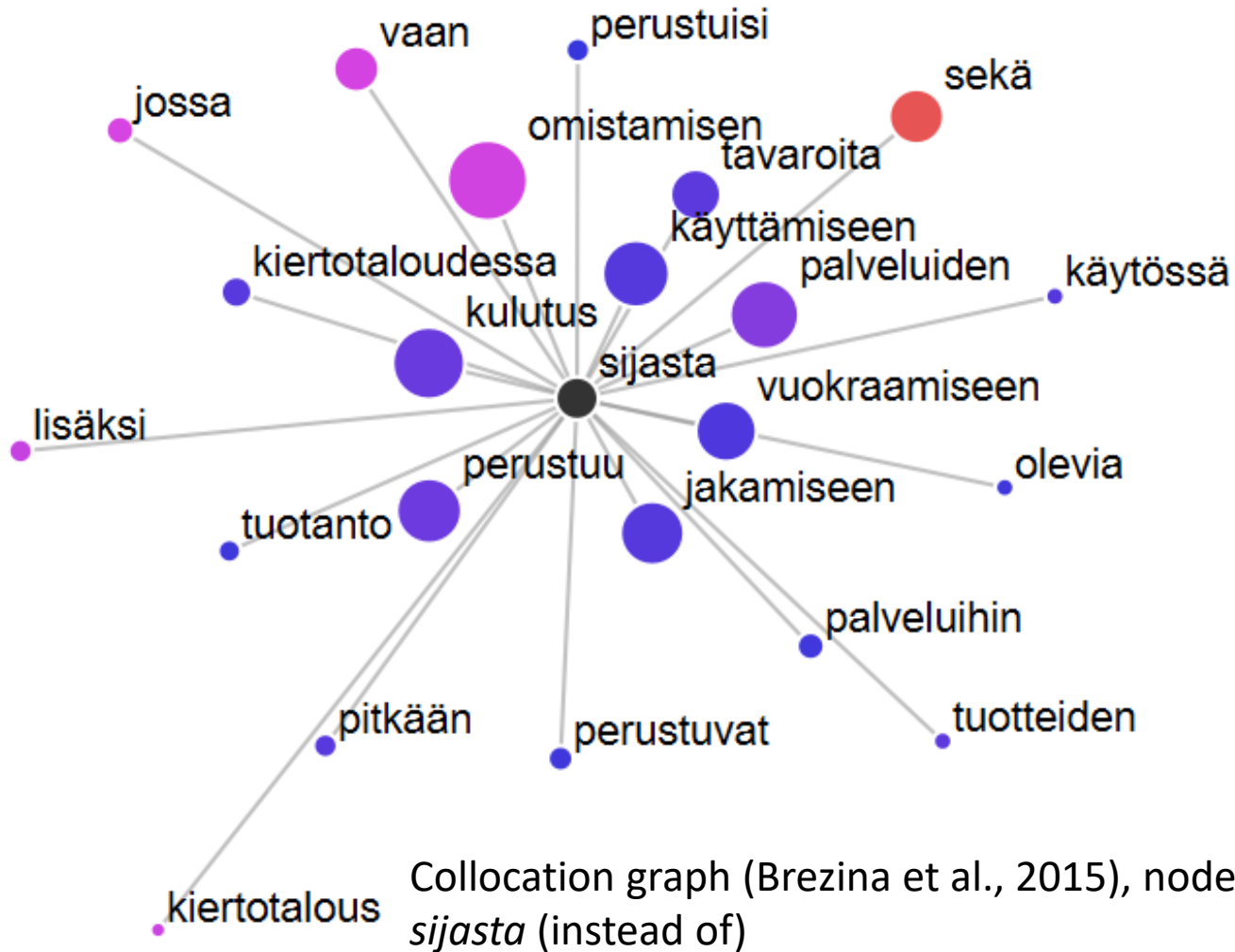
Genitive attribute + lemma OMISTAMINEN	
auton OMISTAMINEN	127
tavaroiden OMISTAMINEN	53
veneeseen OMISTAMINEN	31
datan OMISTAMINEN	9
materiaalin OMISTAMINEN	7
mökin OMISTAMINEN	6
asioiden OMISTAMINEN	6
tavaran OMISTAMINEN	5
tuotteiden OMISTAMINEN	5
autojen OMISTAMINEN	5

Genitive attribute + word form omistaminen	
auton omistaminen	65
tavaroiden omistaminen	31
veneeseen omistaminen	9
materiaalin omistaminen	6

Item	Frequency
omistamisen sijaan	151
palveluiden käyttämiseen	122
kulutus perustuu	114
omistamisen sijasta	112
perustuu omistamisen	99
kulutus perustuu omistamisen	91
sijasta palveluiden	80
omistamisen sijasta palveluiden	80
sijasta palveluiden käyttämiseen	78
omistamisen sijasta palveluiden käyttämiseen	78
perustuu omistamisen sijasta	75
kulutus perustuu omistamisen sijasta	69
perustuu omistamisen sijasta palveluiden	64
perustuu omistamisen sijasta palveluiden käyttämiseen	63
kulutus perustuu omistamisen sijasta palveluiden	60
kulutus perustuu omistamisen sijasta palveluiden käyttämiseen	59
vuokraamiseen sekä	55
sekä kierrättämiseen	54
vuokraamiseen sekä kierrättämiseen	54
tuoteta jatkuvasti	50
tuoteta jatkuvasti lisää	50

Selected
n-grams: a theme
emerges

Defining concepts and discussing the role of ownership



- centrality - strength of the statistical association
- size - frequency of the collocation
- colour - overall frequency of the word

- Definitions of SE and CE - with some variations, but very similar wording. These often refer to a reduced role of ownership, alternatives to it.

- The circular and sharing economy are based on services instead of ownership, so that goods are shared, rented, repaired and maintained instead of always buying new ones (Kaleva, 17/1/2021).

Kierto- ja jakamistalous perustuu omistamisen sijasta palveluihin, jolloin tavaroita jaetaan, vuokrataan, korjataan ja huolletaan, eikä osteta aina uutta.

Defining concepts and discussing the role of ownership

2-gram (contains "omist")	Frequency
omistamisen sijaan	151
omistamisen sijasta	112
perustuu omistamisen	99
omistaminen on	74
omistaminen ei	68
auton omistaminen	65
auton omistamisen	49
ja omistamisen	43
tarvitse omistaa	40
tavaroiden omistaminen	31
omistamisen ja	31
...	

- What ownership is and isn't: discussion about the nature and change of ownership, forward-looking or aspirational discourse
 - Explanation of the growing popularity of the sharing economy: ownership no longer brings status in society - especially for young people #kkvday (Twitter, 17/11/2016)
Jakamistalouden suosion kasvuselitys: omistaminen ei tuo statusta enää yhteiskunnassa- näin etenkin nuorten kohdalla #kkvpäivä
- Changing imaginary of ownership?
- *Young people* are often seen as the driving force behind the change. They are usually presented as a very homogeneous group
- Ownership portrayed as (no longer) a matter of *status*, not so much a material reality for people

Defining concepts and discussing the role of ownership

- People want to get away from ownership because ownership is a burden. They want to get rid of fixed costs because they reduce flexibility and eat up cash. (blog, 16/6/2015)
Omistamisesta halutaan pois, koska omistaminen on rasite. Kiinteistä kuluista halutaan eroon, koska ne vähentävät joustavuutta ja syövät kassaa.
 - Statements of “fact”, but often without evidence; repeat certain “slogans”
 - Often unclear who the owner (no longer) is
 - Critical perspectives rare (e.g. class, economic reality)
- The grand viziers of the sharing economy declare that ownership is totally overvalued. But somebody owns that which is being shared as well, or at least it is owned collectively. The owner collects the money also in the sharing economy. (Tekniikka & Talous, 2/12/2016)
Jakamistalouden suurvisiirit julistavat omistamisen olevan täysin yliarvostettua. Mutta joku sen jaettavankin omistaa, tai ainakin se omistetaan kimpassa. Omistaja kerää fyrkat myös jakamistaloudessa.

The future of the economy and the environment

- Keywords related to *economy, environment* and *change* are abundant
 - *Solution, promote, enable* – optimistic
 - *Change* is often associated with *radical, systemic, rapid, big* and *great*
 - *Change* involves e.g. *mindsets, society, consumption patterns, transport, the use of cars* and *ownership*
 - *The future* of e.g. *the Earth, Finland, company, transport, the use of cars* and *mobility*
- It is a cultural change, driven by concerns about the environment, among other things. Green values are becoming more widespread and consumer attitudes are changing (Helsingin Sanomat, 25/11/2015).

Kyse on kulttuurisesta muutoksesta, jonka taustalla on muun muassa huoli ympäristöstä. Vihreät arvot yleistyvät ja kulutusasenteet muuttuvat.

- Concern for the environment as a reason for change

What is (not) owned?

- *Car* is by far the most common genitive modifier of *ownership*
 - Collocates for car: SE (*renting, sharing, joint use, peer rental and alternative*)
 - resource utilisation (*standing*), necessity (*need*), convenience (*easy, cumbersome*) and economic aspects (*expensive, cheap, value, cost*)
- Also *boat & cottage ownership*
- NOT discussed
 - housing
 - The few mentions found support the idea that, in the case of housing, the cultural meanings of ownership are not changing
 - land, financial assets

Conclusion

- Large scale social trends are envisioned; the discourse remains quite vague (conflation of terms and ideas, see also Eskelinen & Kumpuniemi, 2017)
- The discussion seems quite optimistic about the future (largely within a “techno-market climate imaginary”, see Levy & Spicer, 2013)
- Young people are portrayed as a driving force for change
- “hype” features, largely uncritical and one-sided argumentation
 - The complexity of the cultural, social, and psychological significance of ownership is largely missing
 - Discussion of economic realities and social class largely missing
 - The importance of ownership for sustainability is seen narrowly as related to the ownership of goods, ignoring real estate, land, and financial assets
 - Change is conceived of as happening within current capitalism and current power relations
- Need to (continuously) think about how to bring more perspectives and voices into public discussion

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