Better World or Better Me?
Paradoxes of Sustainability in the Sharing Economy

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Abstract
The study explores the paradoxical nature of the collaborative consumption model within the sharing economy from a sustainability perspective. The sharing economy has garnered significant attention, with scientific literature addressing themes such as sustainability and its role in shaping the experience economy, consumer culture, and collaborative consumption business models and communities. Despite extensive global research, there is a lack of empirical evidence specific to Romania, particularly among Millennials, compared to other European countries. To address this gap, the study employs a qualitative approach to examine user perspectives on collaborative consumption through in-depth interviews with Millennials living both in Romania and abroad. Additionally, the study identifies the emergence of a new trust landscape influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting user behavior and perceptions. This research contributes to the field by offering empirical insights into the sharing economy, providing a comparative analysis of several European countries, and deepening the understanding of its sustainability dynamics. It underscores the importance of considering local contexts and evolving trust landscapes in shaping collaborative consumption practices. The findings highlight the complex interplay between altruistic and self-serving motivations, revealing how users balance ecological and social values with personal convenience and material desires.

Introduction

The sharing economy is an emerging economic model characterized by peer-to-peer access to goods and services facilitated by community-based online platforms. This model aims to optimize the use of underutilized assets, enhancing efficiency, sustainability, and community engagement (Mi et al., 2019). Compared to traditional companies, the distinctive management approaches of sharing economy platforms are rooted in evolving consumer values, users' willingness to engage in the sharing ecosystem, and novel value-creation processes. A significant aspect of the sharing economy is its emphasis on fostering new consumption patterns through community building, which promotes collective interaction and addresses environmental, social, and economic well-being (Light & Miskelly, 2015). This model challenges traditional consumption and production systems by enabling value co-creation, affecting customer attitudes and behaviors (Jiang et al., 2019). Within the sharing economy, collaborative consumption is often highlighted as an alternative model, signaling a shift in consumption practices and purchasing behaviors. Concepts such as the human economy, green economy, new economy, circular economy, and diverse economies integrate the sharing economy into the broader "sustainable development" paradigm (Hellwig et al., 2015). Shared consumption practices, such as swapping, community libraries, public transportation, and potlucks, are viewed as antidotes to

hyperconsumption, reducing environmental impact and fostering community health (Kelly & Davis, 1994).

The sharing economy also facilitates social change and community well-being through symbolic, sustainable, and political consumerism. This includes practices like upcycling, reducing, reusing, recycling, repairing, and redistributing possessions via sharing, donating, and repurposing (Albinsson & Perera, 2009; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Nonetheless, the boundaries between functional gains, monetary benefits, lifestyle politics, and sustainability can often be ambiguous. Collaborative platforms are particularly important in helping people manage fast-paced lifestyles driven more by convenience than meaningful engagement. This study aims to elucidate the complexities inherent in the sharing consumption paradox, specifically examining whether millennials' primary motivation for convenience overshadows the ecological benefits of these platforms. It also seeks to identify the factors that can shift the balance towards achieving sustainable outcomes over personal convenience.

Literature review

Definitional challenges and practical paradoxes of the sharing economy

When studying the economic and social implications of the collaborative consumption model, one must address the challenges of accurately defining the phenomenon. To address the definitional challenges of the sharing economy, Acquier et al. (2017) proposed a framework comprising three foundational cores: Access Economy, Platform Economy, and Community-Based Economy (Figure 1). This framework captures the diversity, complexity, and promises, and lays the foundation for exploring the underlying paradoxes of the sharing economy.
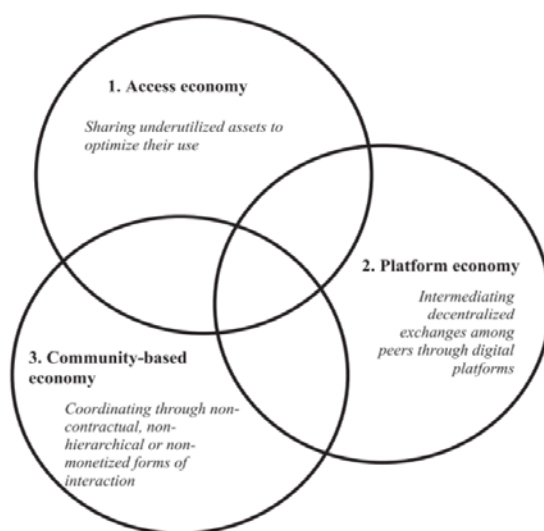

Figure 1. The foundational cores of the sharing economy
(Acquire et al., 2017, p. 4)

Access Economy

The access economy leverages the mutualization of consumption, optimizing the use of "underutilized assets" by providing temporary access rather than ownership (Acquier et al., 2017). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) identified six dimensions of access-based consumption: temporality, interpersonal anonymity, market mediation, consumer involvement, type of accessed object, and political consumerism. This model addresses issues like overproduction and overconsumption, aligning with sustainability initiatives and transparency. However, it also presents challenges such as moral hazard, information asymmetries, and the Jevons Paradox, which highlights the potential for increased consumption due to improved access, thus posing challenges to sustainability-driven consumption (Demailly & Novel, 2014; Parguel et al., 2017).

Platform Economy

The platform economy centers on decentralized exchanges among peers, facilitated by digital platforms that enhance the accessibility of tangible and intangible assets. These platforms enable value co-creation through technological advancements and strong network effects (Sundararajan, 2016). They disrupt traditional asset-driven organizations by reducing information and transaction costs, leveraging rating systems and insurance mechanisms to build trust (Acquier et al., 2017). Despite their promise, these platforms' scalability and economic sustainability often depend on substantial venture capital, which can lead to monopolistic tendencies and regulatory challenges, revealing issues related to equitable access and opportunities.

Community-Based Economy

The community-based economy focuses on non-contractual, non-hierarchical, or non-monetized forms of collaboration, prioritizing social missions over economic value (Acquier et al., 2017). This model promotes community empowerment through social change, emancipation, and solidarity, embodying concepts like Belk's notion of "true sharing" driven by intrinsic motivations (Belk, 2014). However, scaling these initiatives poses challenges due to distribution inequalities and difficulty in maintaining community-based openness.

Consumer culture and sustainability in the sharing economy

When considering the relationships between consumption, the environment, and broader sociological endeavors, examining the main theories concerning interdisciplinary approaches to collaborative consumption helps identify numerous interrelated issues. This can lead to establishing an agenda for "re-engaging with foundational approaches to consumer culture" (Evans, 2018). The current emphasis on sustainable consumption explores social institutions' roles in fostering personal and community well-being through exchange (Campbell & Lindberg, 1990). The sharing economy fosters community building and social ties through shared consumption practices, emphasizing the importance of environmental, social, and economic well-being (Light & Miskelly, 2015). Crucial in addressing overconsumption and promoting responsible consumption practices, collaborative consumption models—upcycling, reducing, reusing, recycling, repairing, and redistributing—are aligned with sustainable development goals and represent a pivotal shift towards more sustainable consumption practices (Hellwig et al., 2015). Examining the three periods of consumer culture development, Warde (2015) highlights a shift from mass culture production to the creative potential within consumer culture.

Platforms play a crucial role in this transition by creating environments that enable value-creation interactions and leveraging network effects to enhance user participation and trust (Parker & Wang, 2016). Acting as prosumers, users engage in various forms of participation—attitudinal, informational, and actionable—actively contributing to the value-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). They also enable value co-creation through reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships, positioning users as prosumers who contribute attitudinally, informationally, and actionably to the value-creation process (Maglio & Spohrer, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This new paradigm emphasizes a fundamental shift in how value is generated and perceived, prioritizing intangible benefits like relationships and experiences over tangible products. Ronald Inglehart (1971) proposed a theory of value change focused on "postmaterialist" values that emphasize freedom, self-expression, and quality of life beyond "material" values. This theoretical approach aligns with the principles of the sharing economy, which promotes access over ownership and experiences over material possessions. By embracing the sharing economy, individuals can contribute to a sustainable consumption culture that values environmental stewardship and social responsibility. This phenomenon underscores the relationship between consumption, individualization, and value exchange.

In this context, the revival of the political economy of consumption emphasizes the phenomena of political consumerism, dependent on both macroeconomic conditions and micro-situations of consumption. Political consumerism refers to the "use of the market as an arena for politics to change institutional or market practices found to be ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable" or to reward companies for favorable practices (Stolle & Micheletti, 2015, p. 39). Political consumerism is a form of lifestyle politics that uses market decisions as political statements to promote ethical, environmental, or political change (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). The implications of these everyday decisions have global ramifications, and the theories of lifestyle politics advance discussions on modernization (Giddens, 1991), individualization (Belk, 2007), and value change (Inglehart, 1971). The deliberate purchase or avoidance of products, goods, and services for political reasons focuses on the social and cultural practices around commodity units, underpinning the production, distribution, circulation, retail, and consumption of the specific commodities concerned (Fine, 1993; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). Analyzing the sharing economy through the framework of political consumerism reveals its potential to become pivotal in the transition toward a sustainable consumption culture. "The relationship between consumption and class, and material inequalities were sidelined in favor of analyses of specific examples of different modes of personal identity creation" (Blue, 2021). People who engage in lifestyle politics view everyday decisions as political statements (Bennett, 2012). For example, people may reduce energy use, use public transportation, or choose a vegetarian lifestyle for political reasons (de Moor, 2017; Copeland & Boulianne, 2020). These choices contribute to a more sustainable consumption culture by reducing waste and promoting efficient use of resources. In the sharing economy, this involves practices like carpooling, shared accommodations, and collaborative consumption models, often conceptualized as forms of lifestyle politics (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

The collaborative consumption model, often involving organized sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping, blurs the lines between sharing and marketplace exchange (Belk, 2014). Botsman and Rogers (2010) emphasize the role of monetary compensation, while Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) highlight participatory

motivations in market-mediated access. Albinsson and Perera (2012) categorize collaborative consumption into product-service systems, redistribution markets, and collaborative lifestyles, each fostering social connections through sharing. The shift from goods-dominant to service-dominant logic emphasizes value co-creation by both consumers and producers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This paradigm shift aligns with the broader socio-economic transition from production-based to consumption-based economies, focusing on consumption's experiential and relational aspects (Baudrillard, 1998; Miller, 1987; Simmel, 2009). While this paradigm prioritizes intangible benefits such as relationships and experiences over tangible products, redefining traditional notions of value, there's a blurred line between lifestyle and lifestyle politics.

In contemporary political and economic spheres, Millennials, encompassing both Generation Y and Generation Z, represent a global cohort characterized by evolving citizenship norms and market behaviors. In the political realm, the emphasis on self-reliance is exemplified by the emergence of the self-responsible citizen. This transition is further exemplified by the adoption of Do-it-Yourself (DIY) politics, which signifies a shift towards regenerative practices. Economically, this self-reliant mindset is evident in the rise of the 'maker' occupational profile and the proliferation of non-traditional employment forms that emphasize individuality and personality (Çevik, 2022).

Methodology

The research seeks to delve into the nuanced motivations and perceptions of Millennials toward collaborative consumption practices within sharing economy platforms. By emphasizing the need for a deeper qualitative analysis, the study aims to uncover how the sharing economy embodies sustainable practices and influences Millennial participation. The central focus is to explore the complexities of how the sharing economy presents both opportunities and challenges in *fostering a better world and cultivating better selves.* Specifically, it investigates how these platforms reflect sustainable and equitable collaborative consumption practices while meaningfully engaging and motivating Millennials to participate.

The qualitative study, conducted over six months, involved 22 participants aged 24-34, both male and female, living in Romania and abroad (in the EU), from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds to ensure data diversity. Data was collected through in-depth exploratory interviews, employing a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed individual experiences and perceptions of the sharing economy. Each 90-minute interview engaged millennials active in the sharing economy, selected for their substantial involvement in collaborative consumption and potential to offer valuable insights. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom to accommodate a diverse participant pool. The interview transcripts were analyzed using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), specifically ATLAS.ti. This software facilitated intricate data relationship analysis, memo writing, and conceptual contemplation of the data. The Five-Level Qualitative Data Analysis method (Woolf & Silver, 2018) was applied to differentiate between software functionalities and analytic strategies, thereby enhancing the depth of data interpretation. The data analysis process entailed categorization, pattern detection, proposition development, and theory building.

The study used pattern and theoretical coding methods for data analysis, structured into two phases: the first cycle and the second cycle. The first cycle coding (Table 1) involved an epistemic coding stage, utilizing a data-driven approach (open coding) to develop ideas and concepts from the text without prior conceptualization. During this stage, descriptive coding was employed to assign topics to various data aspects, effectively capturing the landscape of collaborative platform usage. The second cycle coding encompassed pattern coding, identifying trends, patterns, and relationships to unify theoretical concepts. Additionally, theoretical coding connected categories and synthesized data into new clusters of meaning. Thematic data interpretation ('better world, better me') consolidated meanings and functions. The coding frameworks were informed by the methodologies of Saldaña (2016) and Onwuegbuzie et al. (2016).

Table 1. First cycle methods of coding (Source: Author's research results)

Coding Method	Function	Categories
Descriptive coding	Assigning topics to aspects of the data	Landscape of collaborative platforms usage

Table 2. Second-cycle methods of coding (Source: Author's research results)

Coding Method	Function	Categories
Pattern coding	Examining initial codes Identifying trends, patterns, relationships Assigning labels	Thematic analysis
Theoretical or Selective coding	Connecting the categories	Illustrative, inductive narratives

Results and discussion

Landscape of collaborative platforms usage

The descriptive coding analysis created a detailed landscape of collaborative platforms categorized by type, brand, and usage characteristics. Open-ended questions encouraged respondents to recall brands and describe their positive and negative experiences. The platforms most frequently mentioned were Airbnb and Uber, which participants compared to "Xerox" for their respective categories. Many respondents needed to check their phones for installed apps when discussing platform usage, indicating a strong connection between collaborative platforms and mobile apps. This aspect merits further exploration in future quantitative studies. During the interviews, additional platforms were recalled based on past experiences. Using ATLAS software, the platforms mentioned were categorized into five main groups: accommodation, transportation, marketplace, food, and niche platforms (Figures 2-6).
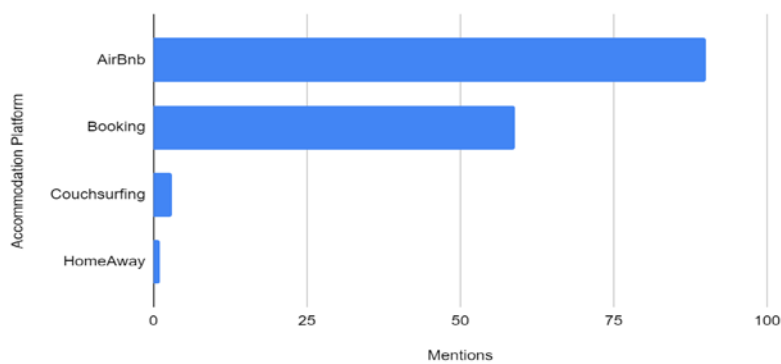
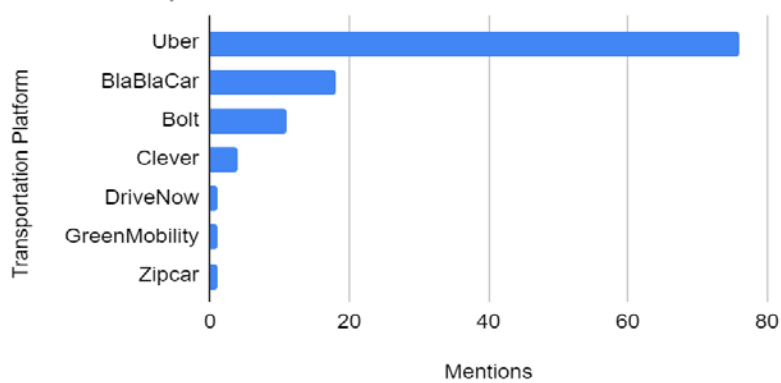*Figure 2. Accommodation platforms, number of mentions*

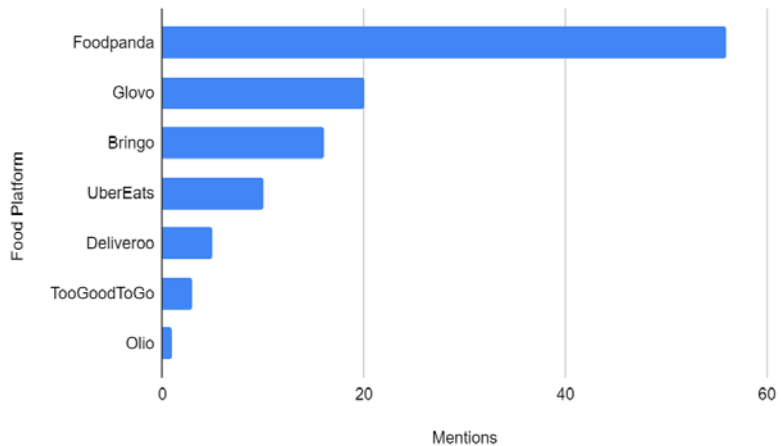*Figure 3. Transportation platforms, number of mentions*

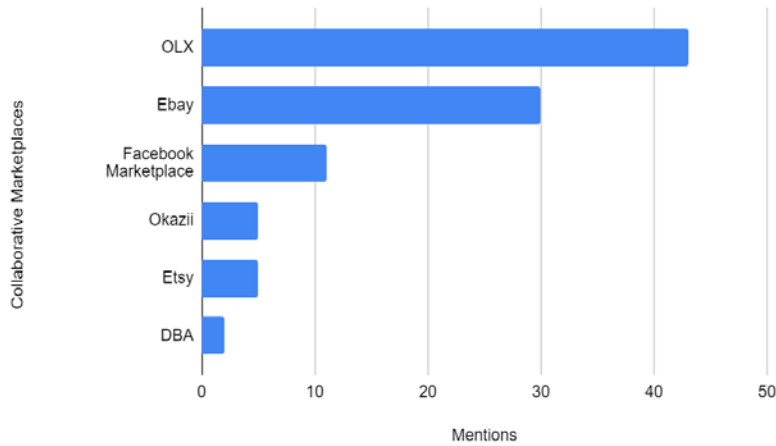*Figure 4. Food-related platforms, number of mentions*

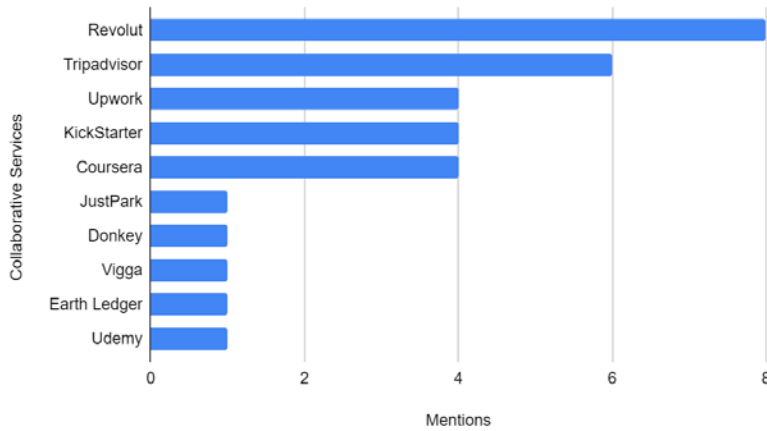*Figure 5. Collaborative marketplaces, number of mentions*

Figure 6. Niche collaborative services, number of mentions

Thematic analysis

The pattern coding method facilitated the emergence of subthemes, introducing depth and novelty by uncovering and illustrating new relationships. This approach enhanced the original thematic framework, revealing dimensions and connections that provided a solid theoretical grounding. The theoretical coding aimed to identify underlying concepts, highlighting the paradoxical nature of the sharing economy concerning sustainability. This analysis uncovered subthemes such as altruism, trust, materialism, slacktivism, capitalism, and convenience. The central theme of "better world, better me" underscores the tension between altruism and individualism within the sharing economy, exploring the balance between environmental care and economic growth and the interplay between social identity and collective well-being.

Millennials' lifestyles are shaping and are being shaped by technologically-enabled sharing experiences, which they believe contribute to societal development but also lead to decreased face-to-face interactions. All the more so, at a societal level, participants do believe that the sharing economy contributes to *"the development of the society because it makes our lives easier, but we're turning into antisocial beings in the process"* (A.O., 31, female, prosumer). To this point, our needs are shaping the world around us, and vice versa: *"The newspapers kiosks disappeared in front of our eyes, and along the time, big industries disappeared and bigger industries replaced them… it's just that in this case, the cost we're paying is that we're estranging ourselves from face-to-face relationing"* (R.V., 32, male, prosumer).

Participants discussed ecological and economic aspects through the lens of lifestyle philosophies, such as intentional living and minimalism versus materialism and capitalism. Both customers and providers highlighted the platforms' responsibility to create business models that benefit all stakeholders. However, providers were particularly interested in the financial opportunities offered by these platforms, emphasizing the ability to provide goods or services without long-term commitments. This aligns with their lifestyles centered on well-being and independence from centralized corporate environments.

The diversity of social, environmental, and economic perspectives underscores the inherent paradoxes of the collaborative model. While platforms rely on a two-sided client base, which may encourage participants to support environmental benefits, practical considerations of convenience often outweigh these benefits: *"We were buying food on Too good to go (app fighting food waste) because it was on our way home from work, but now that I work somewhere else it doesn't make sense to order Too good to go, because the carbon footprint of the delivery is much higher than the actual food waste discharge, for example"* (A.A., 29, female, prosumer); *"Yes I'm always telling myself that I'm environmentally wise using Uber instead of owning my own car, but at the same time, I'm always choosing to travel alone (not *actually* sharing the ride), so I'm not even sure if environmentally it makes sense"* (V.B., 24, female, prosumer).

The few instances when convenience meets sustainability have major ecological and social benefits. This seems to apply in a particular area within the 12 SDG (United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal for Responsible Consumption and Production) regarding the reduction of obsolete consumerism by means of second-hand shopping, borrowing, lending, and renting. The case was argued by an interviewee who mentioned the role of SE platforms in providing tools she doesn't need to own for a one-time use (e.g., borrowing a drill, a lawnmower, etc.).

While participants acknowledged the convenience-sustainability trade-off, the sharing economy's impact on consumer behavior is also evident. It promotes minimalist lifestyles and reduces overconsumption. Despite the persistence of materialism, driven by social media and societal expectations, these platforms foster a shift from affluence to meaning, enabling users to build desired lifestyles around intentionality and minimalism.

There is also a noticeable pull toward self-expression within these platforms, where users are drawn to lifestyles that reflect personal values. To effectively counteract the overconsumption-driven, materialism-led, and status-oriented needs that harm society

economically, socially, and environmentally, the solution must go beyond offering alternatives. It requires fostering a habit-forming, prestige-building lifestyle that fundamentally reshapes societal norms: "*Driving a Tesla is not about contributing to the health of the planet as much as it is about showing off eco-friendly values tied to somewhat privileged lifestyles…. It's the same with Uber Green (…); it's not that we're so concerned with the planet. I mean, maybe some people actually are, but most of them just want to be seen entering an Uber green instead of the 'embarrassing' yellow cab.*" (V.B., 26, female, prosumer).

Participants acknowledged that a favorable cost-benefit ratio is crucial for the success of collaborative platforms. The notion that these platforms can simultaneously save time, money, reduce waste, and enhance well-being is often considered idealistic. Nevertheless, the experience economy, facilitated by collaborative platforms, provides access to what Ferris (2007) terms "new luxuries"—experiences such as human interaction, well-being, and travel. Investing time in these experiences has become more valued than investing in material possessions, like home furnishings. As one participant noted, "*It's about the things that matter: human interaction, well-being, traveling… investing in your time has become much more valuable than investing in your space*" (A.O., 31, female, prosumer). Aligned with the millennial mindset, which values progressive, nomad-oriented, and experience-driven lifestyles, there is a shift away from traditional markers of success like cars and houses. Instead, millennials seek validation through unique experiences like scuba diving in Costa Rica. As one participant remarked, "*Nowadays youngsters don't show off with cars and houses, but with unique experiences… It feels so old-school to work 9-5 and pay the mortgage*" (C.B., 24, female, prosumer). The trend towards minimalist lifestyles, akin to the KonMari method of decluttering, appears to encourage the use of collaborative platforms. Generational differences highlight varying attitudes toward ownership and freedom. Many millennials' lifestyle choices are intertwined with their political views, often leaning left-liberal. One participant expressed this sentiment: "*For me, it's about contributing to a better society, where we stop encouraging the accumulation and exploitation of resources and people… even if that gets me labeled as anti-capitalist (laughs), they're the greedy ones*" (C.B., 26, female, prosumer).

The interplay between self-expressive needs and social identity-building reveals both instrumental and hedonistic values. Despite this, the (self-)serving principles highlight the gap between personal wants and needs, as well as between social identity and collective well-being. On the one hand, mainstream culture continues to promote materialism by accumulating tangible objects rather than intangible experiences. Social media influences users to either embrace or reject this materialistic culture, reflected in behaviors such as 'posting a Porsche versus posting a book.' The fear of judgment often acts as a significant barrier to the adoption of peer-to-peer markets: "*…sometimes people mock others for buying second-hand items, especially furniture, clothing or smaller objects. I believe second-hand cars and gadgets are gate-openers, but we still have a long way to go until we're educated enough not to call second-hand buyers "poor people", or "charity cases. (…) In Romania, the 'brand' matters for everything you own.. So even when using OLX, some people buy second-hand or even replicas of Gucci, Louis Vuitton or other household names, so it kind of defeats the purposes of sharing economy as an anti-consumerist environment*" (C.B., 26, female, prosumer). To revise the cultural aspect of consumer behavior, different cultures assert collaborative consumption to different social statuses. The prestige-related paradox explains why

students are more likely to use sharing economy platforms for affordability, given that students are generally perceived as being on a budget, while employed individuals face certain social expectations. This paradox highlights a broader issue: the sharing economy can become a privilege-driven system where the wealthy (providers) benefit disproportionately while the less affluent (consumers) may struggle. Barriers such as geographical, social, or technological accessibility, combined with slacktivism—the practice of superficially supporting causes with minimal effort (Cabrera et al., 2017)— contribute to a culture of fake altruism and inclusivity within the sharing economy. Negative implications of these business models include expanding black markets (e.g., selling untaxed gadgets), facilitating gentrification through competing short-term rentals, and inadequate regulation of intermediaries. Traditional businesses, which cannot compete on price or evade taxation, often find themselves at a disadvantage.

The decentralization of power and the democratization of the digital market pose yet another paradox: platforms aren't necessarily encouraging diversity and access: *"Not everyone has an idle house ready for Airbnb, so let's bring up privilege, ok?"* (A.B., 28, female, prosumer). Within the sharing economy, access is not granted equally, and issues around social and cultural stereotyping or income inequality are raised in relation to the access-based economy, as its initial promise focused on solving these problems in the first place. The paradox of access illustrates how the sharing economy can sometimes reinforce economic disparities and social stereotypes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, socio-cultural aspects of using sharing platforms in Romania were examined, revealing several key sub-themes: the perceived meanings of safety within the sharing economy, the role of platforms in enforcing safety measures, and the frequency of platform use before and during the pandemic. The pandemic introduced a heightened focus on safety, which reshaped perceived value in several ways: financial costs (*"I would definitely pay more for Covid-safe places"*), trust costs (*"I trust Uber because they have Covid measures in place"*), and health costs (*"I think people would prefer private, intimate, and thus more expensive Airbnbs over cheaper, overcrowded hotels"*). This shift deepened existing inequalities and presented both opportunities and challenges for sharing economy platforms due to the evolving discourse around safety.

The environmental value is brought up in regard to the employed business models, where participants recognized the overall positive impact that the platforms have despite their lack of inherent environmental purpose: "*They can provide so many social and environmental advantages, but it doesn't seem to be their mission... it's like a bonus*" (V.B., 24, female, prosumer). The side effects of their business models are also paradoxical: while the profit-driven values encourage more and more providers to adhere, the social impact diminishes over time. Building familiarity and trust directly influences the commissions and the prices. Yet, the lack of competitors creates too much leverage around these platforms: "*They rely so much on familiarity and the lack of competitors, I think we're used to them in terms of their power... 'Cause you always return to them because you need them - just like with traditional providers. I once swore and promised I'd never ever use Ryanair (airline company) again after they've charged me 60 Euros for 2 extra kilograms on my luggage, and I was so, so upset. Yet, the next time, I still used Ryanair because I was familiarised with their services, and it was much more convenient than researching other airlines...*" (A.O., 31, female, prosumer).

The 'better world-better me' paradox underscores the ongoing discussion around altruism versus individualism within the sharing economy, reflecting broader questions of environmental care, economic growth, and social identity. This paradox explored through diverse and sometimes unrelated questions, sheds light on the cultural implications of user behavior and the complex interplay between social well-being and economic status. The probes facilitated a deeper understanding of these paradoxes by comparing different perspectives in detail. As a result, the nuances and intricacies of personal experiences helped shape a collective theme, revealing inherent contradictions. This necessitated reframing the foundational principles of the sharing economy within the context of sustainability, recognizing that simplistic dichotomies are insufficient. Instead, a more nuanced framework is needed to address the complex realities of how sharing economy practices influence sustainable development through personal values, societal expectations, and systemic inequalities.

Combining the foundational cores of the sharing economy within the context of sustainability

The 'better world-better me' paradox elucidates key features at the intersection of foundational principles (Figure 7).

The decentralization of power and democratization inherent in the sharing economy presents a paradox: while these platforms ostensibly promote diversity and access, they frequently fall short. As one participant observed, "*Not everyone has an idle house ready for Airbnb*," highlighting the issue of privilege (A.B., 28, female, prosumer). This uneven access perpetuates social and cultural stereotypes and income inequality despite initial promises to address these concerns. The paradox suggests that the sharing economy can sometimes exacerbate economic disparities and reinforce social stereotypes. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated these dynamics, introducing safety as a key concern that reshaped the perceived value of sharing platforms. Participants expressed a willingness to pay more for Covid-safe options and a preference for private accommodations, deepening inequalities as those with greater financial resources could access safer services.

While participants recognized the potential for sharing platforms to deliver social and environmental benefits, these are often secondary to profit-driven goals: *"They can provide so many social and environmental advantages, but it doesn't seem to be their mission"* (V.B., 24, female, prosumer). The dominance of profit motives, reliance on familiarity, and lack of competition diminish the platforms' social impact over time, leading to user dependency even amid dissatisfaction.

The 'better world-better me' paradox captures the tension between the aspirational goals of the sharing economy and its real-world implications, particularly in balancing social impact with profit-driven objectives.

Figure 7. Combining the foundational cores of sharing economy
(Acquire et al., 2017, p. 6)

Access platforms are at the forefront of a cultural transformation, shifting focus from mere wealth accumulation to the pursuit of meaningful experiences. By offering a variety of ownership-free options, these platforms align with a growing preference for sustainability and personal fulfillment. Despite their profit-driven nature, users increasingly acknowledge the environmental benefits of engaging with these services.

As central figures in the sharing economy, access platforms facilitate peer-to-peer transactions, shaping social norms and enforcing rules. However, this shift is not without its challenges. Issues such as racism, discrimination, and gentrification persist, reflecting the complex dynamics at play.

The community-based access model underscores a critical tension between altruism and individualism, raising important questions about privilege, accessibility, and equity in the digital marketplace. Balancing economic and social values remains a significant challenge for the sharing economy.

These platforms often cater to self-expressive needs by appealing to shared values such as solidarity, open access, and sustainability. User testimonials reflect this duality: *"I loved telling people I use Couchsurfing—it was so cool," "Uber is cool but still a middle-class option," "Airbnb is great, but it's not Four Seasons,"* and *"Sharing apps are for hipsters."* This reveals a nuanced contradiction in managing the public image. One participant remarked, *"I think Romanians switched to Uber to appear glamorous but avoid second-hand markets for the same reason"* (C.B., 26, female, prosumer).

The ideal sharing economy model positions access platforms as intermediaries facilitating peer-to-peer transactions while setting social norms and enforcing policies. Reputation mechanisms, such as reviews and ratings, are crucial in maintaining a collaborative environment based on user experiences. To foster a balanced platform economy, it's crucial to harmonize community-based access models with the perceived value generated by both platforms and users. This integration must center on collective values such as sustainability while also addressing self-expressive needs and

values, which are influenced by the local context. By aligning these elements, platforms can effectively meet diverse user expectations and promote broader inclusivity.

Discussion

The sharing economy presents both significant opportunities and challenges in fostering a better world and enhancing personal well-being. Addressing its paradoxes is necessary to shape more sustainable and equitable collaborative consumption practices. This analysis highlights both the perceived advantages and obstacles of engaging in the sharing economy.

When asked to define the sharing economy in their own terms, most participants (n=20) emphasized its technological edge, noting how digitalization, globalization, and automation drive innovation and create opportunities. It fosters a sense of freedom and independence compared to traditional models. It presents a convenient and accessible transaction medium, eliminating the constraints of timing and physical boundaries—features uncommon in traditional systems. Technology adapts to these needs, predicting and shaping future demands, which creates a cyclical dependency on intermediaries (platforms).

In this context, the primary motivations driving Millennials to participate in the sharing economy are convenience and self-improvement, often at the expense of deeper ecological and social engagement. Millennials frequently turn to collaborative platforms to streamline their lives, prioritizing convenience over meaningful engagement. These platforms are perceived as essential time-saving tools, crucial for managing the fast-paced lifestyles of Millennials. The 'anytime, anywhere' culture surrounding these platforms focuses on minimizing the psychological costs associated with time. Despite this tendency, responses from participants reveal that the socio-economic and environmental aspects of the sharing economy—such as collaborative consumption and production, circularity, and access-based markets—do appeal to specific socio-demographic groups. Practical implications like reusing goods, engaging in second-hand shopping, and circulating resources within local communities often serve as self-expressive needs rather than purely aligning with sustainable values.

Local development initiatives are crucial for expanding the benefits of the sharing economy to enhance local economies and social and ecological well-being. Initially perceived as *black markets*, these platforms have evolved to gain legitimacy and institutional trust, transitioning into a widely accepted mode of co-consumption. As one participant articulated, "I*t's just the way we interact with each other nowadays, through apps… it's the means that provides us with the most benefits*" (O.V., 28, male, prosumer). This perspective suggests that collaborative platforms are not merely products of necessity or choice but represent *a contemporary language for expressing evolving modern needs*. The intersection of Millennial lifestyles with the characteristics of the sharing economy is illustrated in Figure 8, highlighting the alignment between their needs and the nuances of their interaction.
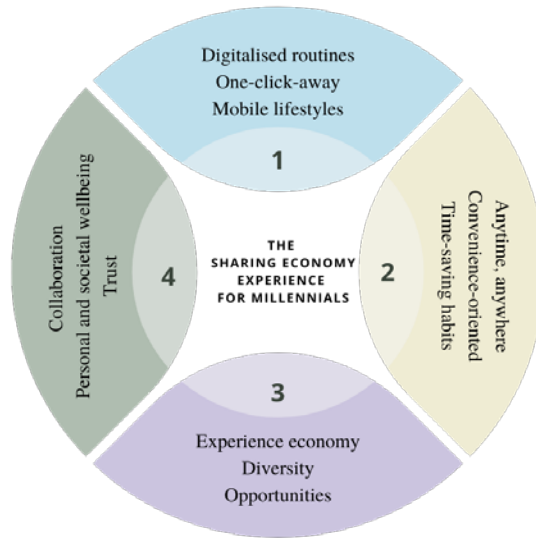
Figure 8. Mapping the sharing economy experience for Millennials
(Source: Author's research results)

Conclusions

To balance user convenience and sustainability, sharing economy platforms should integrate features that promote eco-friendly habits and enhance awareness of how individual lifestyles impact collective well-being. By educating users about the broader implications of their choices; these platforms can foster a more sustainable approach to collaborative consumption. Additionally, local governments must support infrastructure development that enhances the benefits of the sharing economy while addressing its potential drawbacks.

Addressing an empirical gap, this study contributes to the broader discourse on collaborative consumption. It reveals how the evolution of these platforms, as perceived by Millennials, has led to increased institutional trust but also highlights persistent challenges in aligning user behavior with sustainability goals. The findings underscore the need for continued research to explore these evolving dynamics and their implications for the future of the sharing economy, with a focus on balancing convenience with sustainable development and integrating these principles into technological applications.

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