

# **Competing With the Sharing Economy: Overcoming the Challenges Faced by “Traditional” Providers**

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*Consumer participation has made the sharing economy an economic wonder, creating valid competition for traditional service providers. Using the self-determination theory, we examine why both consumers and peer-providers engage in the sharing economy. Two common themes emerge: convenience and personalization. We examine ways in which traditional providers can embrace these themes. Three areas of consumer-focused marketing where traditional providers can increase efforts to decrease erosion are app abilities; niche markets; and consumer-desired amenities. Two areas of employee-focused marketing where traditional providers can increase efforts to decrease erosion are flexible hours and environments, and employee appreciation and rewards.*

*Keywords: sharing economy, collaborative consumption, peer providers*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Modern-day platforms within the sharing economy have exploded, starting with Airbnb in 2008 and Uber close behind in 2009. Consumer participation has made it an economic wonder; its technology-driven approach has made it a popular social innovation (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Wang and Zhang 2012). In a 2016 poll, an estimated 42% of Americans had used a sharing economy service, and more than 20% had provided one. In the United States, the most commonly used shared services are ride sharing (22%), room sharing (19%), and personal services (17%) (Steinmetz, 2016).

The rise in corporate corruption has led more consumers to decrease reliance on traditional providers (Kozinets 1999). Amid financial scandals and increased distrust toward corporations, consumers are increasingly seeking out more business-type relationships with their peers (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Albinsson et al. 2010; Ozanne and Ballantine 2010; Albinsson and Perera 2012). While the sharing economy, sometimes referred to as collaborative consumption, is still in relative infancy (when compared to technologically-driven companies like Amazon and Google), the effects of these platforms are already being felt across several “traditional” provider platforms, including hotels, taxis, and public transportation. In 2010, the sharing economy had an estimated market volume of approximately \$100 billion (Lamberton and Rose 2012). In 2016, there was 44.8 million adults using sharing economy services in the United States; it is forecasted to increase to 86.5 million by 2021 (Foye 2017).

A plethora of reasons are given for why consumers and peer-providers engage in collaborative consumption (e.g., Benoit et al. 2017; Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen 2016); however, researchers have not discussed how traditional providers (e.g., taxis and hotels) can combat the shift of consumers and peer-providers moving to or increasing their participation in the sharing economy.

To address this gap, we discuss various motivations on why both consumers and peer-providers engage in the sharing economy. Utilizing qualitative research in the framework of the self-determination theory (SDT), we examine two research objectives: (1) what are the motivating factors for consumers and peer-providers in choosing a sharing platform over its traditional provider (e.g., Uber over a taxi; Airbnb over a hotel) and (2) what can traditional providers do to combat the consumer exodus to peer-provided services?

This article is organized as follows. First, in the scope of SDT, we provide a literature review that includes various rationales from different research streams on why consumers engage in the sharing economy. Next, we outline the qualitative method employed exploring why both consumers and peer-providers engage in the sharing economy and present ways in which traditional providers can embrace these themes. After presenting the results, we close with a discussion of limitations and identify avenues for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

From an economics point of view, the sharing economy is a substitute product for services once supplied by companies (traditional providers). More specifically, the sharing economy is a market-driven relationship between a tech-based platform, a peer-provider (e.g., employee of the sharing economy), and a consumer where no transfer of ownership occurs (Benoit et al. 2017). It often begins inside mobile platforms (apps) that are seen as “virtual social communities” (Möhlmann 2015; S. Benoit et al. 2017).

According to the self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan 1985), the success of the sharing economy may be due to the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of both consumers (Hamari, Sjöklint, and Ukkonen 2016) and peer-providers. Human motivations are on a sliding scale with extrinsic values (individuals do something because there are external factors they seek, like money or peer acceptance) on the left and intrinsic values (individuals do something because they love it) on the right. In the sharing economy, SDT applies to both consumer and peer-provider perspectives – e.g., extrinsically-driven to save or earn money, and intrinsically-driven to meet, engage with, or help new people (Crowne and Marlow 1964; Bellotti et al. 2014).

Consumer participation in the sharing economy may be driven by many perceived social and economic benefits (Benoit et al. 2017; Hamari et al. 2016), mediated by perceived usefulness and hedonic enjoyment (Barnes and Mattsson 2016). Economically, consumers oftentimes see the sharing economy as less expensive than owning the good and see it as a risk reduction because they acquire no burdens of ownership. It allows access to desired products and services at a lower cost by bringing together buyers and sellers (Koopman, Mitchell and Thierer 2014; Skift 2013; Tussyadiah and Pesonen 2015) and making the marketplace more competitive; this suggests it adds extrinsic value (Sacks 2011).

Socially, consumers see it as an opportunity to meet new people and be welcomed into the sharing community (Benoit et al. 2017). The idea that consumers can stay “where the locals live” allows the consumer to perceive greater genuineness in their travels (Botsman and Capelin 2016; Guttentag 2013). This provides intrinsic value by fulfilling the consumer’s need to be socially-accepted. Consumer intrinsic motivations may also include the enjoyment from participating in the overall experience (Lindenberg 2001; Bellotti et al. 2015; Porter and Kramer 2011).

The increase in consumer desire to participate in the sharing economy has been viewed as a reaction to the surge of social innovation; this desire corresponds to the current ideology of supporting peers. Being seen as someone who supports his or her peers provides extrinsic value by allowing the consumer to feel accepted because s/he perceives the locals as accepting.

From a peer-provider perspective, the sharing economy encourages individuals to make income from underutilized assets (Lamberton 2016). Additionally, it can provide a level of entrepreneurial freedom by allowing peer-providers to match their skills or assets with those who are willing to pay for them (Hamari

et al. 2016). The sharing economy may also fulfill social needs for the peer-provider (e.g., being accepted by new people and building relationships) and create a sense of belonging (i.e., being part of a community) (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Möhlmann 2015). These can satisfy both intrinsic and extrinsic pursuits of the peer-provider.

From a consumer's perspective, these motives help explain why individuals choose to participate in the sharing economy over owning the good. From a peer-provider's perspective, these motives address why individuals look to supplement their income with opportunities within the sharing economy. There is still the question of why consumers are motivated to consume more sharing economy opportunities (e.g., Airbnb) over traditional providers (e.g., hotels), and why peer-providers are willing to accept the risks associated with the sharing economy (e.g., vehicle maintenance, home repairs).

## **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

In order to find out why consumers and peer-providers not only opt for sharing economy opportunities, but also why they opt to not use company-based services, a qualitative methodology was used. Qualitative research allows for greater response detail compared with quantitative methods and is therefore more useful in understanding consumer behavior (Stake 2010). Using in-depth interviews, we were able to develop a meaningful understanding of the sharing economy from the customer's point of view. Qualitative methods allow the researcher to obtain the intricate details related to the experience, such as the feelings, thought processes, and emotions, that are difficult to learn through other research methods (Strauss and Corbin 1998)

Our focus was to understand the consumer's rationalization in choosing the sharing economy over a traditional hotel. A highly trained interviewer conducted 15 in-depth interviews with individuals from 5 different states and Washington, D.C. Participants were identified through self-selection, recommendations and snowball sampling (Patton 1990). The sample included 11 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 22 to 45 years of age.

### **Consumers**

Consumers of services provided through the sharing economy were asked a series of questions regarding why they choose the service, what they get out of the service over traditional providers, and if they planned to use the service again. Further, the interviewer asked the consumers to discuss their relationships with the peer-provider from the shared economy. Interviews were semi-unstructured, allowing respondents to tell their stories as much as possible.

A variety of services provided through the shared economy were discussed, including room sharing (Airbnb), ride-sharing (Uber, Lyft, and Turo), and personal services (Shipt, a grocery shopping and delivery company). When the latter interviews failed to extract original concepts, the qualitative study was concluded (e.g., Brunk and Blumelhuber 2011; Silverman 2000).

From the qualitative research, we see that consumer have two basic intrinsic motives for participating in the sharing economy. First, it is simply a way for them to satisfy economic needs or wants. They are going to consume the service offered, and it is simply a choice on who offers the greatest safety and convenience. Second, consumers feel virtuous in their choice because they feel they are helping others. Instead of spending their money with a corporation, they choose to support small "entrepreneurial ventures" where they can often deal directly with the people they are helping.

There are underlying extrinsic motives in the consumer responses, as well. Consumers are motivated by how they are perceived by others. For example, they may want to be known by their friends as someone who is safe in their lifestyle choices and does not cause harm to others; who is savvy with finding good deals and values; or who cares about small entrepreneurs and acts upon that caring nature.

### *Safety and Convenience*

While many respondents noted that services provided through the shared economy are cheaper (e.g., most ride-sharing experiences), cost was not always the determining factor. Safety and convenience of the

services were also important motives. One respondent noted that he would only use Uber when it provided a safer alternative than public transportation:

*“When I travel back to Boston I use Uber late at night when it’s potentially more dangerous to take the subway. That being said, I’ll use the subway during the day in Boston before I use Uber.”*

Safety and convenience would even outweigh the cost-saving benefits. Oftentimes, consumers would be willing to pay more for Uber or Lyft (for example, during what is known as “surge pricing”) for several reasons, including the convenience of ordering through the mobile-based app; driver availability; or overall customer experience due to driver concern:

*“It’s a supply-and-demand thing. If a whole bunch of people are wanting an Uber in the same area then they will make you pay more for it because they can. Normally an Uber would cost about \$16 between my house and downtown; after the fireworks ended [on the Fourth of July], a taxi at that time would have been way cheaper ... at the end of the night when I’ve been drinking and am tired, I’m much more likely to say, “Just get me home; I don’t care that it’s expensive”.”*

*“[In Boston] Uber is much more available [in convenient or safe places] than public transportation.”*

*“[I would pay more because] they still get [to my location] quicker and I feel like Uber or Lyft drivers listen better than taxi drivers, like if you have a better route [than the one the driver is taking].”*

One respondent noted when choosing between Uber and Lyft that price wasn’t the determining factor; location was - a benefit derived from the location-based app:

*“[Which provider I choose may be based on] how long it takes for one to get there versus the other. For instance, if I need to get somewhere quick, I can check to see who gets there first and then I’ll choose the faster one.”*

In fact, because of its convenience, many respondents found the use of the app to be the best feature:

*“Uber was much more convenient than a taxi. By logging into the application, I can see exactly where drivers are, and I also don’t have to wait as long on an Uber.”*

*“I like being able to summon the ride via my smartphone [and] being able to see where my driver is on my phone. Uber cars tend to be cleaner/nicer in my experience, [and] I like conducting the entire transaction, including tip, in my app.”*

*“I can review immediately through the app, which keeps the Uber drivers on their toes... Uber drivers live for reviews. The criteria for being able to drive Uber is based on actual client feedback... if you give a taxi driver a bad review, it’s just like, “Yeah so what...it’s a taxi.”*

Amenities are also a convenience that can play a role in consumer decision-making. While traditional providers do oftentimes provide amenities (e.g., shampoo in the room and happy hour socials at hotels), the “perks” do not off-set the fees:

*“Hotels [make you] pay resort fees on top of what you pay for the room... For a regular room (no kitchen, and no balcony) it was about \$1500 for the week. We did Airbnb and got a two bedroom, two bathroom apartment with a full kitchen and a private balcony just off the [Vegas] strip for under \$1000. Oh, and it had a washer and dryer so we had our laundry done before we went home which was awesome.”*

Some are willing to pay the equivalent of a hotel in order to get the “convenience” of staying in a home:

*“My husband loves having a kitchen to cook in (although he never cooks?) and he loves having more space so he prefers houses/condos over hotels.”*

*“[I choose Airbnb because of] ... the unique options! I also seem to get a better price most of the time, or at least more things for the same price that I would spend at a hotel. I love actually staying in a home when I go somewhere. I feel like I’m more connected to the place I’m traveling to when I stay at a home.”*

The types of amenities offered are important, and oftentimes those amenities differ from what traditional hotels are focused on:

*“Some have had shampoo, etc. and some haven’t. I always bring my own so that’s not something I consider. I don’t expect a daily clean up when staying at an Airbnb. I will say that a hotel wins in that department because they do offer the daily clean ups. But, you can find Airbnb’s that offer great coffee makers, laundry machines, etc. you just have to seek them out.”*

*“We don’t usually stay anyplace too fancy so [the amenities offered were] comparable. But [at the Airbnb] there were free snacks.”*

*“They provided all toiletries as well as a kitchenette. They also had a binder of their personal recommendations and a book full of guest recommendations. They also had an entertainment center with a loaded Roku.”*

Consumers also noted the convenience of alternative methods of communication:

*“[We were able to do everything] through chat and never had to meet in person.”*  
*“The home owners that I’ve booked from have been very nice and helpful. They think of everything and know all the best places to try. They will email or text to check in from time to time to see if there’s anything we need.”*

In alignment with intrinsic values, we found that consumers recognize the value of choosing peers over businesses:

*“We love helping support fellow owners.”*

#### *Choosing Traditional Providers Over Sharing Economy*

There were specific instances where traditional providers like hotels and public transportation were preferred over shared economy services; these included day trips (where safety is less of a concern) and traveling with a child that requires a car seat. Traditional providers have the opportunity to capitalize on certain benefits, particularly in these niche markets:

*“I have a car, but I’d take a train or subway into the city over driving anyway. It’s way more convenient [for shopping]. If I’m going to the grocery store or work and need transportation, that’s a more practical option than spending \$40 one way.”*

*“Because my daughter needs a booster seat I would have to use the deluxe version of Uber, and that has a ten-dollar surcharge. It’s free for her to ride the subway, [otherwise] I’d have to lug around her booster seat.”*

*“I just got back from NYC with my daughter, and I looked at Airbnb but there wasn’t a room available in an unshared space. I’m not about to share space when I have my daughter with me.”*

### **Peer-Providers**

Peer-providers were asked a series of questions regarding why they choose to participate in the sharing economy, what they get out of the sharing economy over traditional providers, and if they would like to move or stay full-time in the sharing economy realm. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing respondents to tell their stories as much as possible.

The largest intrinsic motivator for peer-providers was the income opportunity; however, unlike consumers, the corporate behavior of the company was also a motivator. Workplace environment and convenience, particularly in regards to job flexibility, of the sharing economy is perceived as attractive. They oftentimes enjoy getting to know the consumers and support them in getting to know the local area. As an extrinsic motivator, peer-participants benefit through social interaction with their peer group and through earning an income while using resources that might go unused. Additionally, because peer-providers are rated through customer satisfaction on the app-based platform, they hope to offer a more pleasant interaction than what the consumer (whom the provider may view as a peer) would have received with a traditional provider.

#### *Workplace Environment, Convenience, and Customer Interaction*

Peer-providers often appreciated the added perks of working in the sharing economy. They also recognized joy from working with an organization that was well-known or perceived as “good.”

*“I chose to work for Shipt because of the culture in the business. I had researched the company before deciding to apply and the company had such an easy going feeling to it. Shipt is a company that brings dogs into the office on Fridays.”*

*“I like to align myself with companies that have a greater sense of social purpose. Lyft has been there to support some of the craziness going on with the immigration debate; they’ve been there to support a veteran; they’ve been there to support equal rights, and I’m all for that.”*

*“The brand name makes it easy to get customers.”*

Job convenience was also a large attraction for peer-providers. The flexibility allowed them to work in a more comfortable atmosphere, pursue opportunities that would typically interfere with a regular job, or maintain an active lifestyle with a disability:

*“I’ve done the whole traditional thing. It’s a little depressing and not really conducive to personal growth...I didn’t want to be stuck in a desk all day, so this presented the opportunity to go out and meet new people.”*

*“I like the flexibility in when and how long a drive.... Once I got approved it was easy. All I had to do was put myself into driver mode and wait. I’m in driver mode as we speak.”*

*“I would like to continue with Shipt because of the ability to make more money and to stay busy. Shipt allows you to take whatever time off you want and set the hours you need. They allow complete freedom for working hours and I needed that while still in school.”*

*“I’m on disability because of cancer... I just needed to get out of the house and make a little money, so this [Uber] allowed me to do both.*

Customer interaction, or the lack of it, was also a common theme for peer-providers. A benefit peer-providers have in the sharing economy over traditional providers is that they can choose when and how much to interact with consumers.

*“I get to meet all sorts of people from all walks of life. I meet some really interesting people and some really freaking weird ones. Because I work from home now, it’s nice to be able to get out and actually talk to people.”*

*“It’s a great way to make some extra cash and meet all kinds of people.”*

*“I did not like the idea of needing to pursue a regular 9-5 job out in the public. I don’t like dealing with people overall so this suits me well.”*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While respondents were not against using traditional providers, there are two common themes of both consumers and peer-providers on why they choose the sharing economy: convenience and personalization. Consumers appreciate the convenience capabilities of the apps and attention received from the peer-providers; these lean more toward intrinsic motivations. Peer-providers value the job flexibility that allows them to do other tasks and the ability to interact with the consumers on their own terms; these lean more towards extrinsic motivations. Utilizing these two themes in the framework of SDT, there are several actionable marketing items traditional providers can do to combat erosion from the sharing economy.

### **Consumer-Focused Marketing**

Most large corporations have detailed data on individual consumers but do not use it in the most effective ways. Using the details of the consumer gathered through data, a traditional provider can target the desired intrinsic motives of the consumer. Three areas of consumer-focused marketing where traditional providers can increase efforts to decrease erosion are app abilities; niche markets; and consumer-desired amenities.

Having a mobile app is not enough to satisfy a consumer’s need for convenience. Consumers want an app that allows them to conduct a transaction from beginning to end. They appreciate that the entire process, from search to post-purchase review, can be done in one move. Traditional providers need to invest in app technology that provides location-based services, payment abilities, and feedback opportunities. While some taxi services are attempting this now by asking users to download the app, there needs to be greater emphasis on a pull strategy that overcomes the switching costs of moving to a new app – creating an incentive for the consumer to download the app, complete the setup process, and begin using it. Adding in the convenience of voice-activated (e.g., being able to call or book through Siri or Alexa) and chatbots can increase the perceived intrinsic value and overall consumer engagement.

There are niche markets where traditional providers can focus greater marketing efforts. For example, parents of small children have the child’s safety as their foremost concern; promoting the fact that public transportation and hotels are a safe and affordable option for these parents is valuable. Traditional providers

can cater to the needs of these individuals, offering services and goods to better accommodate the needs of these travelers. For example, public transit can offer child-friendly seating and activities at the waiting station and implement programs that allow parents and small children priority seating.

While mid-priced hotels often offer amenities like shampoo, shower caps, cable television, and continental breakfast, these are no longer the most-desired amenities by the market. Updating amenities to reflect the desires of the market will increase user satisfaction. For example, many hotels have started evening events such as happy hour socials which does appeal to certain consumers. However, many users of the sharing economy seek out greater experiential activities, like shows and tours. Traditional providers can ask a short survey or use the data they already have on a consumer to better tailor the amenities provided. For example, if a family is staying in a hotel, the provider can share with them restaurants and activities that other families staying at the hotel enjoyed. Instead of a large continental breakfast, hotels can include preferred snacks in a “Welcome” bag upon check-in.

### **Employee (Peer-Provider)-Focused Marketing**

Two areas of employee-focused marketing where traditional providers can increase efforts to decrease erosion are flexible hours and working environments and employee rewards and satisfaction. Many employees no longer fit into the traditional working hours of 9-5. Promoting flexible hours and working environment (e.g., 4-day work weeks or 4-hour rotations) can alleviate the boredom and discontent that can come with 8-hour, 5-day shifts. While it may not be possible for a taxi driver to work from home, it may be possible to increase satisfaction by allowing greater flexibility in the work environment (e.g., taxi space where the driver spends much of his time).

Because peer-providers receive instant consumer feedback through app feedback, they feel immediate appreciation for a job well done; they also receive a tip based on their performance. Providing reward opportunities to employees based on occupant ratings can increase employee satisfaction. For example, a hotel can implement a bonus program based on immediate consumer reviews, where higher reviews in an employee’s area lead to larger bonuses.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There are limitations of this study that provide future research opportunities. First, to develop an understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted on a small sample after the consumer had participated in the sharing economy. Because hindsight can alter recollection of specific events, researchers may want to use a survey to measure before, during, and after the experience. Second, the current study bundles transportation, hospitality, and delivery services into one sample. It may be valuable to monitor and measure on a more granular level, evaluating behaviors that match industry-specific needs. Lastly, regional effects can affect the responses. Because of varying population density and consumer psychographics, it may be beneficial to segment results in designated market areas.

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