Romanian Consumers' Perception on Carpooling Phenomena – A Successful Example of Collaborative Consumption

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Abstract
Sharing economy represent a complex concept that is intensively debated in the last decade. Proposes an economic model based on collaborative consumption and four different layers: circulation of goods, increased utilization of durable assets, exchange of services, and sharing of productive assets. The present article wants to investigate how Romanian consumers relate to a carpooling application - BlaBlaCar. Consumer perceptions are measured in a quantitative research as an online field survey addressed to users of the BlaBlaCar platform who have completed at least 3 trips in the past 2 months. The results of the research are discussed and analyzed not only from the point of view of factors that are determining the consumption decision for this kind of services but from the point of view of future implications regarding consumption social models and the development of sharing economy and collaborative consumption within the context of Romanian economy. The findings are showing that a large part of educated, young and middle age consumers from the urban area with medium to large incomes are embracing on a wide scale a new model of consumption, which is characterized by the sharing of resources, intense social engagement and a new type of free transactions.

Keywords: collaborative consumption, carpooling, consumption behavior, sharing economy.

JEL classification: D16, M31, R40.

1. Introduction

Economic crisis, shifts and developments within information technology field with a special stress on digital platforms brought to life new forms of consumption and without any exaggeration a new supply- demand paradigm.

This new paradigm implies the fall of traditional boundaries between producers of goods and services and consumers due to distance, price, hard to established communication channels and so on.

The travel experiences are having nowadays a broader horizon, both temporally and spatially. That is to say the capacity of nowadays consumers to create personalized service experience using their own knowledge and communication resources. (Lu, C., Geng, W., & Wang, I., 2015).

Many travel services interactions are made within the virtual marketspace of digital products like taxi online order mobile applications etc. The main characteristics of these new way to deliver services is that the limits where the customer experience begins and ends are becoming blur and hard to define, because interactions with digital platforms are creating customer experience during all stages of the consumption process. Another essential element is represented by the fact that all actors implied in transport services creation and delivery can contribute to the creation of customer experience (customer itself, digital online platform l,m, taxi drivers, public transport companies etc). In a collaborative consumption process this feature is more enhanced by the fact that consumers themselves are creating and delivering consumption experiences to each other.

2. Literature review concerning collaborative consumption
2.1. The collaborative economy between innovation and re-socialization: the theoretical framework

The new model of consumption puts into the center the citizen-consumer and his capability of production and creativity in the same time. After the promotion of Web 2.0 and social networks the interactive digitalization has been facilitated and developed. The next step further was the boom of sharing that has modified the economic exchange.

Collaborative consumption represents a new form of mass sharing among individuals.

These new forms of reciprocity have been defined with different verbal phrases: "sharing economy", "collaborative economy", "common-based" economy" (Belk R., 2014). These are new production models, distribution and consumption capable of leaving the pattern of individuality, looking at potential of the community economy and the recovery of the value of reciprocity in the Polanyian sense. The practices of collaborative economy fit into this scenario thanks to the enabling and disintermediation force promoted by digital platforms, leading to the emergence of new forms of integration between the economy and companies, which expand the boundaries of traditional reciprocity mechanisms in a hybridization perspective with the market and redistributive logic (Pais I., Provasi G., 2015): from the collaboration, based on instrumental motivations, where the cycle of reciprocity becomes "short" and the relationship is based on forms of trust live; to sharing, which distinguishes clan or community structures, based on a dimension of belonging and mutual recognition that even crosses the identity dimension, defining a "We" as a noun reference, not limited to the simple summation of the transiting parts, which traces the boundaries of a generalized but not universal trust. The organizational model is based on "Common-based peer production" (Benkler Y., 2004; Benkler Y., Nissembaum H., 2006) which makes use of it collective intelligence (Lévy P., 2008, p.154; Brabham D.C., 2013) distributed in the networks of open collaboration, in the absence of rigid forms of intermediation and managerial hierarchies.

This determines some fundamental implications inherent in the paradigm of the collaborative economy, starting a redefinition of the concepts of reputation and community:

1) The boundaries between consumption and production, as between amateurism and professionalism (not by chance we talk about pro-sumer and pro-am), they become more and more opaque and fluid. It is therefore a model that puts at the center the empowerment of the citizen-consumer and his creative and productive abilities (Bruns A., 2008). If, we can talk about an augmented society in which the distinction between on and offline appears increasingly blurred, so what exists and has relevance in the digital sphere has a significant impact in our sphere of relationship and physical action, the systems of digital reputation and online trust building play a fundamental role. These are mechanisms powered by algorithms that process a plurality of information by building digital reputation of the members of a platform. If, as Coleman says (1990) the concept of trust can be defined in terms of willingness

to make a collaborative task even before we may asses how it will involve the effort of other persons. The collaborative economy is developed based on interpersonal or community relationships, having the trust that develops from the reputation of the members who use the service. In the so-called "trust age" (Mazzella F., Sandurarajan A, 2016, p. 13) a user has access to the share capital of another that is made evident on the platform. These reputational mechanisms can have ambivalent results: promoting attitudes and virtuous behavior oriented towards quality and the common good (Arvidsson, A. Peitersen N., 2016), may be subject to the fear of some form of negative retaliation by others users (Resnick P., Zeckhauser R., 2002) and at the same time can be characterized by a deep one opacity (Pasquale F., 2015) or even promote a sense of renewed individualism and exclusivity of his own relational circle (Hearn A., 2010).

2) The strongly relational nature of this paradigm that supports collaborative transactions contributes to the creation of new social aggregations, the so-called OSCC, online social change community. The concept of community, which has always been at the center of sociological thought, has assumed different connotations and specificities in the theoretical elaboration of the discipline. (Farajallah, M., Hammond, R. G., & Pénard, T., 2019). In Classical sociology the term tended to indicate formations like the family nucleus, or pre-modern like the small village communities, with a low division of social work (Durkheim, 1974), to the point of outlining the importance of the transition from the gemeinschaft (community) to the gesellschaft (company) (Tönnies F., 1963). However, it has also been thematized as a set of individuals who "Share a territorial area as a base of operations for daily activities" (Parsons T, Shils E.A., Smelser N.J., 1965, p. 97) and this concept has also animated the tradition of community studies, developed in after the Second World War, and focused on the importance of the dimensions of originality of relationships and contextual climate that the community is able to generate (Tosi S., Vitale T., 2016). The culturalist approach he then began to thematize the theme of the community as a semantic field or boundary expressing symbol (Keblusek L., Giles H., Maass A., 2017), which is articulated in the composition of the meanings attributed by the actors through communication and social interaction processes. This meaning has become more important relevance in the era of communication platforms (Paccagnella L., 2000), leading to the birth of communities that aggregate around more than territorial / linguistic affiliation mechanisms new identity and hedonic symbols (for example the brand), or to specific functional needs (as in the case of many sharing economy platforms including those of shared mobility) or a issues of global interest (the Avaaz or Open Street Map case). These new communities, on a par of their territorial counterparts, develop distinctive features that, however, are common to them traditional community systems (Muñiz A., O'Guinn T., 2001): from species consciousness, or rather an identity distinctive linked to belonging to the group, sharing traditions and rituals, even up to sense of moral responsibility felt towards other members.

2.2. Carpooling and the BlaBlaCar platform: successful ways to implement the collaborative economy?

Mobility, together with hospitality, is among the most developed sectors of sharing economy around the world. In a phase in which the city rethinks mobility and redefines transport practices, tools such as car sharing and/or carpooling represent a strategic lever with a strong potential for impact on sustainability and urban liveability. The success of these practices fits into a growing one expansion of the collaborative mobility market

With particular reference to the studies on ride-sharing and car-pooling, most of the analyzes available are technical and focus on service design (Kamargianni M., Li W., Matyas M., Schäfer A., 2016; Furuhata M., et al., 2013; Agatz N., Erera A., Savelsbergh M., Wang X.,

2012) or its impact on traffic and the environment but much less on the relational impact generated by these practices (Novaco R. W., Collier C., 1994; Mazzella F., Sandurarajan A., 2016).

As Belk notes (2014), it is necessary to distinguish collaborative services based on access and based services on sharing: in the first case, there is no form of co-ownership or shared use, it is not an altruistic action, not even oriented to sociality; in the second, however, access can be free, yes share the burdens and responsibilities among users, with a greater connotation in a pro-social sense. (Belk R., 2014)

Car sharing, in fact, remains a market service on demand. It is characterized by being a service based on access as none of the users owns the property or develops any sense of identification / appropriation through use, the reasons are mostly dominated by the need individual and personal of a single user. (Arcidiacono D., Pais I., 2016)

Bardhi and Eckardt (2012) attribute to car sharing a mechanism of "negative reciprocity" for which a single subject (in this case the provider) appropriates the most of the benefits generated by the transaction; the service does not develop any sense of identification community, not even to the provider's brand, but rather it could manifest almost a kind of embarrassment in the show that the item used has been rented. (Li J., et al., 2007)

Carpooling, on the other hand, is based more largely on relational and sharing aspects among users of the platform, which work together as peers, dividing the costs and costs of the move. (Arcidiacono D., Mainieri M., Pais I., 2016) Carpooling is based on the shared use of an asset that belongs to one of the users and that is in fact shared with a not owner. The mechanism that is generated is one of positive reciprocity (Bardhi F., Eckhardt G. M., 2012) in which the two subjects, however, obtain an equal advantage from the transaction. Furthermore, the relational dimension is the recognizability of belonging to a group of people who usually use this system facilitates exchanges between users, acting on the "universes of meaning" that guide the ways of consuming cars and vehicles mobility habits (Bhappu A., Schulteze U., 2019). It is a positive sum system that creates distributed advantages equally between drivers and passengers in terms of reducing the monetary and / or temporal costs of a travel, but also creates benefits of a collective nature to those who are not involved in the transaction, in terms of reduction of traffic congestion, pollution or consumption of fossil fuels (Charles K.K., Kline P., 2006; Ferguson E., 1997; Kelley K.L., 2007; Chan N.D., Shaheen S.A., 2012).

The success of car-pooling has been limited for a long time in that in the past it has been structured mainly in informal and disorganized manner. This would have prevented users from using it systematically as a form of alternative mobility, also due to the difficulty of matching routes and timetables between the transients (Furuhata M., Dessouky M., Ordóñez F., Brunet M., Wang X., Koenig S., 2013). The evolution of communication technologies, especially mobile, combined with those of geo-localization, allowed to overcome these problems making the user experience more dynamic and in real-time with respect to the displacement needs of the subjects (Agatz N. Erera A., Savelsbergh M., Wang X., 2012) also simplifying the payment methods and the building of mutual trust or towards the service in general. In the last decade these services have multiplied, both in Europe and in the US, both for long and short distances, also with the support of different municipalities, with the aim of reducing traffic congestion (76% journeys between 100 and 800 km are made by car with 1.4 passengers per vehicle) (Handke V., Jonuschat H., 2013).

The one generated by platforms like BlaBlacar is a shared mobility system that is part of the forms of ridesharing (see chart 1) and has also been defined as dynamic ride sharing (Agatz N. Erera A., Savelsbergh M., Wang X., 2012), as it incorporates these technological innovations and provides independent subjects, drivers who do not are employees of the platform or service provider, the sharing of parking spaces and the costs of the shift so that it

is mutually beneficial for all those involved. (Orden D.G., Andrada A.V., Sánchez-Serrano, J.L.S., 2015) It is a service tend to be non-recurring (compared to other forms of car-pooling, for example organized at the level company), based on an instant pre-agreement between subjects who are not in the same place (such as in random ride-sharing) and on an automated matching of supply and demand (see fig 1).
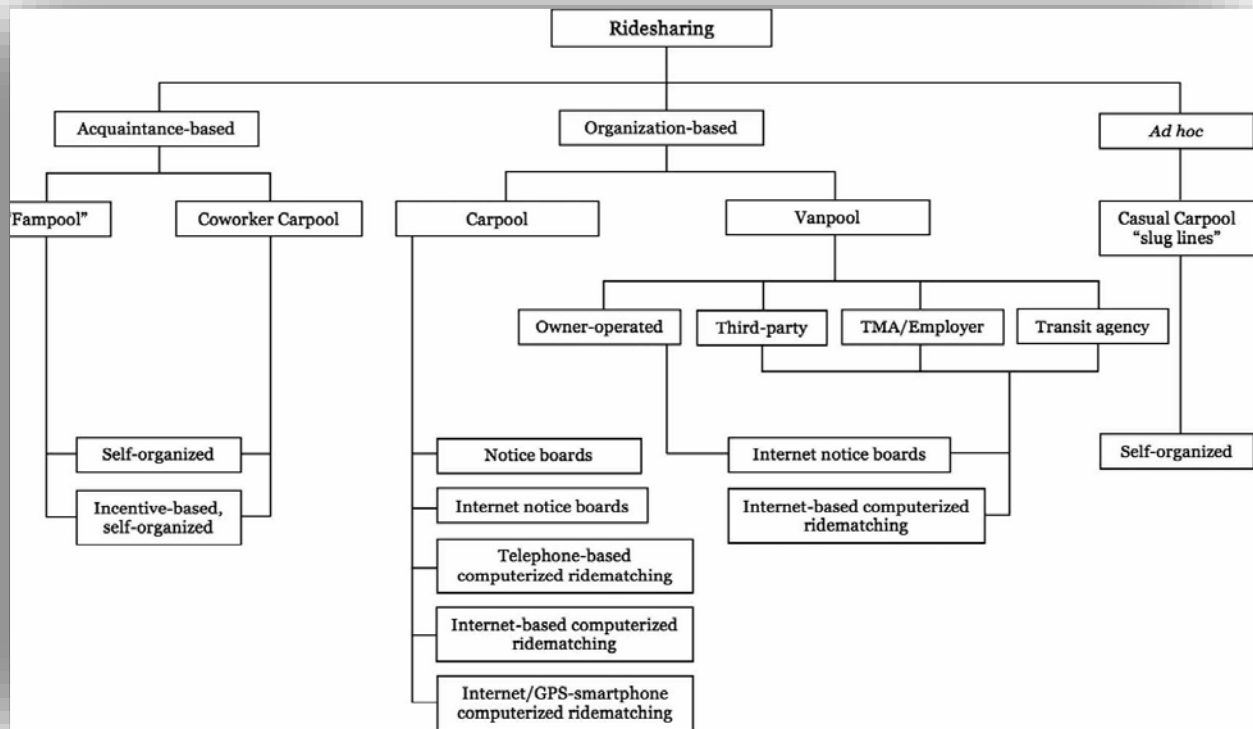

Figure 1. Car-pooling within the classification of forms of ride-sharing
Source: Chan, N. D., & Shaheen, S. A. (2012). Ridesharing in North America: Past, present, and future. *Transport Reviews*, *32*(1), 95.

3. Methodology of research

A research was conducted in order to assess the main hypothesis regarding collaborative consumption in the field of transportation services within the Romanian market. As we stated above, collaborative consumption has been developing in more and more different ways across national economies within the world. New profile of the postmodern consumer implies a propensity over this type of consumption model along all complex implications at the level of goods and services exchange process. In this context we can advance the main research hypothesis - Romanian consumers are more and more involved in collaborative consumption models and especially young population from urban areas are embracing new ways of consumption in the field of transportation services. Young urban consumers at bachelor level of education are using on a large scale mobile applications for taxi companies especially for in town travels and, in the same time they are beginning to use more and more carpooling applications for long distance travels like BlaBlaCar.

The research was implemented as a interview based field type survey, using an online type questionnaire in order to maximize the number of responses in a short period of time.

The final number of responses validated have been of 540, mainly students from economic specialties.

4. Results and discussion

The frequency of travels using BlaBlaCar platform during the last 6 months is between 20 to 29 for 21% of the respondents showing that the propensity of using this type of services is pretty high.

Most of the users, meaning 38% are beginners in terms of the level of experience within the BlaBlaCar platform, followed by experienced users with 25% and Ambassador with 16%. The amount of users that declare themselves having a high level of experience within the platform is up to 40% if we consider together experienced users along expert and ambassador.

Most of the respondents are using the platform mainly as travelers, with 40% them being only drivers. This means that the propensity for traveling as a user for the transportation service itself is higher within the analyzed sample, as the main profile of the respondents is the one of a typical student.

Taking a look to the main reasons for traveling with BlaBlaCar, 32 % of the travelers respondents have the need to go with the family or visit family using the platform, followed by 22% that are going to friends, 17% that are going to faculty, 14% that are going to work and just 8% that are using the platform for make holidays and pleasure trips. The structure of the sample actually consist in 78% of the respondents that are young people between 18 and 27 years of age, followed by 18% from the age interval between 28 and 37 years of age and 4% with 38-47 years of age. Regarding level of instruction we have mainly high school as the last level achieved, a common situation for the typical student with a personal revenue interval between 2000 and 4000 Ron for as much as 82% of the respondents, followed by 16% from them with a personal revenue between 4001 and 6000 Ron.

As consumption motives we can assess that 69% of respondents are sharing the vehicle cost and 10% are using the service for convenience, meanwhile 8% of the respondents are enjoying traveling with others, as it can be seen in the figure 2.
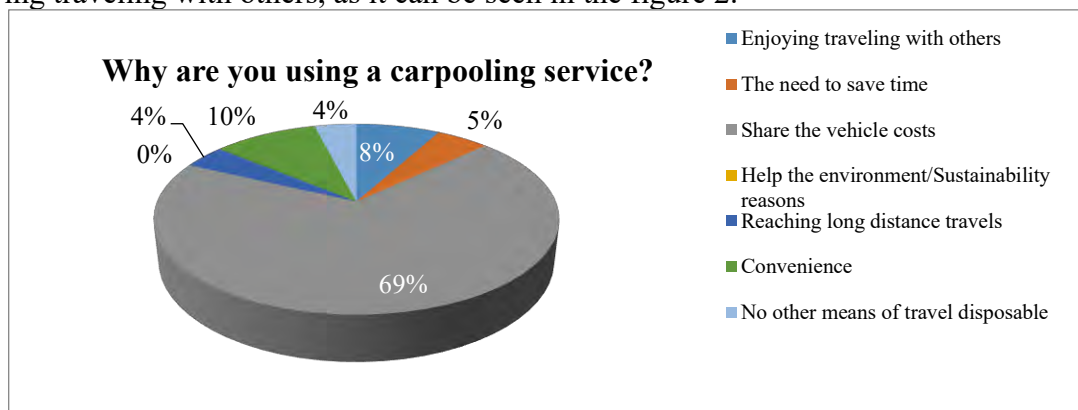

Figure 2. Consumption usage motives for carpooling service

Using a semantic differentiation scale for the degree of satisfaction related with BlaBlaCar services, we have obtained 4.8 mark that is indicating a rather high degree of general satisfaction.

71% of the respondents, before traveling are taking a look to the profiles of the various drivers and choose who they travel with. About 18% of respondents take a look at the profile but then generally travel with anyone, while 11% don't look at the profile and travel with anyone.

The perception regarding traveling with strangers has brought to our attention the fact that most of the respondents are trusting the persons that are using BlaBlaCar followed by the fact that the platform gives them relevant information within the user profile. A percent of 14% of the respondents are considering to share life experiences and 12% are considering BlaBlaCar an safe system.

As regarding different attributes of the services delivered through the platform the highest mark was received by the easy method of traveling, followed by a way to share life experience and the fact that you gain access to an attractive community of users.
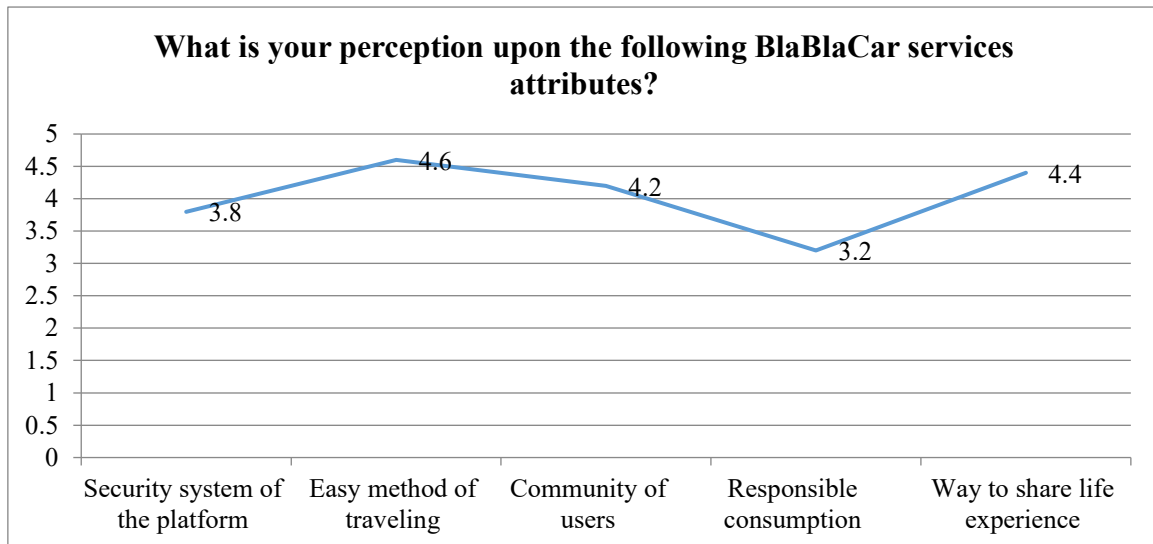

Figure 3. BlaBlaCar services attributes

Respondents have declared also that the feedback that they offer through the platform after a travel is quite important with a mark of 4.5 on a semantic differentiating scale with 5 steps. The information provided by the platform regarding the quality of other users (drivers and travelers the same) is satisfactory for the most of the respondents.

The utility of BlaBlaCar service in comparison with other transportation modalities is very high.

In order to decide regarding the traveling modality for most users the importance of information provided by the platform regarding other users and their level of experience is the highest possible.

Among the hypothesis of research we have tested if the level of experience of the users within the BlaBlaCar platform is correlated with the perception upon service attributes. As we can see below there is a strong and direct correlation between the two variables.

Table 1. GDP Index evolution

Correlations						
		Security system of the platform	Easy method of traveling	Community of users	Responsible consumption	Way to share life experience
Level of experience within the BlaBlaCar platform	Pearson Correlation	.622**	.854**	.766**	.615**	.833**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	540	540	540	540	540

This means that perception upon service attributes are evolving as much as the status of the user and his experience with the platform is evolving too. More experienced users tend to appreciate the service that is a easy method of traveling and a way to share life experience.

If we analyze correlation between the degree of importance for the feedback offered through the platform after a travel and the degree of importance regarding the information provided by the platform about other users and their level of experience from the point of view of decision to travel or not with a particular user, it may be highlighted also a strong and direct correlation. For assessing the correlation it was used the Pearson coefficient because both of the variables have been measured with the interval type scale (Pearson Correlation = 0.712, Sig.(2-tailed) = .000, correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), a sample size N = 540).

It means that users who are appreciating most the information provided by the platform regarding the others are considering also very important their feedback registered by the platform after a travel. Here it has to be made a nuanced observation: the level of importance regarding information provided by the platform about the other users is measured for both categories: travelers and drivers alike. This occurs because both categories have to take the decision to travel or not with a certain company.

The research conclusions are showing that the collaborative consumption regarding traveling services becomes a reality also into the Romanian economy. The utility of the mobility carpooling services analyzed is very high, also the degree of satisfaction perceived by the users. The way in which respondents are involving themselves in terms of consumption shows that these consumers are tend to be more mature and are embracing the sharing economy values on a large scale. Consumption motives are related off course with the profile of the users, mainly represented within our research by students, but the emotional involvement shows a high propensity for present consumption and a future intention too. The profile of urban type student from a large city implies the need to visit home family frequently and the need to optimize time and expenses associated with long distance traveling. Taking account of the answers given, BlaBlaCar platform users are showing the willingness to build a long term commitment within the platform by giving the possibility for other users to assess their individual preferences and profile in order to become reliable as future travelers or drivers.

This means the predisposition to assume responsibility and to offer trust to other participants in collaborative consumption model. The success of the platform indicates the viability of the collaborative consumption model within traveling services field and offers a strong framework for future research in the field. Possible new lines of research can involve qualitative type studies than can assess multiple layers of consumption motivations taking into account the socio-economic profile of the users. Another interesting topic can relate to the fact that carpooling users can develop also other forms of collaborative consumption as well, for example into the field of tourism. How the involvement in different collaborative consumption context can affect the consumer behavior and long-term motivations it can be measured through separate research into the field. Also the effort to evaluate the propensity of consumption into the future for the same users, as they evolve, personally and culturally can be very helpful to understand the phenomena of sharing economy and its trends at least a the level of Romanian economy. The question that remains unanswered is if in the long run, collaborative consumption can outgrow or even replace the traditional ways of consumption, and if these can be the case for any type of product or service or it will be limited to certain types or even certain brands.

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