

The sharing economy: Is participation a question of confidence?

Josette Debroux,
associate professor of sociology, Lyon 2 University

Abstract:

Many studies on the “sharing economy” have referred to the paradigm of an exchange with its core concept of confidence. This “sharing” can be analyzed by using the working hypothesis that these practices spring from the meeting of a set of “dispositions” (ways of seeing, thinking and acting formed during the individual’s socialization) with a context that actualizes them. As a survey of persons who regularly drive for Blablacar shows, these drivers developed a mental disposition for thrift or even asceticism, along with relational skills and, sometimes, even an appreciation of “others”. During a period of social vulnerability with their status at stake, they turned to ride-sharing, a practice that someone wwwwclose to them had brought to their attention and encouraged. For this sharing to last, these dispositions, which have a weak basis, must be reinforced.

Ever present in the discourses of the media and of political and economic circles, confidence as the “*basis for any life in society, for any citizen initiative, political, economic*” (DELAYE & LARDELLIER 2016) is said to be “*in a crisis*”: confidence has been eroded in every field of social activity. Citizens have lost confidence in institutions; distrust of the media is widespread; household confidence, the economy’s driving force, is at its lowest level... This “collapse” of confidence has not hindered the development of a “sharing economy”, a phrase that covers various economic activities in both the nonprofit and business sectors where strangers enter into transactions for goods and services through the brokerage of an online platform. To increase their business activities, the for-profit platforms (the emblems of this sharing economy) have thrived in a “*hypercapitalistic dynamic*” (DAGNAUD 2015) and are trying to arouse confidence by constructing indicators of reputation and enabling users to verify identities.¹

Confidence is the “key concept” in this paradigm for “exchanges”. Several studies of how this “sharing economy” has developed have referred to it as a property of individuals (who “by nature” tend to have confidence), as the outcome of a rational choice, or as the result of how platforms operate, since they are equipped to generate confidence (HADRHRH *et al.* 2017).

To understand why people take part in an activity typical of the sharing economy, namely as a driver in ride-sharing as organized by the platform BlaBlaCar (DEBROUX 2018), I would like to refer to another model. According to this model, which refers to “predispositions” and “contexts”, a practice is always the “*meeting point of individuals’ past experiences incorporated in the form of: schemata of action (sensorimotor schemata or schemata of perception, judgement, evaluation), habits, ways of seeing, feeling, talking and doing, and a present social situation*” (LAHIRE 1998).

¹ This article, including any quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor’s approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in June 2021.

What predispositions are activated by the ride-sharing practices that a platform organizes between strangers and that the heavy-duty drivers of BlaBlaCar have appropriated? What characteristics of the context trigger these practices? Why have they lasted? To answer these questions, I shall use the findings from a survey, which consisted of interviews and participant observation, of approximately thirty regular drivers for BlaBlaCar. These persons ranged in age from 26 to 62, and nearly all of them had a postsecondary diploma.

The predisposition to share rides with strangers via a platform

Like any noncompulsory social practice, accepting the driver's role in ride-sharing as brokered by a platform is socially selective. It involves individuals on the move (a mobility that increases with the rank in the social hierarchy), who use their own car, have access to the Internet and have acquired the necessary predispositions or skills — the inclination to be thrifty, to accept the conditions set for this activity (submission to the platform's rules, *e.g.*: create a profile, answer passengers' questions, negotiate the places for pickups or dropoffs, be on schedule, stay in control behind the steering wheel, etc.), or to have relational skills for playing on the ambivalence in this relationship (friendliness versus business) (JACQUET 2015). Other predispositions might be added, such as wanting to help or enjoying interactions with others.

The large majority of BlaBlaCar drivers come from the middle and upper social categories (ADEME 2015). In terms of their social background, the survey lets us see the difference between older drivers (over forty, many of whom had experienced rising social mobility) and younger drivers (more often in a situation of stationary or descending mobility). However all of them had been raised in families that attached importance to managing money.

Those in the older group came from the lower class, often from the stablest strata in this class that are porous to dominant norms about vacation, home ownership and, above all, education. Many of them had fathers who had moved up slightly in the world of work. These respondents learned very young how important it was to manage money. All of them mentioned the notebook their parents kept for accounts. They also learned restraint in spending, how to tell the useful from the superfluous, and had developed a propensity to save. They paid less attention to spending during adulthood, as they gained confidence in the future owing to their rising social mobility, often bolstered by hypergamy (the choice of a spouse with a higher social status or with better-off social origins).

Those in the younger group had more privileged social origins, which made them relatively comfortable in economic terms. This feeling was rather recent. Their parents did not, as the survey showed, see eye-to-eye about how to manage money, or were even at odds about this. Clara, a 27-year-old literature teacher, came from a well-off family. Her parents (whose parents were low-earning self-employed professionals) had divorced when she was six years old. Her mother (a primary school teacher) was a spendthrift: *"She was always in the red, at the end of every month"*; whereas her father (a doctor) was very attentive to bookkeeping and his estate, as Clara recalled, *"I have memories. He was doing up his accounts on the computer, on Excel spreadsheets with the tax code. He knew everything about how to pay less tax [...] He was caught up with 'you have to earn money', 'have to build up capital, an estate'."* Clara set money aside every month *"just in case"*: *"I'd say that I pay attention. I'm always afraid of running out. I don't know where that fear comes from, since I never lacked what money could buy when I was a child. So, I always pay attention, attention to my savings."*

Regardless of their social origins, all the persons in the survey had an ascetic predisposition — ascetic in the sense of *“self-control and the substitution of duty for pleasure or for what one wants — the guidelines, outright or implied, of practices”* (DARMON 2010). Evidence of this came from their educational background. Those with lower-class origins said they worked *“hard”* to continue their education after secondary school, even though they had often been oriented toward vocational schools. Many of them, whose educational level did not meet up to their parents’ expectations, went back to school later, after having started a career. Sylvia, the daughter of a sales director and a secretary, had, after failing during her first year in languages at a university, turned toward a community college diploma (BTS) in office automation despite her lack of interest in this subject. Her parents had had other dreams for her: *“They would have preferred that I enroll in a longer course of higher education [...] They would have liked for me to do more and better.”* After having worked as a real estate agent for several years, Sylvia went back to school, obtained a master’s degree and set up a business in e-learning as a self-employed professional.

Opening your car door to strangers implies a sense of familiarity with social differences. It means that the person has the codes for entering into relations with persons from other groups. The older drivers in the survey had acquired a sensitivity to the international environment (Several of them had lived abroad), to traveling, to the experience of being wrenched out of the ordinary; and they often genuinely liked exchanges with strangers. On the contrary, the younger drivers, owing to their *“cultural capital”*, had the minimal relational skills needed for exchanges but lacked the predisposition. They described themselves as loners who took little interest in other people’s lives. When they tried to engage in a conversation with passengers, their motivation was to *“fill the contract”*. As Clara said, *“When I talk to them, most say that it’s out of principle.”*

The context triggering the practice

Internalizing an ascetic predisposition, acquiring relational skills and even enjoying interactions with strangers do not mechanically determine the decision to drive for a ride-sharing platform. This decision was always made in a context when the person’s social status was uncertain and vulnerable: the difficulty of finding work after graduation, the loss of a job, the downgrading of the person’s occupational status, or a separation that affected personal resources, both economic and relational. After several months of joblessness, Noria, 27 years old with a master’s degree, accepted a job 100 kilometers from the house that she had just purchased with her spouse (who held a steady job). She was overqualified for the job. Even though she soon benefitted from a promotion, she was not sure that the job suited her: *“I’m starting to go to pieces [...] there are people [suppliers] crying in front of me. Some of them are putting it on; others not. They tell me, ‘I’m going to dismiss employees.’ [...] A week ago, I managed not to think about it in the evening, not to think about it over the weekend.”* In this uncertain context, the idea of moving closer to her work remains hypothetical: *“We bought a house here, and then there’s one steady job here. Maybe move, eventually, but it’s good here.”* She is looking for a way to commute economically, a trip that weighs heavily on her mind.

The loss of employment might reactivate a strong predisposition to be thrifty, which had been put on hold during a period of rising mobility. Corinna, 46 years old and socially mobile (Her father had risen from worker to foreman), had held very well paid positions of responsibility that let her live comfortably. Following a burnout and long-term sick leave, she was afraid of *“not having enough money [...] I told myself I’d have to cut expenses, which was not at all economically justified [...] Besides, five or six euros aren’t going to change anything.”* This predisposition to thrift had been acquired in her family: *“My mother was always careful about everything.”*

A final factor for becoming involved in ride-sharing is having a “connector” or “maven” who is familiar with this practice. Usually this is someone close, a “significant other”, someone in whom the driver-to-be has full confidence, very often someone in the family. None of the persons in the survey talked about having doubt, needing to think things over, or being hesitant, which would have been evidence of a rational calculation of costs and benefits. In the words of Aline, a 55-year-old flight attendant: *“My nephews who live in the Paris area came to see their parents, and they told me, ‘But you should do that. It’s swell. You meet people.’ So, I made up my mind to do it.”*

Predispositions, more or less acquired, put to the test of ride-sharing

The ascetic and relational predispositions of these heavy-duty drivers for the platform vary, and interact. A strong propensity to save might counterbalance weak relational skills or even a sense of anxiety around strangers. William, a 32-year-old engineer was always, like his parents (his father, a ticket controller on trains; his mother, the head of an office), attentive to outlays: *“They always taught me to manage my money well in the sense that they were able to buy a house and, afterwards, an apartment and then a second one for my brother and me.”* When the company where he worked moved to the outskirts of the city, the time he spent commuting (by train) increased considerably. Following his wife’s advice, he enrolled on ride-sharing platforms and received a request from BlaBlaCar. To obtain “likes” and (according to the platform) more demands for rides, William had to constantly make an effort to be “friendly” and overcome his timidity and his fear of the gaze of others. In contrast, liking what is different and exchanges with strangers might not fully make up for a not deeply acquired ascetic predisposition. Charles, a 42 year-old coach, described himself as a “talkative” altruist, who liked helping and meeting new people but had difficulty keeping to schedule and honoring commitments. Several negative opinions had upset him, since he was looking for symbolic profits, *“I bend over backwards, and then I happen on people like that who post, uh careless, opinions about my being late.”* He tried hard to be on time, “to be more structured”.

As this explanation in terms of predispositions has shown, becoming a driver for a ride-sharing platform is not just a question of confidence. It results from a combination of an ascetic predisposition (the propensity to save, the willingness to accept the constraints of ride-sharing), relational skills or the enjoyment of new situations and of meeting strangers with a biographical context conducive to the foregoing.

References

- ADEME [Agence de l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Énergie] (2015) *Enquête auprès des usagers du covoiturage longue distance* (Paris: ADEME), available at <https://librairie.ademe.fr/mobilite-et-transport/2713-enquete-aupres-des-utilisateurs-du-covoiturage-longue-distance.html>.
- DAGNAUD M. (2015) "L'économie collaborative ou la confiance à tous les étages", *Telos*, <https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/societe/entreprise/leconomie-collaborative-ou-la-confiance-a-tous-les.html>.
- DARMON M. (2010) "Des jeunesses singulières. Sociologie de l'ascétisme juvénile", *Agora. Débats/jeunesses*, 56(3), pp. 49-62.
- DEBROUX J. (2018) "Les ressorts de l'engagement dans une pratique de consommation collaborative. Le case des conducteurs d'une platform de covoiturage", *L'Homme and la société*, 207(2), pp. 187-217.
- DELAYE R. & LARDELLIER R. (2016) "Introduction. Penser la confiance... Radiographie d'une valeur en souffrance" in R. DELAYE (editor), *La confiance. Relations, organisations, capital humain* (Caen, FR: EMS Éditions), pp. 21-27.
- HADRHRH W., DRAC L. & LEMOINE L. (2017), "La confiance au cœur des modèles de l'économie collaborative", *26th International Conference of Strategic Management*, Lyon, 7-9 June, available via <https://www.strategie-aims.com/events/conferences/28-xxvieme-conference-de-l-aims/communications/4824-la-confiance-au-cu-r-des-modeles-de-l-economie-collaborative/download>.
- JACQUET É. (2015) "Le 'prêt payant'. Les paradoxes de l'économie collaborative", *Réseaux*, 190-191(2), pp. 99-120.
- LAHIRE B. (1998) *L'Homme pluriel* (Paris: Nathan).