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# **INDUSTRIAL MARKETING MANAGEMENT**

## **Unravelling the dark side of sharing economy – Managing and sustaining B2B relationships on digital platforms**

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# **Unravelling the dark side of sharing economy – Managing and sustaining B2B relationships on digital platforms**

## **Abstract**

Sharing economy is often characterized by an interplay of underutilized resources sharing, information technology facilitation, peer to peer process, and intermediary intervention. In a business to business sharing economy, two or more businesses with common interests follow the principles of collaboration and access share resources to create mutual value. While it benefits the parties involved, there have been concerns about this exponentially growing phenomenon. This special issue focuses on contributing to the business to business (B2B) marketing literature on sharing economy, exploring the concerns, and finding ways to address the existing lacunae. The objective of this introductory article is to nudge the academic literature on sharing economy by (1) integrating the fragmented B2B scholarship on sharing economy, (2) creating a larger framework for understanding the tenets of sharing economy based on real life evidences and (3) summarizing the articles covered in this special issue that explore and recommend ways to face the challenges that have emerged in the present context.

**Keywords:** Sharing economy, B2B, platform economy, business ethics, sustainability

## **1. Background**

Firms working within the sharing economy are often characterized by an interplay of underutilized resources sharing, information technology facilitation, peer to peer process, and intermediary intervention. For example, organizations like Breather allow sharing of office spaces, Flexe allow renting of unused office space to other organizations, and Floow2 allow sharing of trucks to equipment to professionals (Businesslink, 2018). It is a recent yet fast emerging business model in the industry across the globe (Schlagwein et al., 2020) which is popularly referred to as business to business (B2B) sharing economy. The sharing companies gain from reduced capital expenditure and receiving new revenue streams. According to many, trust, a key variable in the marketing literature, plays a pivotal role here and digital platforms play the role of intermediary to enable this trust between the parties involved in a contractual relationship (HDI, 2022). It is a part of a more encompassing concept, sharing economy, an “information technology (IT) facilitated peer-to-peer model for commercial or non-commercial sharing underutilized goods or service capacity through an intermediary without transfer of ownership” (Schlagwein et al., 2020, p. 827).

Business models on ‘sharing economy’ for accessing and reusing products to share and utilize the idle capacities are increasingly becoming popular in the business-to-business (B2B) marketing literature and practice. For example, AirBnB, in its B2B platform allow companies to book Airbnb listings for their employees to build a strong brand (Sigala, 2018). The importance and popularity of this business can be gauged from the fact that platform providers are expected to cross the revenue mark of \$40 billion in the year 2022 (Statista, 2022). The fast growth of the sharing economy is often attributed to reduced cost and enhanced accessibility in different literature (Chakraborty, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018). Whether it is the mobility service platform ecosystem framework or the food sharing, redistribution, and waste reduction model, the

dominance of information technology in explaining the concept of sharing economy appears to be inevitable (Harvey, 2019). While the traditional marketing concepts such as value co-creation have often been researched in the business-to-consumer context, their usefulness in co-creating the B2B service ecosystem remains under-explored (Hein et al., 2019).

Although there are several advantages ranging from cost saving to mutual development for businesses, sharing economy also has certain strong criticisms. The scholars argue that sharing is a social exchange and when sharing is market-mediated, the very essence of sharing that is knowing each other without expecting any return is lost (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). It is primarily due to the intermediation by a company, as third party, between consumers. Research in this direction is particularly required to address the fast growing space of sharing economy and its impacts.

In this editorial we attempt to provide few research directions in the space of sharing economy based on existing evidence, emerging signals from trade literature and accepted articles in this special issue. The remaining article is structured as follows: we start off with an overview of existing academic literature, followed by select synthesis of trade literature to bring in insights that are complementary. This is followed by a summary of the research articles accepted in this special issue, followed by the conclusion.

## **2. Underlying issues in the sharing economy**

It is important to note that past academic literature on dark side of sharing economy is relatively at a nascent stage. As explored by scholars in the recent studies, the bundle of benefits often adding to the popularity of sharing economy has a social angle to it. The advocates of sharing economy advance their arguments to say that it promotes communal forms of consumption and develops trust, solidarity, and social bonding among the stakeholders (Benkler, 2017; Palgan et al., 2017).

On the contrary, there is criticism that sharing economy diffuses ‘pseudo-sharing’ business models. In specific, it has been argued by the critics that the moment the financial aspect is included, it no longer remains sharing as currency based relations can influence the process. Thus, investigations are solicited towards examining the mechanisms wherein both, the positive and the negative ends meet and facilitate value co-creation amidst tradeoffs among the stakeholders.

The arguments and findings of some of the research studies guide us that to create an efficient platform ecosystem, the value chain needs to be flexible (Grondys, 2019), digital marketing channels such as search engine marketing and social media marketing need to be exploited to facilitate trust, utility, and user experience especially for the supplier (Key, 2017). However, building a supplier’s trust is not easy and research suggests that safety, credibility and security remain a point of concern particularly in the B2B sharing economy context and may lead to trust deficit (Yang et al., 2017). Such customer-supplier relationships need to co-evolve for sustaining against opportunism and unequal sharing of co-created value can impact both the partners of the relationship (Laaksonen, 2008; Grönroos and Voima, 2013). However, many of these theories have not been explored for the firms involved in a sharing economy.

Another concern is the variability of service quality by different service providers engaging with users through sharing economy platforms. Since the sharing economy organizations are often not physically involved in delivering the service to their business customers, they hardly have any formal obligation to the supply-side users, and thus, regulatory control is less thereby raising concerns of service quality (Täuscher & Kietzmann, 2017). The ways in which marketers may help ensuring service quality to their business customers remains an area less explored. Another challenge to the B2B marketers especially in case of social media marketing is to match the social media platform such as SlideShare and LinkedIn and content with the decision-maker (Habibi et

al., 2015). The scholars may like to conduct studies and propose mechanisms to bridge this gap.

Another issue is compromising with privacy which is often undermined by marketing analysts while doing the so called ‘B2B customer Analytics’ in order to gain insights into the data (Iacobucci et al., 2019). However, not much has been researched about the ethical usage of B2B customer analytics. Further creation and sharing of information for maintaining healthy B2B relationships is also a challenge. Open platforms for facilitating firms to engage may also lead to cyber-bullying, which is a fairly common incident in social media (Chan et al., 2019). Larger differences of relative bargaining power can also lead to reaping greater benefits created in business relationships (Crook et al., 2007). Such problems of managing information integrity and its sharing without adverse impacts becomes a concern particularly in the B2B context because of the complexity involved in integrating a diverse suite of actors (Prior & Keränen, 2020). Furthermore, such agency problems often have a negative word of mouth and can affect the platform in the long run (Alexandrov et al., 2013). Thus, exploration is needed on how managers can maintain these complex relationships sustainably in such B2B relationships in both upstream and downstream value chain?

Lack of familiarity with social networks and uncertainty in the extent to which social media can help in building the company’s brand are yet other issues with the social media sharing platform adoption for the B2B companies. What are the ways in which the B2B marketers can be helped in adopting the social media marketing techniques? It becomes a pertinent question to investigate here. To address the above concerns, *the objective of this special issue is to explore and examine the dark side of business-to-business marketing*. Articles that contribute to this special issue help us meet this objective as briefed in the subsequent section.

### **3. Inputs from grey literature**

While grey literature does not go through a rigorous peer review process, insights from grey literature is often useful to capture honest signals from different stakeholders and then generate an understanding about thematic developments in new areas of research and leads to evidence based development of management practices (Adams et al., 2017). Following these guidelines, we undertook a review of grey literature using databases like Business Source Complete in Ebscohost. The search term included (sharing economy or collaborative consumption or collaborative economy or peer economy or share economy) across all text for magazines, trade publications, country reports and industry profiles. There were 19,918 results, of which 9538 were in magazines, 4639 were in trade publications, 4527 were in country reports and 1215 were in industry profiles. Almost all the text in these trade publications had neutral and positive sentiments of how business models and technological artefacts created value for the users. The text of all these documents were downloaded to identify which documents had at least 5 negative sentiment words based on natural language process using lexical analysis. The result showcase there were only 813 articles which had some elements of negative context which fit the scope of our review. These articles were selected as it was assumed that these would have some elements of dark side of sharing economy platforms which is currently the focus of this special issue and editorial. These articles were then further analyzed for thematic elaboration.

The text was mined with Latent Dirichlet Allocation for text summarization to estimate themes and topics that the articles covered. Based on the topics that emerged, a word cloud was created that summarized the words in the topics, and visually provides an idea of the focus of these negative discussions in trade literature. This word cloud is presented in Figure 1.





are operating in a markets with high concentration. Further once a customer agrees to try a service, they often have to accept surge pricing for the services, which is justified due to demand variability. For example, in India, the transport department banned Ola and Uber drivers for a duration because of complaints made related to overbilling (FPJ Webdesk, 2022). However, individual customers often have no resolution because of this difference in bargaining power till dissonance about service providers reach a scale where government intervention is feasible.

### **3.2 Platform fairness to all onboarded customers**

There is evidence in news media that firms have been stopped from booking a service based on algorithmic rules created in a platform. For example, in Spain, many customers were denied services because they were from small and medium enterprises and they wanted to rent certain homestay properties close to their residences. Interestingly, the platform nudged certain travellers from smaller firms to book hotel rooms instead so that the homestays were made available to other institutional travellers from larger firms who made batch booking. Further, there have been reports of denial of services to customers with special needs due to disabilities that were seeking services from certain locations which went against the equal opportunity policies of the firms they were employed with. For example, in the United States of America, the National Federation of the Blind requested federal interventions for drivers of Uber and Lyft, who deny services for passengers with special needs, like traveling with a service dog (Masson, 2022). Besides the United States, similar incidents were reported in Canada as well, for passengers with special needs, and government interventions were imposed on the platform. However this discrimination were not faced by employees who were booked cab services from larger employer firms.

### **3.3 Barriers to exit for users**

There is evidence that users and customers who join a platform do not have easy mechanisms to

exit the platform if they lose the need of the services. For example, long term users of Zipcar wanted to cancel their corporate membership after they changed employers and faced immense challenges simply because it was difficult to connect with the platform to cancel their subscription or membership (McFarland, 2020). The options for exiting the platform was fairly difficult and often users would complain that despite stopping usage of services, they would continue to be billed because their accounts were not deleted. Customers were often unable to reach out to service providers for clarifications and problem redressal. Similarly, retention models using AI were created in platforms like Zoomcar to reward and retain customers (Aggarwal, 2019)

### **3.4 Service variability and reliability**

A lot of discussions surrounding sharing platform service experiences are related to service variability, unreliable partners and challenges faced during externalities. There is multiple evidence where customers were stranded in difficult locations while taking trips using platforms like Zipcar in countries like UK (McFarland, 2020). Reported cases show that during the trip the vehicles malfunctioned leaving customers in unsafe positions and there was no support provided from the platform during times of uncertainty. Then there are reports about Uber and Ola in emerging economies like India which also highlighted often the cars were dirty, unhygienic and not maintained appropriately for use (FPJ Webdesk, 2022).

### **3.5 Hyper Personalization of offerings**

While most of the time, hyper-personalization of service offerings using recommendation engines powered by artificial intelligence and data science are perceived to improve end-to-end customer experience journey, this attempt will lead to digitizing physical spaces and enhancing techno-empathy (Aggarwal, 2019). However service bots like chatbots may create hyper-personalization recommendations based on less inclusive datasets and that may lead to challenges of bypassing

these personalized recommendations in the online platforms. Generative Artificial Intelligence based chatbots and recommendation engines often mine selective data to create hyper-customised offerings for institutional buyers which may not be suitable but very difficult to change for the individual employee. Further, platforms may attempt to cross sell services and products when the time or nature may be inappropriate to the employees using the platform (Narula, 2022). For example, chatbots using OpenAI product ChatGPT has been known to push recommendations based on hyperpersonalization based on inappropriate knowledge base in a laptop manufacturer. Further, users may find it difficult to bypass recommendations from hyper-personalization if they are less relevant. Pricing recommendations based on bundling of products and services have created challenges for institutional buyers in platforms like Alibaba to access services without purchasing the bundle, even though the bundle may not be useful for the user in totality. Services bundling and dynamic pricing has sometimes been undertaken across platforms by mining text communication on the platform as well as formal communication between firms (Kumar et al., 2021).

### **3.6 Data sharing among service partners**

Data sharing often happens among partners and stakeholder collaborating for delivering services in sharing economy business models, as the platforms evolve over time. For example, Zipcar declares that data collected through their platforms like website and mobile applications is shared with partners like Sift in order to detect and prevent fraud, theft and abuse (Zipcar, 2020). Now this data involves both personal and professional usage by the traveler. These services may be used for identity verification and service improvement. However users often are not familiar explicitly when they onboard the platform that their data may be shared with external stakeholders. Similarly AirBnB introduced a data sharing platform across fifteen cities to provide local municipalities

access to data about property listings and their compliance with local laws. Information such as contact details, personal identifiers, site transaction information, verification documents, device and browser information for service access, website and mobile application usage information may be shared with third parties through these data sharing initiatives, which individual and institutional users may be unaware when they onboarded the services. Data marketplaces can have a critical role in the sharing economy for value co-creation, and may contribute to the creation of sustainable societies (Pappas et al., 2018). Data sharing as a service can also be explored in B2B platforms with informed consent of all stakeholders (Lomotey et al., 2022). In the sharing economy, individuals or organizations share their resources to create value for themselves and others. Data marketplaces are platforms that enable the exchange of data between different stakeholders, including individuals, organizations, and even machines. These platforms allow data providers to monetize their data by making it available for purchase by interested buyers.

#### **4. Contributing articles**

In this special issue, the following articles were published after a rigorous peer review process which has brought out interesting evidences of dark sides of sharing economy business models. In totality, eight articles were finally accepted for publication after undergoing multiple rounds of rigorous blind review from at least three reviewers.

Chen et al. (2022) highlight how privacy concerns have become important in the home sharing economy business models, where service providers are subject to both digital privacy risks and physical privacy risks. Their findings offer significant inputs in both academic literature and practice for understanding providers' psychological process of legitimacy judgement, by incorporating the micro-level psychological aspects of institutions and multiple stakeholders who are engaged in a relationship.

Behl et al. (2022) highlight how interpersonal relationships in sharing economy could potentially face challenges. Using a lens of relational turbulence theory for the management of agency problems, the study focuses on antecedents, benefits, hazards, and boundary conditions in the management of agency problems among value chain partners. The study identifies how intra-firm level antecedents affect relational turbulence among stakeholders in the value chain. This in turn affects the boundary conditions and risks in the value chain, along with the impact on the benefits generated in the value chain.

Behera and Bala (2022) focus on the unethical use of information access and analytics on B2B relationships to observe the dark side of service quality and behavioural loyalty with customer perceived value as the mediator. The authors present a novel conceptual model that includes information access, analytics, service quality and behavioural loyalty, which is tested from data collected from 307 respondents of B2B service businesses. The findings illustrate that the unethical use of access to privacy and secured information, and unethical use of analytics in sensitive inferences, risk assessment, model drift and eDiscovery results in unfavourable service quality, which lead to unfavourable behavioural loyalty. Acting ethically is a sine qua non for long-lasting relationships.

Akter et al. (2022) presented a marketing analytics capability model using dynamic capabilities and contingency theories to enrich the understanding in industrial marketing research. The authors used the thematic analysis and a survey based empirical study on B2B cloud sharing platforms and found that pattern identification, real-time solutions and data governance as the antecedents of marketing analytics capability with its overall effects on marketing agility and marketing effectiveness. The findings also supported the mediating role of marketing agility and the moderating impact of market turbulence on marketing-analytics-effectiveness and

marketing agility-effectiveness chain.

Culiberg et al. (2022) examined how individual service providers develop their relationship with a sharing economy platform using psychological contract theory. Using a sample of 252 UK Airbnb hosts that were recruited through the online consumer panel, the results indicated that psychological contract breach is an important construct within platform B2B relationships, which enhances the feelings of violations and reduces trust. Also, perceived opportunism was found to be negatively related to feelings of violation.

Davlembayeva et al. (2022) aim to explore the challenges in platform-provider relations and investigate the provider's perspective on platforms' responses to negative incidents in such relations. Using 510 responses from ridesharing providers demonstrated that perceived information asymmetry, uncertain working conditions and relational opportunism predict dissatisfaction with platforms and a subsequent feeling of job insecurity. The authors used latent class analysis resulting in three clusters of respondents that had a significant variance in the perception of proactive, passive and defensive responses, and the job satisfaction level following the implementation of those responses.

Bag et al. (2022) used the ethical theory of organizing wherein they quantitatively examined the role of ethical climate in affecting organizational practices such as ethics training and ethics audit and how these practices affect relationship quality in terms of co-creation and co-innovation. The results of 318 responses from employees in the B2B industry in India suggested that the B2B alliances perceiving strictness in ethics audits tend to be less willing to improve relationship quality. On the other hand, the influence of strictness in ethics training does not lower willingness to enhance relationship quality.

Davlembayeva et al. (2023) aim to explore the challenges in the platform-provider relations and

to examine the provider's perspective on platforms' responses to negative incidents in such relations. Using responses from 510 from ridesharing providers, the findings indicated that perceived information asymmetry, uncertain working conditions and relational opportunism predict dissatisfaction with platforms and a subsequent feeling of job insecurity. Moreover, the latent class analysis based on the providers' perceptions of the platforms' responses to the negative work incidents resulted in three clusters of respondents. These clusters were found to have a significant variance on in the perception of proactive, passive and defensive responses.

## **5. Discussion**

In this section, we attempt to synthesize the dark side elements of sharing economy by combining evidences in grey literature and academic literature. Our review of past published literature, which was relatively scanty combined with articles accepted in this special issue, highlighted many important areas of deliberation for future academic exploration. Further, combining evidences of challenges that are documented in grey literature, we bring out a conceptual framework for managing the darker sides of sharing economy. Figure 2 attempts to summarize and synthesize our findings for a larger audience.



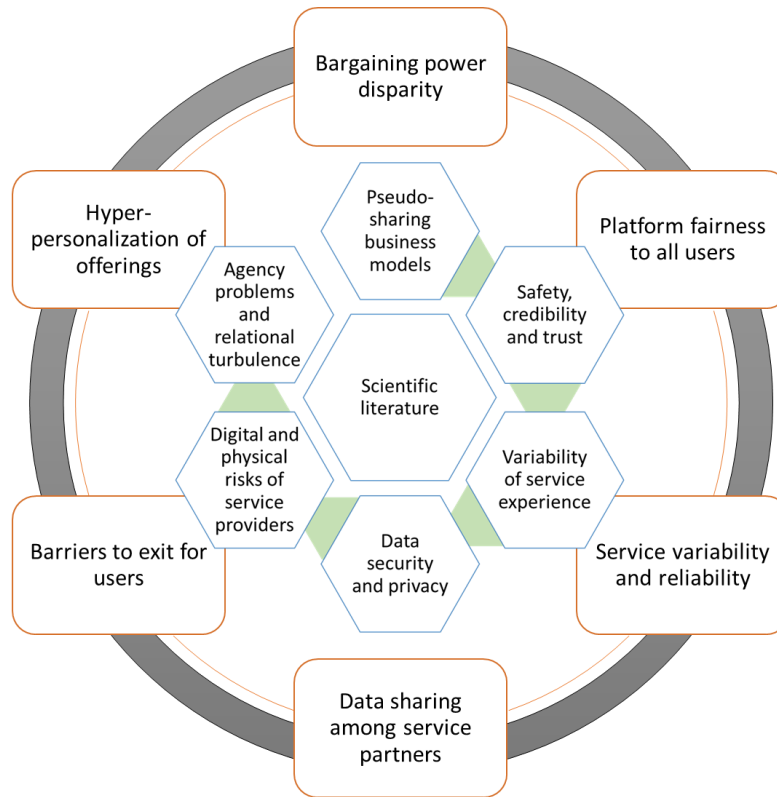


Fig 2: A typology of challenges in sharing economy business models

Based on the above discussion, we propose research questions for each of the six key areas of interest:

### **Bargaining power disparity**

1. How can B2B marketers ensure service quality for their business customers when working with third-party service providers on sharing economy platforms, and what impact does this have on trust and value co-creation?
2. What are the ethical considerations for B2B customer analytics in the context of sharing economy platforms, and how can marketers balance the need for insights with concerns around privacy and data usage?
3. How can B2B marketers leverage digital marketing channels, such as social media and

search engine marketing, to build trust and credibility with their business customers on sharing economy platforms?

4. What are the challenges and opportunities for B2B marketers in adopting social media marketing techniques on sharing economy platforms, and how can these techniques be used to build a company's brand?
5. How can B2B marketers navigate bargaining power disparities and agency problems in the context of sharing economy platforms, and what strategies can they use to build sustainable relationships with their partners in the upstream and downstream value chain?

#### **Platform fairness to all users**

1. What mechanisms can be implemented to ensure that B2B sharing economy platforms are fair to all users, particularly in terms of service quality and privacy concerns?
2. How can B2B marketers ensure that their use of social media platforms is fair to all users, and what strategies can be implemented to minimize potential ethical concerns?
3. What impact does relative bargaining power have on the fairness of sharing economy platforms in B2B marketing, and how can power imbalances be addressed?
4. How can B2B marketers ensure that sharing economy platforms are inclusive and provide equal opportunities to all users, particularly those from historically marginalized groups?
5. What are the most effective digital marketing channels and strategies for B2B marketers to promote fairness and equity on sharing economy platforms, and how can these channels be optimized to reach all users?

### **Barriers to exit for users**

1. What are the main barriers to exit for users in sharing economy platforms, and how can they be addressed in B2B marketing?
2. How do different pricing strategies affect user retention in sharing economy platforms, and what role does B2B marketing play in this?
3. What role do trust and transparency play in reducing barriers to exit for users in sharing economy platforms, and how can B2B marketing promote these values?
4. How do platform policies and regulations impact user retention and barriers to exit in sharing economy platforms, and what role can B2B marketing play in shaping these policies?
5. What impact do network effects have on user retention and barriers to exit in sharing economy platforms, and how can B2B marketing leverage these effects to promote user loyalty?

### **Service variability and reliability**

1. How does service variability impact trust and loyalty among business users in sharing economy platforms?
2. What measures can sharing economy platforms take to improve service reliability for B2B users?
3. How do B2B users perceive the reliability of sharing economy platforms compared to traditional service providers?
4. What role does communication and transparency play in mitigating service variability

issues for B2B users in sharing economy platforms?

5. How can sharing economy platforms better manage and predict demand to ensure service reliability for B2B users?

### **Hyperpersonalisation of offerings**

1. How can sharing economy platforms effectively balance hyperpersonalisation with concerns for data privacy and security?
2. What are the potential ethical implications of hyperpersonalisation in sharing economy platforms and how can they be addressed?
3. How do different types of hyperpersonalisation strategies affect user behavior and satisfaction in sharing economy platforms?
4. What role does user trust play in the success of hyperpersonalisation strategies in sharing economy platforms?
5. How can sharing economy platforms ensure that hyperpersonalisation efforts do not result in discrimination or unfair treatment of certain user groups?

### **Data sharing among service partners**

1. How do sharing economy platforms ensure data privacy and security in their data sharing arrangements with service partners in B2B marketing?
2. What factors contribute to successful data sharing partnerships between sharing economy platforms and their service partners in B2B marketing?
3. How do data marketplaces facilitate data sharing and exchange between sharing economy platforms and their service partners in B2B marketing?

4. What are the ethical and legal implications of data sharing among sharing economy platforms and their service partners in B2B marketing, and how can these be addressed?
5. What are the benefits and drawbacks of data sharing among sharing economy platforms and their service partners in B2B marketing, and how do they impact platform competitiveness and innovation?

To address the above research questions, we suggest going beyond the well-established traditional quantitative and qualitative approaches and data analyses, in order to get a better understanding of the phenomena in question and their inherent complexities.

Many of these platforms allow data to be generated in very high volumes. These big data collected through sharing economy platform can open up very interesting theoretical contributions by mining the user generated content and trace data. Theory building can be attempted in these studies using computational intensive methods of theory building (Kar and Dwivedi, 2020; Miranda et al., 2022). These theory building studies may be both deductive or inductive but should try to develop theoretical lexicons from platform data and then validate the model using inferential analysis models stemming from econometrics (Kar et al., 2023).

Further, considering the type of research problems, we believe that aiming for more active and effective stakeholder engagement in the research activities can lead to more impactful outcomes. Employing interventionist approaches (e.g., action research, clinical research, and action design research) can help towards this direction (Pappas et al., 2023). Finally, authors may examine asymmetric relations among variables and employ Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) (Ragin, 2009), which allows to get deeper insight into the data as it enables to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for an outcome to occur (Pappas & Woodside, 2021; Woodside, 2017).

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that the sharing economy presents a complex landscape for B2B marketers, characterized by a wide range of challenges and opportunities. We posit that addressing bargaining power disparities, ensuring platform fairness, reducing barriers to exit, improving service reliability, balancing hyperpersonalization, and promoting data sharing are all critical areas for future research and development. The proposed research questions offer a starting point for exploring these areas in greater detail, and we encourage scholars and practitioners alike to engage in this important work.

As the sharing economy continues to expand and evolve, it is essential that B2B marketers remain vigilant in their efforts to manage the challenges and leverage the opportunities it presents. This requires a deep understanding of the unique dynamics and drivers of this new economic model, as well as a willingness to embrace innovation and explore new strategies for value creation. By doing so, B2B marketers can help to shape the future of the sharing economy, driving sustainable growth and creating new opportunities for all stakeholders involved.

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