THE SHARING ECONOMY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT TOURISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Yuldashev Kamol Sharifovich
Head of the Department of Tourism and hotel management, Bukhara State University (Uzbekistan)
kamolyuldashev1987@gmail.com

Abstract. The development of the sharing economy became one of the most significant trends in the transformation of contemporary tourism. The spread of online platforms based on the principles of collaborative consumption gave independent travelers the opportunity to organize transport, accommodation, and the exchange of experience directly with other participants, without the mediation of traditional agencies. The present article examines the formation of peer-to-peer tourism services, from online vehicle rental to hospitality exchange and ride sharing communities, and it analyzes the model of interaction between resource providers, digital platforms, and travelers. Particular attention is given to the role of trust, of user reviews, and of the proportional division of costs, as well as to the contribution of the sharing economy to the autonomy of travelers and to the ecological sustainability of tourism.

Keywords: sharing economy, independent tourism, peer-to-peer, collaborative consumption, ride sharing, hospitality exchange, Couchsurfing, BlaBlaCar, backpacking, digital platforms.

Introduction

The digitalization of the tourism market not only transformed the booking of services but also gave rise to fundamentally new models of interaction between the participants of travel. With the spread of online platforms and of social networks, tourists gained the possibility to organize their trips independently and to exchange resources directly with one another. On this basis the sharing economy was formed, that is, a model of collaborative consumption in which private persons provide one another with accommodation, transport, and advice. The aim of the present article is to examine the formation and the global spread of peer-to-peer tourism platforms and to analyze their role in the development of modern independent tourism, which can be presented as follows.

Research methods

The study applied the methods of analysis and synthesis, the historical and chronological method, the comparative method, the systems approach, content analysis, and statistical analysis.

Discussion

Table 1. Main peer-to-peer platforms of the sharing economy in independent tourism

Year	Platform	Type of service	Contribution to independent tourism
2003	VroomVroomVroom (Australia)	Vehicle rental comparison	Online comparison and advance booking of car rental for independent tourists
2004	Couchsurfing	Hospitality exchange	Free accommodation and advice within a global community of over six million members in 246 countries
2006	BlaBlaCar	Ride sharing	Connecting drivers and passengers with proportional cost splitting on long-distance trips
2017	BlaBlaLines	Regular ride sharing	Extension of ride sharing to longer and more regular routes

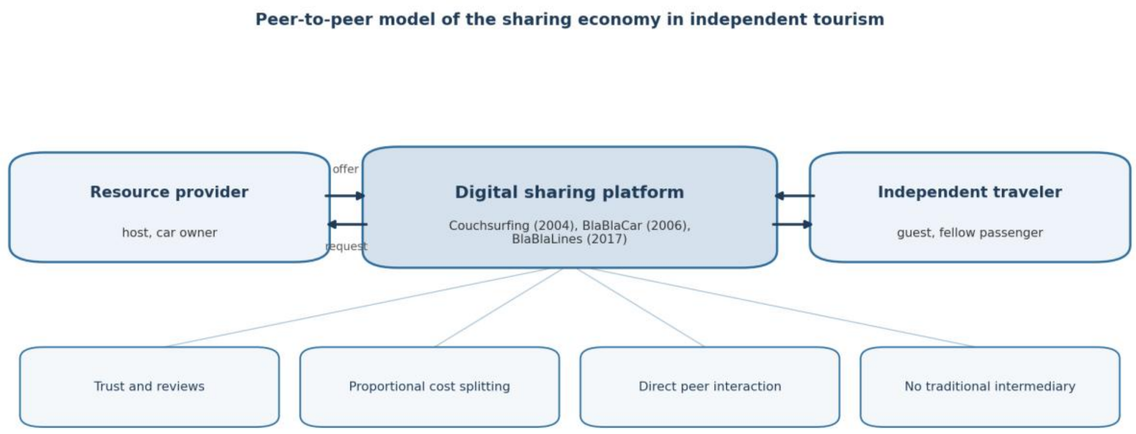

Figure 1. Peer-to-peer model of the sharing economy in independent tourism

The concept of the sharing economy is based on the principle of collaborative consumption, according to which the temporarily unused resources of private persons, such as a free seat in a car or a spare room in a home, are made available to other users through a digital platform. In tourism this principle proved especially productive, since travel by its very nature generates a demand for transport, accommodation, and local knowledge that established providers cannot always satisfy in a flexible and inexpensive form. Online platforms assumed the role of an intermediary of a new type, one that does not own the resources itself but organizes trust between the participants through systems of registration, of personal profiles, and of mutual reviews. In this way the sharing economy combined the economic interest of the resource owner, the convenience of the traveler, and the technological capabilities of the digital environment.

Unlike the traditional commercial model, in which a company sells a standardized service to an anonymous client, the sharing economy is built on direct relations between equal participants and on the social capital that accumulates within the community. The reputation of a host or of a driver, expressed in the form of ratings and written reviews, performs the function that in the classical economy is performed by a brand or by an official certificate. This mechanism of distributed trust made it possible for such platforms to spread rapidly across national borders, since a single global system of profiles and evaluations is equally understandable to a traveler in any country. As a result, the sharing economy acquired a pronounced international character and became one of the channels through which independent tourism spread on a global scale, connecting providers and travelers who would never have met within the framework of the traditional market.

In 2003, in Australia, the online platform VroomVroomVroom was launched with the aim of creating new possibilities in the sphere of tourism and of filling existing gaps. The main task of this system was to provide tourists and local residents with a convenient and rapid service for the rental of vehicles. Whereas previously travelers had to apply in person to the offices of rental companies in order to rent a car, spending considerable time and additional funds on this, the VroomVroomVroom platform made the process significantly simpler. Users now gained the possibility to compare the offers of different companies, to compare prices, and to book a suitable vehicle in advance through the internet. As a result, this system became not only an innovative solution on the tourism market of Australia but also a convenient instrument for independent tourists, and moreover it served as a stimulus for the development of analogous services in other countries as well.

With the spread of electronic online booking systems, of mass media, and of internet technologies, tourists gained the possibility to reserve independently all the services of their trip, to compose a route, and to determine the time and the dates of the journey. Most importantly, they are able to select in advance companions corresponding to their interests and worldview, to determine which transport to use, in which types of accommodation to stay, which dishes and products to consume, what the duration of the trip will be, and how flexible it can be. Tourists thus gained access to the solution of a global task, namely the adaptation of a trip to their own needs and to their individual rhythm of life, which became one of the key achievements of the modern industry of independent travel.

During the period of the active development of internet systems, in 2004 Casey Fenton [1] founded the company Couchsurfing, which was initially created as a community of travelers who left reviews and gave advice to future tourists. Couchsurfing is a web platform of an international tourism community that unites more than six million participants from 246 countries of the world. The main idea behind the creation of the site was that its participants could provide one another with free accommodation and with various kinds of help. For example, a tourist setting off abroad could find on the site people ready to offer entirely free of charge a room, a bed, a sofa, a folding bed, or a mattress for the night. Such services spread especially rapidly among backpackers, since they traditionally organize budget trips and look for inexpensive accommodation. At present about 1650 users from Uzbekistan are registered on the site, of whom approximately 30 participants from Tashkent provide sleeping places for tourists in their homes.

At the next stage of the development of independent travel, ride sharing began to spread actively, that is, movement between cities and countries in private vehicles as fellow passengers without payment. In 2006 the French entrepreneur Frederic Mazzella [2] founded the online platform BlaBlaCar, intended for finding fellow passengers for private cars. The main aim of the system was that car owners could find passengers for shared long-distance trips and thereby reduce their costs, while tourists could gain the possibility to reach the necessary destination with minimal expenditure. At the first stage the service functioned in the format of intercity transport (up to 340 km), but already in 2017 the BlaBlaLines service was launched, which made it possible to make trips over longer distances as well. The mechanism of the platform was simple, in that the driver, as the owner of the car, published information about the planned trip on the site, while travelers heading to the same destination could book a place in the car in advance. During the trip the costs were distributed proportionally among all participants. An advantage of BlaBlaCar was that it not only increased the efficiency of the use of personal transport but also contributed to ecological sustainability, since the transport of a larger number of passengers in a single car reduced the number of cars on the roads. The platform rapidly gained popularity in Europe and beyond, and today BlaBlaCar is recognized as one of the most successful examples of the sharing economy model in the sphere of tourism and serves as an important transport solution for independent travelers.

The spread of the sharing economy platforms had a significant influence on the very model of independent tourism. The traveler ceased to be a passive consumer of a ready package and became an active organizer of the trip, capable of selecting companions, transport, and accommodation in accordance with personal interests and a limited budget. Such services proved especially attractive for the backpacker segment, which traditionally seeks inexpensive and authentic forms of travel. At the same time, the collaborative use of transport and of housing contributed to the more rational use of resources and to a reduction of the ecological burden, which corresponds to the principles of sustainable tourism. For destinations such as Uzbekistan, where independent and budget travel is steadily growing, the development of peer-to-peer platforms and of the digital trust infrastructure that supports them represents an important reserve for strengthening the competitiveness of the national tourism product.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the sharing economy became a logical continuation of the digitalization of tourism and one of the driving forces behind the development of independent travel. The successive appearance of platforms for online vehicle rental, for hospitality exchange, and for ride sharing reduced the dependence of travelers on traditional intermediaries and replaced it with a model of direct interaction between equal participants, supported by digital systems of trust and of mutual evaluation. As a result, independent tourism acquired the features of a distinct and dynamically developing segment of the world tourism industry, characterized by the autonomous organization of the trip, by flexible decision making, by the proportional division of costs, and by an orientation toward the sharing of experience. The sharing economy should therefore be regarded not only as an economic mechanism but also as a social and technological foundation of modern independent tourism, the further study of which is of considerable practical importance, including for the tourism sector of Uzbekistan.

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