Car Sharing: A Driving Alternative

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In an age of metropolitan cities, and urban populations where transit or walking is often a reasonable option, not all people need to own their own cars. Vehicles are often unnecessary, so people simply do not own one. However, most people do still take the occasional longer trip that requires a car. Enter the idea of car sharing.

Car sharing, or “Car Clubs” in the United Kingdom, is the practice of sharing a car between multiple people for regular travelling. This may include for commuting for some people, but it is often used for errands and short trips. Car sharing programs are run as socially responsible business that cut down on people’s carbon footprint and people’s vehicle associated cost because it is shared with others. They are typically a membership based service and offer all qualified drivers in a community access to a dispersed network of shared vehicles.

Car sharing first began in 1948, in Zurich, through the Selbstfahrergenossenschaft carshare program. However, it was a smaller endeavour. The first popular carshare program originated in Britain in 1977 in Suffolk. This was called the “Share-A-Car” service, but more closely resembled that of a ride sharing, or carpooling programs rather than a modern day car sharing program. This had gained popularity rapidly after the Oil Crisis in 1973-1974, and people had begun to realize that fossil fuels were a highly finite resource. Through the 1980s-1990s, it slowly increased still in popularity, but the modern day programs weren’t widely used until the 2000s. In present day in Britain, there are many car clubs to choose from including City Car Club, Co-Wheels, Hertz 24/7, Zipcar, E-car Club, Drive-Now, and easyCar Club, as well as many smaller community based car clubs.

Car sharing offers many benefits to not only the driver, but also the wider community as a whole. Firstly, car sharing reduces road congestion. Britain is known for having less than ideal traffic condition, especially during rush hour periods in metropolitan areas. Many people state this as the reason alone as to why they do not drive or own a motorized vehicle. However, if more people choose to be a part of a car sharing program instead of owning their own vehicle, this causes less drivers to be on the road at any given time. Therefore, this lessens the demand on the roads, lessens traffic jams, and increases general traffic flow.

Another benefit to car sharing is that it has a positive impact on the environment. For each and every person to drive their own vehicle takes a lot of fossil fuels, and has a very large carbon footprint from emissions, which leads to increased climate change and global warming through the greenhouse effect. However, choosing not to own your own vehicle, and instead share with a group of people reduced greenhouse gas emissions, through the act of not driving unless absolutely necessary. This also reduces demand on fossil fuels as a resource.

Lastly, car sharing can help reduce the cost of owning a vehicle and it’s associated costs. An article published in 2013 in the Daily Mail stated that Britain was the most expensive place on earth to run a car, costing £3500 annually, which is equal to $6500 Canadian (Daily Mail, 2013). This is simply the cost of running the car, and does not include the actual cost of buying the car itself. However, if people choose to join a car sharing program, not only do they save the cost of purchasing the vehicle, but they can save on gas and insurance as well. This could actually potentially make driving a much more affordable possibility for residents of the UK, while still reducing demand on public roads, and demand on fossil fuels.

Overall, this means that carsharing can help protect and increase multiple forms of capital. It can protect natural/environmental capital through the environmental benefits and it helps to increase economic capital through it’s business model. As well though, the model may help to increase social capital by providing people with a way to get to one another. Transportation is an essential piece to the ability to network and socialize, so car sharing programs may provide this.

When car sharing programs began to increase in popularity, it wasn’t without concerns. Many drivers of paid transport such as taxi drivers, or public transport operators were concerned that car sharing would take business away from them and that they were at risk of losing their livelihoods. As well, there were concerns around the licensing and insurance of vehicles shared by a network of drivers in the case of an accident. These concerns were both solved through British legislation. Drivers and vehicles are now required to have special licensing in order to drive shared vehicles. As well, when car sharing was first introduced, it was made illegal to accept a reward for giving somebody a ride in a private car. This was later reformed in 1978 however, so that the driver may receive payment, but may not make a profit. This lessens motivation to give cheap rides as an alternative to public transport, as the driver does not benefit. As well, there are limitations as to how many drivers can be a member of each car sharing scheme. Limiting the membership leaves a demand for public transport and taxi services, so that those operators do not lose their livelihood.

Another difficulty with car sharing is that it may not be effective in smaller cities. These programs are more effective and thrive better in large cities with a high density, because there is more demand for transit, and a need for fewer cars on the roads, and therefore, more people willing to give up full ownership. In less dense areas, there often are simply not enough people within a certain catchment area to not only have interest in the program, but to support and afford the cost of the program (ie. purchasing vehicles, maintenance, etc.). Whereas in cities, it is almost guaranteed that the initial interest and capital for the program can be found.

Over the years, car sharing programs have become increasingly innovative in order to stay current, and constantly improve on their service. Many car sharing companies have chosen to display advertising on parts of their vehicles to help increase revenue. As well, as sustainability and environmentalism grow in popularity, so do green carsharing innovations. Plug-in hybrid electric vehicles have been purchased by many car sharing companies as an eco-friendly option. As well, some companies have chosen to calculate and attempt to counteract all emissions that the drivers of a program create, according to the Kyoto protocol (one example includes planting trees). A company, Respiro Car, based in Madrid recently became with world’s first carbon neutral car sharing service. As well, in Japan, vehicles are being designed specifically for car sharing. These vehicles are small and are powered solely by battery power. This makes them eco-friendly, but still small and powerful enough for the vehicle to be driven and parked in urban and metropolitan areas.

In times where roads are severely overcrowded with people driving around in personally-owned vehicles, car sharing provides not only an economical, but environmentally conscious alternative for drivers. Having grown in not only size, but also scope and business model since the Selbstfahrergenossenschaft carshare program in 1948, car sharing has spread around the globe and increase exponentially in popularity. Today there are many car sharing options for anybody who wishes to partake in one of these programs, and it is likely to increase in years to come.

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