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Sharing Economy Adoption in Iran – A Social Innovation Adoption Perspective

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ABSTRACT

While the sharing economy is rapidly gaining global prominence, the adoption of this contemporary social innovation in various communities and emerging markets remains ambiguous. This study explores the determinants of sharing economy adoption through the lens of innovation. Employing a qualitative approach, we conducted in-depth interviews and a systematic analysis of actors in food-sharing platforms in Iran to uncover key factors influencing adoption. The findings demonstrate that potential adopters seek to cultivate value co-creation in the sharing economy. Three crucial factors, namely the "Positive Mental Image," "Perceived Attributes of Innovation," and "Perceived Value Co-Creation," significantly influence adoption and participation in the sharing economy. These factors not only shape adopters' perceptions but also influence their sustained engagement with these platforms. This study contributes to the literature on innovation adoption and offers practical recommendations for managers of platform-based sharing economy businesses to enhance the perceptions of potential adopters, particularly in emerging markets.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the sharing economy has reshaped market consumption patterns and ecosystems, driving significant changes in lifestyles and quality of life (Cherry & Pidgeon, 2018; Morewedge et al., 2021; Szymańska, 2021). For instance, Uber, a ride-sharing platform operating in over 80 countries, and Airbnb, a lodging-sharing platform in over 190 countries, have delivered more efficient and cost-effective services to global populations (Vargo et al., 2020). Additionally, platforms such as OLIO, boasting over four million active users, have played a crucial role in reducing food waste and benefiting the environment in the food consumption chain (Choi et al., 2019; Meshulam et al., 2023). The projected annual growth rate of the sharing economy, increasing from \$15 billion in 2015 to an estimated \$335 billion in 2025 (PWC, 2015), underscores its growing global influence, with nearly one in two Europeans utilizing sharing economy platforms (PWC, 2018).

While the positive impacts of the sharing economy as a modern innovation in addressing social issues, such as poverty, unemployment, pollution reduction, and overconsumption, have been well-documented (Hamari et al., 2016; Laukkanen & Tura, 2020), resistance to its adoption persists among certain populations (Huynh & Gurtner, 2023), resulting in uneven acceptance across different societies (Chuah et al., 2021; Nakamura et al., 2021). One possible explanation is that adoption factors are rooted in different domains, such as food sharing, compared to accommodation or ride-sharing (Böcker & Meelen, 2016), as well as distinct socio-cultural contexts (Dahmani & Ben Youssef, 2023; Davidson et al., 2018), exacerbating disparities between developed and developing countries.

Although emerging economies in developing countries stand to derive greater benefits from the sharing economy, particularly in novel sectors such as food, apparel, and employment (Alharthi et al., 2021; Akbar & Bodhanya, 2021; Quattrone et al., 2022), the presence and success of sharing economy platforms in these innovative domains remain notably limited. According to a PWC report (2015), a significant portion of financial investments in sharing economy startups has been directed toward ride-sharing and accommodation platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb. Most studies related to the sharing economy have focused on Western societies and leading platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb, highlighting a significant research gap concerning developing countries and emerging markets, especially in innovative sectors (Cheng, 2016; Quattrone et al., 2022; Tamilmani et al., 2022).

Unlike the empirical literature on antecedents, which primarily examines consumer motives for participation in the sharing economy, research on adoption requires a broader focus. Several studies have highlighted the significance of economic, social, environmental, and hedonic motivations (Böcker & Meelen, 2016; Ek Styvén & Mariani, 2020; Hamari et al., 2016; Jain & Mishra, 2020; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Sung et al., 2018). While understanding these motivations contributes to a deeper comprehension of the reasons behind individuals' participation in the sharing economy, these factors alone do not fully explain its adoption. They do not account for why, despite the stronger presence of many of these motivations in developing countries, the sharing economy faces significant challenges in these societies. Many sharing economy platforms, particularly in critical social sectors, struggle to gain acceptance from potential stakeholders. Consequently, they often face early failure or, at best, experience very slow adoption rates (Evans & Schmalensee, 2010). Given that platform-based sharing economies represent some of the latest social innovations (Szymańska, 2021; Vignieri, 2021), this study seeks to identify factors affecting sharing economy adoption through the lens of social innovation, particularly in emerging markets and novel sectors. To address this, it explores the following questions: (1) What factors influence the adoption of sharing economy platforms in emerging markets, particularly in culturally distinct settings? (2) How do socio-cultural and contextual dynamics shape the adoption of sharing economy platforms in novel sectors? (3) What theoretical insights can these findings provide to enhance understanding of social innovation adoption in emerging markets and novel sectors?

Conducted through a qualitative study of food-sharing platforms in Iran, this research contributes to both theoretical advancements and practical implications. First, it proposes a model for sharing economy adoption, offering theoretical insights into the influential factors shaping social innovation adoption in emerging markets. Second, it addresses the overall dearth of qualitative research in innovative sectors such as food, independent of mature sharing economy markets like accommodation or ride-sharing. Finally, building on these theoretical advancements, the paper also offers practical recommendations for fostering value co-creation across consumer-platform-supplier networks and

proposes a framework for enhancing marketing strategies to increase adoption rates among sharing economy stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

The success of platforms such as Uber and Airbnb has sparked significant scholarly interest in examining the nature of the sharing economy (Martin, 2016). This phenomenon is often described in the literature as addressing socio-economic challenges through innovative solutions enabled by advancements in internet technology, social networks, and online platforms (Böcker & Meelen, 2016). It promotes decentralization by forming triadic social exchanges among consumers, the intermediary platform, and providers (Benoit et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2018). The breadth and complexity of the sharing economy have prevented scholars from reaching a consensus on a single definition. However, one of the most prominent definitions is offered by Eckhardt et al. (2019): "a scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology-enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and intangible resources that may be crowdsourced." Despite disagreements over definitions, the sharing economy can establish its identity as a contemporary social innovation (Martin, 2016).

2-1. The Sharing Economy from the Lens of Social Innovation

Social innovations aim to meet social needs, improve social connections, and enhance the quality of social life (Phills et al., 2008). When these social innovations are disseminated through technological mediation, they foster a harmonious interaction between the economy, society, and the environment (Szymańska, 2021).

Ziegler (2017) emphasizes that collaboration among diverse actors, particularly through collective action and shared goals, is crucial in technology-based social innovations. These characteristics are sufficient to classify the sharing economy as a social innovation. From this perspective, the sharing economy, by introducing new solutions for access and active participation in sharing, leads to more efficient utilization of resources, a fairer distribution of social capital, and the creation of social and environmental sustainability (Heinrichs, 2013; Martin et al., 2015). The impact of innovation in online businesses further reinforces this idea, as online platforms continue to evolve and shape consumer behavior (Samieifard et al., 2024).

Studies examining the sharing economy through the lens of social innovation often focus on social impacts, social inclusion, and changes in social behavior, using foundational theories such as social exchange theory, social impact theory, and social capital theory (Boateng et al., 2019; Davlembayeva et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Kim & Yoon, 2021). While these theories offer valuable insights into the dynamics of the sharing economy, they may not fully capture the complexities and unique challenges associated with the adoption of sharing economy platforms.

2-2. Innovation Adoption

Several theories provide useful frameworks for understanding innovation adoption. Prominent among these are the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000) and its evolved form, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003). These models focus on individual-level factors influencing intention and behavior regarding technology use. TAM utilizes two primary constructs: Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use. UTAUT identifies four core determinants: Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, Social Influence, and Facilitating Conditions.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) focuses on predicting and explaining behavioral change. It posits that the intention to perform a behavior is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Additionally, the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) model provides a complementary framework for examining innovation adoption. The VAB model posits that values play a central role in shaping an individual's attitudes, which, in turn, influence behavior (Homer & Kahle, 1988).

The Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) model (Rogers, 2003) offers a broader perspective, explaining how new ideas and technologies spread through cultures. The theory's constructs—perceived attributes of innovation, type of innovation decision, communication channels, nature of the social

system, and the extent of change agents' promotion efforts—are crucial for understanding innovation adoption.

2-3. Adoption of the Sharing Economy

The sharing economy has been extensively studied across various dimensions, including platform technology (Perren & Kozinets, 2018; Wirtz et al., 2019), societal impacts (Choi et al., 2019; Köbis et al., 2021; Martin, 2016), and actors' activities (Gerwe et al., 2022; Laurell & Sandström, 2017). However, research on the adoption of the sharing economy is limited and often conflates participation motivations with adoption factors, neglecting the complexity of adopting this social innovation within diverse social systems (e.g., Chuah et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2017).

Few studies have taken a broader view of sharing economy adoption, examining the subject from an innovation standpoint and applying theories from the literature on innovation acceptance. Most of these studies have embraced classic theories as a fundamental framework and have endeavored to refine or extend their constructs (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). For example, integrating motivational factors such as price value into TPB (e.g., Chatterjee et al., 2019; So et al., 2018), and incorporating hedonic motivations, trust, and self-efficacy into UTAUT significantly enhance the models' explanatory power for the adoption of Airbnb (Tamilmani et al., 2022).

Akbari et al. (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of combining TAM and TPB to predict Iranian consumers' intentions to use ride-sharing platforms, emphasizing additional factors, such as price value and perceived satisfaction. Integrating VAB and TPB has also proven valuable in exploring adoption and decision-making in the sharing economy. For instance, Tajeddini et al. (2021) explored visitors' decision-making processes for Airbnb and hotel accommodations, highlighting the indispensable role of subjective norms in shaping revisit intentions in both contexts, while attitudes significantly influence customer loyalty in Airbnb.

These insights highlight the need to account for psychological and contextual factors when studying sharing economy adoption in diverse settings. Similarly, Tajeddini et al. (2022) examined how self-gratification and social values influence revisit intention and customer loyalty among Airbnb customers, emphasizing the interplay of social and individual factors in fostering long-term adoption. These studies underscore the multifaceted nature of sharing economy adoption, influenced by individual, social, and cultural factors.

Min et al. (2018) and Liu & Yang (2018) extended DOI and TAM by including social influence and herd behavior, respectively, providing deeper insights into Uber adoption in the United States and bicycle-sharing adoption among Chinese people. However, applying these models to the complex, platform-based sharing economy—where consumers favor access over ownership and innovations are co-created among participants—necessitates a more nuanced approach, often requiring qualitative research methods.

While the literature often examines the sharing economy through the lens of technological innovation and employs theoretical frameworks related to technology acceptance, factors such as cultural differences, economic conditions, and social crises in developing regions necessitate research approaches with a social innovation perspective. This perspective accounts for these unique contexts and could yield more insightful understandings of the adoption of the sharing economy in these regions and emerging sectors, compared to studies predominantly conducted in Western contexts with current participants of leading platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb.

3. Methodology

3-1. Research Context

Conducted in Iran, a country with a population exceeding 85 million, this study navigates the challenges posed by international sanctions, intensified financial pressures, and limited food resources for households (Hejazi & Emamgholipour, 2022). The resulting dynamic environment has spurred the growth of platform-based startups, particularly in the food sector, as an innovative solution to social problems.

Framed as a qualitative exploration, the study emphasizes the novelty and promise of social innovation in food-sharing platforms compared to established sectors like ride-sharing and accommodation. It underscores the significance of addressing challenges in the food sector within

developing countries and highlights the research gap in less-explored sharing economy sectors. These factors collectively motivate the study, offering insights into the sharing economy dynamics and potential avenues for social innovation within the food sector in Iran.

3-2. Research Design

The primary objective of this research is to comprehend the factors influencing both why and how potential stakeholders are drawn to sharing economy adoption and, furthermore, why certain sharing economy platforms gain greater acceptance among their potential stakeholders than others. In the context of the sharing economy, markets are characterized by complexity, where innovations are frequently co-created, involving intricate interactions among participants, with each individual's actions influencing others (Kristensson et al., 2020).

At the same time, studying customer participation involves a multidisciplinary and complex approach, requiring an understanding of the perceptions and interactions of individuals in society, especially in culturally distinct settings. Therefore, to address this question, we adopt a qualitative approach, as this method has proven effective when limited information is available about the phenomenon in question (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014).

Qualitative research is particularly apt for delving into the experiences of individuals and unraveling the meanings they construct during their interactions with social phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To facilitate this exploration, the grounded theory method, situated within the realm of qualitative methods, is chosen. The grounded theory methodology was implemented in a structured, iterative cycle, where data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously (Charmaz, 1996; Charmaz, 2014), providing benefits when the research process becomes dynamic and includes both interpretation and exploration.

The key steps of implementation were as follows: 1) theoretical sampling, 2) collecting data, 3) analyzing data (including open coding, identifying first-order concepts, developing second-order concepts, and integrating theoretical aggregate dimensions), 4) constant comparison, 5) writing memos, and 6) achieving theoretical saturation. This iterative process allowed the theory to evolve directly from the data gathered in the field. Grounded theory enables researchers to comprehend the processes through which actors construct meaning out of intersubjective experiences (Suddaby, 2006).

The choice of the grounded theory method is strategic, given its suitability for studying complex social processes and its effectiveness in dealing with the rich qualitative data that emerge in the context of sharing economy adoption research. The study meticulously adheres to the guidelines and strategies outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), ensuring a robust and systematic approach to qualitative inquiry. Following the Straussian approach to grounded theory (Rieger, 2019), this study employs systematic steps for theory development through coding and categorization. The Straussian Grounded Theory approach was selected due to its emphasis on a step-by-step coding process, which aligns well with the objective of exploring underlying relationships in complex social phenomena.

3-3. Sampling and Data Collection

To unravel the intricate mechanisms of sharing economy adoption by potential stakeholders, a multi-method approach, encompassing interviews, observations, and online monitoring, was employed. The triangulation of data sources was incorporated to bolster the study's findings, enhancing credibility (Patton, 2002).

In line with grounded theory methodology, data collection began with identifying a broad target population of stakeholders within the food-sharing economy in Iran. As the study progressed, emerging concepts guided the researcher toward specific individuals, platforms, and settings, following the theoretical sampling approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process involved accessing stakeholders through initial social networks and expanding the sample using theoretical sampling and snowballing techniques.

The study targeted stakeholders (e.g., users, platform managers, and service providers) involved in food-sharing platforms, identified through online resources such as Google search engines, App Store, and Google Play. The first interview was conducted with the operations manager of a prominent Iranian food-sharing platform, chosen for their anticipated valuable insights. Subsequent interviews were guided by theoretical sampling, focusing on emerging themes until new data became redundant,

ensuring the integration and density of the theory within the empirical limits of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

A total of 23 interviews were conducted with informants (Table 1), each lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. These interviews were conducted both in-person and over the phone, audio-recorded, and transcribed for coding. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, following a minimal interview protocol that allowed participants to share their stories on their own terms.

The key open-ended topics explored during the interviews included: How participants were first introduced to food sharing; goals, motivations, and barriers to joining the food-sharing initiative; feelings and experiences when using a food-sharing platform; perceptions of food-sharing platform attributes and its innovation; perception about other actors in food sharing platform (consumers, platform, providers); interactions with other participants; preferences for adopting food-sharing platforms; feelings associated with activities around food sharing; how they value food sharing; and reactions of others to their participation in food sharing. While these areas served as a general framework for the key themes to be discussed during the interviews, the semi-structured format provided the interviewer with the flexibility to explore specific cues given by the interviewees.

Preliminary analyses after each interview guided subsequent interviews, allowing for the discovery of new concepts. To glean practical insights, we employed a triangulation method, combining on-site and online observations. Leveraging the researcher's unique position as an employee in a large organization with diverse demographics, the reactions of employees to a popular food-sharing platform were observed. Online activities, such as platform acceptance, food selection, and support, were monitored through an online panel and virtual groups on the Telegram social network application. The observational role of the researcher, introduced as a marketer for the platform and an ordinary consumer among colleagues, ensured a discreet study without participants realizing their actions were under scrutiny. This observational strategy proved pivotal in understanding the adoption process.

3-4. Data Analysis

In adherence to the qualitative data analysis principles outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), we meticulously immersed ourselves in the entire dataset, following a sequential process where categories were generated from the data, which were then systematically integrated into a theoretical model to depict the interconnections among these categories. Our data analysis involved several key phases: open coding, identifying first-order concepts, developing second-order concepts, and deriving aggregated dimensions, ensuring a rigorous examination of the data at each stage.

a) Open coding

The initial phase of our analysis involved open coding, during which we engaged in a detailed examination of the raw data. Each interview was transcribed immediately after completion, ensuring that the analysis remained deeply rooted in the participants' narratives. During this phase, we conducted line-by-line coding to capture the nuances of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the adoption of food-sharing platforms. These codes were not predefined but emerged from the data itself. We categorized them into groups based on similarities and differences. The purpose of open coding was to break down the data into discrete parts and identify initial codes, which represented fundamental ideas and phenomena observed in the text. This meticulous process ensured that no significant concepts were overlooked, forming a solid foundation for subsequent analysis.

b) Identifying first-order concepts

Following open coding, we moved to the identification of first-order concepts. In this phase, we organized the initial codes into more coherent and meaningful units that remained closely aligned with the participants' language. By assigning short phrases to express what was contained in each group, we identified a range of first-order concepts that reflected the content of raw data. These concepts were constantly refined as new insights emerged. For example, participant statements expressing concerns over potential disease transmission through food, such as "When COVID-19 arrived, many people stopped ordering food," and remarks like "We have set certain standards that food must be freshly prepared and not cooked in haste," were categorized under the concept of "Hygiene Risk." This step was crucial in building a structured understanding of the data while retaining the richness of the participants' perspectives.

Table 1. Profile of Informants

Code	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Role in the sharing economy
F1	Female	28	Master	Operations Director	Platform
F2	Female	29	Master	Marketing Director	Platform
M3	Male	26	Undergraduate	Marketer	Platform
M4	Male	24	Undergraduate	R&D Manager	Platform
M5	Male	45	PhD	CEO	Platform
M6	Male	47	Master	Commercial manager	consumer
F7	Female	42	Undergraduate	Administrative Officer	consumer
M8	Male	52	Master	Administrative Officer	consumer
F9	Female	40	Master	Freelancer	provider
M10	Male	47	PhD	CEO	consumer
M11	Male	37	Undergraduate	Operational employee	consumer
M12	Male	47	Undergraduate	Operational employee	consumer
F13	Female	29	Undergraduate	Freelancer	provider
F14	Female	33	Master	Administrative Officer	consumer
F15	Female	54	Undergraduate	Employee	consumer
M16	Male	47	PhD	Marketer	Platform
M17	Male	25	Undergraduate	Freelancer	provider
M18	Male	29	Master	Employee	consumer
F19	Female	33	Undergraduate	Employee	provider
M20	Male	42	Undergraduate	Employee	Platform
M21	Male	34	Master	Freelancer	consumer
M22	Male	26	Master	Marketer	consumer
F23	Female	30	Undergraduate	Employee	provider

c) Developing second-order concepts

In this phase of the analysis, we employed comparative methods to examine the relationships between the first-order concepts and organize them into broader, more abstract categories. This involved interpreting the data at a more conceptual and analytical level, identifying overarching themes that could explain the connections between the initial codes. For example, concepts such as "hygiene risk" and "social risk" were integrated into the second-order concept of "perceived risk," providing a more synthesized view of the concerns affecting user decisions in the adoption of the sharing economy. Eight second-order concepts emerged, namely: trust, perceived risk, economic benefits, platform technological innovation attributes, platform participants' innovation attributes, value communication channels, interaction, and social influence.

d) Aggregated dimensions

In the final stage of our analysis, we integrated the second-order concepts into overarching aggregate dimensions. This involved mapping out the interactions among various concepts to develop a theoretical model of food-sharing economy adoption. The process was iterative; we continually refined our interpretations by revisiting the data and the existing literature to ensure that the dimensions were consistent and robust. Ultimately, the second-order concepts were consolidated into three aggregate dimensions: positive mental image, perceived attributes of innovation, and perceived value co-creation.

Throughout the analysis, we employed memos and diagrams to capture insights, theoretical reflections, and methodological decisions. Memos facilitated constant comparison, ensuring theoretical saturation, while diagrams visually mapped relationships between categories and illustrated the emerging theoretical framework. We consistently employed questioning and comparison strategies to address all dimensions of the issue, asking analytical questions to deepen our understanding and comparing incidents within the data to ensure robust and well-defined categories.

4. Findings

In this study, we adopted a broader perspective on the sharing economy as a contemporary social innovation. This approach facilitated the investigation of food-sharing platforms in Iran and the identification of factors influencing the adoption of the sharing economy. The data analysis yielded three categories of factors influencing the adoption and participation in food-sharing platforms:

"Positive Mental Image," "Perceived Attributes of Innovation," and "Perceived Value Co-Creation." The overall coherence of these factors is illustrated in Figure 2. In the following sections, we provide an introduction and a detailed explanation of these factors, drawing upon examples from the dataset. Figure 1 illustrates the data structure of our findings.

4-1. Positive Mental Image

The term "Mental Image" refers to the experiential encounters, perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and knowledge of individuals when confronted with a phenomenon. Before adopting an innovation, such as food-sharing platforms, individuals must first assess and convince themselves of its anticipated consequences. Rogers (2003) refers to this stage as "persuasion." Addressing the question, "What if I adopt this innovation?" necessitates the formation of a mental image that can significantly impact the decision to adopt or reject the innovation (in this study, food-sharing platforms). The analysis of data in this study indicates that three factors, namely "Trust," "Perceived Risk," and "Economic Benefits," play a role in shaping individuals' perceptions toward a positive mental image for adoption. The absence of these factors, or an unfavorable perception of them, can pose a substantial impediment to adoption (Valor, 2020).

Trust: Trust is a fundamental concept that contributes to the formation of a positive mental image for potential participants in food-sharing platforms. Numerous research studies have highlighted trust as a crucial factor influencing innovation adoption and active participation in the sharing economy (Akin et al., 2021; Finley, 2013). The data analysis in this study emphasizes that individuals, when interacting with a platform, actively seek indicators to assess trust in both the platform's stakeholders and the platform itself.

For example, respondent M18 expressed, "I feel these people are honest and upright." The study's findings suggest that two key components, namely "Honesty and Transparency" and "Uncertainty Reduction," play a significant role in instilling trust among participants in food-sharing platforms.

Honesty and transparency are integral to stakeholders' ethical perceptions of their mutual responsibilities. Research indicates that such ethical considerations play a crucial role in enhancing trust within the sharing economy (Nadeem et al., 2020). It is noteworthy that honesty and transparency manifest differently for various stakeholders engaged in food-sharing platforms.

For consumers, the perception of honesty and transparency in providers is shaped through various cues, including platform rating systems, provider profiles, reviews, and the self-presentation of providers through written content and images. This perception addresses challenges related to the use of desirable food (M17: "We use fresh food and reassure the customer that the food is prepared daily and is fresh"), hygiene (M4: "At the beginning of the pandemic, our sales significantly decreased because people believed they might be infected with COVID-19 through food. However, later, with the confidence we gave them, we managed to recover"), and the disclosure of accurate weights (F19: "We offer more food than restaurant dishes. We inform customers about the size and weight of the food so that the customer can trust us"). Establishing trust significantly contributes to forming a positive mental image conducive to adoption.

For platforms, concerns about honesty and transparency may arise due to unclear financial transactions, especially when platforms serve as financial intermediaries between providers and consumers. The extent to which consumers rely on honesty and transparency as the basis for trust depends on their experiences and inherent sensitivity to online payment gateways and credibility indicators when evaluating the platform.

For providers, honesty and transparency vary depending on factors such as financial settlements, particularly when the platform acts as a transaction intermediary (M10: "We settle accounts with providers on a daily basis"), or instances of platform fraud (F1: "The outputs we provide to our providers and consumers are transparent, and they know that there is no manipulation behind the scenes. This makes them love the platform").

Uncertainty reduction: From an innovation standpoint, it is recognized that any innovative concept inherently encompasses a certain level of uncertainty. This notion is articulated by Rogers (2003), who posits that individuals strive to cope with uncertainty when considering the adoption of innovations, primarily through information acquisition. Given that innovation in the sharing economy is not solely reliant on platforms but is rather a co-creational process involving a network of diverse actors (Vargo

et al., 2015), reducing uncertainty toward adoption requires a more intricate and multifaceted approach to information exchange.

Analysis of data in this study demonstrates that potential users of food-sharing platforms require support and occasional commitments from the platform to reduce uncertainty. For instance, interviewee F2 underscores the significance of platform support and responsiveness, stating, "The support and responsiveness our platform offers are highly noticeable. What we learn from campaigns and surveys is that quality and services are important to them, but support holds significant value." Similarly, M20 highlights the importance of commitment and assurances to providers (moms) regarding the profitability and sale of their food products through the platform. Observations also confirm that individuals employ platform support and various features such as chat systems for peer-to-peer communication between providers and consumers, and even phone calls to alleviate their uncertainty. Resolving uncertainty helps foster trust among individuals and toward the platform itself (Vaclavik et al., 2020).

Perceived Risk: While sharing economy platforms have gained popularity for their convenience, economic benefits, and enjoyment, perceived risk has consistently acted as a substantial deterrent to participation (Chuah et al., 2021). This study identifies two key categories of risks evaluated by potential adopters of food-sharing platforms: "social risk" and "hygiene risk." The extent to which these risks are tolerated and integrated into users' mental frameworks significantly influences their willingness to adopt and participate in the platform.

Social Risk: The sharing economy, inherently a social phenomenon with extensive interpersonal interactions (Kim & Yoon, 2021), entails various risks, including social risks (Andreassen et al., 2018). Since the motivations to adopt innovation are often linked to aspirations for an improved social status (Rogers, 2003), social risks arising from the potential jeopardization of an individual's social standing can significantly influence their decisions regarding platform adoption.

Social risks in this study are primarily associated with consumer perceptions. For instance, interviewee F2 acknowledges, "Our main customers are those who order food for important managerial meetings or parties where they want to receive good food." This quote suggests that the quality of ordered food profoundly impacts the social standing of the consumer. Individuals, assuming the role of food consumers on the platform, are willing to tolerate social risks, recognizing that delivering poor-quality food to friends and acquaintances can affect their social standing. It's noteworthy that while prior research in the sharing economy has predominantly focused on risks like privacy and security (Lee et al., 2018), the social risks identified in this study have received comparatively less attention, despite their substantial influence on adoption.

Hygiene Risk: Risks associated with food hygiene form another subset of perceptions that can hinder platform adoption. Individuals express concerns about potential disease transmission, such as COVID-19, through food consumption, highlighting hygiene risks. For example, interviewee M5 notes, "When COVID-19 arrived, many people stopped ordering food." Similarly, M16 emphasizes, "We have set certain standards that food must be freshly prepared and not cooked in haste." Awareness of hygiene risks can create an unfavorable mental image for potential participants, deterring their adoption of the sharing economy.

Economic Benefits: Economic benefits are among the most crucial factors influencing individuals' participation in the sharing economy, as widely recognized in numerous studies (Hamari et al., 2016). However, economic benefits alone may not always be a predominant motivator for individuals to engage in the sharing economy, including the food-sharing sector. Motivations for participation vary significantly across different contexts and sectors (Böcker & Meelen 2016).

Data analysis in this study reveals that the perception of economic benefits contributes to forming a positive mental image for both consumers and providers although each holds a distinct understanding of these benefits. For consumers, the variables of "Price vs. Quality" and "Discounts and Incentives" shape their perceptions of economic benefits, allowing platforms and providers to enhance consumer motivation.

For example, M17 notes, "We use Iranian rice in our meals, and the price, relative to the quality we provide to customers, is appealing to them" (Note: Iranian rice is highly esteemed for its quality by Iranian consumers compared to foreign varieties). Consumers closely associate food prices with quality, considering material type, recipes, food size, seasoning, and packaging. Observations confirm that price

alone does not create a positive mental image; a low price, without a clear understanding of food quality, acts as a deterrent. Discounts and incentives are significant in attracting initial interest, but the 'Price vs. Quality' consideration gains prominence after acceptance. For instance, F14 mentions, "I check for discounts. Food Party, for example, offers free items or bonuses for the first order."

Economic benefits for providers revolve around earning profit by sharing their resources (time, skills, location, and food) on food-sharing platforms. F23 elaborates, "I started cooking at home but had to rent a place to expand. I work from 5 a.m. to noon, focusing on turning cooking into a profession and increasing income by delivering food with my car, earning a delivery fee from the company." Economic benefits for providers extend beyond mere monetary gain, encompassing the utilization of shared resources to establish a sustainable income stream.

4-2. Perceived Attributes of Innovation

The diverse perceptions individuals hold regarding the characteristics of sharing economy platforms, or, in other words, the attributes of innovation, constitute a crucial explanation for the rate of adoption of innovations, as posited by Rogers (2003). Variations in how potential adopters perceive the attributes of the solution presented by the sharing economy can explain why some sectors, such as accommodation or ride-sharing, experience high adoption rates, while others, such as food or apparel sharing, receive relatively less attention, as evidenced in previous studies.

Understanding the innovation attributes of sharing economy platforms appears to be a complex endeavor for potential adopters. This complexity arises from the fact that innovation boundaries on these platforms transcend business-centric innovation, intertwining with the innovations of other stakeholders, including providers and consumers (Vargo et al., 2015). In simpler terms, sharing economy innovation results from the active collaboration of all parties—platform, providers, and consumers—aiming to attain a shared understanding of the novel solution. Thus, the innovation attributes identified in this study can be categorized into two distinct groups: "Platform Technological Innovation Attributes" and "Platform Participants' Innovation Attributes."

Platform Technological Innovation Attributes: The art of sharing economy platforms revolves around facilitating peer-to-peer connections among diverse stakeholders (providers and consumers) and creating value for all participants (Vignieri, 2021). The technology of the platform, as an innovation in value proposition, may exhibit attributes that influence the perception of potential beneficiaries. The results of data analysis reveal that attributes such as "Relative Advantage," "Attractiveness," and "Ease of Use" have the most significant impact on platform adoption.

Relative advantage refers to a perceived preference in which an individual favors using the platform over other alternatives. Advantages such as thematic focus, leading to time-saving and convenience (e.g., F2: "One of our platform's advantages is specialization. We focus only on food") and features such as automation and dynamic platform capabilities can shift potential adopters' perceptions. For instance, M12 emphasizes the prompt delivery of high-quality food as a significant factor in using the platform, while F1 states, "People who order food from our platform are looking for special features, and our platform provides and supports those features. Of course, I should mention that there is still room for growth." Relative advantage, as perceived by users of food-sharing platforms, heightens the adoption rate of the platform compared to other alternatives (Rogers, 2003).

Attractiveness: Interviewee F1 mentioned that "many of the features our platform offers are attractive to both consumers and providers." Attractiveness has also been recognized in various other studies as a driving force behind the success of sharing economy platforms (e.g., Vignieri, 2021). The concept of attractiveness, as derived from the data in this study, implies the appeal of innovation and the platform's business model in presenting value propositions to users on both the consumer and provider sides.

Ease of Use: As mentioned by interviewees, ease of use is essential for adopters. For example, M22 states, "The platform must be user-friendly. If I get confused while using it, I won't use it." Ease of use has also been identified in the literature as a key factor influencing behavioral change toward technology acceptance (Davis & Davis, 1989).

Platform Participants' Innovation Attributes: Sharing economy platforms represent a shift toward decentralized control, in contrast to the centralized structures in traditional businesses that oversee customers, products, services, pricing, and financial transactions. As these platforms embrace

decentralization, the potential for participant-driven innovation increases. Data analysis and observations in this study suggest that innovation among platform participants unfolds through "diversification" and "differentiation."

Diversification in food denotes providers' innovation in using new ingredients and cooking methods, such as homemade or local dishes. This continuous innovative process evolves through collaborative interactions with consumers, fostering a mutual understanding of value creation. The capability of platform participants to creatively challenge conventional restaurant norms without constraints serves as a magnet for potential adopters. For instance, M3 articulates, "In our panel, we offer various models of homemade food daily and change them every day to be more attractive to customers."

Differentiation, on the other hand, involves setting oneself apart from other providers through unique service offerings. For example, M4 elaborates, "Everyone has their own special food and strives to create distinct, unique homemade dishes." Similarly, F7 expresses, "I go to work every day, but I can't afford restaurant food daily because prices are high and there's no variety. However, this platform provides homemade food that can be tailored to your budget, considering the quality and quantity of the food you want."

4-3. Perceived Value Co-Creation

The concept of value co-creation is central to economic activities and business endeavors (Corsaro, 2019). In the digital age, failure to generate sufficient value can lead to business demise, while enhanced value co-creation ensures success (Zott & Amit, 2017). In platform-based sharing economy businesses, value is collectively produced by all participants, despite their potential differences in goals and values (Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022), making the platform both an intermediary and facilitator in this process. Individuals' perception of possible value co-creation on the platform is a prerequisite for adoption and participation. Factors elevating this perception fall into three categories: "Value Communication Channels," "Interaction," and "Social Influence."

Value Communication Channels: In the sharing economy, potential adopters first encounter communicated values. As this economic model inherently relies on peer-to-peer interactions facilitated by platforms, value communication is more intricate compared to traditional business models. Various actors, including consumers, providers, and the platform, communicate their value propositions within a social system, influencing stakeholders' perceptions toward adoption (Corsaro, 2019). Rogers (2003) refers to communication channels as means of information exchange regarding innovation among members of a social system, which can influence innovation adoption. Sharing economy platforms emerge from technological advancements, online communication networks, and collaboration among actors for value co-creation. Therefore, communication channels in the sharing economy serve not only to share information but also to convey value propositions among interconnected actors.

Findings from the study on food-sharing platforms in Iran reveal the pivotal role of social networks, such as Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp, as well as family and friend groups within these networks, in value communication, information exchange, and encouraging potential adopters. Additionally, we highlight the importance of interpersonal networks as a communication channel in convincing people to either adopt or reject sharing economy platforms. A platform manager (F1) noted, "We gauge the platform's likability through conversations on social networks or our campaigns." Similarly, an adopter (F9) mentioned, "If the platform is trendy in social networks or everyone is talking about it, I care. I trust recommendations from friends and groups but not radio or TV advertisements as they seem unreal."

Interaction: Derived from interview data and observations, potential adopters strive to enhance their perception of value co-creation through interaction. This interaction occurs at two levels: "peer-to-peer" or "peer-to-platform." Establishing interactive channels between consumers and providers, such as chat systems or phone calls, as well as between the platform and users, can shape actors' perceptions of value co-creation. Easy access to these interactive channels is also crucial for users. For example, F9 states, "Sometimes, things are not clear to me, like the timing or method of food delivery, so I have to chat with them or call them."

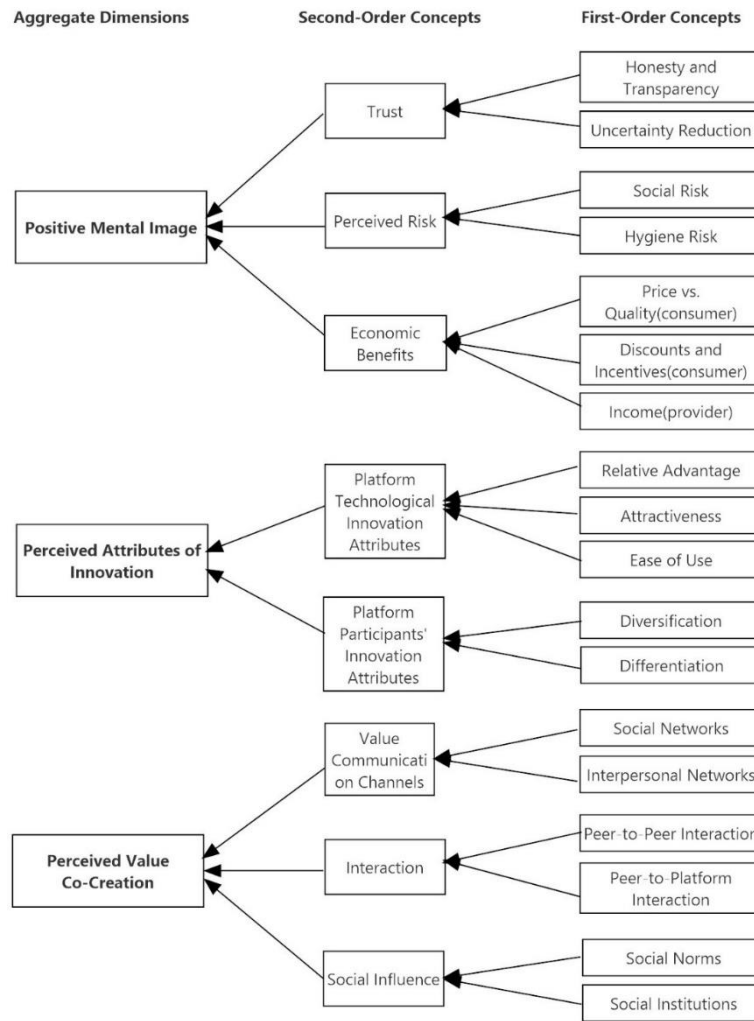


Fig. 1. Data Structure

Social Influence: Social influence illustrates how social networks can influence people's behavior in adopting the sharing economy. Since individuals try to adapt their behaviors, preferences, and beliefs to their social conditions (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), potential adopters of food-sharing platforms exhibit different responses to adoption or rejection based on their social interactions. "Social norms" and "social institutions" are two concepts of social influence identified in this study.

Social norms refer to the behavioral patterns of members of a social system in response to social phenomena based on an individual's perception of what society expects from them. Social norms can act as either a strong deterrent or an incentive for members to change their behavior toward innovation adoption (Rogers, 2003).

Observation and data analysis in this study show that individuals, under the influence of colleagues and mutual expectations, develop a new attitude toward platform adoption. For example, M22 states, "I think if all employees use this platform for food, we can replace it with the company restaurant and get better services." Social Institutions and their impact are among other factors that are particularly prominent in developing countries. Vargo et al. (2015) confirm how institutions can influence value co-creation among various actors, such as businesses, providers, and consumers.

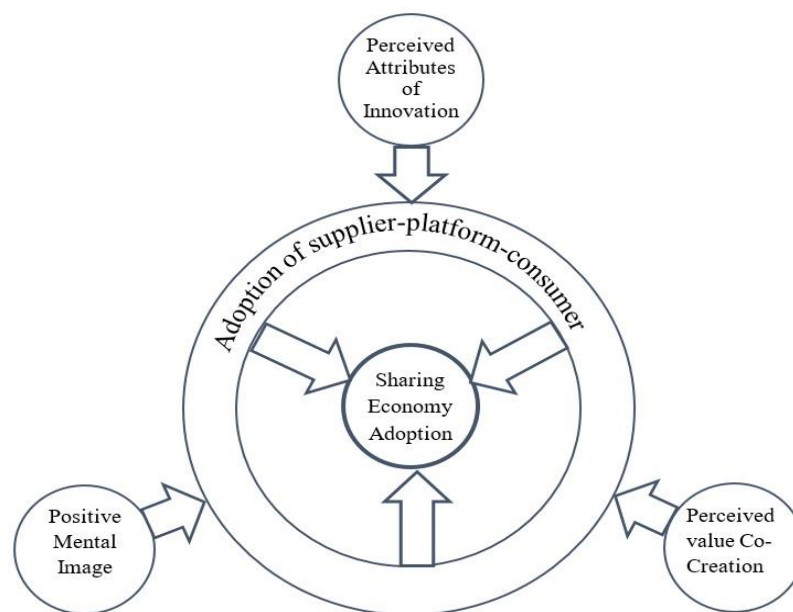


Fig. 2. Model of Food-Sharing Economy Adoption

Data analysis shows that some individuals, for instance, mentioned supporting housewives (food providers on the platform) as a reason for adopting it, while others rejected the platform due to its specific political affiliation. For example, F14 states, "Most of the food on this platform is prepared by housewives. For this reason, it gives me a good feeling to support them by ordering, which contributes to their income."

5. Discussion

The findings of this study have led us to propose a model for sharing economy adoption in emerging markets (Figure 2), highlighting the key factors influencing the adoption of food-sharing platforms in Iran. The model reveals that the adoption of the sharing economy is more intricate than previously assumed. Relying solely on basic technology acceptance theories for this contemporary social innovation may result in significant research gaps. These gaps stem from rapid advancements in online technologies and the transition from Web 2.0 (extensive peer-to-peer communication on the Internet) to Web 3.0 (broad social collaborations on online platforms).

Our findings suggest that the adoption of sharing economy platforms begins with an awareness of existing value, communicated through value propositions not only by businesses but also by a network of interconnected actors, including providers, platforms, and consumers. This value must appeal to all parties, enabling co-creation through interaction. The concept of "Perceived Value Co-Creation," identified in this study, can be interpreted as a benefit similar to the benefits outlined in social exchange theory (Homans, 1958). However, as the platform functions as both an intermediary and a partner in value co-creation, the benefits for each entity become interdependent, reflecting a collective perception. This complexity extends beyond the scope of social exchange theory, which typically posits that perceived benefits must exceed costs for sustained exchanges, and instead, emphasizes interdependent benefits among all entities involved.

Although much of the existing literature underscores the role of perceived value co-creation in the success of the sharing economy (Scaraboto & Figueiredo, 2022; Zhang et al., 2018), this study expands upon prior research and highlights its significance in adoption, explained by three critical factors: value communication channels, interaction, and social influence.

Consistent with social impact theory and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Latané, 1981; Venkatesh et al., 2003), emphasizing the impact of social influence on individual behavior and attitudes, our findings indicate that, in the context of the sharing economy, social influence acts as a filter through which entities perceive value co-creation, ultimately leading to

adoption. This finding aligns with Nasidi et al. (2022), who demonstrated that habitual consumer engagement with social media significantly influences online shopping behavior, reinforcing the role of continuous digital exposure in shaping consumer decision-making. Social influence has been emphasized in ride-sharing economy contexts (e.g., Min et al., 2018; Liu & Yang, 2018), which aligns with findings in the food-sharing economy context in this study. Similarly, Tajeddini et al. (2021) highlight the significance of subjective norms in influencing consumer decisions for accommodations, which aligns with the identified impact of social influence as a pivotal factor in adoption in our study. This suggests a broader, cross-context relevance of social dynamics in shaping sharing economy participation.

Previous studies assert that value co-creation is the ultimate outcome of communication and interactions between providers and consumers (Zhang et al., 2018; Rogers, 2003). Indeed, observations and analysis of our interview data indicate that peer-to-peer and peer-to-platform interactions work together to shape actors' value perceptions, influencing their adoption or rejection decisions regarding sharing economy platforms, supporting the empirical work of Tussyadiah & Pesonen (2016), which identifies social appeal as a primary driver of sharing economy adoption. These interactions occur through communication channels in both interpersonal and social networks. Additionally, Tajeddini et al. (2022) highlight that self-gratification and social values are instrumental in shaping loyalty and revisiting intentions, indicating that similar underlying mechanisms of perceived value and social influence drive customer behaviors across sharing economy contexts.

Previous research on the sharing economy emphasizes the technological aspect of innovation (i.e., platform technology) and its indirect role in influencing participation intentions (e.g., Min et al., 2018; Liu & Yang, 2018). However, sharing economy platforms, through their technological innovation attributes, establish a foundation that aligns with the innovations introduced by platform participants, thereby facilitating innovation co-creation. This duality between platform-driven and participant-driven innovation extends prior findings, reflecting a more holistic understanding of perceived attributes of innovation. Accordingly, the "Perceived Attributes of Innovation" identified in this study encompass both technological innovation and participants' innovation attributes. This newly identified dual perspective stems from our view of the sharing economy as a social innovation. It expands upon previous research and reveals a direct impact of perceived innovation attributes on the adoption of sharing economy platforms.

Additionally, this insight suggests that foundational models, such as TAM and UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), which focus on technological characteristics, such as ease of use and usefulness, are insufficient to explain the adoption of the sharing economy as a social innovation. Similarly, while the relative advantages of innovation highlighted in the Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) theory (Rogers, 2003) are often cited as critical factors in adoption and diffusion, they do not fully account for the multi-faceted dynamics of the sharing economy.

Our findings align with existing knowledge, arguing that the absence of, or unfavorable feelings of, the sharing economy can impede its adoption (e.g., Valor, 2020). Previous studies have identified enjoyment, satisfaction, and economic benefits as factors creating favorable attitudes toward adopting the sharing economy (Hamari et al., 2016; Tussyadiah, 2016; Amaro, 2019). However, our study identifies 'Positive Mental Image,' shaped by determinants of perceived risk, trust, and economic benefits, as the key drivers producing favorable attitudes toward adoption. This nuanced perspective emphasizes the role of trust and risk alongside economic benefits, offering a broader understanding of the factors influencing adoption behaviors. Furthermore, the identification of the 'Positive Mental Image' factor in this study reveals significant differences in the adoption of the sharing economy between developing and developed societies.

While other studies in developing regions sporadically emphasize critical factors, such as economic disparities, risk, and trust, as barriers to adopting the sharing economy (Akin et al., 2021; Finley, 2013; Chuah et al., 2021), this study suggests that a positive mental image—including trust, risk, and economic benefits—is a primary driver of adoption, particularly in developing countries and emerging markets. This factor has been overlooked in basic innovation acceptance theories, prompting some studies to extend these models by incorporating elements like trust, risk, and economic benefits. However, these attempts often remain fragmented, highlighting the need for a more unified and

comprehensive framework. Viewing the sharing economy through the lens of social innovation in these regions elucidates its significance.

Ultimately, our proposed model asserts that the adoption of the sharing economy results from the collective adoption of all actors, including consumers, platforms, and providers. This complexity cannot be captured by a narrow producer-consumer perspective. While motivations behind participation in the sharing economy are important, they appear insufficient for fully understanding adoption.

6. Conclusion

This study delves into the sharing economy adoption, examining it through the lens of innovation, with a particular focus on emerging markets. The findings contribute to the development of an adoption model tailored to these evolving marketplaces. The identified factors in the context of food-sharing platforms in Iran highlight three pivotal elements: "Positive Mental Image," "Perceived Attributes of Innovation," and "Perceived Value Co-Creation". The authors recognize that the adoption of the sharing economy is a collective outcome shaped by the perceptions and collaborative efforts of all actors involved, encompassing consumers, intermediary platforms, and providers in the process of value co-creation within the social system. The study underscores that motivation alone, although significant, falls short of providing a comprehensive explanation for the adoption of sharing economy platforms.

6-1. Managerial Implications

Value co-creation stands out as one of the most critical indicators of success and long-term sustainability in the sharing economy (Eckhardt et al., 2019). Despite the substantial potential of sharing economy businesses for value co-creation, many platforms still hold a conventional, linear view of value creation, where value is created by the firm and delivered to consumers. In this framework, innovation is produced by the firm and expected to be adopted by consumers. However, we argue that the adoption of the sharing economy results from the innovative collaboration of all stakeholders, including consumers and providers within platforms, along with the existence of favorable conditions for value co-creation.

We propose that focusing on three factors - "Positive Mental Image," "Perceived Attributes of Innovation," and "Perceived Value Co-Creation" - can create fertile ground for sharing economy adoption. The most influential factor that can enhance adoption rates is the presence of a positive mental image of economic benefits derived from interactions with other actors, coupled with trust within the risk-tolerant spectrum of this engagement. Managers should acknowledge that economic incentives are pivotal for participation, particularly in developing countries like Iran, which are facing challenges such as poverty, sanctions, and economic tensions. Additionally, the sense of insecurity due to incomplete and ineffective regulations is more pronounced in emerging markets, amplifying the evaluation of service risks (Chen & Wang, 2019). Hence, managers should concurrently employ strategies to instill trust by reducing ambiguity, fostering honesty, and promoting transparency. They should also address social and hygiene risks originating from peer-to-peer interactions. Utilizing innovative solutions to facilitate secure financial transactions, commitments, and guarantees by the platform, along with refining business processes to augment economic benefits for all stakeholders, can be advantageous.

Moreover, as some studies have underscored the influence of communication channels on innovation adoption rates (e.g., Rogers, 2003), the findings of this study affirm this influence. However, managers should recognize that the sharing economy thrives within a network of interconnected actors, where traditional one-way communication channels evolve into mutual exchanges within the actor network, facilitating the exchange of value propositions. Therefore, while leveraging the networking power of individuals on social networking sites, managers should fortify both offline and online interactive channels within the platform. Ultimately, the platform must incentivize individuals to engage, thereby enhancing the potential for value co-creation.

Finally, managers must comprehend how value communication can be influenced by social norms or institutions. In developing countries such as Iran, where a high-power distance is acknowledged (ranked 58 compared to 40 in the USA), social pressures can lead to the formation of informal social

structures to mitigate these tensions. These structures materialize as social support or widespread social opposition to phenomena such as the sharing economy, ultimately influencing the adoption or rejection of the platform. Regarding innovation, managers should understand that the platform's innovation is interconnected with that of other stakeholders, including providers and consumers. In other words, contemporary social innovations, such as sharing economy platforms, are co-created within a social ecosystem and shaped by all participating actors (Vargo et al., 2015). Consequently, they should not only bolster the characteristics of platform innovation, such as creating relative advantages, attractiveness, and ease of use, but also provide room for peers to innovate. This can be achieved through mechanisms that decentralize control over interactions, self-presentation, and service offerings, as well as by creating a customizable panel for consumers.

6-2. Theoretical Implications

In line with prior research seeking to explore the reasons for individuals' participation in the sharing economy (e.g., Hamari et al., 2016; Morewedge et al., 2021; Sung et al., 2018), this study endeavors to investigate the sharing economy adoption. While numerous prior studies have predominantly examined consumers' intentions to participate in the sharing economy through a technological lens (e.g., Min et al., 2018; Tamilmani et al., 2022), this research embraces the sharing economy as a contemporary social innovation and, therefore, explores the pivotal factors influencing its adoption by potential stakeholders through the innovation adoption lens. Additionally, it diverges from a narrow focus on the motivations of existing participants in sharing economy platforms, as observed in other studies, and instead, through a qualitative research approach on potential adopters, conceptualizes the sharing economy adoption as a multifaceted phenomenon, involving all three key entities—consumer, platform, and provider—endeavoring to engender value co-creation. Given the scarcity of qualitative inquiries in the existing literature on sharing economy adoption—which frequently relies on quantitative methodologies or extends prevailing theories from other domains—this study contributes to the discourse on modern innovation adoption. By conducting qualitative research employing the grounded theory method, deemed apt for unraveling intricate social processes, and deliberately distancing itself from the traditional business-centric stance on innovation acceptance, this research elucidates the various dimensions of adopting contemporary innovations.

Responding to the call for research in new contexts beyond developed societies, particularly in the Muslim world and other distinct settings (Weng et al., 2020), this study examines sharing economy adoption within the food-sharing sector in Iran, as an emerging market. It stands as a noteworthy contribution to the literature on sharing economy adoption, demonstrating a model that can increase the rate of adoption in nations striving to expand sharing economy platforms to address socio-economic issues (Akbar & Bodhanya, 2021).

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on food-sharing platforms as a new sector to address gaps in previous studies, which predominantly examined accommodation and ride-sharing. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should replicate the empirical analysis and compare results across other sectors, such as clothing and skill-sharing. Second, this study employed qualitative methods. Quantitative examination of the derived model with larger groups can improve its reliability and validity. Third, since this study was conducted in Iran—with its idiosyncratic socio-cultural conditions—future research on sharing economy adoption through the lens of social innovation in other developing regions could further expand the knowledge and applicability of our findings.

Declarations

- The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.
- All authors declare that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.
- Declarations of interest: none

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