Why not share rather than own?

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Consumers might easily share certain scarce or environmentally threatening resources such as vehicles, homes, and various household tools and appliances. Yet, we increasingly choose to privately own possessions. This is even true within the family where what were once the family radio, television, and automobile are fast giving way to privatized duplications among family members, even in the less affluent world. This paper asks why this is so, and whether the trend toward such privatized ownership might be reversed.

Sharing is a broadly encompassing concept, but it first requires feelings of possession of things that might be shared. After defining sharing, I recognize that sharing, ownership, and possession are culturally determined and learned behaviors with norms attached to them. I note that sharing can have both positive and negative consequences. I then move to a discussion of the impediments to sharing in contemporary consumer cultures, focusing on extended self, materialism, and status considerations. I next consider incentives for sharing, treating intangibles and tangibles separately. Virtual communities and online gift economies raise interesting questions and possibilities of keeping while giving. Nevertheless, academic sharing shows that these emerging developments are not without problems. The discussion of sharing tangible goods draws on marker goods, brand cults, leveraged lifestyles, heirlooms, institutional sharing, and an emerging movement toward virtual renting. I conclude with a discussion of the social desirability of sharing and renting and sketch out some alternative future scenarios in these areas.