

Cash?, Card?, “Put It on the Tab”?, Or a Kind of Osmosis

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Abstract

In this complex and changeable world, especially due to the boost of AI, we want to underline the main payment means, cash and card, along with a traditional one, that of “putting on the tab, mettre sur le cahier”. In our opinion, this analysis means a parallel between the digital/virtual world and the day-to-day life, represented by recording debts on the tab, or in the account. The latter mean is still used in the case of bistros, taverns, pubs, peripheral stores or rural ones, where it deals with loyal and regular customers, in fact, a form of credit. This is not a modern method, but it still exists in the places already mentioned above. There are no contracts or guarantees, but just the promise that the payment will be done in the next few days or even weeks. Based on questionnaires, stories of students, graduates, people who have worked or are working abroad, we came to the conclusion that the future solution in payment will be a mix of cards/digital means in the largest proportion, along with cash and, in small proportion, the direct relationships vendors—customers, buy/consume now, pay later. This forecast is valid only in the case in which AI will not replace humans in all their actions and existence, that is to reach the AGI (Artificial General Intelligence), compared to human intelligence. The digital devices will be prevalent, but in united payment system, cash and “put it on the tab” will co-exist, to strengthen the direct human interactions.

Keywords

Cash, Card, Digital Devices, Payment on the Tab, Trust, Benefits

1. Understanding What Is and the Role of Each Payment Modalities Described

For the last few years, the technology has completely transformed the way we initiate our daily payments. If in the past, cash was the only available option to

choose from, things stay a tiny bit different today. We can pick the most modern ones, like debit or credit cards, contactless payments or even mobile apps. This transition from cash to card is not just a more practical solution but a society evolution to efficiency and digitalization.

However, cash has not completely disappeared. Many people continue to use it for various reasons: whether out of habit, lack of trust in digital systems, or to better control their spending.

In our era of accelerated digitization, the question “cash or card?” is becoming increasingly relevant. Both payment methods have advantages and disadvantages, and the choice depends on the context, personal preferences and degree of access to technology (our emphasis).

Therefore, *the Hypothesis* in the beginning was if one single method, that is the digital one, will prevail, or overpass the other ones.

The Cash Advantages

Anonymity: cash payments leave no digital footprint, providing complete privacy. also, consumers use this mean of payment for agriculture goods and other products from the free individuals agricultural producers’ market (admin, 2019). furthermore, privacy is a design feature of payments system that can be tailored to meet social needs and preferences. But, based on the analyses of Ahnert et al (2025), the use of the cash is declining fast.

Universal acceptance: cash is accepted almost everywhere, regardless of the available technological infrastructure, making it essential in emerging economies or areas where access to digital financial services is limited (Rogoff, 2017).

Better control over spending: studies show that cash users tend to be more conscious of spending, having better personal budget management, as they do not rely on credit cards that can encourage impulsive spending (Goodhart & Pradhan, 2020).

NO added taxes: there are no bank fees or hidden costs involved for users, which makes cash more attractive, especially for people on low incomes.

The Cash Disadvantages

Risk of theft, loss or counterfeiting: cash can be easily lost or stolen, without the possibility of recovering it, which makes cash more vulnerable than electronic payments.

Inconvenience: handling and transporting large amounts of money can become risky, especially in the context of modern economies, where quick transactions are essential.

Inefficiency: cash requires physical handling and manual recording of transactions, which increases operating costs for banks and merchants and reduces efficiency in globalized trade (Goodhart & Pradhan, 2020).

Goodhart and Pradhan in their very interesting and documented analyses, put together globalisation and demography, ageing of population and, mandatory financial and fiscal issues with impact on people’s lives, jobs and retirements.

A conclusion of the two authors, perfectly folded on what’s happening starting

from 2024, is that the decades from 1990 until 2020 have been the glory years of the central banks and the future (we may say, the present) will be/is more difficult with many unknowns.

The Advantages of Cards and Digital Payments

Enhanced Security: in the event of a card loss, it can be blocked immediately and funds are protected by card companies and banks. Digital payments are also protected by advanced encryption technologies.

Convenience: Electronic payments are fast, efficient, and secure. This allows for instant transactions and cross-border trade without the need to handle cash (Rogoff, 2017).

Additional benefits: many cards come with benefits, such as cashback, loyalty points, discounts on various products and included insurance, stimulating consumption and loyalty to banks.

Clear financial history: cards and digital payments offer complete traceability of transactions, which helps with personal financial management and improves access to credit.

Advanced technologies: Contactless payments and mobile banking allow for a fast and secure payment experience, and crypto-currencies are starting to gain traction in some economies.

The Disadvantages of Cards and Digital Payments

Dependence on digital infrastructure: It is a compulsory condition that electronic payments are only possible if there is access to the internet or banking networks. In the event of cyber-attacks or technical failures, payment systems may become inaccessible.

Cybersecurity risks: Online fraud and cyber-attacks are constant risks for digital payment users, and their security must be constantly improved.

Additional costs: Certain cards or digital payments involve processing fees, maintenance fees, or additional costs, which can affect costs for consumers and merchants.

Many reliable information to be used in this paper, for the digital technologies especially, for the Cards and Digital Payments, were provided by Buckley, Arner, Zetsche (2024) in their work.

Furthermore, we want to present, in short, elements also for the necessity of using new payment technologies sustained, exactly within the larger chapter of *Payment Technologies* and another one, regarding the “dispute” between cash and its end and the new technologies (2013). In their works, they argue that modern electronic payment systems function like an externalized memory of social interactions—digitally capturing every monetary transaction and social relation in databases that others control. Or, many modern payment innovations operate through invisible “private gateways” (e.g. connectivity between Apple Pay and American Express), which shape how we pay, yet remain opaque to users. We can see that the problems concerning the new payments technologies, impact on society and a lot of questions being asked, were developed, including the two-men-

tioned authors, even some decades ago.

In Romania, considered the study-case in this paper, the transition to digital payments is underway, but cash remains predominant in many aspects of daily life. According to a Mastercard Report, the level of digital payments usage in Romania stands at 44 points out of 100, indicating progress, but also a significant dependence on cash (see [Admin, 2025](#)).

1) Number of active cards: At the end of June 2024, there were over 22.42 million active cards in Romania, up from the end of 2023.

2) Payment infrastructure: The number of POS terminals has increased, reaching 490.134 nationwide, facilitating the acceptance of card payments in more and more locations.

3) Instant payments: Over 65% of retail payments in Romania are currently instant payments, thanks to the developed infrastructure and mobile banking applications offered by banks.

In 2022, as another aspect, more than 7 out of 10 Romanians used a mobile phone to pay online compared to a desktop computer (about 3 persons) or a tablet (less than 1 out of 10). In 2022, card data was stored online for 68% of online purchases, while in 2021 the level was 62%, thus resulting in an upward trend by increasing by almost 10% (the same source). It was mentioned Mastercard Report, in fact, the *Payment Digital Index*, which is an analysis tool that tracks the evolution of digital payments at the national level. The rate of use of contactless ATMs increased by 2 points, up to 4%, reflecting infrastructure limitations, as the proportion of contactless ATMs in total ATMs is low in Romania.

The index was carried out this year in four countries: Austria, Croatia, Romania and Hungary, analyzing the data recorded at the level of 2022 (also [Admin, 2025](#)).

Continuing the analysis, also in Romania, but with another payment mean, we can say that we are, in a large measure under the rules of “put on the tab”. Even in the last years, months, several programmes were launched for increasing digitization mainly in public administrations and for people, and regarding the digital skills, the degree is far behind that the EU ratio, Romania being situated at the bottom of the Member States’ rankings, reflecting lower digital infrastructure and digital skills overall.

In fact, probably not only in the Romanian case we deal with an extrapolation of the meaning of the term being analyzed, that is we continue to consume on debt, “on the tab of creditors” (we get into debt, or other economies get into debt through continuous borrowing from various creditors, even with billions of euro in a single tranche).

Adding the fact that we have also a large population in the rural zones, far behind the development of the cities and rich regions, we can say that this classic mean of payment, “put it on the tab” is still in use.

Dealing with this third mean of payment, we have to say that it is used for a long, long time, from the times when innkeepers in the largest measure were *real bankers*. If we can synthesize their action, the result will be *consume or purchase*

now, and pay later (that is on the payday). But, our story begins in Ireland, 1970, when a general strike of the banking workers has blocked the banking activity. And, using the famous IOU (Promissory Note) it acknowledges a debt. IOU is a phonetic version of the words “I owe you” (see [Popa, 2025](#)).

In fact, including this “recent” example, the pubs, inns, corner shops created a financial system, without using banks. And, at the same time, the trust and customers’ word were the base of the existence of this mean of payment.

At last but not at least, an example of so-called “*pay and put in waitance*”, an example seen on a short video of still a custom in Turkey, dating back from the Ottoman Empire. It’s about a custom in the rural regions, where the bakers received money from the wealthy persons to buy bread. The money was for 4 breads, for examples, but the person effectively took only 2, and the rest had to be put in *Askida Ekmek (Hanging Bread)*.

From that hanging basket with bread, the poor people took freely exactly the necessary bread for the family. And so on, rich people bought for more breads and the surplus was put into the basket. Thus, for those communities was a very efficient mechanism to satisfy all the parts involved in: the bakers, the rich people and the poor people, that is not only the provider (the baker, in this case) and the payer/consumer, but also a third part, the persons helped and supported gaining the basic food: the bread.

2. Methodology

We use a quantitative analysis, mainly based on the answers given by students and MAs. This analysis was combined with data provided by the specialized institutions and organizations in the field and with the information provided by persons who worked abroad, or graduates who continued their studies abroad.

The quantitative analysis based on a questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of 85 undergraduate students and 30 master’s students from social and economic fields at “Petre Andrei” University of Iasi. The respondents, aged between 19 and 27, provided insights into their daily payment habits. The questionnaire included multiple-choice and open-ended questions focused on:

- Frequency of use for cash, card, and mobile payments.
- Perceptions of security and convenience for each method.
- Use of informal credit (“on the tab”) in their local communities.
- Forecasts regarding the future of payments.

Moreover, interesting and very important as a base of information, both old and recent movies, older generations’ memories were also a study reference for this issue. Yes, it seems that we are adding narrative description of what is happening around us.

As we’ll see, there are countries with the whole financial system focused on digital means of payment, other countries with a majority digital payments, but also with cash using approval and, in some countries, niche locations we encounter the classic payment mean “put it on the tab”, or into account”, or “mettre sur le cahier”.

Combining the written information with the answers received, especially younger generations, in the conditions of a more powerful and multi-tasks AI (in fact, AGI), we've tried to see a desirable mean of payment, or as we suggest, a mix between the two first, of course with accent on digital means, but considering the human interactions given by the third mean of payment.

The answers received, the data provided, and the reality in-progress of our days lead to more than 50%, those who think that not only the cash payment will raise, but the future will be a combination of the described methods of payment.

Findings of the Students/Mas questionnaires reveal, for the Romanian case, relevant insights into the younger generation's behaviour:

While not representative at a national level, the survey provided relevant insights into the younger generation's behavior:

- Approximately 85% of student respondents indicated using a card or mobile app for daily purchases (e.g., coffee, transport, shopping).
- However, 60% still prefer cash for small-value transactions at local markets or small neighborhood stores, citing habit and a perceived lack of infrastructure.
- Only 15% of respondents from urban areas had ever used or witnessed the "put it on the tab" system, whereas 45% of those from rural areas were familiar with it, confirming its persistence in traditional communities.

3. Possible Forecasts and Solutions to the Payment Means

There are countries, such as Sweden, Norway, Poland, in which all payments are done with cards. And, other countries with a relevant ratio of the payments by cards.

Because we've presented the works sustaining the importance and efficiency of the cards and digital payments technologies, we try to underline some countries with a cvasi-majority of cards using, which countries been already in the digital era in all domains.

Countries with a high, or very high proportion of using cards or digital devices, some known from own experience, are the following:

- Norway, with extremely high card usage;
- Sweden (sometime ago) over 90% cards and digital payment technologies used;
- Denmark, also with cvasi-majority usage of cards (seen on the spot);
- Poland, with over 80% debit cards in use (very popular in the country), hence there are dominant (seen on spot);
- Singapore with high smartphone penetration and fintech adoption;
- And, of course, the other industrialized countries in the world.

On the other side, Switzerland intends to defend its own currency, the Suisse Franc. That is, the right to cash and the franc as the national currency should be stipulated in the Constitution.

Therefore, in an era of accelerated digitalization and electronic payments, Switzerland seems determined not to give up banknotes and coins, neither monetary

sovereignty, nor the freedom to pay “cash in hand” (Romanian Global News, 2025).

BUT, in the last period, we also observe that Sweden reconsider the use of cash for commercial purposes. Switzerland decided, also, to use cash payments for goods and services provided to the population.

In the Sweden case, a few years ago, it was the world’s frontrunner in going cashless, now their policymakers make legal efforts to safeguard the role of the cash, as a tool exactly for social inclusion and national security. Why this new attitude? Because the cash must not be allowed to disappear (Maroevic, 2025).

And, as a partial conclusion, but relevant for understanding this issue, we may say that Sweden’s renewed commitment *to cash* is a reminder that in *an era of growing digital dependency and uncertainty, cash remains a cornerstone of both freedom and security* (our emphasis).

Furthermore, in this aspect, which supports the final conclusion, we may say that the future desired *Digital Euro* aims to preserve the role of cash in the digital age, ensuring safe and inclusive payments and protecting the monetary sovereignty of the Euro Zone.

Strengthening again the benefits of Cash, we can affirm that Cash is simple, private, and universally accepted. You don’t need a bank account, there are no hidden fees, and your payment history stays with you. As the information provided by organizations like Goldman Sachs, many small businesses and consumers still prefer cash, and in some countries this preference is even growing, almost 30% of SMEs in the Euro Zone prefer cash as a form of payment, but the percentage rises to over 50% in Austria and almost 40% in Italy (Coman, 2025).

Continuing the third mode to pay the goods and foods in HoReCa industry and in small peripheral or rural shops, taking into account the revenues of the consumers/clients and, at the same time, to honor/satisfy the orders received from regular and good paying customers, the system *sur le cahier*, or *put it on the tab/account* remains a normal mode of action in many countries, such as UK, France, both you satisfy the orders/demands of the people and to continue at above the line of subsistence the economic activity.

The future of the payments, based on some opinions and forecasts made, indeed, several years ago, was to focus on technology and financial innovations. Emerging trends include, amongst others:

Biometric Payments: Using fingerprints and facial recognition to authenticate payments, increasing security and efficiency.

Digital coins of the Central Banks (CBDC): Many states are considering the possibility of introducing digital currencies to more effectively control economies and replace cash (Rogoff, 2017), including European Central Bank, which is decided to put in circulation *the Digital Euro*.

Surprise, because *a digital euro* would be *a digital form of cash* (our emphasis), issued by the central bank and available to everyone in the Euro area. In other words, to be understood what ECB is going to take into account, it would be a

central bank digital currency, an electronic equivalent to cash. And, it would complement banknotes and coins, giving people a necessary additional choice about how to pay (ECB, 2023).

Payment automation: IoT (Internet of Things) technology and artificial intelligence will enable automatic payments and the integration of payments into everyday flows, without human intervention.

Increasing use of crypto-currencies: Bitcoin, Ethereum and other crypto-currencies are becoming increasingly popular and integrated into global financial systems, providing alternatives to traditional payments.

Electronic payments, facilitated by cards and innovative digital solutions, are appreciated for the increased security, convenience and efficiency they offer, also supported by the need to meet the demands of modern economies.

In sum, both cash and card have their role in a modern society. Ideally, we would be able to choose according to our needs and situations. Flexibility and balance between the two methods of payment will remain the keys to an efficient money management. It's hard to say which one will "win", but most likely all these options will exist together for a long time, each with its own purpose.

And, upon this approach, we want to highlight the opinion of the Albanian leader, who intends to transform until 2030, a short time indeed, the Albanian economy into a *cashless one* (our emphasis).

Thus, in a country where cash is king, Prime Minister Edi Rama's ambition to make Albania cashless by 2030 would revolutionize society (G4Media.ro, 2025). It will be the first economy entirely cashless in the world. There are several ambitious plans in Rama's Agenda, now in this fourth term as PM. But it is necessary a sustained combination of internal, but especially external efforts, in order to be able to achieve at least part of the plans, and in such a short time.

The idea supporting this attempt starts from the truth that eliminating cash is an absolute priority for countries with high levels of informality and destabilizing amounts of illegal money in the financial system, problem with sound roots in the communist past in Albania. The economic and financial infrastructure in Albania does not allow such project to be accomplished, especially in 4 - 5 years.

But we also consider that the third form has to be taken into account, because it is still in use. Where?

- In small towns, villages, and peripheral zones of towns, exactly where trust and long-term relationships exist between the shopkeepers and customers;
- In developing countries within isolated areas;
- In the most developed countries, where there are large areas of isolated lands, or with sparse population, as in US, Canada, Australia, UK, and other one;
- Where it exists regular customers, in pubs, bistro, bakeries, coffee shops...

That is, where people know each other, spend more time in such socializations, we have direct communication between them, and empathy can also be manifested (not through technical devices). Or, we already saw, there are still customs of helping/supporting the poor people of these rural or isolated communities, us-

ing the method of “*bread in waitance/pay and put in waitance*”

Thus, in such manner, we find again the situation from the first part of the paper, closing the circle of ideas.

For the people with low income, pensioners or the ones living from a salary to another, we can call this method a vital solution. It allows them to “buy” whatever they need, even if they do not have enough money right away, and pay later when the salary or pension arrives. Still, there are no guarantees the payment will be done, so debts can accumulate. Therefore, we can easily compare it with the modern way called “buy now, pay later” but with the major difference that this last one has a form of contract on hands.

Looking back in time, where exchangeable goods/items were accepted as payments, and taking into account what we have said so far, the “putting on the tab/into account” system is more than just a way to delay money but it reflects a lifestyle where patience, communication and mutual understanding play a significant role. Unlike any modern payment methods, it creates a personal link between people: the shopkeeper knows the client, their family, and their needs.

This small, simple system often supports local economies and keeps traditions alive, especially in small towns or rural areas where trust has more value than a card or an app. It also teaches responsibility, because both sides need to respect the agreement. Looking forward, while technology will continue to grow, there will always be moments when simple, personal solutions like this are the most human way to solve everyday challenges.

Thus, the initial *Hypothesis* is not confirmed, not only due to the respondents’ answers, but due to the realities of these days, with social movements and resistance against austerity measures, leading to a reasonable conclusion of a combination of all three methods, taking into account the specificity of each economy, of each people.

This forecast is valid only in the case in which AI will not replace humans in all their actions and existence, that is to reach the AGI (Artificial General Intelligence), comparing to human intelligence.

Regarding this outstanding issue of our days, with pros and cons opinions and ideas, we will use only the opinion of the Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics for 2024, the American Professor Simon Johnson, from MIT Sloan School of Management (Ionescu, 2025). The interview was taken by Finance & Development and picked up by the Romanian press.

He speaks of an “*oligarchy of vision*”, referring to the fact that a small number of companies and individuals decisively influence the direction in which artificial intelligence evolves. It’s not just about who invents the technology, but who decides what kind of technology we develop and for what purposes. It’s essential that these decisions are not made exclusively by a small circle of actors. Approximately 95% of global investments in AI are concentrated in the US, only 3% in Europe and 2% in the rest of the world.

Therefore, the largest part of the world’s countries will remain simply spectators

in this matter, unable to influence the evolution of these revolutionary new technologies.

This is an important challenge on our economic system, including the issue developed in this paper, but our faith and trust is that the human activities and traits will prevail. And, perhaps, we must take into account also the opinion of Geoffrey Hinton, considered “the AI Godfather”, that we need to make sure that when AI becomes more powerful than us, this super-intelligence continues to care about us, the humans.

4. Conclusion

In a world of rapid change, where technology is rapidly evolving and influencing every aspect of our lives, the way we pay for goods and services has become an important indicator of economic and social progress. The shift from cash to bank cards and, more recently, to mobile applications or digital wallets, reflects the desire of societies to adopt more efficient, secure and faster solutions for managing money. Ideally, each person should have the freedom to choose the right method, in a system that offers security, accessibility and diversity. The future certainly belongs to digital payments, but cash still has an important role in a balanced and inclusive economy.

The transition from cash to digital payments is not without its challenges. There are still significant risks related to cyber-security, technological accessibility, and the economic impact of eliminating cash, especially for vulnerable individuals who lack access to technology or prefer to maintain more direct control over their spending.

Technology companies themselves must develop solutions that meet the diverse needs of consumers and ensure transparency and fairness in the use of new financial instruments.

On the other hand, AI is possible to widen economic and social gaps, between countries and within them, undesirable aspect which will be solved, we believe, in a reasonable way, maybe in the spirit of what Geoffrey Hinton predicts.

Thus, the future of payments is certainly digital, but a full transition to a cashless world will not be possible without global adaptation. A framework is needed that balances the advantages of cards and digital payments with the need to protect those who still depend on cash, ensuring that the benefits of digital economies are not only accessible, but also inclusive, secure and sustainable for all segments of the population.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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