



Freedom from ownership: An exploration of access-based consumption[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Consumers are increasingly attracted to the idea of accessing products instead of owning them. This shift is important to businesses as they pursue the growing market of consumers engaging in alternative forms of consumption. Access-based business models align consumer self-interest with responsible consumption behaviors, enabling consumers, businesses and society to benefit through this unique form of exchange. A multi-method approach examines the perceived motivations that impact consumers' willingness to access products through socially networked short-term rentals. The results suggest that multiple factors drive consumer attitudes. A cluster analysis reveals four distinct groups of consumers with varying dispositions toward access-based consumption: Fickle Floaters, Premium Keepers, Conscious Materialists and Change Seekers. This research provides an actionable segmentation framework for business practice.

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1. Introduction

Ownership, or rather the lack thereof, is one of the pivotal changes occurring in today's business environment. A growing number of consumers are engaging in alternatives to ownership, often referred to as access-based consumption, where consumers gain access to the products they seek, but no transfer of ownership takes place (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). In this type of exchange, consumers pay for the experience of temporarily using the products through rental and/or membership fees. Car and bike sharing services (e.g., ZipCar, B-Cycle), luxury product rentals (e.g., Rent the Runway, The Mr. Collection) and intangibles, like skills (e.g., TaskRabbit) or available space (e.g., Airbnb), are just a few examples of this growing form of socially networked short-term access. A recent PwC study estimates access-based consumption revenues rising from \$15 billion globally in 2014 to over \$300 billion by 2025 (Zhuo, 2015). This research explores consumer motivations for accessing products and equips firms seeking to tap into this growing marketplace with an actionable framework for effective market segmentation.

Access-based consumption is available across many categories, including but not limited to clothing, tools, cars, handbags, golf clubs, bicycles and accommodations. Academic research is only beginning to investigate this form of marketplace exchange, despite increased recognition of the access-based consumption phenomenon (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014; Lamberton & Rose, 2012; Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Schaeffers, Lawson, & Kukar-Kinney, 2015). As consumers shift away from traditional forms of ownership, forward-looking firms that regard changing technologies and environmental trends as opportunities rather than threats can benefit by being on the forefront of delivering disruptive technologies (Belk, 2014). In order to do so, it is important for firms to understand what motivates consumers to participate in access-based consumption.

2. Defining the scope of access-based consumption

Access-based consumption is defined as “market-mediated transactions that provide customers with temporarily limited access to goods in return for an access fee, while the legal ownership remains with the service provider” (Schaeffers et al., 2015, p. 3). Access-based business models differ from traditional renting in that these market-mediated exchanges take place among consumers using intermediary firms leveraging the use of networked technologies on a scale never before possible (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). For example, ZipCar, a car sharing service that allows consumers to rent vehicles by the hour, uses smart phone technology to allow users to book and access the vehicles on location. Moreover, these access-based business models rely on

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consumers to be active participants in the service provision. Access-based firms can be environmentally advantageous because a product that would have previously been owned by an individual and used infrequently is instead shared among multiple consumers maximizing usage (Botsman & Rogers, 2010).

Access-based business models are of particular interest to firms as these economic exchanges rely on market-mediation and are underscored by profit motives (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Understanding consumer motivations to engage in access-based consumption is critical to providing a successful business platform, yet the motivating factors for adoption of these business models are not well known. We undertake this research problem with a mixed method approach. Next, consumer motivations to engage in access-based consumption are explored with a qualitative study, followed by a larger-scale quantitative study that enables the creation of a segmentation framework that firms can put into practice.

3. Study 1: exploration of perceived consumer motivations

3.1. Sample and data collection

This study utilizes an open-ended survey where participants were asked to recall instances where they may have engaged in access-based consumption. The survey was sent to 400 U.S.-based consumers that participated in a large public university panel; the data collection resulted in a sample of 72 individuals (18% response rate). The panel was open to any person over the age of 18, and is quite representative of an average consumer, as evidenced by the demographic information of the sample (see Table 1). The goal was to gather information from a diverse set of individuals that may, or may not, engage in various access-based consumption activities. This type of qualitative analysis is used to uncover emergent patterns or themes by categorizing incidents or stories (Reynolds, Folse, & Jones, 2006; Spiggle, 1994). Rather than being generalizable, this analysis technique allows us to provide insight into the nature of a phenomenon and is integrated with the theory utilized in the next study (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, & Bitner, 2000; Spiggle, 1994).

This open-ended exploration started by defining and describing access-based consumption. Participants were then asked to recall instances they had engaged in access-based consumption and list items that they recently rented, borrowed, or shared with others. Specifically, participants were asked to list six items, or instances, when they accessed products and to describe the item or example. Then,

participants were asked to explain their rationale for engaging in these behaviors and to further elaborate on what they perceived as the benefits, or negative aspects, of it.

3.2. Results

The qualitative responses from the open-ended survey provide valuable insights into participants' perceived motivations to engage in access-based consumption. Two graduate assistants familiar with the research and trained in categorization techniques acted as independent coders to categorize the responses. In numerous instances, more than one reason was provided as to why the participant chose to engage in the behavior. Participants reporting more than one reason were grouped into multiple categories yielding 149 responses. Coding discrepancies were discussed between the coders; when a resolution was not reached the response was counted against the reliability assessment (Kassarjian, 1977). An additional researcher was brought in to discuss the response with the coders to determine the category if an agreement could not be reached. Inter-coder reliability was nearly 97%. The categorization of responses resulted in seven motivational categories. Five themes emerged as key factors influencing participants to engage in access-based consumption while two themes provided insight into why they may avoid engaging in this form of consumption.

The results of the qualitative study reveal several motivational factors that impact consumers when deliberating on whether to engage in access-based consumption. In particular, the economic benefits associated with short-term access were the most prevalent perceived positive motivation, as noted by a participant stating that "Renting certain items that are rarely used is a cost effective alternative to buying or owning. Tools are a great example." While saving money seems an intuitive motivation for access-based consumption, other motivations were also revealed: "It is a mutually beneficial situation. People who need an item can obtain it temporarily while owners, in the case of renting, can profit in some way off of unused items. Sharing and borrowing can benefit the environment and can help friends or family without cost." The positive environmental impact of product rentals is an important factor noted by many participants. Items being reused by multiple people or purposes is a positive environmental function, however other benefits were brought to light that one may not consider: "Renting, borrowing and sharing can reduce the amount of packaging that is wasted on new products."

Additionally, the ability to take a product on a "test run" without the responsibility of ownership was an important motivation noted by participants. One response noted that "Renting and borrowing is good because if you rent a product you do not like, you can always return it and the only thing you lose is the rental fee. Renting is also good if you want to try something out before you commit to buying it." It was noted by participants that given the abundance of product options in the marketplace, they like the ability to try things before they commit. The ability to experience something outside of the norm, or above what one would normally be able to experience, was another commonly noted reason. Given the prevalence and influence of variety seeking on consumption (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Simonson, 1990), it was not surprising to have participants note they like "having a lot of new things to you and not having things get old." Responses often indicated the desire to seek status, as illustrated by "you can pretend to be someone you aren't for a day and do something that you may not otherwise get to do," which is made possible through access rather than ownership.

Moreover, some participants stated factors that may impede ones involvement in access-based consumption. In some cases, respondents noted a preference for owning the item, rather than accessing it, indicating themes of possessiveness and materialism as deterrents. For instance, one participant noted: "They aren't yours, you can't keep them, there is a deadline on when to give them back, and it still costs money either way," while another responded that "The product is not

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Demographics	Study 1	Study 2
<i>Age range</i>		
18–35	48.6%	59.8%
36–54	41.7%	28.5%
55+	9.7%	11.7%
Mean age	35.7	36.5
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	50.0%	58.9%
Female	50.0%	41.1%
<i>Education</i>		
High school diploma	22.2%	8.4%
Some college	37.5%	32.2%
Bachelor's degree	34.7%	47.7%
Graduate degree	11.8%	11.7%
<i>Income^a</i>		
<\$25,000	20.7%	
\$25,001 to \$75,000	10.7%	
\$75,001 to \$125,000	22.4%	
>\$150,000	17.3%	

^a See Table 5 for a detailed breakdown of income for Study 2.

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