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A triadic framework for collaborative consumption (CC): Motives, activities and resources & capabilities of actors

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative consumption (CC) is an increasingly prevalent form of exchange. CC occurs within a triangle of actors: a platform provider (e.g., Uber), a peer service provider (e.g., an Uber driver) and a customer. The platform provider's main role is matchmaking, so that a customer can access assets of a peer service provider. This paper has three objectives. First, this article identifies three criteria to delineate CC from related constructs such as access-based consumption, sharing or renting. Second, it introduces a literature-based framework explicating the roles of the actors in the CC triangle along three dimensions: motives, activities and resources and capabilities. Third, it highlights areas for further research, such as the dynamics of CC, context-dependent motives and the emergence of professional (peer) service providers.

1. Introduction

Exchange has long been considered a cornerstone of marketing thought (e.g., Bagozzi, 1975) and, as noted by Belk (2014), is "as old as humankind" (p. 1595). While having taken various forms including sharing, bartering, and trading, in a more recent customer context, exchange is typically considered a dyadic process occurring between two parties (e.g., a company providing a good or service and a customer providing some financial consideration). Furthermore, exchange over the past century can be characterized as "aspirational exchange," meaning that customers "trade up" in buying more luxurious goods (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011). Recently, however, there has been an increase in a very different form of exchange which can be labeled "collective exchange," whereby many customers access goods and services that are provided by a peer (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2014).

This form of exchange has been referred to by an almost dizzying number of labels including access-based consumption (e.g., Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), access-based service (e.g., Schaefers, Wittkowski, Benoit, & Ferraro, 2016), non-ownership services (e.g., Wittkowski, Moeller, & Wirtz, 2013), sharing (e.g., Belk, 2014), commercial sharing programs (Lamberton & Rose, 2012), two-sided markets (Rochet & Tirole, 2006) or shareconomy or sharing economy (e.g., Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2015). Perhaps the most common being collaborative consumption (CC) (e.g., Botsman, 2015; Hamari et al., 2015). The firms engaged in this new market mechanism have become some of the most talked about in the business press. An example is Uber, which operates a well-known ride-sharing service. Uber drivers utilize their own vehicles and work hours that are most convenient for them. Customers access the service via an app on their smartphone or some other device. As such, Uber provides a technology platform (the app) that efficiently coordinates underutilized assets (owner's vehicles) to serve customers who need transportation. Similarly, Airbnb provides an app/online presence that coordinates people seeking short-term accommodations with people who have underutilized space (e.g., room, apartment) available to be rented. Thus, CC is fueled, in part, by social media platforms that easily connect peers (Belk, 2014; Matzler, Veider, & Kathan, 2015).

Academic research regarding this new phenomenon is just emerging and as it does, it seems to be moving in a number of different directions. The goal of our paper is to make three primary contributions. First, although research regarding CC has been accelerating, there has not been a formal conceptualization of CC in the academic literature. To help alleviate this confusion, we introduce three criteria that can be used to aid in the characterization of CC as a triadic exchange involving customers, peer service providers and platform providers. Second, we

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Table 1
Collaborative consumption and related phenomena.

	Buying	Renting	Non ownership/access based services	Collaborative consumption	Sharing or co-owning
Number and type of actors	Dyadic, between provider and customer	Dyadic, between provider and customer	Dyadic, between provider and customer	Triadic, between a platform provider, a peer service provider and a customer	Two or more individuals, e.g. within families or friends
Nature of exchange	Transfer of ownership, Usually assets are exchanged for financial contribution, sense of finality	No ownership transfer, longer, fixed period of agreed consumption time, mostly investment goods, sequential use	No ownership transfer, shorter periods of agreed consumption time, sequential use	No ownership transfer, shorter periods of agreed consumption time of underutilized assets from the peer service provider, sequential use	No ownership transfer, Often shared ownerships, therefore simultaneous or sequential use
Directness of exchange	Predominantly mediated through market mechanisms	Predominantly mediated through market mechanisms	Mediated through market mechanisms	Mediated through market mechanisms	Not mediated through market, but social mechanisms

provide a discussion of the roles of these actors as manifested in their motives for CC, their activities, and their resources and capabilities (see Table 2). Finally, we present a number of avenues for potential research relative to this area.

2. Conceptual foundation for collaborative consumption

The goal of this section is to present three characteristics of CC that we believe delineate it from other, more traditional forms of exchange. These are: 1) the number and type of actors, 2), the nature of the exchange, and the 3) directness of exchange (see Table 1).

A key differentiator of CC from traditional forms of exchange is that due to the *number and type of actors involved*, CC can be characterized as triadic rather than dyadic. Specifically, (a) a platform provider enables exchange, (b) a customer seeks access to assets and (c) a peer service provider grants this access. In other words, two different service providers serve customers in CC: the platform provider (e.g., Uber) and a peer service provider (e.g., the Uber driver).

Characterizing and delineating CC this way helps to define it as activity whereby a platform provider links a consumer that aims to temporarily utilize assets with a peer service provider who grants access to these assets and with this delivers the core service. For example, Zipcar, a firm that is frequently included in discussions of CC, would be considered as an access-based service company because Zipcar has inventory of cars to provide transportation rather than relying on peer-to-peer exchange. Further, this definition of CC excludes sharing, which might occur in a triangle of actors, but usually occurs among individuals so that no (professional) platform provider and no monetary contribution are involved (see Fig. 1).

A second characteristic of CC concerns the *nature of the exchange* between the three actors. As in traditional exchanges CC exchange entails (a) customers gaining access to tangible/intangible resources (Wittkowski et al., 2013) (b) when monetary compensation is exchanged for goods or services. However, with CC there is no exchange of ownership. Rather, the actor who owns the resource (e.g., car) grants *temporary* property rights to other actors (e.g., those in need of temporary transportation) (Haase & Kleinaltenkamp, 2011).

Our third criterion is that CC differs from related phenomena (such as sharing, non-ownership or access-based services, renting and buying) because it is mediated by market mechanisms. For example, *sharing* is not market-mediated, but rather relies on social mechanisms for coordinating exchange (Hill & Wellman, 2012) and occurs within socially connected groups, such as families (Belk, 2010). Moreover, sharing does not necessarily involve triadic exchange. *Purchasing* and *renting* usually occur within a dyadic relationship between a company and a customer. For both a company owns the sold, rented or accessed good. The core of the transaction is either the transfer of ownership (buying) or the access to the good or service (renting or access-based services). When customers obtain *ownership,* a full transfer of property rights takes place (Haase & Kleinaltenkamp, 2011). The transfer has a sense of finality and the customer has to make a monetary contribution that equals the value of the good (Durgee & O'Connor, 1995). Renting generally entails access to investment goods (e.g., house or flat) for longer periods of time, whereas access-based services customers usually obtain relatively short-term access to consumption goods (Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010).

Following the CC triangle presented above, the rest of our paper will focus on the three actors (customer, peer service provider and platform provider) involved in the triadic exchange that characterizes CC. The theoretical foundation for our conceptual framework is the capabilities approach (Day, 1994, 2011) stating that the most distinctive features of market-driven companies are their market sensing and customer linking capabilities (Day, 1994). Since the market capabilities approach emphasizes the ability of a firm to learn about customers and competitors and act on such information, we have included motivations and activities of all three actors into our conceptual framework. The