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When do materialistic consumers join commercial sharing systems

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ABSTRACT

Commercial sharing systems (CSS) evolve to a relevant business concept that provides access to product benefits without ownership. A series of three studies delivers new knowledge on how to target consumers who still refrain from sharing to widen the market potential of CSS. Study 1 demonstrates that materialism's sub-dimension possessiveness is the dominant inhibitor of sharing. Study 2 then confirms that this negative impact of materialism diminishes with elevating levels of the desire for unique consumer products. Study 3 reveals that this interaction effect is further qualified by the ownership of a product if the product category has a strong product-need-fit. This research outlines implications of how marketers can design CSS so that they are also attractive to the critical target segment of materialistic consumers.

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1. Introduction

A growing number of consumers consider commercial sharing systems (CSS) a viable alternative to product ownership (Belk, 2007; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Havas, 2014) that competes with the dominant logic of purchasing goods (Belk, 2010; Economist, 2013; Sacks, 2011). The commercial sharing market has an estimated volume of more than US\$100 billion (Sacks, 2011) with the potential to exceed \$335 billion by 2025 (PwC, 2014). The global car sharing revenue alone will grow to \$6.2 billion by 2020 (Navigant Research, 2013). Accordingly, marketing academics started to explore the drivers of sharing participation to develop attractive sharing offerings. Yet, consumer research is still in its early phase (Belk, 2010, 2014). The current literature demonstrates that some consumers join CSS due to financial restrictions and a tendency toward frugality, while others participate for ideological reasons (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Lambertson & Rose, 2012; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010). In order to expand the share economy to a broader mass of consumers, marketers require knowledge about the motivating factors in different consumer segments, particularly for consumers who have been reluctant to make use of CSS so far.

As materialistic consumers prefer to buy and thus own goods (Belk, 1984, 1985), there is reason to expect that consumer materialism (the deep-seated wish to possess things) is the key barrier to join CSS. The present research proposes that, under certain conditions, even materialistic consumers may choose CSS-offers. Yet, their motivational drivers

may differ from those of frugal or sustainability-conscious consumers (Geiger-Oneto, Gelb, Walker, & Hess, 2013; Hudders, Pandelaere, & Vyncke, 2013; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). This research suggests that the desire for unique consumer products is a potential moderating factor. Consumers with a strong wish to use unique products may join CSS despite materialistic dispositions. Although no empirical evidence of the interplay between materialism and the desire for unique consumer products has been published, recent studies provide indications that both concepts relate to sharing intentions (Lynn & Harris, 1997; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010; Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012).

This research makes several contributions to the literature. Study 1 tests two types of materialism (possessiveness and non-generosity) against a set of factors that potentially shape the intention to participate in CSS. Study 2 then analyzes how the desire for unique products attenuates the detrimental influence of materialism on sharing participation. Study 3 finally shows how the interplay between both factors depends on whether the ownership of one product fulfills the basic product category need. Together, this research has theoretical implications for explaining consumer sharing behavior as well as managerial implications for developing new sharing offers and for widening the sharing market.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Commercial sharing systems

CSS provide customers access to product benefits without ownership, and thus, offer revenue and growth potential for companies (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Drawing on the public goods literature (Ostrom, 2003), the marketing discipline distinguishes between open

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and closed CSS (Lamberton & Rose, 2012). In open CSS, consumers get access to the shared good for a fee. Zipcar, for example, provides over 900,000 members on-demand-access to their car fleet for monetary compensation. In closed CSS, only some individuals (qualified by member status, relationship to others, or certain characteristics) get access to the shared good. Mobile providers such as AT&T or Verizon allow their customers to share their cell phone minutes and data volume with predefined others.

2.2. Sharing

The sharing paradigm lays the behavioral foundation of CSS participation. Belk (2007, 126) defines sharing as “the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use as well as the act and process of receiving something from others for our use”. The literature distinguishes two modes of sharing, namely sharing in and sharing out (Belk, 2010). While sharing in dissolves interpersonal boundaries, sharing out creates no social bond as individuals divide resources to optimize their use. The marketing discipline focuses on how to commercialize sharing out willingness via CSS, which is also in the scope of this research.

To date, several conceptual (Belk, 2010, 2013; Widlok, 2004), qualitative (Arsel & Dobscha, 2011; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), and non-peer reviewed (Havas, 2014) articles discuss the drivers of why consumers engage in CSS. However, only few empirical studies analyze these drivers quantitatively (Table 1). A prior research shows that factors such as frugality or sustainability motivate consumers to join CSS (Seegebarth, Peyer, Balderjahn, & Wiedmann, 2016). In contrast, factors like materialism dispositions make consumers prefer to possess goods rather than to participate in sharing systems (Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010). The cost–benefit approach of Lamberton and Rose (2012) illustrates that the degree of substitutability or the search costs of sharing affect the sharing decision process. A research further demonstrates that previous experience with sharing fosters participation in CSS (Möhlmann, 2015; Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010).

2.3. Sharing as a hybrid of consumption and anti-consumption

Sharing enables consumers to reduce their purchases without the need to abstain from using products (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Accordingly, sharing combines constituting elements of the traditional consumption paradigm with aspects of the anti-consumption paradigm. A previous research (Table 1) confirms that some consumers participate in sharing systems to reduce their level of consumption, either for reasons of frugality or sustainability (Seegebarth et al., 2016). Accordingly, CSS participation can be considered a type of anti-consumption

(Chatzidakis & Lee, 2013), that is, an act of reducing or avoiding consumption for ethical, sustainable, or symbolic reasons (Lee, Fernandez, & Hyman, 2009). From an anti-consumption perspective, not choosing a product is not simply a function of the preference to consume one object over another (Zavestoski, 2002). In contrast to regular non-choice decisions, anti-consumption is an active and conscious decision not to consume (Close & Zinkhan, 2009). While scholars traditionally focus on the consumption aspect, the motivation for and the conscious decision to reduce consumption are still under-researched (Craig-Lees, 2006).

To disentangle the hybrid status of sharing conceptually, this research takes into account that consumption subsumes the usage as well as the purchase of goods and services (McCracken, 1990). Likewise, anti-consumption refers to both aspects simultaneously. The sharing concept, however, and more specifically the use of CSS, is a way to reduce the purchase component, irrespective of the usage component (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Hence, sharing is a form of anti-consumption with regard to possession, but not regarding the use of specific products or brands.

The hybrid nature of sharing is particularly relevant when looking for new ways to increase the attractiveness of CSS. As Hutter and Hoffmann (2013, 217) pinpoint, “anti-consumption obviously requires sacrifices, but many consumers are not willing or able to bear the subjective costs of reduced consumption and, thus, are unwilling to make sacrifices”. In a similar fashion, Connolly and Prothero (2003) reveal that consumers associate consumption self-restrictions as cold and dark. For materialistic consumers, possession is highly relevant and these consumers are thus less likely to reduce consumption. CSS could help to resolve this dilemma because sharing is a possible form of purchase reduction without usage reduction. Hence, this research proposes that under certain circumstances sharing is even attractive for materialistic consumers.

2.4. Materialism

Belk (1987, 26) conceptualizes materialism as a “dominant consumer ideology and the most significant macro development in modern consumer behavior”. Highly materialistic consumers attach importance to worldly possessions that play a central role in their lives (Goldsmith & Clark, 2012). Accordingly, materialism is a crucial predictor of consumer behavior (Ellis, 1992). In contrast to traditional business models, using (rather than possessing) is a key element of sharing by definition. In other words, a person uses things owned by others, as well as giving his/her things to others. While, for persons who share, possession is not the major concern of their consumption behaviors, for materialistic consumers, consumption is usually not satisfying without possession (Belk, 1987).

Table 1
Overview of previous empirical sharing research.

Construct	Key finding
<i>Drivers</i>	Sharing tendency is <i>higher</i> , ...
Price of ownership ^{2, 4}	... the <i>higher</i> the calculated costs of owning and maintaining.
Frugality ^{2, 4}	... the <i>higher</i> the frugality disposition.
Sustainability ⁶	... the <i>higher</i> the sustainability orientation.
Anti-consumption ²	... the <i>higher</i> the anti-consumption disposition.
Anti-industry ⁴	... the <i>higher</i> the anti-industry attitude.
Idealism ³	... the <i>higher</i> the idealistic orientation.
Degree of substitutability ¹	... the <i>higher</i> the substitutability of a good via sharing.
Social utility of sharing ^{1, 2, 4}	... the <i>more</i> options to socialize with sharing system members.
Functional utility of sharing ¹	... the <i>higher</i> the perceived utility of sharing.
Sharing knowledge ^{2, 5}	... the <i>higher</i> the familiarity with the sharing system.
Satisfaction with sharing option ⁵	... the <i>higher</i> the satisfaction with the sharing option.
<i>Inhibitors</i>	Sharing tendency is <i>lower</i> , ...
Materialism ²	... the <i>higher</i> the importance of material goods to a person's life.
Search cost of sharing ^{2, 4}	... the <i>more</i> time is spend looking for providers.
Perceived product scarcity risk ¹	... the <i>higher</i> the perceived likelihood that a product will be unavailable.

Source: ¹Lamberton and Rose (2012); ²Ozanne and Ballantine (2010); ³Hellwig et al. (2015); ⁴Hennig-Thurau et al. (2007); ⁵Möhlmann (2015); ⁶Seegebarth et al. (2016).

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