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“It's not my fault, I am in the right!” Exploration of neutralization in the justification of the support and use of a controversial technological collaborative consumption service

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ABSTRACT

Community-based platforms (CBPs) such as Uber and Airbnb are increasingly prevalent in modern society. Inherent disintermediation and informality render these web-based systems especially attractive in the eyes of consumers, while exacerbating old problems and spawning new challenges. This study posits CBPs as ethically and morally questionable, and thus as controversial consumption schemes. Drawing on the neutralization theory research stream, this study seeks to identify how supporters and users justify the existence of controversial consumption systems such as CBPs. Our results show that, to justify CBPs, supporters and users both tend to depend heavily on neutralization techniques such as appealing to higher loyalties, condemnation of condemners, denial of victims, denial of responsibility and invocation of normalcy. Interestingly, these techniques are used in conjunction with non-neutralization techniques to defend controversial collaborative services such as Uber.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have provided a rich overview of the impacts of technology on consumers' proclivity to engage in collaborative consumption (Acquier et al., 2017; Barnes and Mattsson, 2017; Laurell and Sandström, 2017; Mair and Reischauer, 2017; Murillo et al., 2017; Parguel et al., 2017). The concept of collaborative consumption is exceptionally vast in scope, and this study focuses on mutualization systems that allow peer-to-peer exchanges (Ertz et al., 2016). These systems, called community-based platforms (CBPs) (Acquier et al., 2017), combine two systems: the community-based economy, which involves “coordinating through non-contractual, non-hierarchical or non-monetized forms of interaction” (Acquier et al., 2017, p. 4) and the platform economy, based on “intermediating decentralized exchanges among peers through digital platforms” (p. 4).

The major attraction of CBPs resides in the fact that they eclipse commercial intermediaries, making it possible for consumers to engage with one another (Marchi and Parekh, 2015). However, it appears that these classic intermediaries have merely been replaced by new and seemingly more unscrupulous and disloyal actors (Murillo et al., 2017; Slee, 2015). Unlike traditional companies, the new CBPs operate via the Web with minimal staff, and are poorly fitted for conventional

regulations and taxation regimes (Zuluaga, 2016). Public authorities have little or no awareness of the value created by CBPs (European Commission, 2015; Marchi and Parekh, 2015). These new actors call into question the traditional commercial, economic, fiscal, and legislative order, in which consumers and commercial enterprises were clearly separated and had distinctly different roles regulated by government institutions and the rule of law (Perret, 2014). CBPs embody a form of alternate consumption, which runs counter to the commercial and economic norms of society (Slee, 2015), giving rise to tensions in both the environmental (Parguel et al., 2017) and economic fields (Laurell and Sandström, 2017; Mair and Reischauer, 2017).

Meanwhile, the challenges linked to disintermediation and informality have become established in the public forum, and CBPs have led to a highly polarized debate. Debate has centred on the leading actors (e.g. Uber, Airbnb) and has spawned highly disparate public regulations. The ongoing debate in many countries on the issue of the legality of CBPs illustrates the collective societal challenges associated with these platforms (Murillo et al., 2017; Zuluaga, 2016). In certain contexts, recourse to CBPs can be viewed not only as an act of consumption determined by traditional criteria of choice, but also, for some the population, as an immoral or unethical form of consumption. Determining the legality of CBPs falls outside the scope of this study.

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Instead, we seek to identify the societal challenges raised by these practices through public debate and, more especially, the points of view of consumers with respect to this new economy.

The size of the collaborative economy is rising from \$15 billion in 2015 and is expected to grow into a \$335 billion industry by 2025 (PwC, 2015). Hence, this topic appears of critical importance for public authorities called upon to regulate these new practices, to address the concerns of the new collaborative consumption players in search of legitimacy. As in the case of new economic models representing a break from traditional economics, it is therefore essential to understand the points of view of consumers regarding this new form of commercial endeavour. More specifically, the object of this study is to explore how consumers justify a new form of consumption, which calls into question the established rules of competition among economic players of a given activity sector.

This study draws on the neutralization theory developed by Sykes and Matza (1957), highlighting the different techniques used by consumers to justify and rationalize a form of socially contested consumption, namely CBPs. Neutralization theory is well suited for analysing consumers' justification of a form of consumption that breeds controversy. The theory encompasses a variety of techniques used continually or periodically by consumers to rationalize their consumption decisions that may be considered as being less moral or ethical (McGregor, 2008). Since we propose that recourse to Uber might be considered as morally questionable, at least as regards the conventional regulation and taxation system, neutralization theory is an appropriate tool. Past studies illustrate the powerful insights that can be gained from bringing in this theoretical perspective (e.g. Gruber and Schlegelmilch, 2014; McGregor, 2008). The present study applies the neutralization theory framework in the context of the much-debated collaborative economy, and more especially CBPs, which are considered by some as the most controversial facet of the collaborative economy.

2. Ethical challenges surrounding community-based platforms

2.1. Revisiting organizational responsibilities

This study seeks to identify the societal challenges raised by CBPs through public debate and, more especially, by considering consumer viewpoints about this new economy. For this purpose, we need to consider disruptions to the established order caused by these novel forms of commerce. The ethical issues that have emerged can be categorized based on the principles of corporate social responsibility identified by Carroll (1991) and Carroll and Buchholtz (2009). According to this model, commercial organizations have four types of responsibility: economic, social, ethical and philanthropic.

The primary responsibility of an organization is economic, namely, ensuring a return on investment for shareholders, provision of stable, gainful employment for employees, and quality goods and services for consumers (Crane and Matten, 2007). On this issue, when returns on investment begin to increase for private investors (Bloomberg, 2016), the services provided by CBPs are deemed by consumers to be more efficient than those of the conventional economy (Hamari et al., 2015). However, gainful employment for “employees” has become highly debatable with respect to labour law. In reality, workers employed by CBPs are not employees, but are actually self-employed individuals (Forbes, 2016; The Guardian, 2016) or prosumers, namely consumers who also exercise the role of purveyors of goods and services (Ritzer, 2015). CBPs tend to boost job creation and enhance purchasing power, notably in sluggish economic conditions (Marchi and Parekh, 2015) or in underprivileged communities (Dillahunt and Malone, 2015), but these creations come along with high social and economic costs (Rogers, 2015). The status of self-employed is more disadvantageous to workers than the status of employee, since it annuls traditional remuneration and corporate benefits, while generating income that is not

subject to any legal minimum wage (Summers and Balls, 2015). In certain specific industries, with CBPs gaining an increasingly larger share of the market due to their cost edge, self-employed status may no longer necessarily be a matter of choice, but will become the norm. As such, CBPs could appear as mostly detrimental to employees in comparison to investors and consumers.

The position of CBPs with regard to common law leads to a second responsibility which requires the compliance of organizations, namely their legal responsibility (Carroll, 1991). This is quite clearly the type of responsibility which leads to most of the questions concerning CBPs. Authorities are faced with a shortfall in taxation revenues, and conventional enterprises denounce the unfair competition posed by CBPs, given their non-compliance with the law and their tax evasion practices (Slee, 2015). As a result, there have been numerous lawsuits, decrees, and regulations involving major collaborative economy names such as Uber and Airbnb, even though the decisions are often contradictory. For example, the cities of Berlin and Paris have imposed a series of limitations on lodging rentals, subrentals in particular, via Airbnb (Penn and Wihbey, 2016). At the same time, Amsterdam has developed Airbnb-friendly legislation, while London seeks to become a ‘global centre for the collaborative economy’ (Penn and Wihbey, 2016). Uber and Lyft have been prohibited in a number of European and North-American cities as these companies provide taxi services without having the permits necessary to offer such services (Cannon and Summers, 2014). In other world cities, these applications remain legal while causing previously unheard of legal dilemmas (Rogers, 2015). CBPs generally find themselves in a sort of legal grey area since they represent a *fait accompli* which forces the authorities to reinvent the regulations. In reality, legal disputes often involve conventional enterprises that comply with the laws in force, with the aim of urging authorities to develop new regulations.

Ethical responsibility refers to the choices made by organizations to do what is right, true and fair even if they are not required to do so by law (Crane and Matten, 2007). CBPs therefore showcase their contribution to the environment. The mutualization inherent in CBPs is often identified as a factor which makes it possible to reduce the human impact on the environment (Leismann et al., 2013). Other benefits specific to CBPs are also advocated, such as the renaissance of community spirit (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). CBPs appear ripe with ethical potential, while creating new issues of ethical importance. One issue specific to these platforms arises from the massive collection of extremely detailed personal information, and very little is known about the actual use made of this information (Rogers, 2015). Additionally, consumers are increasingly inclined to view their possessions from a utilitarian angle, in the sense that any unused resource is regarded as a monetary shortfall, a concept some refer to as the commodification of all aspects of life (Kallis, 2014).

Lastly, philanthropic responsibility refers to those activities (e.g. donations, sponsoring of sporting events, construction of leisure facilities for communities) engaged in by organizations aimed at enhancing their employees' quality of life, helping the communities in which they operate and, ultimately, benefiting society in general (Crane and Matten, 2007). Companies are particularly fond of this type of action, which fosters positive public relations and good corporate image (Brammer and Pavelin, 2005). Accordingly, CBPs engage massively in altruistic actions. Uber has launched a programme dubbed ‘Ride for a cause’. For each ride completed by an Uber driver, the company paid out \$1 to one of five partner charitable organizations. Following the massive influx of migrants into Europe, Airbnb launched a global disaster relief programme and provided lodging valued at \$300,000 (Philanthropy Age, 2016). Many companies also gear their philanthropic activities towards programmes that preserve the environment for the populations that are concerned. Consequently, CBPs also promote their activities as beneficial to the environment. For example, Uber states that its services reduce carbon emissions. From an environmental point of view, however, this claim appears debatable. The

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