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The role of values in collaborative consumption: insights from a product-service system for lending and borrowing in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative consumption is an emerging socio-economic model based on sharing, renting, gifting, bartering, swapping, lending and borrowing. Made possible through community interaction and, increasingly, use of network technologies, these alternative and more sustainable ways of consuming have attracted growing attention for their potential to prevent new purchases, intensify the use of idle assets and promote reuse of possessions that are no longer wanted. Nonetheless, the uptake of Product-Service Systems (PSSs) that enable collaborative consumption is still very limited. This paper investigates how consumers' values can influence the acceptance, adoption and diffusion of collaborative consumption. It reviews two theoretical frameworks used to understand pro-environmental behaviour, social psychological models of behaviour and social practice theory. Coming from contrasting disciplinary perspectives, these approaches conceptualise values differently. The paper evaluates the possibility of resolving these differences through a mixed methods study. It examines values empirically through a case study of Ecomodo, a UK-based online marketplace where people can lend and borrow each other's objects, spaces and skills, and present the results of a quantitative study which identified and measured value priorities among Ecomodo users through Schwartz's Portrait Value Questionnaire. It concludes with a discussion of the role of values in relation to the introduction and scaling up of PSSs that enable collaborative consumption.

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1. Introduction

Current patterns and levels of consumption in industrial economies are widely recognised as unsustainable (*cf.* Tukker et al., 2006). Over-consumption and a throwaway culture are liable for major environmental problems such as resource depletion and waste. A possible solution to prevent unnecessary use of resources and excessive waste is to reduce new purchases and promote the reuse of products. Collaborative consumption¹ – a socio-economic model based on the shared usage of some kind of commodities – illustrates how it is possible to avoid, or at least delay, waste by bartering, swapping, gifting, renting, trading, lending and borrowing multiple, underused or unwanted goods between groups of individuals (Botsman and Rogers, 2011). Made possible through community interaction and, increasingly, use of network

technologies, collaborative consumption has grown in such a way that sharing has been described as having turned from a private or local behaviour into a transformational movement able to disrupt traditional business models (Owyang et al., 2014). Well known examples include eBay, Airbnb, TaskRabbit, BlaBlaCar, Uber, and Zipcar.

These innovative business models are largely enabled and performed by means of Product-Service Systems (PSSs): a specific type of value proposition oriented to fulfil needs and provide satisfaction to consumers (or 'users') through the delivery of an integrated system of products and services (Vezzoli et al., 2012). PSSs that enable collaborative consumption can be generally classified as 'use-oriented' and 'result-oriented' services (Tukker and Tischner, 2006a), providing access to products that remain owned by a company (e.g. bike and car sharing schemes, launderettes) or making privately owned possessions available to other people within a community (e.g. ridesharing, clothes swapping, peer-to-peer accommodation). In most cases, these PSSs offer an enabling platform or a final result instead of a traditional product, thus representing a novel way of fulfilling a certain function (Manzini et al., 2001).

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¹ Also referred to as the 'sharing economy', or 'collaborative economy'.

For their capacity to bring economic interests in line with positive social and environmental impacts, sustainable PSSs have gained much attention in recent years as a promising pattern towards more sustainable consumption (cf. Tukker and Tischner, 2006b). By creating value out of shared resources, PSSs that enable collaborative consumption shift the focus from individual private ownership of material goods to access and more efficient usage of pooled assets. This creates opportunities for development of new (and conceivably profitable business) propositions with potentially lower environmental impact and providing more meaningful experiences to users. For example, ridesharing stands as an opportunity to reduce car-running costs and negative environmental consequences but, also, to meet new people while travelling or daily commuting. Finally, due to its reliance on social networks and interactions, collaborative consumption may promote social innovation and contribute to building stronger and more connected communities.

Despite some successful cases and the untapped potential of peer-to-peer sharing, the phenomenon is in its infancy and the uptake of PSSs that enable collaborative consumption on the market is still very limited. Inadequate acceptance, adoption and diffusion has prevented such alternative forms of consuming from becoming mainstream. Also, exploratory research suggests that a number of start-ups have collapsed (e.g. ShareSomeSugar.com, Kashless.org) and many others are encountering serious difficulties in establishing themselves due to a lack of resources to scale-up (e.g. consumer base, money, trusted brand) (Owyang et al., 2014). One reason for this situation may be the concerted challenge that the sharing economy presents to existing consumer/user habits, company business models and regulatory frameworks. Alternative patterns of consumption require a radical change in practices from individuals, business communities, policy makers and society-at-large. Renewed academic attention on the lack of wide implementation and dissemination of sustainable PSSs demonstrates the need to gain more insightful and useful knowledge on how consumers, in particular, can influence the process of introduction and scaling up of these propositions (cf. Vezzoli et al., 2012).

The aim of the research project which informed and provided data for this paper was to investigate different ways of thinking about how values may contribute to the acceptance, adoption and diffusion of PSSs that enable collaborative consumption. The findings reported here are from the first phase of the study, which sought to identify values associated with engagement in collaborative consumption. Locating an overall context for the research project in pro-environmental behaviour change, the next section reviews two different approaches to understanding the role of values in the context of sustainable consumption, comparing aspects of social psychological models of pro-environmental behaviour with social practice theory. Section 3 presents an empirical study of Ecomodo, an online sharing platform, and explains how it is used to consider relationships between the concept of 'values' found in social psychology with that of 'meaning' found in social practice theory. In following sections, results from the initial, quantitative, strand of research are presented and discussed. These findings are used to draw some preliminary conclusions in Section 6, which sets the scene for a subsequent strand of qualitative research that will be reported in a future paper.

2. Theoretical frameworks to pro-environmental behaviour change

In the context of sustainability, understanding consumer behaviour and how to bring about change is deemed essential to reduce the environmental impact of consumption. Grounded in the social sciences, different disciplinary perspectives offer distinct, if

not contrasting, accounts to conceptualise pro-environmental behaviour change. Much academic literature and contemporary policy interventions either draw on social psychological models of consumer behaviour or sociological theories of practice.

2.1. Social psychological models of consumer behaviour

Social psychological models of consumer behaviour provide frameworks to understanding what motivates behaviour and drive its change. These models are built from different sets of conceptual premises and assumptions (for a comprehensive literature review refer to Jackson, 2005; Darnton, 2008). In 'rational choice models', for example, consumers are believed to make decisions between different courses of action by calculating individual costs and benefits, thus selecting the option that maximises their expected net benefits. 'Adjusted expectancy value theories' (e.g. Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action; Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour) attempt to overcome some limitations of rational choice models by accounting for the psychological antecedents of consumer preferences. Moral and normative considerations are, instead, explicitly recognised as driver of pro-environmental or pro-social behaviour in a number of later models (e.g. Schwartz's Norm Activation Theory; Stern's Value-Belief-Norm Theory; Cialdini's Focus Theory of Normative Conduct).

While these models mainly focus on cognitive processes and determinants of behaviour that are internal to the individual, 'integrative theories of consumer behaviour' (e.g. Stern's Attitude-Behaviour-Context Model; Triandis' Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour; Bagozzi's Comprehensive Model of Consumer Action) add external elements (e.g. fiscal and regulatory incentives, institutional constraints, and social norms) in order to provide a more complete view (Jackson, 2005). Stern (2000), in particular, considers attitudinal (e.g. values, attitudes, beliefs), contextual or situational factors (e.g. interpersonal influences, government regulations, financial cost), personal capabilities (e.g. knowledge, skills, resources) and habits or routines as the four major types of causal variables either driving or hindering pro-environmental behaviour. However, the type and number of determinants that can be actually included in an empirical model is limited and it has to account for the complexity of contributing factors while balancing between parsimony and explanatory/predictive power of the proposed model (Jackson, 2005).

Policy interventions aimed at supporting more sustainable behaviours have been traditionally informed by social psychological understandings of individual attitudes and behaviour (cf. Collier et al., 2010). Strategies put in place largely attempt to remove possible barriers to behaviour change and encourage consumers, seen as autonomous decision makers, to undertake a desired course of action by re-framing their attitudes and providing them with more information (e.g. eco-labelling), economic incentives and rewards (cf. Defra, 2008). However, this approach proved to attain scarce and not durable results (Morris et al., 2012). Also, it has been recognised that behaviour is not always aligned with expressed pro-environmental values and attitudes. The 'value-action gap' (cf. Blake, 1999) is a major shortcoming undermining the fundamental assumption embedded in these models of a linear relationship between personal values and behaviour, as well as the related possibility to modify consumers' behaviour by influencing their attitudes and values.

As a result, a growing body of academic literature has criticised the intrinsic problems and limitations of social psychological models of behaviour and called for more holistic theoretical perspectives grounded in social and technological theories of practices and transition (Shove, 2003, 2010). In particular, social practice theory has been advocated as an alternative position able to re-

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