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Collaborative consumption: a goal-based framework

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Collaborative consumption takes many forms, including car sharing, community gardens, credit unions and toy libraries. While these phenomena are arguably reshaping the marketplace, to this point, we lack a way to harmonize these diverse systems under a single umbrella or to connect them to prior research. The present paper focuses on the ways that various social sciences have conceptualized collaborative consumption's goals. The resulting goal-based framework allows both alignment of and differentiation among modern collaborative consumption systems. This approach also helps us identify the rich literatures that can inform our study of different types of modern collaborative consumption systems, thus offering potential for future programmatic knowledge-building.

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Collaborative consumption

Botsman and Rogers' *What's Mine is Ours* [1] suggested that 21st-century consumers were witnessing a radically new phenomenon: whereas in the past, consumers needed sole ownership of a good to enjoy its benefit, 'sharing economy' models would now allow access without ownership. Ideally, such systems would allow consumers to pool resources, withdraw when necessary, and reduce waste associated with fallow excess.

Despite their apparently novelty, it is questionable whether these systems are truly new territory for researchers. Anchored by Hardin's work outlining potential problems inherent in public goods contexts [2], academic work had subsequently defined 'collaborative consumption' [3] and analyzed peer-to-peer exchange both in terms of specific contexts [4–7] and broad conceptualizations [8]. However, what remains lacking at present is a way to connect prior research to modern collaborative consumption phenomena. Further, we have no lens that allows us to analyze systems as divergent as toy libraries, credit unions, and car sharing companies under a single theoretical umbrella.

The present paper argues that a goal-based framework offers promise in this regard. To build this framework, I begin by noting goals that different disciplines have argued underlie collaborative consumption. Depending on these goals, key elements of collaborative consumption systems (individual versus group benefit, a priori resource equality, repeated interactions, interpersonal similarity, and formal or informal trust mechanisms; Table 1) may differ in their importance. We can use this analysis to predict the elements that will promote or detract from such systems' success, as exemplified in specific modern collaborative contexts, as well as to identify differences across collaborative consumption phenomena. Further, this approach may prompt further interdisciplinary research that can inform our understanding of truly novel marketplace collaborative consumption experiences.

Collaborative consumption in anthropology: resource-smoothing goals

Anthropologists have pointed out that collaborative consumption is ancient, having deep roots in human survival [9,10••,11]. Since food supplies might flow in highly-variable quantities [12], collaborative families could smooth their food availability over time via reciprocal altruism: when my family has more, I share with you, and when yours has more, you share with me [13,14,15••].

An analysis of the critical features of resource-smoothing collaboration is shown in the first row of Table 1. First, a priori resource inequality is important in promoting resource-smoothing sharing. If some individuals did not have more than others, they would not be able to signal their wealth to potential mates or allies [15••] and thus, would be unmotivated to share. Further, the costs of defending one's excess — another sharing prompt — will only arise [17] when one has more than other potential scavengers.

Second, repeated interactions are critical for resource-smoothing collaboration to occur. Repeated interaction allows individuals to anticipate reciprocation. Indeed, recent work has shown that collaboration is more likely in more static networks than randomly-assorted groups [18•]. In these communities, reciprocation is likely to be general rather than strictly tit-for-tat [13]. In addition, relationships among sharing partners matter: collaboration

Table 1

Collaborative consumption goals and factor importance by discipline.

Disciplinary perspective	Goals	Primary beneficiary	A priori resource equality	Repeated interactions	Interpersonal similarity	Interpersonal trust	Contractual trust
Anthropology	Resource smoothing	Individual	Low	Yes	Low	High	Low
Experimental economics	Personal utility	Individual	Low	In some games, but not others	Low	Low	High
Psychology	Task completion	Both	High	No	High	High	Low
Consumer: commercial	Financial or efficiency gains	Individual	Moderate	No	Low	Low	High
Consumer: relational	Relationships, community, learning	Both	Low	Yes	High	High	Low

was more likely within than outside families, due to kin-selection based nepotism [16•,17].

Community gardens can be construed as a modern resource-smoothing prototype. Entrance to the collaborative network may be allowed by personal relationships; making friends allows us to survive by connecting us with collaborators [19]. Applying anthropology's insights, an ideal garden would include regular swap meets among like-minded individuals. Inequality in initial resource levels is important: while one consumer might have a bumper crop of onions but lack beets, another has beets but no onions. Reciprocated exchange can occur, with more consistent exchange expected between close than distant neighbors. When all exchanges are complete, tolerated scrounging from the 'wealthiest' members may occur, with group members gleaning leftover odds and ends.

Collaborative consumption in experimental economics: utility-driven goals

But what happens if our goals are framed less in terms of survival, and more in terms of gain? Economics offers the perspective that collaboration can allow individuals to maximize their personal utility compared to sole ownership. In common-pool resource or public goods games, players divide their 'goods' between themselves and a shared public account, from which they and other players may benefit [20,21••]. Common-pool resources create a tension between one's own personal gain (contributing a minimal amount but withdrawing as much as one would like) and the survival of the resource (contributing more or taking less, such that the resource can be replenished) [21••].

As shown in Table 1, the factors that further utility goals differ substantially from those that promote resource-smoothing collaboration. First, a priori inequality is undesirable here, as vastly unequal contribution and withdrawal can lead to the 'Tragedy of the Commons' [2], where the shared pool may be depleted by individuals who have contributed little or nothing. However, like in resource-smoothing systems, repeated interaction may help the system to function: over more rounds of a game, individuals may match one anothers' donations, satisfying requirements for anticipated reciprocity [22••] and 'free riders' can be identified and punished by others [23]. Also unlike resource-smoothing collaboration, such systems generally offer formal reward and punishment mechanisms that individuals can choose to use or not [24]. Indeed, large utility-driven collaborative systems such as tax-funded public goods provision rely on such penalties [25].

Credit unions with many outlets, low fees and high late penalties mirror the goals and important characteristics of utility-driven collaborative consumption. Individuals benefit via low loan interest rates and higher savings account interest rates, to the extent that they both contribute to and withdraw from the pool. While some weak-group-based membership may exist, most credit unions are open to a wide range of participants, who may share in a weakly-defined but concrete community. Further, members' behavior is trackable by those in charge of monitoring the system, such that rewards and punishments can be assigned.

Collaborative consumption in management and psychology: task-completion goals

While psychology has aligned a large number of different goals with cooperation, it offers the unique insight that collaboration is a critical means of task completion. When people collaborate, their individual goals are positively correlated with the group's goals [26]; unlike in anthropology and economics, the two are inextricable. Because every individual's effort forwards the group's goals, cooperating raises motivation and enables consumers to more efficiently solve problems and complete tasks [27–29].

To meet task-related goals, we need to add to the requirements set forth in the prior two perspectives. Chiefly, collaborating consumers must face positively-related, interdependent tasks [26]. For example, two consumers may both have a need to clear their shared road of snow. If either consumer shovels for 15 min, both consumers are closer to having their goal achieved. Individual differences