Exploring the practice of collaborative consumption

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EXPLORING THE PRACTICE OF COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION
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Introduction
This paper focuses on peer-to-peer (P2P) exchanges facilitated by online sharing platforms, among actors who cocreate value in a quasi-commercial context. The recent advent of P2P exchange of services through online platforms enables the monetisation of underutilised assets for peer-providers, and more cost-efficient, convenient, and eco-friendly alternatives to traditional modes of consumption for peer-consumers. One example is the digitalisation of the old practice of hitchhiking. Thanks to technological developments over the last 15 years, “hitchhikers 2.0” can find a ride online by using ridesharing platforms such as BlaBlaCar or Zimride.

The contemporary sharing economy phenomena include various forms of access-based service provision, as well as pseudo-sharing and collaborative consumption practices which allow temporary access to products, for a fee or for free, without transfer of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2010; Benoit et al. 2017). Some individuals engage in true sharing practices within closed social circles (e.g. friends and family), while others engage in P2P exchanges with a commercial or even entrepreneurial mindset. For instance, a potential use of collaborative consumption practices is to gain access to new products, brands or places otherwise financially inaccessible (Herbert and Collin-Lachaud 2017). Thus, there seems to be differences in magnitude in collaborative consumption, and not one unique way to participate. In light of practice theory, it is the consumers’ and the organizations’ practices that influence how P2P and B2C markets are shaped (Kjellberg and Harrison 2007).

This study explores the quasi-commercial context of P2P exchanges in order to understand what platform users do when performing a collaborative consumption practice, and to what extent the differences in procedures, understandings, and engagement with the practice by its actors lead to different styles of collaborative consumption.

Theoretical Foundations
This paper reviews the relevant literature on access-based services (B2C market-mediated exchanges; see Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), sharing (socially-mediated mechanism; see Belk 2010), and collaborative consumption (P2P market-mediated exchanges; see Benoit et al. 2017). That is, the access paradigm is about offering nonownership services to consumers driven by self-interest and utilitarian motives so that they can benefit from sequential use of the same product (e.g. commercial on-demand car rental). In contrast, sharing does not involve a transfer of ownership, nor an exchange of money as this practice is embedded in pro-social and communal relationship norms (e.g. car sharing among friends and family). Eventually, collaborative consumption is P2P exchanges between private individuals acting as peer-providers or/and peer-consumers, which is facilitated by an online platform (e.g. P2P private car rental). A deeper understanding is required about what peer-consumers and providers do
when they conduct P2P exchanges (not B2C or B2B), impregnated with both social and economic writs and involving both online and offline exchanges. In order to do this, this paper’s theoretical framework is rooted in practice theory.

Through practices, consumers are not conceptualised as passive actors, but as active producers of a culture. As “brand community members” or “market actors”, consumers participate in each other’s practices, thereby influencing one another and shaping communities and markets (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007; Schau et al. 2009). To investigate the practice of collaborative consumption, this paper relies on Schau et al.’s (2009) practice analogy: (1) procedures, or “explicit know-that,” rules, principles, precepts, and instructions; (2) understandings, or “tacit know-how” about what to say and do; and (3) engagements, commitments, or emotionally charged ends and purposes. Furthermore, the body of studies on the sharing economy and collaborative consumption indicate that consumers adopt a particular style of practices. A practice style is defined as “a specific styling of a practice that orders and roots the service system in a particular value creation effort” (Chandler and Chen 2016, p. 823). Therefore, this paper argue that collaborative consumption can be performed in various styles according to the individual’s engagement, understandings and procedures of the practice.

Methodology and Findings

The context of the study is long-distance ridesharing (i.e. carpooling in the US), where platform providers like BlaBlaCar or Zimride facilitate interactions between drivers with otherwise empty seats on a pre-existing trip, and passengers who need a transportation option on part of, or the entire trip. Ridesharing dates back to the 1970’s, and it does not include chauffeured vehicles (i.e. transportation network companies, or taxi services) as passengers contribute monetarily only to share travel expenses, not to remunerate the driver. Data collection was conducted using participant observations, ethnographic interviews, and a netnographic study of digital artefacts. The participant observations consist of rides offered to passengers in Germany, Belgium, France and the Netherlands (2500 kilometres), as well as online interactions with other platform users. The interviews were performed with 11 passengers of the shared rides. The netnography predominantly reveals how the ridesharing practice has evolved since its early days, both from the perspectives of the platform managers and its users.

Using practice theory, 10 ridesharing activities were identified in the mixed dataset of field notes, fragments of online forum posts, and interview data: creating a profile, posting a ride and reserving a seat, coordinating, driving, exchanging monetary compensation, exchanging opinions, relaxing, snacking, saving and earning money, and rating peers. The procedures of the ridesharing practice include signing up online, coordinating meeting points, exchanging journey details, being courteous and respectful towards others, driving safely and obeying traffic rules, providing the agreed-upon monetary compensation, and reviewing the experience through peer-ratings. The understandings of ridesharing as a practice include establishing social relationships, collaboratively reducing environmental impact, and sharing travel costs. The emotional engagements with ridesharing vary from an attachment to the sharing and original ridesharing ethos as a pro-socio-environmental movement, to a commercial and professional orientation.
The variation in the performance of the ridesharing practice (i.e. in terms of procedures, understandings, and engagements) across participants lead to the distinction of three styles of collaborative consumption: communal, conspicuous, and opportunistic collaborative consumption. The communal style of collaborative consumption is close to true sharing, altruism, and generalised reciprocity with a pro-social orientation and centred around community values. Conspicuous collaborative consumption is performed by individuals who seek status and convenience in the access economy, following a lifestyle trend, with minor commercial interests. The opportunistic style of collaborative consumption is adopted by individuals who seek to achieve monetary gain or personal benefits from abusive practices, regardless of the authentic sharing culture and norms.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper’s main contribution lies in nuancing the conceptualisation of collaborative consumption as an alternative mode of consumption. Such nuances in how platform users exchange P2P services build on and contrast previous studies on the access economy, propose a more relevant framework for future studies to depict what aspect of the phenomenon is in focus, and aid characterise collaborative consumption as a form of socio-economic exchange, distinct from B2C access-based services and true sharing. That is, it contributes to the framing of the access economy as not true sharing, but not pure commercial exchanges either.

By taking a phenomenological approach on collaborative consumption, this study adds to the understanding of the access economy as embedded in both a utilitarian/commercial economic system, and a non-market/communal social system, which are not incompatible. The novel use of netnography and participant observation provides original data that methodologically advances service research to the access economy. Eventually, this paper adds to the limited research on misbehaviour (Schaefer et al. 2016). The opportunistic style of collaborative consumption, strongly embedded in a commercial logic, had not been previously identified in the literature.

References


