Sharing values: The relationship between values and meanings in collaborative consumption

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Collaborative consumption (also referred to as the 'collaborative economy', or the 'sharing economy') is an emerging socio-economic model based on sharing, bartering, gifting, swapping, renting, lending and borrowing enabled by network technologies and peer communities (Botsman and Rogers 2011). When enabling shared access to under-used assets and thereby making use of spare capacity, it reduces the environmental impact of consumption and prevents unnecessary waste. Often underpinned by belief in openness, inclusivity and the commons, sharing may additionally encourage meaningful interactions and trust between strangers (Stokes et al. 2014).

The aim of the research project which informs this paper was to investigate how consumers' values may contribute to the acceptance, adoption and wider diffusion of collaborative consumption. Drawing from two different, if not contrasting, theoretical perspectives to understand consumer behaviour, social psychology and social practice theory, the exploration was conducted through a mixed methods study using Ecomodo, a UK-based online sharing platform, as a case study. Initial quantitative research was carried out to measure its users' values through Schwartz's Portrait Value Questionnaire (cf. Schwartz et al. 2012). A subsequent strand of qualitative research was carried out to explore values in the specific context of collaborative consumption.

This paper focuses on this latter phase and presents findings from 10 semi-structured interviews which uncovered the values associated with alternative ways of consuming in the areas of transportation, holiday accommodation, clothing and consumer goods. In particular, it explores the relationship between individual values and socio-cultural meanings and the potential benefits of combining psychological and sociological insights in order to understand consumer behaviour. Finally, it considers the importance of engaging values in order to move away from individualistic and wasteful consumerism towards sharing and more sustainable patterns of consumption.

Keywords: Collaborative consumption; Sharing economy; Social practice theory; Social psychology; Values.

1. Introduction

'Collaborative consumption' is a term first used by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers (2011, xv) to describe "traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting and swapping, redefined through technology and peer communities." These alternative models of consumption allow people to access and share goods and services instead of needing to own them outright. Increasingly based on peer-to-peer (P2P) online marketplaces, collaborative consumption capitalises on the social, environmental and economic idling capacity of underused assets including resources, time, spaces and skills. Examples are car and bike sharing schemes (e.g. Zipcar), P2P ridesharing (e.g. Uber, BlaBlaCar), P2P lodging (e.g. Airbnb, Couchsurfing) and goods/skills exchange or transaction sites (e.g. eBay, Freecycle).

The potential benefits of these innovative practices in response to individuals' capacity for over-consumption include preventing or reducing waste through avoiding unnecessary purchases, increasing or extending the usable life of products, and saving or making money through leveraging unused assets or sharing existing items. Furthermore, they can create new business opportunities for companies and add social value from the community interactions they put in place. In particular, alternatives to individual ownership are believed to build social capital by rediscovering social ties and fostering trust and reciprocity between strangers (Stokes et al. 2014).

For this capacity to bring economic interests in line with positive environmental and social impacts, collaborative consumption has been considered as a possible contributor to sustainable consumption and production. However, the real effect that collaborative activities are currently having on economies, communities and the environment (e.g. waste reduction, income generation, community connection, local economy impact) remains extremely difficult to assess (Jacob 2015; Leissman et al. 2013; Schor 2014). In addition to this, the success of collaborative consumption in unmaking waste goes back to questions of lifestyles and the rebound effect – if sharing saves money will people simply spend money on other forms of consumption.

2. Values and social practices

A large body of academic research has attempted to understand what motivates behaviour and drive behavioural change drawing from different disciplinary perspectives, including social psychology and sociology (*cf.* Jackson 2005). The aim of the research project which informs this paper was to investigate how consumers' values may contribute to the acceptance, adoption and wider diffusion of collaborative consumption.

2.1 Values in social psychology

Social psychological models of (pro-environmental) consumer behaviour aim at identifying the determinants of behaviour accounting for different attitudinal (e.g. values, attitudes, beliefs), contextual or situational factors (e.g. interpersonal influences, government regulations, financial constraints), personal capabilities (e.g. knowledge, skills, available resources) and habits or routines (Stern 2000).

In particular, much attention has been devoted to the study of human values, considered as motivational constructs located within the individual and translating into behaviour (*cf.* Corner et al. 2014). A commonly agreed definition of values conceptualise them as "trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group" (Schwartz et al. 2012, 664). Schwartz

identified 19 basic individual values (Table 1) and ordered them in a circular motivational continuum according to their compatibility or conflict. The values are consequently divided into four distinct clusters: 'openness to change' vs. 'conservation', and 'self-enhancement' vs. 'self-transcendence' values (Fig.1).

Value	Conceptual definitions in terms of motivational goals
Self-direction-thought	Freedom to cultivate one's own ideas and abilities
Self-direction-action	Freedom to determine one's own actions
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty, and change
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification
Achievement	Success according to social standards
Power-dominance	Power through exercising control over people
Power-resources	Power through control of material and social resources
Face	Security and power through maintaining one's public image and avoid humiliation
Security-personal	Safety in one's immediate environment
Security-societal	Safety and stability in the wider society
Tradition	Maintaining and preserving cultural, family, or religious traditions
Conformity-rules	Compliance with rules, laws, and formal obligations
Conformity-interpersonal	Avoidance of upsetting or harming other people
Humility	Recognizing one's insignificance in the larger scheme of things
Benevolence-dependability	Being a reliable and trustworthy member of the ingroup
Benevolence-caring	Devotion of the welfare of ingroup members
Universalism-concern	Commitment to equality, justice, and protection for all people
Universalism-nature	Preservation of the natural environment

Table 1: Schwartz's 19 values defined in terms of their motivational goal (Schwartz et al. 2012, 669).
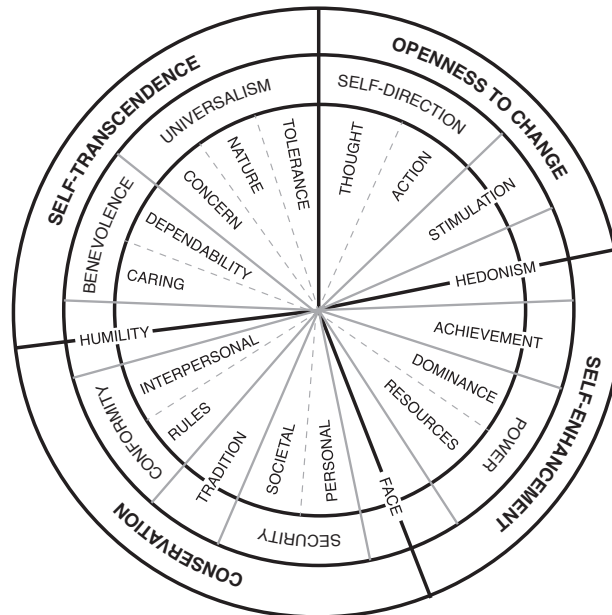

Figure 1: Circular motivational continuum of 19 basic individual values. Adapted from Schwartz et al. 2012, 669.

Although certain types of values are predictive of positive engagement with social and environmental issues (*cf.* Gutierrez Karp 1996; Stern and Dietz 1994), values are generally considered to have a weak influence upon behaviour, often mediated through other variables, and low predictive power for ecologically conscious consumer

behaviour (Pepper et al. 2009). The so-called 'value-action gap' (*cf.* Blake 1999) identifies the observed discrepancy between endorsed values and actual behaviour. In other words, values often do not translate linearly into behaviour.

2.2 Meanings, competences and materials in social practice theory

Social practice theory provides an alternative, sociological perspective to conceptualise human action, which takes social practices rather than individuals as the unit of analysis. A practice – e.g. a way of driving, walking, cooking – results from the connection of underlying 'meaning', 'competence' and 'material' elements (*cf.* Shove et al. 2012) (Fig.2). Cooking as a practice, for example, consists of raw ingredients, pans and pots, hobs and gas pipes, knowledge of how long things need to be cooked for, and sets of ideas of what a 'proper' lunch means or what following a healthy diet entails.
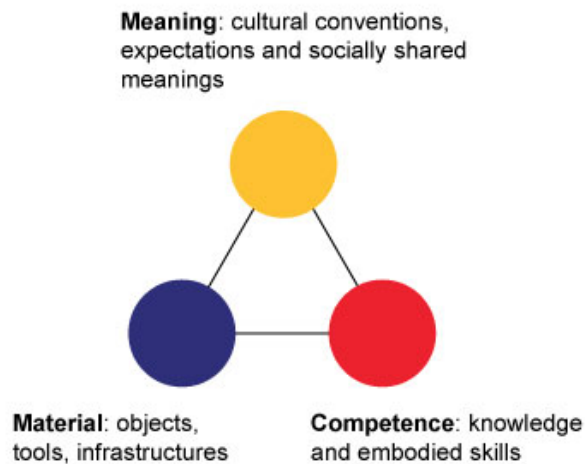

Figure 2: Elements and linkages sustaining practices. Adapted from Shove et al. 2012.

Practices and (more or less sustainable) patterns of resource consumption are linked in reproducing what people take to be 'normal' and, for them, ordinary ways of living and doing (Shove 2003). This shifts the focus from determining the antecedents of behaviour (as in social psychology), to understanding the dynamics of the routinisation of practices and their underlying shared notions of normality.

However, in moving from the 'individual' to the 'social', social practice theory is vulnerable to critique as it reduces people to "more or less faithful carriers or practitioners" (Shove et al. 2012, 63). This raises a series of considerations over the primacy of structure or agency (i.e. the role of the individual) in shaping behaviour. Further, it is possible to question the degree to which conceptions of normality that are culturally and socially constructed play out through personal actions in practices. It thus becomes apparent that the extent to which shared understandings, social expectations and conventions (i.e. the 'meaning' element of practices) may be mediated by and through personal traits and characteristics, including individual values, needs further investigation (Piscicelli et al. 2015).

3. Methodology

Social psychology and social practice theory provide two different, if not contrasting, theoretical perspectives to understand consumer behaviour. Drawing on their possible complementarity, the relationship between values and collaborative consumption has

been explored through mixed methods research. Ecomodo[1], a UK-based online platform for P2P lending and borrowing, was used as a case study.

Initial quantitative data collection and analysis measured 63 Ecomodo users' value priorities through Schwartz's Portrait Value Questionnaire (*cf.* Schwartz et al. 2012). In line with previous studies on values and pro-environmental behaviour, respondents scored higher in 'self-transcendence' and 'openness to change' and lower in 'self-enhancement' and 'conservation' values (Fig.1) compared to the general UK population (i.e. non users) (*cf.* Piscicelli et al. 2015).

A subsequent strand of qualitative research was carried out to examine whether and how individual values could act upon the 'meaning' element of collaborative consumption practices (i.e. lending, borrowing, bartering, swapping, sharing, trading, renting and gifting). 10 Ecomodo users participating in the previous quantitative phase of data collection were reached and one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and September 2013 in different UK locations. A series of prompts were used to uncover values associated with alternative ways of consuming in the areas of transportation, holiday accommodation, clothing and consumer goods. For each, three alternative scenarios (i.e. private ownership, business-to-consumer and peer-to-peer) were described. Interviewees were asked to assess them and associate any relevant values from the 19 values proposed by Schwartz. (Fig.3).

Figure 3: Example of scenarios presented in the area of transportation, with associated values.

4. Values and collaborative consumption

In the context of transportation, interviewees were asked to assess three possibilities for getting around their city or travelling to one: to buy and own a private car; to join a car sharing scheme such as Zipcar; to check online through BlaBlaCar.com for other travellers going the same way and share a ride. Schwartz's values (Table 1) most directly associated with these options were: 'Self-direction-action', 'Power-resources', 'Face', 'Security-personal' and 'Universalism-nature'.

'Self-direction-action' and 'Power-resources' were discussed in relation to ideas about freedom, control, flexibility, convenience, practicality, comfort and notions of 'acceptable availability'. Accordingly, they were associated positively with private ownership (e.g. *Brian: "You want to own your car, you want to know it is there"*) and negatively with the other options, in which access to a car may be limited (e.g. *Holly: "[Car sharing] seems like a great idea, for other people. … I am quite often wanting to*

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[1] http://ecomodo.com

transport a fair number of people and be quite spontaneous about it, and have the car on my doorstep"). 'Face' was negatively linked to having a car, which is conventionally regarded as a status symbol, a sign of personal affluence, success and power (e.g. *Brian: "Owning a car is a lot about your public image, I think. Most people want to own cars because it's about social status. It's not just owning a car, obviously, it's owning the 'right' car"*). 'Security-personal' was positively associated with car ownership and negatively with lift sharing (e.g. *Thomas: "There are obviously potential issues you have to be very careful of [when lift sharing]. I don't think that would anyone steal my car, but there is potential for carjacking. I've lift shared with two women in the past and obviously that didn't bother me, but for them I could see that could potentially be an issue"*). 'Universalism-nature' was discussed in terms of resource efficiency and waste. As such, it was associated negatively with having a car and positively with car and lift sharing (e.g. *Amy: "Now that I live in a big city with really good public transportation, a car seems … just like a complete waste, … I guess a bit of 'protecting nature' comes back into it"*).

In the holiday scenario, interviewees were encouraged to imagine planning a short vacation somewhere. The options under evaluation were: to buy and own a private vacation home; to book online a hotel/hostel through Hostelworld.com; to look for a house or spare room offered by someone on Airbnb.com. Values considered most relevant were: 'Universalism-concern', 'Power-resources', 'Universalism-nature', 'Stimulation', 'Self-direction-action', 'Security-personal', 'Conformity-interpersonal' and 'Benevolence-dependability'.

Ownership of a holiday home was largely considered "*unfair*", "*greedy*" and "*selfish*", thus negatively associated with 'Universalism-concern' (e.g. *Brian: "There are people who need houses and you have got holiday houses: it's not a good mixture, really. It's inequality at its absolute worst"*). As a symbol of material wealth, status and success, it was also negatively associated with 'Power-resources'. Left unused for most of the time, holiday homes were believed to go against 'Universalism-nature', which was, by contrast, positively associated with Airbnb (e.g. *Brian: "I would never own a holiday home. It is just so inefficient. It is just ridiculous. … You just can't tie up that amount of resources to one person or one family, and then let these empty for most of the year"*). 'Stimulation' was seen as conflicting with the sense of obligation and "*feeling tied in*" that arises from owning a vacation home. Conversely, the range of available choice makes the online hotel/hostel option well aligned with 'Self-direction-action'. 'Security-personal' was negatively associated with online hotels/hostels and Airbnb, which were also negatively linked to 'Conformity-interpersonal' (e.g. *Emma: "It might be that I would feel that I have to spend more time with the family that owned the house, whereas in fact I just wanted the room and the breakfast and to go out each day"*). Finally, the possible unreliability of a P2P service such as Airbnb led to it being negatively associated with 'Benevolence-dependability' (e.g. *James: "[With Airbnb] there is not necessarily any validation or particular standards that apply. So, it can be a bit hit and miss in terms of what you get"*).

In the area of clothing, interviewees were invited to consider the alternatives of: buying a new item of clothing in a shop; looking online and hiring a designer brand garment for few days; swapping an item of clothing they own for another one with somebody online or at a swapping party. Values most directly associated were: 'Hedonism', 'Face', 'Achievement', 'Universalism-nature', 'Stimulation' and 'Self-direction-action'.

Clothing was related to the way in which people express themselves and are judged by others, thus criticised for its emphasis on public image and conformity to (dispraised) social standards. Therefore, buying new clothes was negatively associated with 'Face'

and 'Achievement' (e.g. *Connie: "People like to be in the 'right' shops, they like to be seen with those bags that say whatever the brand is on the side of the bag. There's something there about keeping up with the Joneses as well"*). Clothing was also related to ideas of self-gratification. However, 'Hedonism' and 'Stimulation' were associated negatively with buying new clothes and positively with hiring and swapping solutions where the pleasure and "*thrill*" of getting something new occur *"without the guilt"*. This reading was motivated by their underlying perception of fashion as (environmentally and socially) unsustainable. Buying new clothing was negatively associated with 'Universalism-nature', which was positively linked to hiring and swapping options (e.g. *Brian: "You cannot continue to buy things at the rate we are buying things. It just can't happen. … Buying clothes it's awful. Fashion is awful. Someone told us that we need to change the way we look every year and it's a disaster!"*). Considerations of convenience and practicality, however, explain the lack of success of these latter options, which were seen as limiting 'Self-direction-action' (e.g. *Isabel: "Renting online sounds like a good idea, sounds like it would be ecological and sensible, but I didn't find it very practical. … I would say that the socially responsible thing to do would be clothing swapping, but I just think it's a bit silly and trendy and I think it will pass"*).

The scenario proposed for consumer goods was the purchase of a new piece of furniture at IKEA and the need to assemble it. Interviewees were asked to evaluate several options: buying or owning a DIY set of tools and assembling it by themselves; opting for the IKEA assembly service; advertising the task they need to have done on TaskRabbit.com and pay for someone from their neighbourhood to do it. Values considered most relevant were: 'Power-resources', 'Self-direction-action', 'Self-direction-thought', 'Stimulation', 'Achievement', 'Benevolence-dependability', 'Security-personal' and 'Benevolence-caring'.

Owning the tools and being able to carry out odd jobs was positively connected with 'Power-resources' and 'Self-direction-action'. Ideas of self-reliance, learning, enjoyment and personal satisfaction were mentioned in relation to DIY. As such, it was also positively associated with 'Self-direction-thought', 'Stimulation' and 'Achievement' (e.g. *James: "You might get 'Stimulation' through giving it a go yourself, … because you like fiddling around with screws and drills"*). 'Benevolence-dependability' was positively linked to professional assembly services, considered more reliable than the P2P option, TaskRabbit (e.g. *Thomas: [In TaskRabbit] this person might let me down, might damage it, might not actually be that good at it, and therefore they would just damage the new item of furniture"*). Additionally, outsourcing household errands was negatively associated with 'Security-personal' (e.g. *Martha: "I would be slight worried about the 'personal security' side of [TaskRabbit], more than the having an electrician or someone like that coming around. Which is daft, really. But, you know, it's just worrying about whether they would actually subsequently break into your house, or they take something while they were there or whatever"*). However, 'Benevolence-caring' was positively associated to TaskRabbit for its potential to build trust between strangers and empower local communities (e.g. *Emma: "[TaskRabbit] is a very nice option. I really like this, because it's a 'caring' thing. And it's good for the society, it's good for your local community, you might make contacts and you might recommend them to other people so you might be helping someone in some way"*).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Combining a social psychological appreciation of values with a practice-based framing of different ways of consuming, the investigation provided insights on interviewees'

understandings of their behaviour and the social practices they may engage in. In particular, the analysis revealed the values that Ecomodo users relate to diverse modes of travelling, finding accommodation, getting new clothes, and doing odd jobs.

When Schwartz's 19 values were associated with the different options (and, thus, their underlying practices), connections were made in relation to specific meanings (i.e. cultural conventions, social norms, collective understandings) and notions of normality. The relationship between values and meanings proved to be either positive or negative. However, the association was often not univocal. If related to different meanings, the same value can be associated with a practice positively and negatively at the same time. For example, 'Benevolence-dependability' was negatively associated with TaskRabbit in relation to the possible service unreliability, but positively linked to it when related to the idea of strengthening local communities. Moreover, people can make a particular association positively and negatively, thus reflecting differences in individual value priorities. For instance, 'Stimulation' was positively or negatively associated with hiring and swapping clothes according to how this value was generally hold important by interviewees.

Endorsement of a set of (pro-environmental) values alone is not sufficient to explain why people carry out certain practices but not others: personal perceptions of 'value' (e.g. what is considered to be convenient, efficient and practical) come into play. More specifically, if the values individuals aspire to and their perceptions of value are aligned (+) with the meanings of a practice, engagement in that practice may result more likely (a). On the other hand, a misalignment (-) between values, value and meanings may hinder such engagement (b).

(a)   Values -> Meanings (+); Value -> Meanings (+)
(b)   Values -> Meanings (-); Value -> Meanings (-)

Intermediate situations may also occur: endorsed values may be aligned with meanings, while perceptions of value are not (c), or the reverse may be true (d).

(c)   Values -> Meanings (+); Value -> Meanings (-)
(d)   Values -> Meanings (-); Value -> Meanings (+)

This may lead people to find a way around the perceived inconsistency between their endorsed values and actions, or to reject certain practices in favour of alternative ones.

To summarise, efforts to move away from individualistic and wasteful consumerism towards innovative practices and more sustainable patterns of consumption should consider the role that values and perceptions of value have in the acceptance, adoption and diffusion of social practices. Acknowledging the existing relationship between values, value and meanings has important implications for the design of services for collaborative consumption. This should aim at providing 'design cues' able to convey desired meanings and activate values supportive of sharing, while addressing the key aspects of perceived convenience, efficiency and practicality.

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