

Enabling Collaborative Consumption Through Product-Service Systems (PSS) Design

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Collaborative consumption is an emerging socio-economic model based on sharing, trading, swapping, lending and borrowing made possible by peer communities and network technologies. In particular, through different product-service systems (PSSs) consumers are enabled to access multiple products owned by a company (e.g. car and bike sharing schemes) and to share, peer-to-peer, underused or unwanted privately owned possessions (Botsman and Rogers, 2011).

By creating value out of shared resources, these innovative (and potentially profitable business) propositions contribute to reduce new purchases, promote the reuse of goods and maximise their usage. Moreover, collaborative solutions have the potential to bring environmental benefits in line with business, individual and social interests (Manzini and Jégou, 2008). However, a failure to achieve implementation and diffusion has meant that these alternative forms of consumption from becoming mainstream. Renewed academic attention on the acceptance, adoption and scaling-up processes of sustainable PSSs (Vezzoli et al., 2012) demonstrates the significance and urgent need for designers to gain more insightful understandings and useful knowledge.

Framed in this current debate, collaborative consumption is examined in this paper through a case study of Ecomodo, a UK-based online marketplace where people can lend and borrow each other's objects, skills and spaces. Drawing from sociological theories of practice, 'social practice theory' is introduced as a valuable theoretical approach to inform the exploration of sustainable practices and their dynamics of recruitment, defection and reproduction (Shove et al., 2012). Accordingly, sharing practices (e.g. lending and borrowing) are described as resulting from the active linkage of specific elements in the form of 'competence' (i.e. skills and know-how), 'material' (i.e. objects and materials) and 'meaning' (i.e. images and meaning).

This paper presents findings from qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted on a purposive sample of Ecomodo users. An empirical study proved essential to deepen the focus of the analysis to the key aspects of consumer perceptions, social expectations and norms involved in sharing possessions through a PSS. The resultant data is used to create insights and envision developments in design theory and practice.

The role of design in enabling (and potentially positively influencing) collaborative consumption through PSSs is investigated in more detail. To provide an account of how design can contribute to sustainable consumption, 'practice-oriented product design' (Shove et al., 2007) is examined to explore its potential to include PSSs design considerations. In the context of collaborative consumption, for example, a practice-oriented PSSs design might be able to facilitate the acceptance and 'normalisation' of these alternative consumption practices by systematically accounting for and embedding sociological frameworks within the design process.