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Sustainability of the sharing economy in question: When second-hand peer-to-peer platforms stimulate indulgent consumption☆

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ABSTRACT

The sharing economy has recently gained momentum among managers, public policy makers and academics as a great opportunity to boost sustainable consumption through sharing or selling durables or semi-durables. The present paper contributes to this debate by investigating the propensity of consumers to give in to temptation on second-hand peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms, which provide a favorable context for self-licensing behaviors. A survey was conducted in 2015 amongst 541 active buyers on the French P2P platform leboncoin (equivalent of US craigslist) addressing questions relative to their buying activities in the previous year. The results show that materialistic and environmentally conscious consumers are more likely (than consumers who are not materialistic and environmentally conscious) to be tempted in the context of second-hand P2P platforms as these offer justifications that help reduce consumption-related cognitive dissonance. This finding corroborates the counter-productive role of collaborative consumption for sustainability in certain conditions. Theoretically, the research contributes to further developing the emerging self-licensing theory in the context of second-hand P2P platforms and understanding impulse buying on this new web interface.

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1. Introduction

The sharing or collaborative economy encompasses “systems of organized sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping across communities of peers” (Botsman and Rogers, 2010, p. xv). Many academics and managers (e.g., Bauwens et al., 2012; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Schor, 2014) see this as a third industrial revolution as the sharing economy induces a new paradigm in terms of production and consumption, engendering technological as well as sociological changes. Amongst collaborative consumption practices, peer-to-peer (P2P) exchanges have recently gained momentum through second-hand P2P platforms (e.g., eBay worldwide, craigslist in the US, leboncoin in France) and become the most widespread collaborative consumption practice.

In 2014, three quarters of the French population bought at least one item on second-hand P2P platforms (Daudey and Hoibian, 2014), rendering these platforms of utmost strategic importance in terms of economic impact and sustainability issues. However, there is a lack of

empirical research addressing current understanding of user behavior on second-hand P2P platforms generally. In terms of sustainability, collaborative consumption is at times presented as a utopia (Prothero et al., 2011; Schor, 2014) in that it creates social links, empowers ordinary people, provides deprived persons with access to markets and reduces the environmental footprint. At the same time, critics denounce it as exploitative and self-interested (Schor, 2014) as well as potentially influencing overconsumption (Denegri-Knott, 2011; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2009; Robert et al., 2014).

In relation to this last complex question, very little is currently known. At first glance, compared to other households that buy new items, second-hand P2P platforms would seem to encourage sustainable consumption as they offer a kind of second life to objects, thereby avoiding their useless storage. As such, these platforms embody the best channel to apply the famous US EPA¹ injunction “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle”. In addition, environmental arguments are a key motivation for “offline” second-hand shopping (Guiot and Roux, 2010) and the first or second motive for 30% of consumers using these platforms, just after economic motives (i.e., saving or earning money) (Daudey and Hoibian, 2014). However, the positive environmental impact of second-hand P2P platforms remains to be verified. Several authors argue that the impact may be negative due to overconsumption through

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¹ Environmental Protection Agency, US public agency in charge of environmental issues.

buying unnecessary items because of their low price or the capacity to resell them easily (e.g., Robert et al., 2014) and rebound effects through purchasing other things with the savings from second-hand buying (Peugeot et al., 2015; Thomas, 2003, 2011).

With these findings in mind, the present research contributes to the debate by investigating two aspects of the question: do second-hand P2P platforms actually stimulate indulgent consumption? If so, who are the specific consumers that may be more likely to indulge when using second-hand P2P platforms? Hence, this research also addresses the question of who would be likely to give way to temptation in the context of second-hand P2P platforms. Common sense would generally dictate that materialistic consumers are more likely to give way to temptation while environmentally conscious consumers are less likely to do so. However, we postulate that due to the liberating context of second-hand P2P platforms, both materialistic and environmentally conscious consumers could be more subject to temptation than others. To defend this assumption, we draw on the emerging self-licensing theory (De Witt Huberts et al., 2012; Khan and Dhar, 2006; Merritt et al., 2010; Miller and Effron, 2010; Mukhopadhyay and Johar, 2009) stating that certain decision contexts lead to indulgent decisions as they offer a justification to give in to temptation, especially when conflicting goals are at stake. Drawing on this theory, we develop a conceptual framework postulating that consumer materialism and environmental consciousness will enhance indulgent consumption on second-hand P2P platforms (i.e., buying impulsively or buying more items), since these platforms offer justifications that allow reducing consumption-related cognitive dissonance. Based on a survey conducted in 2015 amongst 541 active buyers on the French leading second-hand P2P platform leboncoin, we show that both consumer materialism and their environmental consciousness enhance indulgent consumption through the mediation of cognitive dissonance reduction. We finally discuss our findings and derive interesting marketing implications for public policy makers.

2. Collaborative consumption

2.1. Definition and practices

Collaborative consumption effectively emerged as a global concept in 2010 with Botsman and Rogers (2010), even if the first leading collaborative platforms were launched earlier (e.g., eBay and craigslist in 1995, leboncoin in 2006, Airbnb in 2008). While collaborative consumption was first defined by Botsman and Rogers (2010) through a list of activities that emphasized the P2P dimension as the main aspect of its underlying revolution, Belk (2014) then proposed a more conceptual definition stating, “collaborative consumption is people coordinating the acquisition and distribution of a resource for a fee or other compensation” (p. 1597), and making it a central question for marketing and consumption. While such definitions do not advance collaborative practices conducted through web-based platforms as a necessary condition, many authors consider that Web 2.0 technologies underlie the tremendous pace of the phenomenon’s worldwide development (Belk, 2014; Schor, 2014) and the culture that has developed around collaboration, openness, freeness and horizontality (Turner, 2012, cited by Peugeot et al., 2015, p. 21).

Going further, these seminal works contribute to defining typologies of collaborative practices. Botsman and Rogers (2010) organize collaborative practices around three types of activities. The first, termed *product-service systems* (PSS), encapsulates activities relating to renting or sharing durables or semi-durables, where ownership of goods is not transferred. Famous examples of this category include zipcar, blablacar, neighborgoods in the US or sharevoisins in France. The second type, called *redistribution markets*, includes activities of gifting, bartering or selling preowned goods with an effective transfer of ownership where the exchange does not necessarily entail material or financial compensation. Constituting the oldest type of collaborative activities, as

demonstrated by the early emergence of eBay and craigslist in 1995, these are the most widespread. Many new platforms of this type are emerging every day, such as thredup or threadflip for apparel and freecycle or yerdle for free exchange (Schor, 2014). The third type, termed *collaborative lifestyles*, includes sharing immaterial resources such as space (e.g., co-working, co-gardening and housing, such as CouchSurfing or Airbnb), money (e.g., crowdfunding) or services. Schor (2014) proposes a very similar typology depending on the practice objectives: increased utilization of durable assets or sharing productive assets (equivalent to PSS, except that Schor distinguishes between sharing assets for consumption and assets for new production, such as co-working or makerspace), the recirculation of goods (similar to redistribution markets) and the exchange of services.

2.2. Collaborative consumption and sustainability

Practically speaking, many collaborative platforms promote themselves as green or as a way of reducing own carbon footprint given that sharing is less resource intensive than the dominant ways of accessing goods and services (Schor, 2014). These thus respond to the increasing demands of consumers engaging in collaborative practices for ecological reasons, following closely behind economic reasons (Daudey and Hoibian, 2014; Robert et al., 2014).

Many researchers (e.g., Albinsson and Perera, 2012; Belk, 2010; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Gansky, 2010; Prothero et al., 2011; Schor, 2014) share this general view that the collaborative economy is probably a major step towards more sustainable living at the environmental and social level. Belk (2010) considers sharing as an alternative form to traditional distribution channels that in an environmental perspective aims to preserve natural resources and in a social perspective foster a sense of community. Prothero et al. (2011) indicate that the collaborative economy reflects “a global readiness to shift values away from excessive consumption to more frugal and thus more sustainable solutions to everyday problems” (p. 36). Focusing on the ecological side, Botsman and Rogers (2010) also state that these collaborative systems offer environmental benefits by increasing the use of unproductive objects, reducing waste, encouraging the development of goods with longer lifespans or optimized lifecycles, and absorbing the surplus generated by overproduction and overconsumption. Several studies show that collaborative practices also tend to change the relation that consumers have with objects and material life (Robert et al., 2014). As collaborative consumption is associated with sharing instead of having, the superiority of access over ownership and the acceleration of the circulation of goods, it disrupts previous conceptualizations of objects, extending the concept of the self and creating attachment (Belk, 1988), enhancing social identity (Bourdieu, 1979) and encapsulating the memory of the past (Scholl, 2006). This has led to a paradigm shift towards more frugal ways of living and the progressive decay of materialism.

However, following the initial enthusiasm for a utopian view of collaborative consumption, several authors began to consider the environmental benefits as a more complex issue (Robert et al., 2014; Schor, 2014). Detachment from possessions and consumption is not as obvious, since renting or temporarily accessing goods provides an opportunity to enjoy new experiences, thereby increasing their hedonic and experiential value (Durgee and O’Connor, 1995). To illustrate, Peugeot et al. (2015) identify different trajectories of relationships with cars amongst users of the car-sharing platform Drivy: those who sell their cars because their needs are tenuous and they rely on public transport and rental cars, and those who want to keep their cars because they can offset costs by renting them out occasionally. Regarding this issue of the environmental impact of P2P platforms, Schor (2014, p. 6) states, “despite the widespread belief that the sector helps to reduce carbon emissions, there are almost no comprehensive studies of its impact” (with a few exceptions on car sharing as Schor (2014) cites). As these initiatives tend to demonstrate, the question of the ecological impact of collaborative consumption needs to be addressed at the level of a specific type of

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