

Sustainable Collaborative Consumption of Services in the Age of Access: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose- This paper aims at exploring the role of sustainability in collaborative consumption of services. It seeks to link the three dimensions of sustainability i.e. environmental, economic and social sustainability with collaborative consumption of services by drawing support from social exchange theory.

Design/Methodology- Existing literature on collaborative consumption and sustainability was thoroughly reviewed.

Findings- The findings of the study suggests that collaborative consumption of services helps in addressing the three dimensions of sustainability i.e. environmental, economic and social.

Collaborative consumption leads to optimum utilization of underused resources, reduce wastage and lower the need for the new products which ultimately results in lower environmental impact.

It also contributes to achieve economic sustainability by providing access to high quality goods at low cost. Moreover, collaborative consumption fosters connections and trust among community members.

Practical Implications- Understanding the role of sustainability in the development of collaborative consumption models is vital for collaborative consumption platforms as they integrate their business goals and strategies with sustainable practices to promote sustainable consumption behavior.

Originality/Value- The study has filled the gap in the existing literature by providing a conceptual clarity on contribution of collaborative consumption of services in achieving the three main pillars of sustainability by employing social exchange theory. The study also contributes by providing some suggestions for the development of collaborative consumption of services.

Paper Type- Theoretical paper

Keywords- Collaborative Consumption, Economic Sustainability, Environment Sustainability, Sharing Economy, Social Sustainability, Social Exchange Theory

Introduction

Sustainability involves the responsible conservation of resources, ensuring ecological balance and promoting social and economic equity. The term “sustainability” has been consolidated into several global frameworks such as “United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” which outline 17 goals aimed at achieving a sustainable future for all (United Nations, 2015). These goals include addressing issues like poverty, inequality and climate action encouraging countries to collaborate in

ensuring global sustainability. Achieving sustainable development is essential for dealing with the environmental and social challenges (Linnenluecke et al., 2017). The idea of “sustainable development” was initially introduced by “World Commission on Environment and Development” gained widespread acceptance in the Brundtland Report “Our Common Future” published in 1987. Sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). Nowadays, people become conscious about the reality that consumption contributes to create many of the challenges currently facing, consumers have started to consider the effect of their purchases and waste regarding energy and water (Strange and Bayley, 2008). The goals of consumption and sustainable development can be attained by encouraging a change in consumer attitudes, behaviors and expectations towards cleaner practices that reduces environmental degradation (Cruz and Katz-Gerro, 2016; Wachtel, 1989). In alignment with this, innovative forms of consumption called collaborative consumption are emerging, facilitated by technological development.

Collaborative Consumption as a sustainable consumption model emerges from a convergence of factors, such as technological advancement, e-commerce, social media and the growth of online communities. Collaborative consumption refers to “those events in which one or more persons consume economic goods or services in the process of engaging in joint activities with one or more others” (Felson and Spaeth, 1978; p. 614). Collaborative consumption is growing because of two significant reasons: rapid adoption of internet services and sustainability element of sharing services (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). The main feature of collaborative consumption is the ability of gaining temporary access to resources without transferring the ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Many economic, environmental, hedonic and utilitarian benefits derive from using rather than owning goods (Binninger et al., 2015). Furthermore, collaborative consumption of services often contribute to sustainability by sharing under-utilized assets (Ciulli and Kolk, 2019; Laukkanen and Tura, 2020), effectively reducing the consumer’s need for ownership (Stephany, 2015; Zvolska et al., 2019; Amasawa et al., 2020). The collaborative consumption is growing rapidly, reshaping the traditional value chain and creating direct connections between consumers (Sigala, 2015).

Sustainability plays an essential part in the resource sharing models by promoting efficient utilization of resources, economic benefits and fostering social equity. Collaborative consumption which involves sharing, exchanging, or renting resources instead of owning them, directly contributes to sustainable practices. This shift in the consumption pattern is notably relevant in the framework of sustainability, as it aligns with rising concerns about wastage of resources, environmental deterioration, and social equity. The role of sustainability in collaborative consumption is multifaceted. It includes environmental, economic, and social dimension, each dimension plays an essential role in shaping the effectiveness and operations of resource sharing models. It can be related with access-based consumption through well organized use of resources, the social relationships among people and the economic value it provides (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Collaborative consumption is cost-saving and innovative for yielding economic benefits. It satisfies a blizzard of demand and decreases the environmental impact (Kriston et al., 2010). It fosters a feeling of shared responsibility, collective well-being and strengthen community network (Mont, 2002). Collaborative consumption becomes a key tool in advancing the broader goals of sustainable development, aligning with environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability. Several studies were conducted to examine the sustainability aspect of collaborative consumption. Martin et al. (2011) found that car sharing services helps in the reduction of per capita

gasoline consumption and carbon dioxide emissions in North America. Leismann et al. (2013) found that textile swapping, tool hiring and chemical leasing schemes help in reducing the resources use. Many researchers found that sharing practices create and enhance social relationships and community building between individuals (Albinsson and Perera, 2012; Philip et al., 2015). It is stated by Heinrichs (2013) that sharing economy is believed to be the new prospective pathway to achieve sustainability. Although shared consumption seems to be involved in sustainable practices, no previous research has provides the conceptual clarity on the link between collaborative consumption and the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic and social). This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how collaborative consumption contributes to achieve economic, social, environment sustainability by drawing support from social exchange theory and provides some suggestions for the advancement of shared consumption of services. Understanding the interconnection between sustainability and collaborative consumption can guide future initiatives that attempts to build resilient and equitable communities.

Literature Review

Collaborative Consumption

The Internet age has paved a way for the emergence of innovative economic models that would have been impossible before people had access to smart phones and computers. One of the most suitable examples is the case of “Collaborative Consumption” services, emerging as a new business model. The term “collaborative consumption” was put forward in 1978 by Marcus Felson and Joe L. Spaeth in the paper “Community Structure and Collaborative Consumption: A Routine Activity Approach” (Felson and Spaeth, 1978). Collaborative consumption refers to “those events in which one or more persons consume economic goods or services in the process of engaging in joint activities with one or more others” (Felson and Spaeth, 1978; p. 614). Botsman and Rogers (2010) defined “collaborative consumption as an economic model based on sharing, swapping, exchanging or renting resources facilitating access over ownership mediated by digital platforms.” Belk (2007) found in his study that “online channels promote collaborative consumption behaviors, which are described as technology-driven consumption in which individuals coordinate the purchase and distribution of resources in exchange for payment or other financial benefits”. Hamari et al. (2016), considered collaborative consumption as primarily a peer to- peer activity of resource sharing to users by service provider facilitated by an internet technology. Belk (2014), has defined access-based consumption is the economic model in which people combine efforts to acquire and distribute a resource in return for payment or other benefits. Collaborative consumption refers to the collection of resource sharing systems which allow users to access and offer valuable resources with one another facilitated by online platforms (Ertz et al., 2016, p.6). Collaborative consumption is also known as sharing economy, access-based consumption, collaborative economy or peer to peer economy, which allow individuals to participate in sharing activities of leasing, lending, exchange of goods/services, transportation solutions, space, or money (Möhlmann, 2015). The sharing economy is an emerging phenomenon mediated through digital platforms (Heo, 2016) in which people acquire and distribute goods and services among each other for financial benefits via IT enabled platform (Zervas et al., 2017).

In practice, collaborative consumption models operate via IT enabled platforms that connect two peers: the service provider and the consumer. The consumer pays for the service via platform, the service provider receives a part of the benefits generated by the platform and the platform provider obtains a

profit by facilitating the exchange process between both parties. For example, Uber, a ridesharing platform offers peer-to-peer ridesharing services. Uber platform is the mobile application which is used by the drivers (service provider) to connect with the app's users (consumers) to offer rides. It is evident that sharing services are expanding rapidly (Belk, 2014), with companies like Uber and Airbnb transforming the transportation and accommodation sectors (Lee, 2016; Kim et al., 2018). The fundamental motivators of this business model are economic benefits, social interaction, environmental concern and practicality. First, the cost-reduction achieved by the user through collaborative consumption services has been proven to be a driving factor in consumer decision making (Barnes and Mattson, 2016). Second, the eagerness to socialize with the peer service provider or with the other users of the sharing platform (Habibi et al., 2017; Fraanje and Spaargaren, 2018) together with the users' sense of community belonging (Schanes and Stagl, 2018). Third, sharing assets is usually a more sustainable option compared to traditional consumption (Zamani et al., 2017; Geissinger et al., 2018), which can also attract users concerned about ecological consumerism (Edbring et al., 2016; Toni et al., 2018; Mattia et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Finally, peer-to-peer services are the practical way for consumers to gain access to resources without owning it, which implies less risk and responsibility (Benoit et al., 2017). Collaborative consumption models and economic research is flourishing in many different contexts. Still it is among the under-studied area despite the rapid expansion of collaborative consumption practices in different emerging economies across the globe.

Collaborative Consumption And Sustainability

Sustainability refers to “meeting the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The concept of sustainability has captured worldwide attention due to increasing concerns for resource degradation, inequalities and economic instability (WCED, 1987). Scarcity of resources and climate change continues to threaten global stability, necessitating the innovative solutions to attain sustainability. The rise of the collaborative consumption has provided new foundations for business organizations and government to promote sustainable practices. Collaborative consumption has been regarded as a sustainable mode of consumption because of its capacity to lower waste generation. Numerous evaluations of the literature have concentrated on particular business models of collaborative consumption that are thought to be sustainable such as ride sharing, accommodation sharing, bike sharing, fashion sharing, peer-to-peer framework, access based consumption, commercial sharing systems, different modes of collaborative consumption, community, or certain platforms (e.g. Uber, Airbnb), and few others with a broader scope of focus in developing and developed economies. Existing literature suggests that the concept of sustainability is among the valuable concepts in collaborative consumption explaining consumer behavior (De Chernatony et al., 2000; Ritchie et al., 2001). In relation to consumer behavior, sustainability has emerged as an important theme explaining consumer behavior toward a particular behavior. For example, Pasca et al., (2021) conducted a systematic literature review to understand consumer behavior toward gamification in the travel and hospitality sector. They identify in their study that sustainable consumption behavior is among the significant theme explaining the behavior of consumers. Existing research indicates that sustainability is regarded as a key driver by the people for actively participating in the collaborative consumption of services thereby, creating sustainability as a major research theme in the area of collaborative consumption.

Prior research has well emphasized that in contrary to traditional modes of consumption, where consumers exchange money to gain ownership of new products or permanently access to professional services, whereas, the modern mode of consumption i.e., collaborative consumption provides value to consumers where consumers prefer experience over ownership which enables them to access temporarily a wider set of underutilized resources for a monetary compensation. We identify three major dimensions (economic, environment, social) of sustainability within the context of collaborative consumption from the existing literature review. From an economic viewpoint, the collaborative consumption has been noted for offering economic benefits to users by providing access to high quality goods at low cost. Due to this superior efficiency, the collaborative consumption also paved a pathway to environmental and social sustainability. Botsman and Rogers (2010) found collaborative consumption as an eco-friendly economic approach that benefits all three aspects of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Present literature review shows that environmental and economic sustainability are the essential motivating factors that guide customers in decision-making who actively engage in collaborative consumption practices (Alzamora-Ruiz et al., 2020; Kim & Jin, 2020). Several studies found that sharing economy will benefit environment by optimizing resource utilization (Hamari et al., 2016), reducing greenhouse gas emission and saving energy consumption (Kriston et al., 2010; Belk, 2014; Martin et al., 2011; Jeremy Rifkin, 2014; Leismann et al., 2013). Collaborative consumption helps to achieve economic aspect of sustainability by providing people a new way of accessing (Belk, 2014) what they need and, often something they might not have been able to afford otherwise (Bhalla, 2021). In addition to economic and environmental dimension, collaborative consumption seeks to integrate the social dimension of sustainability (Belarmino et al., 2017) and allows "the creation, production, circulation and shared consumption of resources between individuals" (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2018). Yoon and Kim (2021) conducted research on how a shared goal as a society toward sustainability enhances participation in collaborative consumption. The outcomes of their study indicates that social capital has a greater substantial impact on intrinsic motivation, such as enjoyment, pleasure, experience and sustainability, in contrast to extrinsic motivation, such as economic benefits.

However, few research studies exploring deeper into the sustainability aspect of the collaborative consumption yielded somewhat mixed results. Nica and Potcovaru (2015) found that "social sustainability is relative, and the collaborative economy has mixed effects on ecological welfare and social connection." Armstrong and Park (2017) conducted research on digital apparel sharing platforms aligning with sustainable consumption found that "current collaborative apparel consumption platforms do not appear to support sustainable consumption behavior of consumers although some dimensions within specific platforms could be used to maximize the sustainability indicators". Wu and Zhi (2016) conducted a research on exploring the impact of shared economy on urban sustainability from the viewpoint of social, economic, environmental sustainability found that "shared economy influences urban sustainability in a both positive and negative ways therefore an effective design for regulation is needed. The sustainability aspect of the access-based consumption could be challenged by the fact that it stimulates indulgent consumption or rebound effects (Leismann et al., 2013). Many scholars examine sustainability aspect of collaborative consumption in a limited way by focusing on one or two dimension instead of three dimensions of sustainability. Thus with a few exceptions (Daunoriene et al., 2015, Wu and Zhi, 2016), there is an absence of comprehensive research on the contribution of collaborative consumption in achieving the three dimensions of sustainability. Therefore, this theoretical paper

presents the link between collaborative consumption and the three dimensions of sustainability by drawing support from social exchange theory proposed by George Homans (1958).

Theoretical Framework

“Social exchange theory” was developed by George Homans, a sociologist. It was first appeared in his essay “Social Behavior as Exchange,” in 1958. Social exchange theory proposes that “social behavior is the result of an exchange process where individuals enter into new associations as they expect it more rewarding with regard to economic benefits and social connections” (Homans, 1958; Priporas et al., 2017, p. 2282). Social behavior and collaborative consumption are linked with each other as individuals participating in social behavior usually perform a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the risks and rewards involved with the exchange process. The theory suggests that people perceive the benefits of sharing such as (resource optimization, economic benefits and reduced wastage) outweigh the costs such as (inconvenience in buying goods) they are more expected to adopt the sharing services. People use ride-sharing services or accommodation sharing services to reduce the transportation and accommodation costs (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Additionally, the theory emphasizes the significance of perceived reciprocity, when people consider that their engagement in resource sharing services highly contributes to environmental benefits such as reduction in greenhouse gas emission and environmental depletion. Pedersen & Netter (2015) highlights that online fashion renting has reduced the wastage of material. Zamani et al. (2017) found that consumers sharing the apparel are concerned to reduce the clothing production emissions. Social exchange theory further proposes the significance of trust in interpersonal relationships. Collaborative consumption promotes transparency and digital trust among participants in the exchange process. Bockmann (2013) concentrated that social relationships between strangers can only be formed by the establishment of trust. Sharing economy has the potential of generating a more sustainable model by establishing collective sustainable behaviors (Binninger, 2015). By emphasizing economic benefits, reciprocity and trust, social exchange theory presents a foundation for understanding how collaborative consumption contributes to achieve the three dimensions of sustainability (economic, environmental and social).

Research Gap

Existing literature review reveals that several research studies were carried out to examine the customer sustainable consumption behavior in collaborative consumption (Leismann et al., 2013; Butt et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2018; Toni et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2011; Dabrowska & Gutkowska, 2015). Many scholars conducted systematic literature review on sustainability in collaborative economy (Ertz and Leblanc- Proulx, 2018; Binninger et al., 2015; Araujo, 2021). Several studies examine sustainability aspect of collaborative consumption in a limited way by focusing on one or two dimension instead of three dimensions of sustainability simultaneously. Thus with a few exceptions (Heinrichs, 2013; Wu and Zhi, 2016), there is an absence of comprehensive research on the true contribution of collaborative consumption in achieving the three dimensions of sustainability. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a study on exploring the true contribution of collaborative consumption in achieving economic, social and environmental sustainability in general.

Objectives

Based on the research gap identified in the existing literature review, the objectives of the study are men-

tioned below:

1. To examine the role of sustainability in collaborative consumption of services.
2. It explore link between the three dimensions of sustainability i.e. environmental, economic and social sustainability and collaborative consumption of services.

Research Methodology

Once the objectives are set, the next step is to search for the relevant literature. For this study, theoretical approach is adopted to examine the role of sustainability in reference to collaborative consumption. To search for the relevant literature on Web of Science and Scopus, following keywords have been used “collaborative consumption”, “sharing economy”, “access based consumption”, “collaborative economy”, “sustainability”, “social sustainability”, “economic sustainability”, “environment sustainability.” The articles significant for this study were thoroughly reviewed.

Analysis & Findings

This paper organizes the previous studies on the collaborative consumption with the aim of linking the three aspects of sustainability (environmental, social and economic) with collaborative consumption of services. The findings of study reveal that collaborative consumption aids in addressing the three dimensions of sustainability. As a new economic model, collaborative consumption could bring a new vitality to the traditional industry market and stimulate economic activity. It was assumed to be a unique economic growth point for countries or regions, ushering in a new era of novel employment opportunities and lower unemployment rates (Watanabe et al., 2016). Another positive impact of the collaborative consumption is the rise in income or consumer welfare. Collaborative consumption platforms reduces the transaction costs that facilitate more transactions between strangers and provide more opportunities for providers to use idle resources for additional income and moreover, lower prices and more choices of consumption can make consumers obtain more benefits. Additionally, it was also found that low-income groups and disadvantaged communities are expected to benefit from the collaborative consumption, thereby improving the distribution of wealth and income (Brachya and Collins, 2016).

The environmental and economic potential of collaborative consumption models held that it would enable consumers to reduce reliance on individual possession of goods i.e. consumers would prefer “use rather than own” pattern of consumption (Frenken, 2017). With cheap and convenient access to goods owned by other individuals or organizations, consumers would gradually separate themselves from private ownership of goods and favor access-based consumption (Belk, 2014). Through sharing of resources instead of buying, consumers would save money and contribute to lower new material demand and energy consumption. For instance, people use ride-sharing services such as Uber, accommodation sharing services such as Airbnb or co-working spaces, which lowers the transportation, accommodation and office costs for businesses and individuals alike (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Collaborative consumption reduces the financial burden on consumers through sharing of services, particularly in areas like accommodation, transportation and fashion (Sundararajan, 2013). Digital platforms such as Airbnb, Uber and Rent the Runway facilitate new forms of economic transactions where individuals can leverage their idle assets (e.g., cars, homes, clothes) to generate income. This model helps to the formation of flexible work opportunities and supports micro-entrepreneurship (Schor, 2017). Shared goods and services help minimize the production and consumption of new products, thereby reducing the

environmental degradation associated with manufacturing, transportation, and disposal. For instance, car-sharing platforms like Uber reduce the need for individual ownership of cars, decreasing the total number of cars on the road and promoting less traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions (Martin & Shaheen, 2011). Therefore, the collaborative consumption is considered a promising way to help facilitate the sustainability transition. More importantly, sharing can offer a flexible infrastructure system that can efficiently tackle the peak demands in emergencies or mega-events with fewer public investments, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, World Cups, Olympic Games, etc. (Frenken, 2017).

Apart from the economic and environmental advantages, some social benefits have also been asserted. With new technologies, particularly the Internet, sharing propelled existing practices to a much larger social scale. Collaborative consumption practices enhance opportunities for social ties among people from different social backgrounds and promote social bonding (Frenken and Schor, 2017). Thus, it could be understood that the collaborative consumption can help build community networks, strengthen community resilience and social connectivity thereby promoting a culture of social sustainability (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015; Brachya and Collins, 2016), which is especially beneficial in a time of need, such as providing immediate assistance in response to an emergency. Social exchange theory proposes the importance of trust in the social relationship. In collaborative consumption, the basis of transactions between the provider and consumer is the “digital trust,” which is established by verifying the authenticity of the providers and consumers and by online rating and feedback systems. This mechanism for building trust among strangers will continue to grow and improve with development of collaborative consumption and promoting a more trusting society (Nica and Potcovaru, 2015; Wu and Zhi, 2016). Individuals participating in collaborative mode of exchange can foster values such as sharing, cooperation, sense of belonging, trust and sustainability. This cultural shift urges individuals to rethink their relationship with materialism or possession and adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. By prioritizing environmental, economic, and social sustainability, collaborative consumption can effectively deal with the recent global issues, such as climate change, environmental degradation and social inequality and economic instability. As collaborative consumption continues to grow, it has the ability to reshape our consumption pattern and promote a more sustainable world. By encouraging resource optimization, increasing economic benefits, and fostering community networks, collaborative consumption presents a holistic solution to these contemporary challenges.

Study Contributions/ Implications

This study has filled the gap in the academic literature on collaborative consumption by examining the true contribution of collaborative consumption in achieving the three dimensions of sustainability and provides potential future research directions. The study also provides some valuable suggestions for the advancement of collaborative consumption. First, collaborative consumption platforms should develop strategies that align with the growing consumer demand for eco-friendly and socially responsible sharing services. Second, the marketers and policymakers should run educational campaigns through digital and print media to aware consumers about the benefits of sustainable collaborative consumption, focusing on how collaborative consumption practices contributes to reduce waste, lower carbon footprints, increase economic benefits and social equity. Third, businesses involved in collaborative consumption should offer those resources which are designed for reuse and recycle to attract more eco-conscious consumers. Fourth, sharing platforms should enhance transparency and digital trust with consumers by incorporating feedback mechanisms like review and rating systems. Fifth, online platforms should improve the

security payment mechanism, privacy protection mechanism and identity payment mechanism to enhance the credibility of the platform.

Limitations And Future Directions

This study provides conceptual overview on sustainability aspect of collaborative consumption by employing only social exchange theory, future research could be done by using two other behavioral models such as theory of planned behavior or theory of behavioral reasoning. Future research could also be done to investigate the environmental benefits of car sharing programs in urban areas and their role in reducing car ownership and emissions. Future research could examine the relationship between consumer trust and the adoption of sustainable practices in collaborative consumption. Future research could examine the role of emerging technologies such AI and Blockchain in the optimization of resource-sharing models. Further studies can examine the cultural differences in sustainable consumption behavior towards the adoption of collaborative consumption across different countries.

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