Sustainable business models impacting consumers' attitudes

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Sustainability issues are becoming a major concern for consumers and, accordingly, businesses. The latter are striving to engage consumers in new sustainability product/service offerings, which are increasingly in demand. A meaningful example of a business model offering sustainable services is represented by the car sharing business. The aim of the paper is to explore how car sharing can influence consumers' attitudes toward sustainable consumption. The study shows that users mainly join the service for functional benefits, yet symbolic benefits that address sustainability stances also emerge. Hence, the service seems to implicitly heighten consumers' sustainability attitudes. Managerial implications are drawn.

Keywords: sustainable business model, consumer attitudes, car sharing

1. Introduction

Sustainability issues are becoming a major concern for policy makers and other types of organizations. From a business perspective, the decrease in the availability of raw materials has driven organizations to focus their attention on sustainability issues. On the consumers' side, the increasing population worldwide requires a growing number of finite products, generating a paucity of natural resources and a corresponding increase in their price.

Media attention is devoted to the topic. In fact, consumers are progressively showing attention to the outcomes of their consumption behaviour as those relate to society and the environment (Shaw, Newholm, Dickinson, 2006). They are progressively becoming aware of sustainability issues linked to production and consumption choices.

In order to face these issues and gain consumers' recognition and acceptance, businesses are striving to implement sustainable business models. When approaching sustainability issues, businesses endeavour to address consumers' demands and businesses' needs while diminishing social and environmental products' harm. A robust body of literature concerning ecological and societal innovations (Hansen, Grosse-Drunker, Reichwald, 2009) has been developed in this regard, but it has proved to be of modest effect in addressing these problems and creating effective changes in the society. Hence, a more holistic view of sustainability, stemming from inside a company (Stubbs, Cocklin, 2008) and reflecting its outcomes on consumers' attitudes, seems necessary for enhancing long-term social and environmental sustainability.

Taking into consideration the growing sustainability phenomenon of car sharing, the present paper aims to explore, through semi-structured interviews with users, how the car sharing business model can address and influence consumers' cognitive and affective attitudes toward sustainable consumption.

2. The consumer attitude toward sustainable consumption

The issue of sustainable consumption has gained momentum, especially in the last decade. Who the sustainable consumer is and what sustainable consumption means are matters of concern both for policy makers and for companies that seek to address sustainability issues in their business (Huang, Rust, 2010). Existing literature shows increased consumer awareness of sustainable consumption issues, but the empirical evidence suggests that sustainable consumption is more professed than practiced (Park, Ha, 2012).

Sustainable and ethical stances could shift consumers away from specific market offerings toward other and/or new alternatives. This transition often turns into various forms of resistant behaviours, at both the individual and the collective levels. Sustainable and ethical consumption can result in more reflexive and moderate behaviours, as in the case of voluntary simplicity (Ballantine, Creery, 2010), but also in more purposeful behaviours, as in the case of boycotting and "buycotting" (Hye-Jin, Nelson, 2009).

Sustainable consumption practices are also related to substitute products with services by sharing and pooling goods or by leasing and renting them with the aim to increase the intensity of product use and, thus, reduce their environmental impact (Mont, 2004).

Although different alternatives supporting sustainable consumption exist, people either are not always aware of or do not easily adopt them. Consequently, changing consumption patterns requires a much more comprehensive shift than changing production patterns and, perhaps, needs a longer time to occur. In this regard, previous research has highlighted that investigating aspects not directly observable, such as personality traits, attitudes, or motives, can support the configuration of offering systems and business models aimed at changing consumption patterns (Schaefers, 2013). Specifically, attitudes toward consuming a product have been found to be one of the most important antecedents for predicting and explaining consumers' choices across products and services (Conner et al., 2003).

An attitude, which is a theoretical construct, refers to an individual's preference for or disinclination to an idea, issue, item or object. Examining the components of attitude, Katz (1960) suggested it comprises two elements: the belief aspect, which uses cognitive processes to describe the object and its relation to other objects, and the affective aspect, which leads to liking or disliking an object. Cognitive attitude represents one's evaluation of an attitude object (e.g., sharing goods) derived from one's cognition/thinking. It is predicted by two belief components: one's subjective probability that performing a behaviour will result in a desired consequence and the value one gives to that consequence (Park, Ha, 2012). Affective attitude refers to a set of emotions associated with an attitude object (Hirschman, Holbrook, 1982).

While consumers' attitudes have been largely investigated in other contexts, such as sustainable food consumption, attitudes toward car sharing need further investigation (Costain Ardron, Habib, 2012) in order to mainstream this sustainable alternative for car usage.

In fact, car sharing is becoming increasingly popular globally as a sustainable urban mode of transportation in many cities. According to Washington state's code (USA), car sharing is defined as: "A membership program intended to offer an alternative to car ownership under which persons or entities that become members are permitted to use vehicles from a fleet on an hourly basis". The service is gaining momentum in Italy due to the increased number of service providers. Milan, with six service providers (Stella, 2014), entered the market with roughly 1500 shared cars available in 2014.

3. Sustainable business model: advancing sustainability issues

Sustainable business models, which can produce a sound sustainable impact within the marketplace and address environmental and social issues, are flourishing. A business model, although the definition is still ambiguous and not uniquely defined (Osterwalder, Pigneur, 2005), can be considered as a compound of value proposition, value creation and delivery of the system (Richardson, 2008). Accordingly, the increasing scarcity of natural resources and the growing consumer awareness of sustainability issues require the integration of social and environmental concerns within the business model's value proposition. Scholars developed discussions about the necessity of sustainable business models during the late 1990s. They

considered the possibility not only of businesses generating societal advancements (Hart, Milstein, 1999) but also of their potential to heighten environmental transformations (Lovins, Lovins, Hawken, 1999). The integration of sustainability issues into business model value propositions aims not only to pursue profits but also to expand company goals to include social and environmental ones to gain a competitive advantage.

However, sustainable business models have acquired different nuances, including a wide range of meanings. In this regard, the work of Bocken et al. (2014) derives eight sustainable business model archetypes. They extend from material productivity maximization and energy efficiency to value creation from waste; from substitution with renewable and natural processes to delivery of functionality rather than ownership; from adopting a stewardship role, encouraging sufficiency and repurposing the business for society/environment to developing scale-up solutions.

Through the focus on sustainability issues, multiple stakeholder interests must be taken into consideration in sustainable business models, because a company's goals are closely integrated with its sustainable innovations (Boons, Lüdeke-Freund, 2013). In fact, new business models cannot succeed if not supported and recognized by the social context (Birkin, Polesie, Lweis, 2009) and by customers, with the latter expressing their favour through attitudes and consumption choices.

Car sharing represents an interesting research setting to explore the impact of a sustainable (and widely growing) business model on consumer attitudes. Though the mobility sector is widely recognized to be a highly polluting area of human development, the car sharing system aims to abate the greenhouse gas emissions related to vehicle movements. Shared cars are provided by firms in order to be used for limited times (less than a day) and short distances (generally within a city). Customers pay a corresponding amount of money related to the time usage. Recognized outcomes of car sharing use refer to consumers' car buying avoidance and decrease usage of cars. Hence, it embodies an interesting research setting to investigate how car sharing can influence consumers' attitudes toward sustainable consumption.

4. Methodology

Since the aim of the research is to investigate how the car sharing business model can address and influence consumers' cognitive and affective attitudes toward sustainable consumption, we decided to adopt a qualitative approach that aims to capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted from December 2013 to May 2014 in Milan, Italy. Interviews enabled the researcher to strengthen users' reflexivity toward their reported experiences and to further deepen our understanding of the emerging issues. Users were recruited through a convenience and snowballing sample that enhanced the pool of diversified users in terms of age and sex (details of the sample are available upon request). However, as young adults are the service's target group most likely to join the program (Efthymiou, Antoniou, Waddell, 2013), they represent the majority of users interviewed. Additionally, the researcher's perceptions of young adult users have been refined through the responses to the convenience sampling and from observing people using the service in town.

The first two interviews were used as a pilot test to check the effectiveness of the interview format. After minor refinements, the interviewer's leading questions were confirmed and emerging topics were explored according to each interviewee's answers. When the fourteenth and fifteenth interviews did not report new results, the sample was considered saturated (Silverman, 2000).

The interviews were then recorded and transcribed at full length. Atlas.ti™ software was used to support the transcript analyses.

6. Findings and Discussion

Our study confirms that consumer attitudes toward car sharing services are related to both the cognitive and affective dimensions. In particular, functional benefits are reported as the main reasons for subscribing to the service. Therefore, symbolic aspects are also mentioned as additional benefits related to car sharing and to determining positive attitudes toward this sustainable mobility solution.

6.1 Convenience issues

Respondents appear to show mainly convenience issues related to their attitudes toward car sharing services. Convenience in a customer's experience encompasses multiple meanings, stemming from money to time savings, from fewer car management hassles to more flexibility when moving within a city.

Among convenience reasons, saving money is the one most often cited by respondents. Customers explain that through the car sharing option, they have a car at their own disposal without all the associated costs, such as oil, assurance and taxes. Car sharing enables customers to use a car whenever needed at a price that includes all the possible costs connected to a car. Differently from previous investigations, car sharing users in this study are not willing to pay for a lower environmental impact (Costain Ardron, Habib, 2012) but are more concerned about saving money through the adoption of this sustainable mobility solution. The service gives consumers the freedom to use a complex good and not be bothered about all the possible costs that owners must pay for its use.

> *"It is useful to be able to use it in the few occasions when I need a car. I think the rates are affordable.[...] The costs of running a car would be higher than using these services every day; besides you have to add up the cost of amortization of purchasing a car, fuel costs, maintenance costs, insurance and so on. With those costs I can take the car sharing everyday instead of buying it." [Calogero, 31]*

Among convenience reasons mentioned for approaching a car sharing service are both the functional and cost benefits and the unburdening of responsibility connected to the disposal of one's own car. Shared cars allow users to experience the car while eliminating the liability related to ownership duties:

> *"I prefer a service like this that does not give me any responsibility, I can easily find the car park and I do not take care of the car." [Francesco, 29]*

Convenience benefits also encompass time savings for customers in the management of a car within a city. Car sharing services in Milan generally allow users to park the car even in reserved areas' parking lots. Shared cars can generally be parked in multiple areas of the city, and their often small dimension enables an easier drive and parking. This allows people to save time and to avoid all the hassles connected to the management of the car within the city.

> *"A smaller car is more efficient and can be parked in residential and payment parking lots for free. I do not consume so much time searching for a proper parking." [Luca, 45]*

Shared cars are sometimes compared to public transports in the sense that car sharing systems make up for the shortcomings of public transports in specific areas of the city and times of day. They also mentioned that they can be used instead of public transports in areas

where the latter are inefficient or if customers are in a time crunch and need to reach a certain place faster.

> *"For example if two people share the cost of it, it can be compared to a tool between a taxi and a tram and it is more convenient, it is a good integrated system for those areas not served by public transports." [Luciano, 66]*

Further convenience reasons for choosing a shared car also include the car assistance in case of need and problems. If an accident or a problem occurs to the car, some customers reveal they feel reassured by being able to call the person in charge of the problems' resolution. The security and reassurance feelings that someone would help in the management of a complex good in the case of need enables customers to relax and enjoy the experience of driving.

> *"It is a vehicle with car assistance anytime if you have a problem. You can call someone to help you and it is included in the price." [Lisa, 29]*

6.2 Symbolic issues

Along with the convenience aspects, consumers highlight three types of symbolic benefits associated with the use of the service: empowerment, hedonistic and cultural transformation benefits.

Empowerment

Empowerment benefits refer to the potential of generating a sense of owning an expensive and hardly affordable good at a reasonable price. Users feel they are owners of the car while using the sharing service. They do not perceive themselves as inferior to users who can afford a car.

> *"With the car sharing I can have access to a good I would not have had access to otherwise. Car sharing represents the opportunity to enjoy this good in a supple and economical manner." [Stefano, 29]*

Empowerment benefits are meant to develop feelings of independence and freedom, of not depending on public transports and taxis, hence they may heighten users' personal level of well-being. They feel autonomous and self-dependent through the use of car sharing services. They directly or indirectly alluded to the advantages of independence and emancipation made possible by car sharing, from not depending on friends for a ride and from optimising their time and schedule.

> *"I think it is useful especially for those in Milan who cannot have a car; thanks to it you are able to make living in Milan without a car easier, but at the same time you have the opportunity to move rapidly within the city. [...] It's the idea of autonomy, which in my opinion changes. [...] Having the possibility of getting access to another way of transport makes you a little more autonomous." [Francesco, 29]*

According to some respondents, car sharing also boosts their quality of life, because the service enhances a sense of security from having a car at their disposal in the case of need (for example, when one's own car is broken and cannot be used). Car sharing in this sense represents a reassurance good that strengthens the sense of protection toward unexpected problems.

> *"In my opinion, the advantages of having and knowing that in the case of problems with your car or public transport strikes car sharing is a resource for being able to move." [Ottone, 32]*

Hedonistic

Younger respondents, especially, number hedonic benefits among the reasons for subscribing to car sharing services. Shared cars are often mentioned as trendy and new. Accordingly, users are also encouraged to use the vehicles because these cars represent a good that they would otherwise probably not be able to afford. Sharing a car gives access to a fashionable and socially accepted good not affordable otherwise. The attitude of consumers in this regard seems to be led by social acceptance: the uncertain feeling of non-ownership of a car and the necessity of joining car sharing service are made more socially acceptable by the provision of fashionable cars.

> *"The fact that it is such a beautiful Smart or the Fiat500 helps. They are cars that are also aesthetically beautiful from the outside. It is obvious that if a person does not own it thinks about renting a car which is also very nice instead of having a car 50 years old." [Silvia, 30]*
> *"I have never driven a Smart and because of the service I could drive it. Maybe I would have never bought a Fiat500 but I love it. It's fun to change the type of car." [Cristiano, 26]*

The users' involvement needed for the service to occur is also an hedonic reason for using a car sharing service. The service design itself is seen as playful, because it involves customers in experiencing the service: the app and the geo-localization of the parking spot make the experience unique and involving. Curiosity and innovation are leitmotif for approaching the service.

> *"I think it's a pretty funny thing. It is new and certainly it attracts customers. You have to look for the car you want. This playful aspect of having a car that is not your car, but when you book it is yours [...] and the app is fun! I know it can be stupid but I look the app up even if I don't need a car and I see if there are cars around." [Lisa, 29]*

The service subscription also provides the feeling of being accepted by peers and of being part of a trendy, growing and flourishing community. Users report being curious about other people driving the shared cars and being willing to talk about their experience with peers. Users' attitudes toward the service are then influenced by other users. Users themselves report being influenced by peers. Though approaching the service for convenience reasons, users exchange comments about the potential benefits of the service with other customers. Respondents indirectly mention this aspect, seeing it as part of a comprehensive and further aim of the service.

> *"I look at the people in the shared cars every time I am going around the city, because I want to know who else besides me uses it [...]. However, it is a special experience and you wonder who actually uses it. I have this curiosity in knowing who other people in the cars are because they probably have a similar experience to mine." [Lisa, 29]*

Cultural transformation

The third type of symbolic effect is the transformative benefits experienced at a societal level that are enhanced by the service, generally acknowledged as side effects. Sharing a good implies an ethical behaviour and attitude of users toward the good. The service would not occur and would not be efficient if users neither treated nor behaved properly toward to the cars. Respondents tend to mention the necessity of careful behaviour and a "sharing attitude and culture" when approaching the service. The sharing services are meant to educate people about civic socialization, respecting goods and people and the environment.

"I have always found the cars clean, except once..., it is not a bother thinking of getting into a car after someone else has used it. However, this is because the cars are clean and with no problems. I shared a house with other people so sharing things has become a little easier for me, I do not mind the idea that there is someone else using the good." [Francesco, 29]

"From the point of view of citizens I think that it fits into a path of higher civic education, because sharing is not philanthropy. I think it does enable that "little step towards" civic consciousness. We are no longer accustomed to share, we are not more accustomed to civic responsibility. [...] And this service serves as a positive stimulus. This is a side effect and I do not expect it to be the driving force for each person who signs the service up, but a secondary factor." [Stefano, 29]

Users consider potential sacrifices connected to the use of the good unavoidable. Cars are not always available and respondents, though sometimes annoyed by the impossibility of getting a car whenever needed, stated that they have to accept that, because it is inherent in the very nature of the service.

"Being the car sharing a service that I use when really needed, the service is an opportunity that I have of moving, so I consider it a plus. Because of that I do not see as a negative thing if I cannot find a car available." [Daniele, 28]

Notwithstanding that other users can be considered rivals for the good, respondents generally seem to be favourable to the subscription of new users. This is due to the expected growing efficiency of the service. They expect the number of cars to grow accordingly with the number of subscribers. Though intrinsically rivals for the use of cars, users recollect the necessity of numerous users taking part in the service in order for it to be effective.

"I think it is a valuable service and I welcome other users. In this way the service provider will also implement other cars because I think it is used so much that we will need more cars." [Valentina, 42]

Wider effects are mentioned connected to the joint subscription of multiple users to the service. Some respondents envisage a greater sustainability impact related to the widespread use of the service. Users stated that the service can enhance a sustainable impact if a consistent number of users subscribe to it. In this sense customers do not perceive peers as rivals: they are a tool enabling greater sustainable effects. Users induced to a deeper reflection on the service generally recognized the positive social and environmental outcomes as secondary benefits inherent in the service. However, not all respondents appoint sustainability as a goal of the service.

"Sharing the car with others enables the car itself to be at others' disposal. So while I am at a meeting, it becomes available to others. I think it is a winning idea because it reduces the number of vehicles and it reduces the environmental impact." [Luca, 45]

"They are cars that I call "use it and drop it" so you do not have to take the car wherever you go during the day. So a person uses the car and when he drops it there will be somebody else who will use it. Consequently, this will decrease pollution." [Luciano, 66]

7. Conclusions and managerial implications

This study explored consumers' attitudes toward car sharing systems. Car sharing sustainable business models may lead us to think that consumers approach the service for sustainability reasons. As stated by Efthymiou, Antoniou and Waddell (2013), a greater environmental consciousness may lead people to join a sharing program. However, the

majority of users appear to subscribe to the service for convenience benefits. What mainly moves and pushes consumers toward the services are still the money (Duncan, 2011) and time saving benefits, less responsibility connected to the management of the good and the ease of moving rapidly within the city (Costain Ardron, Habib, 2012).

Notwithstanding the observation of convenience reasons in joining the service, the cars' meaning acquires different nuances, opening up to new possibilities of use and experience. Hence, users show cognitive, and appear to develop affective, attitudes toward car sharing. There seems to be a shift toward a different perception of car ownership. Consumers' attitudes toward the good not only includes the car as functional and a symbolic expression of oneself but also, with the dematerialization of possession titles, embodies a useful means for reaching jointly higher level aims with other users.

Consumers' deeper reflections on the service acknowledge attitudes toward a broader range of benefits. The business model appears to inherently determine a rational or irrational transition from merely functional to symbolic attitudes. Consumers express latent feelings or recognize that the joint intentions and behaviours toward shared cars can lead to broader social and environmental outcomes. The car sharing business model implicitly enables a deeper understanding of market mechanisms and of a more sound impact that consumers jointly can have in marketplaces in order to address sustainability issues. When asked to reflect upon advantages or benefits at large of using shared cars, users often seem to be aware of inclusive people services as a prerequisite for generating greater and more positive societal and environmental outcomes. As highlighted by Lane (2005), car-sharing participants report increased environmental awareness after joining the program. They recognize the necessity of "sharing" experiences in order to generate effective changes. People tend to develop attitudes toward the car sharing system thanks to their recognition of being an active part for sustainable change. The use, involvement and empowerment of users as part of an environmental change reinforce and enlarge the convenience attitudes consumers firstly show for approaching the service.

What emerged from the study is that mobility is bound up with symbolic values, emotions, identities and social relationships. This observation poses considerable challenges in defining sustainable business models aimed at supporting changes in behavioural patterns and in new car usage practices (Kent, Dowling, 2013). In this sense, car sharing businesses embody a societal improvement role in achieving sustainability. In fact, when prompted to deeper reflection, consumers often recognised the sustainability outcomes bonded to the service. However, the sustainability features of the service in Milan's car sharing providers are not often underlined.

In order to pursue sustainability goals and effectively generate a shift in consumers' environmental and social attitudes, car sharing organizations can implicitly and explicitly stress the sustainability value underlying the business. They can address implicitly the sustainability issues through the cars themselves. For example, they could use hybrid or electric cars or signal on the dashboard the lower environmental impact shared cars have compared to mainstream ones. These tools will make the sustainability outcomes more evident for consumers and potentially enhance their attitudes in this regard. Car sharing services can also boost explicitly sustainable consumer attitudes through communication. Based on observing that car sharing providers in Milan do not always emphasize the sustainability feature, a greater network alliance with sustainable profit and no-profit organizations could lead consumers to a better understanding of environmental and social benefits connected to the use of shared cars. Partnering with a sustainable organization could underline wider sustainable benefits while preserving the coherence of the car sharing providers' strategy followed until now.

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