

A phenomenological study of liquid consumption

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to reveal consumers' perceptions and interpretations of 'solid' and 'liquid' consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) and their combined usage. The study intends to explore insights for further investigation of switching behaviour in liquid consumption. Our qualitative method includes preliminary literature review and primary data collection of in-depth interviews with six respondents. The research finds that the consumers interviewed perceive a difference between possession-based and access-based consumption. They use them as complements and substitutes for each other. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) defines the emergent topics of 1) perceptions of ownership, 2) perceptions of money, 3) individualism and 4) freedom of choice to be considered in future research about switching behaviour. Consumer understandings and feelings about liquid consumption can influence, among other things, perceptions of the value of and attachment to particular products or services, which can be reflected in the switching in liquid consumption.

Keywords: access-based consumption, liquid consumption, phenomenology

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Introduction

Access-based consumption, including sharing-, digital-, informational- and experiential consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), enjoys its new vigour, because of digitalization. Liquid consumption is not a new phenomenon, it existed long before the digital revolution. Thus, the appearance of the Internet favoured its spread and popularity with no doubt. The instantaneity and remoteness of temporary and online available services train consumers for the same expectations in many aspects of their life and condition them for more and more on-demand consumption. Although, the definition of liquid consumption by Bardhi and Eckhardt represents Bauman's idea about the mobilization and privatization in the postmodern era, we feel a gap in describing the phenomenon of liquid consumption, especially its role and position in consumers' life.

Our aim is to gain insights how the mobilization and digitalisation of society reflects in consumers' everyday consumer decisions, especially the coexistence of solid and liquid alternatives in their consumption. Our phenomenology study finds that respondents feel the difference between solid and liquid consumption form and show a difference in their attitude as well. The key distinctions between the two forms, such as perception of ownership, perception of money, and the need for individualism and freedom, chart the future research directions to extend knowledge about liquid consumer behaviour. Our research also reveals that the mobilization in consumption has accelerated with the spread of access-based services, which reflects the increased usage of short-term, liquid alternatives, and the more fast-paced, more frequent switching. This finding stresses out the importance of future research focusing on the relationship of solid and liquid consumption in consumers' decision making and switching behaviour.

Literature review

Access-based and Liquid Consumption

Access-based consumption is a "market-mediated transaction in which customers receive periodically limited access to goods for an access fee while retaining legal ownership of the service provider" (Schaefers et al., 2016, p. 571). The subject of this transaction may be material, dematerialized, or experiential consumption (Morewedge et al., 2021), including sharing consumption, digital, informational, and experiential consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Liquid consumption, the analogy with the transformation of society from solid to liquid (Bauman, 2000), describes a recent phenomenon in consumption, where the elimination or "liquidation" of goods, as opposed to the accumulation of solid goods, means a necessary sense of personal mobility, variability, and changeability for consumers (Binkley, 2008). Liquid consumption is short-term, access-based, dematerialized consumption, which is not replacing but complementing possession-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

Characteristics of Liquid Consumption

The most significant difference between possession-based and access-based consumption is the "burden of ownership" and the associated risk (Moeller and Wittkowski 2010). For uncertain consumers of liquid modernity, risk reduction is the main motivation for access-based consumption, and the perceived risks of owning the product influence consumers in using a product with access instead of possessing it (Schaefers et al., 2016). Non-proprietary use does not require a commitment after trying a product or service. Consumers can try the latest products without committing to a specific style or brand. It reduces both financial and even social or psychological risk (Morewedge et al., 2021) and enables switching easier,

making access-based consumption conducive to innovative behaviour and to the search for variety (Lawson et al., 2016).

Due to differences in consumption conditions, the consumer decision model also changes in access-based consumption for possession-based consumption. With access (psychological possession), consumers do not strive for the best choice but for a satisfactory choice, thus accepting even lower quality, as their commitment to the product is intermittent and poses less risk to them (Lawson et al., 2021). Lower expectations about the quality of a product or service can result in higher satisfaction during consumption. It can lead to a positive evaluation of the product tested in access-based consumption, which can later result in a purchase, i.e., a deferred choice commitment. This triple construct: a strategy of satisfactory choice, deferred choice commitment, and evaluation of choice, represents a particular form of consumer decision-making (Lawson et al., 2021). Consumers are attached to fewer objects, they also develop a lower level of attachment. Objects are easily replaced, and liquid consumption is characterised by low loyalty (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017).

Methodology

We used a qualitative method, *phenomenology*, to investigate liquid consumption. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) focuses on the personal experience of the individual, how he or she perceives and makes sense of a phenomenon under study (Somogyi et al., 2018). The phenomenological research draws on multiple sources: personal experience, careful observation, exploration of examples, and discussion of the topic (Fisher et al., 2021). We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, which revealed both personal interpretations of access-based consumption and related experiences. The in-depth interview included a stimulus where possession-based and access-based consumption situations were contrasted in pairs. The interviewees were asked to continue the sequence according to an arbitrary logic and then to name the two groups. This allowed us to explore the perceived difference between the traditional possession-based and the contrasted access-based consumption and its interpretation and translation into their own lives (Smith and Osborn, 2007).

The sampling of phenomenology was nonprobability sampling using purposive and convenience sampling methods. The recruiting was done online within the online community (Facebook group) of a car-sharing provider. Data collection was not limited to their car-sharing experience, we asked interviewees about all access-based services used in their life.

Results of the phenomenology

The fieldwork took place in December 2021, and it was conducted through online TEAMS video calls. Each interview lasted 45-55 minutes. The screener filtered the sample to consumers who participate in any access-based consumption (sharing or paid digital services). The sample consisted of six conversations based on the suggestion of a small number of 3-6 people by Smith et al. (2009) (Table 1).

Table 1: List of respondents of interviews (phenomenology)

Interviewee	Age	Residence	Profession	Access-based category
Ákos	41	Budapest	driving instructor	vehicle sharing, cloud service
Lili	30	Budapest	elementary school teacher	video streaming, music app, vehicle sharing
Anna	33	Budapest	brand manager	sport apps, video streaming, digital content
Matyi	30	Budakeszi	IT employee	tool renting, vehicle sharing, music app
Patrik	28	Budapest	brand manager	flat renting, car sharing, video streaming, music app
Bence	30	Budapest	team leader in a bank	music app, video streaming, car sharing

Source: own construction

IPA proved the simultaneous usage of possession- and access-based consumption in the interviewees' life, and the presence of frequent switches among alternatives, defined as liquid consumption in this study. As an outcome of the IPA, four main themes emerged in the experience of liquid consumption: 1) perception of ownership, 2) perception of money, 3) individualism and 4) freedom of choice. Concerning the perception of ownership, the theme of sustainability and the theme of attachment to ownership or lack thereof also emerged.

The most significant difference between possession-based and access-based consumption is the issue of ownership. Respondents feel this difference regarding the ownership: they perceive access as a temporary use, shared ownership, with which they can reduce costs the most, and be exempted from the maintenance and storage associated with ownership. Although ownership does not change hands, respondents experience access as consumption for which they pay with money or data. We grasp a difference in the emotions associated with the two types of consumption. While interviewees have a fundamentally negative attitude towards ownership (overconsumption, resource consumption), access-based consumption is surrounded by positive emotions both about the model principle (resource sharing, recycling) and its use, consumer experience (customisable, individualised). The group of access-based consumption situations is most often defined as shared, mutual consumption, and described as a more modern, sustainable, environmentally friendly alternative to traditional consumption.

"I borrow them. Or I use them temporarily... If conditions change, I can decide anytime to rent a bigger or smaller (house), or a more expensive or a cheaper one... But if one is mine, it is a bit more difficult to change." (Szandra)

"That kind of sharing ... There, I kind of feel like it's being used multiple times, and it's like adding value to not just one person." (Anna)

Due to the positive emotions about access-based consumption, there is a remarkable attachment to access platforms or providers among respondents. Although liquid consumers are tied to fewer objects, there may be a greater attachment to objects that provide access or liquidity (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Our research found that the respondents consider their access-based or even liquid consumption to be a smart decision, which they are especially proud of, and nurture positive emotions towards certain service providers. Exclusive brand preference has also emerged, such as using only the premium-positioned Share Now from car-sharing or listening to high-quality music provider Tidal by leaving the previously used Spotify. However, it is also important to mention the level of attachment. There are times that they watch a movie on Netflix regularly, but they also have it on DVD in their home, or they

listen to it on their vinyl record on the Tidal music app. In this case, the material objects have an emotional surplus, gaining a privileged role in the lives of the respondents by possessing them.

“I still have a DVD anyway... I don't know, it's like that... I'm sure it's there, and I can check at any time if there is no Netflix. It's more like that movie, let's say, has a privileged role, it deserves to be bought, so what's very favourite is to have it.” (Lili)

“The important thing is to have a record that I know I'm not going to get bored; I'm going to listen. Or so that I know it has such a collector's or musical value that even 20 years from now, it reminds me that it needs to be listened to.” (Bence)

The respondents also reported having a different attitude towards non-possessed items than those of their own. Some of them felt greater responsibility for objects owned by others, some others just lose their sense of responsibility for the objects used for access.

“I pay less attention to park full straight or spare.” (Patrik)

“I wouldn't dare to have such a foreign car there, because my god if something happens to it so that I don't damage someone else's car... I'd rather smash my own. So, the interesting thing is that a car is already of such value that... I wouldn't want to drive in someone else's car...” (Lili)

One important motivation for sharing and access-based consumption is to reduce financial risk (Morewedge et al., 2021), however, perceptions of money change with access-based consumption. The convenience of access can lead to looser management of finances (e.g., unused online services are not cancelled) or give the amount paid for the use of items a sense of entitlement to less economical use (e.g., fuel consumption).

“I often start with floor gas. Consumption is absolutely not interesting because you have gas that you pay for. While one obviously pays attention to not driving 180 on a highway... If it's obviously all in one price, and you just sit down, you go where you need to go.” (Patrik)

“Well, honestly that is how I think about this fitness app anyway. It's a pure waste of money, for example, and I don't even look at it ... The big advantage of these subscriptions is that they suck in ... Now that's interesting, I'm wondering why that's not the way money is perceived.” (Anna)

The consumers interviewed in our research, live in the capital city without exception, and the financial situation of their household is typically above average. Although our interviewees experience access-based consumption as more sustainable consumption and therefore with a higher social value, their main advantage is their individual adaptability, thus supporting the increased presence of individualism. Access-based consumption gives respondents the opportunity to use “immediate,” “instant,” and “on-demand” consumption, who can use the available product or service as they please.

A high degree of individualism and a low degree of attachment give liquid consumers freedom of opportunity. Thus, the liquid consumer has several alternatives to meet his needs. You can choose to arrive at a location with car sharing service and then leave by taxi or public transport. Alternatively, you can choose to choose the nearest car from your car sharing service provider or the service provider that offers your favourite car type. Freedom of choice,

therefore, means not only substitutability but also a large number of combinations of complementary uses, including alternation between access-based consumption and ownership-based.

“Obviously as many options as possible... gave me the freedom to go with MOL Limo or Share NOW if there was no Green Go nearby.” (Matyi)

Conclusion and limitation

Our phenomenology study revealed that respondents have a different attitude and behaviour towards solid and liquid alternatives during consumption. This difference is routed, in line with literature, mainly in the question of ownership, thus, our study revealed a differentiation in feelings as well. The positive attitude towards access-based services and the high level of parallel and combined usage of solid and liquid consumption might forecast a further increase in liquid consumption. Although, this study has limitation in terms of sample size and composition (only Hungarian respondents), it gives us remarkable insights to design further research. Examining consumer behaviour in liquid consumption, with a special focus on switching among possessed and access-based alternatives, might be critical to estimate and guide consumers' choice, buying frequency, loyalty. Future research agenda should prioritize switching in liquid consumption to support practitioners maintaining their sustainable business.

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