

The Impact of Technology-Mediated Consumption on Identity: the Case of Airbnb

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Abstract

The affordances introduced by digital technologies are reshaping consumption practices. Individuals are now engaging in networks rather than markets, and ownership-based consumption is giving way to the previously unattractive access-based, collaborative consumption. Such consumption practices produce different relationships between objects and personal identity, on which there is limited research. By means of an ethnographic study, we analyze the nature of consumer-object relationships in the context of Airbnb – a technology-mediated consumption model based on accessing private possessions. Our findings suggest that the consumption experience is meaningful and self-enriching if consumers identify with the accessed consumption object. However, identification is compromised when there is a perceived mismatch, diminishing the consumption experience. Nevertheless, access-based consumption is sometimes a reflexive strategy used to signal anti-consumption ideologies. We thus propose that technology-mediated, access-based consumption is challenging the normative power of ownership in the construction of identity, changing the symbolic repertoire of the contemporary consumer.

1. Introduction

During the last decade, we have witnessed a proliferation of consumption models that encourage the individual to step away from traditional markets and experience alternative modes of acquisition and consumption that depart from the ideal of ownership [2]. Most observers attribute this phenomenon to the affordances introduced by digital technologies, which encourage individuals to engage in networks rather than markets, renewing their inclination towards community values [34] and ethical consumption [27]. By enabling the coordination of activities in the form of “obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services ... through community-based online services” [27, p. 1],

digital technologies are redefining consumption practices by eliminating the economical and institutional reasons for unsustainable (i.e. having negative societal impact), individual and ownership-oriented consumption [27].

One type of collaborative consumption is access-based consumption, consisting of “transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place” [2, p. 881]. Rather, consumers engage in networks that enable them to gain temporary access to (underused) resources that are too costly or non-viable to own. These new consumption practices are shifting the sociocultural politics of consumption away from the historical normative power of ownership, towards the acceptance of the previously less desirable modes of consumption such as renting or bartering [2, 34].

However, consumer research has historically centered its interest on ownership-based consumption, while alternative consumption modes have enjoyed limited attention. Few exceptions are, among others, Belk’s [7], [8] conceptual inquiries into the dynamics of sharing, Belk and Coon’s [6] study on the social and economic dimensions of gift exchange, and Chen’s [13] account of experiential access to art. These pioneering studies have shown that alternative modes of consumption are underlaid by different consumer desires and values. Moreover, while ownership is said to contribute to and reflect consumers’ identities, embodying their experiences, ideals, and desires [5], alternative consumption practices produce different object-self relationships, of which there is limited academic knowledge [2].

In this paper, we focus on access-based consumption practices enabled by digital technologies from the perspective of the extended self [5]. In doing so, we attempt to shed some light on consumer identity projects in the advent of the ‘sharing turn’ [24]. By means of an ethnographic, exploratory study, we analyze the nature of consumer-object relationships in the context of technology-mediated home sharing practices. We investigate the case of Airbnb – a consumption model based on access to privately owned possessions. We

thus address the research opportunities identified by Bardhi and Eckhart, who call for future papers to examine the nature of access-based consumption contexts in which “identity and the hedonic value of the objects are more salient” [2, p. 896]. We aim to answer the following research question:

How does technology-mediated access-based consumption influence identity construction?

2. Theoretical background

In this section, we first discuss the emergence of collaborative consumption. We then review extant literature on identity construction through consumption, highlighting the knowledge gap we are addressing.

2.1. Changing patterns of consumption

Ownership has historically been perceived as the ultimate expression of consumption desire [2]. Because consumers have a long-term interaction with owned consumption objects, these become crucial in anchoring, displaying, and transforming the self over time [5]. Moreover, because the individual has full property rights, ownership acts like a self-to-other boundary mechanism, privileging the owner to allow or deny others access to the owned possession [37]. Ideologically, ownership provides a sense of security and freedom, and a means to signal adulthood, responsibility, and wealth [2]. In contrast, forms of access such as renting or borrowing have historically been considered an inferior mode of consumption [35], signaling lower social status, and inferior financial well-being [2]. However, in the context of an increasingly dynamic society characterized by dematerialization and flexible social structures [32], consumers’ attitudes towards accessing goods are changing [2, 23]. Increasing evidence suggests that traditional forms of consumption are giving way to alternative consumption practices [24] wherein sharing and access rather than ownership are the guiding norms.

While the term “collaborative consumption” was originally coined by Felson and Spaeth [19] to describe “events in which one or more persons consume economic goods and services in the process of engaging in joint activities with one or more others” [19, p. 614], the term is now associated with the digital revolution. Developments in digital technologies not only facilitate co-creation of user-generated information goods, but the “collaborative spirit of the Internet” [11, p. 917] also changes individuals’ attitudes toward consumption of material goods and services. In the context of an increasingly information-intensive society, the allure of ownership is being washed away by networks

supporting collaborative consumption of available, but underutilized resources.

While there is a consensus that such complex, large-scale collaborative consumption models would not be possible without the affordances introduced by digital technologies, other contributing factors have also been suggested. Many contend that collaborative consumption is appealing because of the economic benefits it provides (e.g. lower costs), which was essential to their spreading in the wake of the economic crisis of the late 2000s [2, 11, 41]. Others have argued that this phenomenon is fueled by a capitalist marketplace trading in cultural resources rather than material objects [23, 43]. Ozanne and Ballantine [29] identified four types of consumers, each fueled by different motives to pursue sharing and accessing goods, and conclude that collaborative consumption may be one form of consumer resistance behavior.

Bardhi and Eckhardt [2] propose that access-based consumption, a form of collaborative consumption based on temporary access to goods, can vary across six dimensions: (1) temporality, (2) anonymity, (3) market mediation, (4) consumer involvement, (5) type of accessed object, and (6) political consumerism. Based on their framework, this study advances the current understanding of technology-enabled access-based consumption, by studying the case of Airbnb. However, because temporality, anonymity, and type of accessed object are context-dependent values, we exclude them from our analysis. Although they may vary across contexts and shape consumption experiences, it is beyond the purpose of this paper to analyze such differences. Instead, in trying to understand consumer identity projects in the Airbnb consumption context, it is considered particularly relevant to discuss issues of market mediation, consumer involvement, and political consumerism, which directly relate to the ideological [27] experiential [41], and social [34] values that are said to fuel collaborative consumption practices.

Market mediation. Access-based consumption models can be either market-mediated or non-market-mediated [2]. On the one hand, there are those non-profit organizations (e.g. CouchSurfing) where users gain access to others’ possessions without paying any compensation. These models are more suggestive to the anti-consumption ideology fueling collaborative consumption. On the other hand, there are the for-profit organizations that developed C2C online business models, allowing users to offer and gain access to consumption objects in exchange of a fee (e.g. Airbnb). Market involvement may, however, deter consumers from identifying with the accessed object [2].

Consumer involvement. The degree of consumer involvement in the consumption act can affect the level of consumer identification with the accessed object [2].

Access-based consumption models imply either a limited or an extensive consumer involvement. Models in which consumer co-creation is extensive imply a high degree of consumer involvement. Examples include Zipcar whose members pick up and deliver the cars, gas them up, and report problems [2], and Airbnb where consumer involvement in the planning process is higher than in traditional vacation planning, mediated by travel agencies. On the other hand, there are those models that do not involve a high level of involvement and where co-creation is not essential (e.g. Netflix). In such cases, the level of consumer commitment and identification with the accessed object is usually low.

Political consumerism. Political motives for accessing consumption objects include increased environmental concern [41], anti-consumerism [29], or anticar ownership culture [2]. Politically-motivated access-based consumption contexts might be those involving car sharing such as BlaBlaCar, which are telling of the anticar ownership movement. On the other hand, there are those apolitical access-based consumption practices, “formed predominantly to fill a market gap” [2, p. 885]. Along this dimension, consumer identification, relationships between users, and community feelings are affected.

2.2. The role of consumption in identity construction

The role of artifacts in consumption practices has been the focus of many years of socio-cultural research on consumption. Here, material objects are seen as units of language-like systems that are meant to be displayed in order to validate one’s social claims. By focusing the attention to the “intrinsic materiality of many consumption practices” [44, p. 118], the material culture perspective of consumption has defined objects as mechanisms that generate cultural meanings by acting “as signs of the self” [33, p. 335]. In line with this, we conceptualize consumption through Airbnb as one paved with signs of the self, where one gains access to others’ valued material possessions. However, we subscribe to Belk’s [5] more comprehensive understanding of the self that moves beyond valued possessions to include categories such as ideas, experiences, persons, or places in the construction of the extended self. Because access-based consumption practices depart from the ideal of ownership [2], emphasizing community values [34] and anti-consumption [29], they are characterized by acts of sharing and giving that express a sense of the self through ‘being’ as opposed to ‘having’ [5]. The less the self-identity is defined through ownership, the more is it oriented towards community values [21], which are said to underlie collaborative consumption practices.

In his landmark paper “Possessions and the extended self”, Belk [5] contends that “our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities” [5, p. 139]. However, by possessions he means more than individual ownership of objects. His theory extends previous conceptualizations of the self-plus-possessions to include persons, places, ideas, and even group possessions. Another significant contribution of this paper is that the self is not seen as something incorporeal. To the contrary, Belk contends that the self is embodied in the things we surround ourselves with, our immediate others, or even dear places.

Belk’s [5] paper has accelerated the interest of consumer researchers in investigating the sociocultural aspects of consumption practices and particularly their role in people’s life narratives. As such, we now have a better understanding of the way individuals construct both their social identity and self-perception through consumption objects [5, 17], and we are more knowledgeable of the implications that processes of disposition of possessions have [14].

Prior research on identity projects has also focused on the challenges faced by consumers in constructing and maintaining a coherent self-identity in the context of fragmented societies [3, 1]. Postmodernist researchers argue that in the face of an overwhelming abundance of identity options, the contemporary consumer abandons the desire for a coherent self-narrative [20] and instead possesses a multiple sense of self with contradictory identities. In contrast, critical accounts on consumerism define lifestyle consumption as a mechanism aimed at coping with the continued desire of individuals for coherent self-narratives in the absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning [15]. Cushman [15] sees the contemporary self as a void consumers relentlessly try to fill up by engaging in conspicuous consumption. In response to changing consumer needs, collaborative consumption is emerging as a means of cultivating and managing such coherent self-narratives [3]. However, the Internet and digital technologies influence the means and context of identity construction. Prior research has shown how individuals present themselves online depending on the settings [4, 46]. Extant literature suggests that identity construction in technology-mediated environments is characterized by individuals’ tendency to create online personae that differ from their “real life” identities [39]. However, collaborative consumption practices are often grounded in both the virtual and physical realms where the web is but a “weapon of mass collaboration” [46], enabling a resurgence of community values and shared meanings [34]. Consumer identity projects are shaped by both principles of online, disembodied interaction [46] and the need to anchor such interaction in the physical realm, where the search for social ties and human

contact prevails [46]. While prior research has addressed the process of identity construction through alternative consumption practices [e.g. 6, 7, 8, 13, 29], consumer identity projects in technology-mediated consumption contexts is, with a few exceptions [2, 11, 9], an under-researched topic. In this paper, we contribute to the nascent research on the role of technology-mediated access-based consumption in identity construction by focusing on Airbnb. Airbnb is a technology-mediated consumption environment which encourages particular values, such as community feelings, human contact, and shared meanings [45].

3. Context of study: peer-to-peer traveling

One of the business areas in which access-based consumption practices have flourished is travel. Examples like Airbnb, VRBO, and CouchSurfing are at the forefront in offering P2P traveling alternatives to tourists looking to avoid standard accommodation, either for ideological (e.g. anti-consumerism) or pragmatic reasons (e.g. lower prices), or due to the type of benefits sought (e.g. experiential consumption). These Internet-enabled collaborative traveling models disrupt the traditional tourism industry [26] because they involve individuals renting or accessing underused living spaces at lower costs than those incurred by traditional holiday rental services, thus offering appealing alternatives to traditional vacation experiences.

Airbnb is perhaps the most well-known P2P traveling service. The company describes itself as "a trusted community marketplace for people to list, discover and book unique accommodations around the world". Airbnb facilitates short-term rentals in over 190 countries, and has rapidly grown in popularity since its founding in 2008. Botsman and Rogers [34] describe Airbnb as a mix between nonmonetary travel exchanges (e.g. CouchSurfing) and hotels. Airbnb is thus the middle ground between sharing and marketplace transactions. While hosts do share their homes on Airbnb, this consumption model is market-mediated because users pay in order to access the listed spaces. Nevertheless, because Airbnb consumption involves accessing privately owned possessions, issues related to identity construction and the sign value of objects are both salient and complex. Thus, this specific case is particularly appropriate for our inquiry into consumer identity projects in the context of technology-enabled access-based consumption. As a research approach, case studies generally aim at understanding the dynamics of particular settings [16]. Case studies are particular appropriate for "sticky, practice-based problems where the experiences of the actors are important and the

context of action is critical" [10, p. 369]. Thus, a case study was considered appropriate for our research purposes, because we seek to understand the sociotechnical context of access-based consumption practices in which new patterns of identity construction emerge.

4. Method

The research draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. For conducting the observations, we booked accommodation through Airbnb.com.

We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of Airbnb users. The focus of the interviews was on the personal experiences of the participants when using Airbnb. The interviews lasted between 18 and 89 minutes with an average of 33 minutes, and were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for data coding and analysis purposes. The interviews were conducted from October to November, 2015. In terms of demographic variables, the group of research participants was relatively homogeneous in terms of educational level and age. Participants were adults between 23 and 41 years old, living in urban areas, and having achieved at least undergraduate educational level. Our sample thus reflects typical users of technology-mediated, collaborative consumption platforms [36].

The data from the interviews was supplemented by participant observations, focusing on three types of relationships: guest-space, guest-host, and guest-guest. The purpose of participant observations was to acquire a more grounded understanding of the physical encounter between users and the accessed object of consumption. For this purpose, one of the researchers was a guest in Airbnb shared apartments. During the observations, the researcher was both self-reflexive [18] concerning own Airbnb accommodation experiences and an observer of the other participants and the situation studied. During each participant observation, the researcher wrote down condensed notes in the form of phrases and short sentences, which were shortly after expanded into detailed, verbatim accounts of each field session [38]. Moreover, the researcher kept a fieldwork diary detailing own experiences as an Airbnb guest.

We conducted the analysis of the data using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. During the analytical process we went through several iterations of data coding and analysis to develop an understanding of the phenomenon as a whole [40]. This implied a back-and-forth movement between individual data sets and the emerging understanding of the data as a whole. First, each data set was independently coded using an

inductive approach. At this stage, the focus was on understanding participants' individual accounts of their Airbnb experiences in relation to their personal background, motivation for traveling, and lifestyles. Then, a cross-reading of the whole data set followed, wherein codes that emerged from the individual readings were compared and contrasted across data sets. At this stage, the focus was on identifying holistic patterns [40] concerning the meanings and experiences of the participants and other socio-cultural aspects (e.g. consumption habits, lifestyle). As such, several common themes emerged. These themes were used as a basis for further, deductive NVivo coding following a structured approach. For this purpose, a coding scheme was developed based on our research question and theoretical framework. At this stage, we related the inductively identified themes to the theoretically informed codes (i.e. consumer involvement, market-mediation, and political consumerism). Lastly, we synthesized the cross-referenced codes into thematic categories that guided the subsequent writing process.

5. Findings

Our analysis identifies two main aspects of consumption in the context of Airbnb: first, that the act of hosting is reciprocated beyond its monetary value, leading to inter-personal exchanges. Second, that the functional value of Airbnb consumption has symbolic implications due to the emerging cultural associations with access-based consumption as a "more economically savvy and [...] flexible form of consumption" [2, p. 890]. We elaborate on this below.

5.1. Beyond mediated reciprocity

According to Bardhi and Eckhardt [2], market mediation in access-based consumption practices influences consumer-object relationships. Because in the context of Airbnb the "object" of consumption is the accommodation service as a whole and not only the rented space, hosts are essential to the way consumers perceive their Airbnb experiences. As such, market-mediation in this context affects not only guest-space relationships but also guest-host relationships. While Airbnb is a market-mediated business model, Yannopoulou et al. [45] found that 'inter-personal exchange' and 'human contact' are core discourses surrounding the Airbnb brand. In line with this, our findings suggest that values such as community belongingness and social embeddedness are part of the Airbnb user identity projects. The nature of Airbnb guest-host relationships reflects the very idea that Airbnb is the middle ground between "nonmonetary

travel exchanges" and hotels or hostels [34]. Even though market mediated, Airbnb users often feel compelled to make gestures that go beyond monetary value and as such, it can enable guest-host interactions and lead to inter-personal relationships. This is in line with Yannopoulou, Moufahim, and Bian's findings that Airbnb entails "meaningful life enrichment, human contact, access and authenticity" [45, p. 89]. Indeed, our research participants reported the need to offer small gifts on top of the fee they were charged as a way of expressing their gratitude towards the hosts who had welcomed them into their homes: *Adrija: And another thing is that even if we have paid something, we brought wine and some sweets for the kids or something, to leave just a thank you gift for them because they have accommodated us into their house.*

The excerpt above suggests that Airbnb consumption may be perceived as an expression of deeper values, and the act of hosting is still social in nature even though payment is involved. Because hosts invite people into their private homes and personal spaces, they display trust in total strangers, which some guests perceive as an act of kindness that cannot be price-tagged. Adrija's account is particularly interesting because she explained that while she did not interact with her hosts, she felt it necessary to offer "a thank you gift" in order to reciprocate the hosting act.

5.2. P2P: Beyond convenience

The benefits that consumers derive from Airbnb as a brand are nothing but equivocal. The findings of this study are in line with Bardhi and Eckhardt's [2] claim that the functional and symbolic values of collaborative consumption have varying significance because utility and functionality are part of the contemporary symbolic repertoire of consumption. In a similar trend, Airbnb users appear to include the functional aspects of P2P traveling in their construction of identity as conscious, green consumers. Our research participants revealed that the choice of accessing P2P accommodation services is more often than not underlain by utilitarian motives. Good value for money and the ability to access otherwise cost-prohibitive neighborhoods were among the pragmatic reasons for choosing Airbnb accommodation services. However, for some users, the use value of P2P traveling has symbolic implications. Alexandra talks about the possibility of living in residential areas as a key reason to seek accommodation on Airbnb. However, by being able to access residential areas, she derives value from her accommodation experiences that goes beyond mere functional benefits: *Alexandra: I mean, it's a different way of experiencing the city because you usually just see these buildings, you know... very historical, just from the outside. And I think*

it's a different experience just by sleeping and being in there, and trying to imagine whom was this kind of buildings built for and who used to live there.

Airbnb enables experiential traveling, which according to the interviewees enrich their lives. As such, expanding one's horizons through P2P traveling is part of the Airbnb user's identity narrative. Indeed, use value alone may fail to bring satisfaction to the Airbnb user, because in this context value for money implies the ability to have a "different experience" at an affordable cost. However, "value" holds different meanings to different users. For the ones in search for a "good place to sleep", value means proper, maybe hotel-like conditions at lower costs. These users typically spend less time in finding "the right accommodation" and as such, have a lower degree of involvement in the consumption process. But for many, value implies the ability to have an authentic and possibly life-enriching experience that cannot be offered by competing accommodation alternatives within the same price range. Users seeking the experiential side of Airbnb appear to be more involved in the consumption process, which usually translates into an enhanced, more personal experience.

Differences in the way individuals consume Airbnb services appear across dimensions of personality and what we term "travel desires". In terms of personality, individuals describing themselves as introverts are not driven by relational aspects of Airbnb consumption, seeking instead good value for money. In contrast, respondents who described themselves as extroverts emphasized the relational dimension as important, with "meet the locals", "feel the vibe", and "exchange of stories" being primary reasons for choosing Airbnb. In terms of travel desires, the research participants fall into one of two categories of traveling: "go to see" and "go to feel". The "go to see" users prioritize value in terms of security, access to facilities, and proximity to tourist attractions. The "go to feel" users derive value from living like locals, staying in buildings typical for the country or area they are visiting. In terms of involvement in the consumption process, these users appear to spend more time in finding the "right accommodation" and as such, a match between the online presentation of the accommodation and what they actually receive is imperative for an optimal consumption experience.

Furthermore, evidence from the interviews suggests that Airbnb can also be an expression of one's consumption ideologies and desired social image. Bardhi and Eckhardt report a shift in the historical stigmatization of access-based consumption leading to the emergence of technology-mediated collaborative consumption as a "cool, trendy, hip, green consumption alternative" [2, p. 890]. The early adopters of such

trends tend to use their alternative consumption practices in constructing their identity [28].

The symbolic value of Airbnb consumption also becomes evident from a type of self-selection of people that identify with the concept behind Airbnb. This has been suggested by John, who interpreted the "controlled nonchalance" of his host as a way to signal a sort of loose-tie community belongingness and as a mechanism of selecting the type of people that will choose her place through Airbnb: **John:** *All these [the vibe of the home] made me understand that there was a sort of controlled and intended nonchalance, the creation of a suitable intimacy. "Yes, a certain type of people will come to my place, somehow the niche people, just like me. And yes, this kind of people prefer the things that are not standard, they appreciate the differences." A sort of film directing, in the limits of courtesy.*

Indeed, private possessions are significant to the consumption experience in many ways. Evidence from the interviews and observations suggests that Airbnb users tend to access homes that fit their taste and personality. Harmony between the Airbnb guest and the host's possessions is important to the experience, which can be explained by Belk's [5] contention that cherished possessions are not a random assortment of items. Rather, they are tokens of one's life, tastes, and accomplishments that together form a coherent narrative and are important reflections of one's inner core. Because the possessions convey a consistent and meaningful message, the guests knowingly or unknowingly decode their symbolic properties and thus gain insights into the personality of the owner. Just as a match between individuals' personalities is a precondition to any meaningful relationship, a fit between the guest's personality and the host's possessions leads to a more meaningful consumption experience and may trigger feelings of community belongingness.

On the other hand, when participants mentioned less enjoyable experiences, the issue of person-space mismatches emerged. For instance, Ioana recalls staying in a "messy" student apartment, which leads her to characterize it as an "interesting experience" that, however, did not fit her style: *The place was a shared apartment between students that were very kind of hippie, which I like, it had a very interesting vibe, but it was not really my vibe. So I liked observing it but...*

This mismatch subsequently leads to a consumer-object and consumer-host detachment that prevents the user from engaging in meaningful ways with the accessed object. Such situations appear to create barriers to the inclusion of Airbnb consumption in the construction of self-identity, because feelings of community belongingness are missing from the consumption experience. Furthermore, when the

accessed space is too personal or the objects are perceived to be of particular value to the owner, a feeling of mild anxiety towards using the space and the objects emerges. Our research participants reported feeling slightly anxious and uncomfortable when the room they booked was too personal and covered with tokens of the owner's private life. Griffiths and Gilly [25] found that behaviors like spreading personal effects such as books, clothing, or food items in public spaces signal a lack of desire to share the space. This behavior is understood as a self-to-other boundary-regulation mechanism that communicates "ownership" of the space. Such signs of self-to-other boundaries raise another barrier to the process of consumer identification with accessed objects and the subsequent consumer involvement in the consumption experience. On the other hand, when the room is devoid of any personality, the experience is diminished to one resembling a stay in a hotel room, and as such the experiential dimension of Airbnb consumption is missing.

Findings of this study suggest that the "middle ground" nature of Airbnb (i.e. between non-monetary travel exchanges and marketplace transactions) attracts different types of users. These users differ in their motivation for pursuing collaborative consumption, their level of involvement in the consumption process, and in the nature of their interaction with other Airbnb users. We discuss these findings in what follows.

6. Discussion

Airbnb consumption is perceived by users both as a functional and experiential practice. Factors such as good value for money, proximity to interest points, and access to residential neighborhoods incentivize individuals to consider Airbnb as a viable alternative to traditional accommodation. However, the value that users derive from their accommodation experience goes beyond functional benefits. Airbnb consumption is driven by the desire for meaningful, life-enriching experiences through access to authentic and personalized accommodation spaces. The belief that Airbnb allows users to meet people, explore a city, and understand its culture from the vantage point of a local resident [42] is central to the narratives of most participants of this study. Furthermore, discourses of community [45] are also common among Airbnb users. This contradicts Bardhi and Eckhardt's [2] claim that market-mediation in access-based consumption is likely to discourage brand communities. Our findings suggest that when goods are accessed through a marketplace, i.e. when individuals physically meet, consumers perceive the "mediator" (in this case the Airbnb platform) as a mere facilitator of collective, sustainable behaviors.

However, differences in the way individuals consume Airbnb accommodation emerged across dimensions of personality (introvert vs. extrovert) and travel desires ("go to see" vs. "go to feel"). Variations in these dimensions lead to different Airbnb consumption practices. Figure 1 illustrates the different types of Airbnb users, suggesting the ways each construct their identity narratives through Airbnb consumption. As such, across this matrix, an Airbnb user can be either "the friend", "the pragmatic", "the outgoing", or "the experience-seeker" traveler.

For "the pragmatic" users, Airbnb is not the first choice. They prioritize value in terms of cleanliness, location, and facilities. The fact that Airbnb is market-mediated provides these users a sense of security, and as such they are less prone to spend increased amounts of time searching for Airbnb accommodation. Their motivation for using collaborative platforms rests in the perceived use value they gain.

Users belonging to "the friend" type look for meaningful interactions with hosts and other locals with whom they might develop long-term friendships. The emphasis here is on the relational dimension of Airbnb, and thus shared accommodation spaces are preferred. The authenticity discourse [45] is present, but the focus is on people rather than on the accessed space [42]. The accessed space is important to the extent that it reflects similarities between the identity of the guest and that of the host. This boosts the desire for meaningful interaction such as exchanges of life stories, which in turn enhances the community feeling. Because the interpersonal exchange discourse [45] is pervasive, users identified as being "the friend" type perceive Airbnb as an alternative to CouchSurfing, and as such market-mediation does not alter the community feeling. Discourses of sustainability and anti-consumerism [22] might also be underlying their preference for alternative accommodation practices such as Airbnb.

"The outgoing" guests are also motivated by a need for interaction. However, their emphasis is on fleeting interaction. Thus, long-term connections are unlikely to be established. Their traveling habits can be best described as a mix between "checking" the touristic attractions and "blending in". Low prices are essential to their accommodation choice and their involvement in selecting the consumption object is limited to finding the cheapest alternative. As such, they are the type of travelers typical to youth hostels. However, Airbnb is a viable alternative because it can provide the same "vibe", while enabling access to better facilities.

Lastly, "the experience-seekers" identify with Airbnb's brand identity, which revolves around values such as homeliness, uniqueness, and authenticity [45]. As such, their Airbnb choice is influenced by the possibility to access more interesting areas of a city, and

they derive value from living like a local. They conceive of traveling as a life-enriching experience. To this end, the homes they access should reflect the owner’s idiosyncrasies and foster feelings of homeliness, but they should also reflect the particularities of the area in terms of architecture and artifacts. Their accommodation experience is enhanced by the ability to relate to the identity behind the accessed possessions and for this, they spend more time in selecting their accommodation.

Our findings show that consumers construct their identity with what they can access [9]. Although the benefits consumers derive from Airbnb consumption may seem of a utilitarian nature (i.e. common use of resources at low costs), our study shows that use value in technology-enabled access-based consumption is part of the contemporary consumer’s identity projects. This is in line with Bardhi and Eckhart’s [2] contention that the new symbolic associations with access as an economically savvy and flexible form of consumption have turned the use value of consumption into sign value. However, contrary to their findings that such transactional consumption does not enable the consumer

to extend the self through the object of consumption, we show that in some access-based consumption contexts individuals do seek to develop a perceived sense of ownership of the accessed object. As such, when consumers are highly involved in the consumption process, e.g. in searching for and selecting Airbnb homes, as well as planning their travels based on individual needs, a temporary sense of ownership emerges. This is in line with previous research on perceived ownership [e.g. 30] showing that individuals can develop meaningful relationships with objects even though no transfer of ownership is involved.

Furthermore, in the context of the identity challenges faced by contemporary consumers, our study shows that technology-enabled alternative consumption practices solve the tensions between the continued desire of individuals for a coherent self-narrative and the overwhelming plentitude of identity options available in the marketplace. By seeking to access spaces that match their identities, our research participants exhibited no signs of abandoning the desire for a coherent self-narrative, thus challenging Firat and Venkatesh’s [20] notion of multiple and contradictory identities.

		Personality	
		<i>Extrovert</i>	<i>Introvert</i>
Travel Desires	<i>Go to see</i>	<p><u>The outgoing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction is a choice trigger but deeper, long-term connections with hosts and other guests are not likely to be established • Shared apartment is not a problem • Has predefined schedule, but is flexible if something comes along • Location in close proximity to interest points is desired • Experience is enhanced by people and fleeting interactions 	<p><u>The pragmatic</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value for money is important • Hotel-like accommodation is preferred • Emphasis is on conditions in terms of cleanliness, location, and access to facilities • Airbnb is not the first choice • Privacy is a requirement • Experience is enhanced by use value
	<i>Go to feel</i>	<p><u>The friend</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeks to experience the culture and vibe from the vantage point of locals • Looks for meaningful interactions that might develop into long-term friendships • Prefers shared apartments because of the possibility to meet people • Prioritizes spaces that reflect the hosts personalities • The feeling of being part of the community is important to the traveling experience • Airbnb is seen as part of the self-narrative • Experience is enhanced by meaningful exchange of life stories, ideas, and values 	<p><u>The experience-seeker</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Might push himself/herself to interact because he/she wants to discover “the ways of the locals” • Traveling is as a meaningful, personal experience • Seeks “Airbnbs as tourist attractions” • Authenticity and aesthetics are pivotal aspects of Airbnb consumption • The homes should reflect both owner’s identity and the particular style of the area • Experience is enhanced by nicely furnished, personalized and authentic homes

Figure 1. Airbnb user identity matrix

Moreover, when engaging in access-based consumption, our respondents reported feelings of community belongingness and shared meaning and as such depart from individualistic consumption practices aiming at filling up the “void” sense of the self in the absence of such values [15]. Furthermore, technology-mediated access-based consumption implies both virtual and physical interaction among users and between users and the accessed object of consumption. This, in turn, constrains the freedom of online identity claims, as these have to be anchored in the physical world.

In terms of implications for theory, the study adds knowledge to the literature on identity construction through alternative consumption modes. It shows that technology-mediated alternative consumption practices are underlaid by both functional and symbolic values, and that individuals use these values differently in their construction of identity. The functional appeal of collaborative platforms such as Airbnb thus leads to a segregated user typology. Thus, those individuals fueled by ideological motives to pursue access-based consumption use the functionality of such practices to construct their identity as conscious, green, hip consumers. On the other hand, issues of practicality such as reduced risk, good value for money, and ease of use are facets of technology-mediated access-based consumption that more pragmatic users include in their “economically-savvy” consumer identity narratives. Furthermore, these users differ in their degree of involvement in the consumption process. For the ideologically-driven individuals, a match between their personality and the accessed objects leads to a more meaningful consumption experience. Consequentially, their involvement in the consumption process is extensive, even prior to the actual consumption experience (i.e. online). One can argue that for the collaborative platforms to instill a sense of belongingness and shared meaning among these users, a coordination between online presentation (of the users and consumption objects alike) and physical performance is imperative. On the other hand, the functionality-driven users are involved in the consumption process to a lesser extent. For instance, such users tend to rely mostly on the platform-provided filters in searching for their consumption object, and they are less prone to read profile descriptions, browse through photo albums or interact with other users online.

These findings also have several practical implications. They show that a unified marketing strategy for collaborative brands might not be advantageous. Because of the functional values underlying collaborative consumption, P2P platforms appeal to both pragmatic, and green, conscious consumers. While the second category is more

ideologically-driven and thus more likely to respond to brand-building strategies emphasizing community values and facilitating connections to like-minded people [8], such strategies might deter the pragmatics and introverts from pursuing collaborative consumption, as they emphasize the functionality and ease of use of such platforms, and are not keen on interacting. In the case of Airbnb, for instance, the identity matrix (Figure 1) could serve segmentation purposes. While “the experience-seeker” and “the friend” user types identify with Airbnb’s main brand narrative, “the pragmatic” type might benefit from a different Airbnb consumption experience. A wise course of action for Airbnb would thus be to develop different service portfolios for the four different market segments and to offer a more tailored consumption experience.

While offering some insights into identity construction through access-based consumption, our study is not without limitations. Because it focuses solely on market-mediated P2P travel practices, our study depicts only a fraction of the complex collaborative consumption phenomenon. Future studies should examine the distinctions between identity construction in market-mediated as compared to non-monetary, collaborative exchanges. Another meaningful undertaking would be to further investigate and elaborate on the differences between the distinct types of collaborative platforms users. Such studies would shed additional light on the political consumerism dimension of collaborative consumption practices and its implications for consumer identity projects.

8. References

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