

Speed talk Sessions

[F16] Firms and individuals in transition: Exploring consumer entrepreneurship in the sharing economy

Laura Piscicelli [Netherlands]¹ , Stefan Haefliger [UK]² , Fleura Bardhi [UK]²

Utrecht University¹, Cass Business School - City, University of London²

There is growing consensus that addressing pressing global challenges such as climate change and energy security requires systemic change. That is, a fundamental shift in policy, business and consumer practices towards more sustainable directions (Geels et al., 2008). Sustainability transitions – often triggered by the emergence of new technologies – have typically been studied using the theoretical lens of the multi-level perspective on socio-technical transitions (MLP) (Geels 2002, 2011) with its closely related concepts of strategic niche management (Kemp et al., 1998; Smith and Raven, 2012) and transition management (Rotmans et al., 2001), and the technological innovation systems approach (TIS) (Bergek et al., 2008; Hekkert et al., 2007) (Markard et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, both the MLP and TIS conceptual frameworks have been criticised for not paying enough attention to the micro-level unit of analysis of discrete actors (e.g. individuals, firms and other organisations) and their strategies, resources and capabilities (Markard and Truffer, 2008; Farla et al., 2012). Hence, sustainable transitions research has recently started to investigate the role of different types of actors in influencing and adapting to sustainability-oriented transformation processes. Most studies have focussed on various organisations and their dynamic interplay, including firms (e.g. Alkemade et al., 2011; Hörisch, 2015; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013), public authorities and policymakers (e.g. Bakker et al., 2012), as well as civil society and social movements (e.g. Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Penna and Geels, 2012).

This paper aims to add to the growing body of sustainability transitions literature on sustainable entrepreneurship by exploring a novel and under-theorised actor: the ‘consumer as micro-entrepreneur’. The latter is conceptualised as an individual consumer that, typically operating within the boundaries of a firm, acts as a micro-entrepreneur (e.g. providing products and services to other consumers either free of charge or for some form of compensation). Entrepreneurial consumers are proliferating on a new breed of digital platforms – such as Airbnb or BlaBlaCar – that match consumers in need of something (e.g. a holiday home or a car ride) with consumers willing to supply that good or service to them. The explosive growth of these (peer-to-peer) platforms has been at the core of the ‘sharing economy’ phenomenon: the recent rise of alternative business and consumption practices based on the shared access and use of underutilised resources (Botsman and Rogers, 2011; Belk, 2014).

In order to examine the emergence of the entrepreneurial consumer and its role as a key, albeit overlooked, actor in sustainability transitions, we selected the sharing economy as the context for this study. Building on previous research that conceptualised the sharing economy as a niche of innovation disrupting established socio-technical regimes (Martin, 2016), we formulated the following research questions: How do consumers become micro-entrepreneurs in the sharing economy? How do consumers as micro-entrepreneurs influence (either facilitating or hindering) a transition towards sustainability? To answer these questions, we conducted narrative interviews (Kim, 2016; Davis, 2013) with users of different sharing economy platforms.

While data collection and analysis are still ongoing, this paper presents some preliminary results. First, we revisit and expand the concept of ‘consumer entrepreneurship’ (Huefner and Hunt, 1994) by showing how the practices and motivations of entrepreneurial consumers engaged in the sharing economy evolve overtime. In particular, we follow the trajectories of their participation across multiple sharing economy platforms to unpack how consumer entrepreneurship comes about and develops. Second, we discuss how consumer participation is shaped by (and, in turn, could shape) each platform’s business model design. We argue that the interplay of consumers and platforms, ultimately, contributes to set the sharing economy transition pathway towards more or less sustainable directions.