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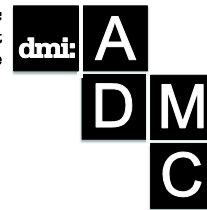
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## Design and Identities: the Case of Carsharing

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*Amongst the collaborative consumptions arising nowadays, sharing is one of the most widespread systems. Sharing traditionally owned objects such as cars has certainly affected the consumer-possession relationship.*

*This paper shows the role of design in both identity and brand community building, in the context of carsharing. The carsharing system Autolib in Paris is the research field of this paper. Data from the interviews is analysed through a grounded theory method.*

*Consistent, homogenous and peculiar car design helps a personal appropriation of a shared car by its users. In addition some design elements contribute to brand community development, mostly by creating shared rituals.*

**Keywords:** Carsharing, Identities, Brand Communities, User Design

## Introduction

Collaborative consumption has emerged as one of the new economic and social trend of the past decade. This new form of consumption entices individuals to commit to a lifestyle of using but no longer having. Hence, the initial focus is not the creation of a new product but its utility, leaving design to become an illusory tool. The job of the marketing research field is to show companies operating in the collaborative consumption arena that design can be the key to success of a shared product. The links between design and marketing are not always easy to see; yet when these disciplines work in tandem the results can be incredible (Berveland and Farrelly, 2011). It is crucial for marketers to understand the power of design, and for designers the influence they have on consumers. By studying new types of consumption involving a design project this research aims to highlight the role played by design in the level of engagement of consumers towards a shared object. In particular this concept is studied in the case of carsharing. How do consumers relate to a product, which instead of being owned as it traditionally was, is now shared by multiple users? What can be the role of design in consumer's involvement towards shared objects?

Those questions are investigated through the study of a carsharing system involving a design project at its core. After presenting a literature review on consumers and their relation to products, user design and sharing, a study focused on Autolib users (Paris carsharing system) provides results with implications for design and marketing managers.

## Literature review and research question

### *The object and the self*

The question of the relationship between objects and their owner has been of major importance in consumer research since the 1980's. Belk (1988) presented a paper in which he identified possessions as being part of the self. He states that 'we are what we own' and draws on prior literature to understand how consumers use products to construct their identity. The car we own for example speaks a lot about who we are. The representation we make of a man who owns a sporty red car will not be the same as that of a man who has a large family car. The car is part of its owner's identity. It represents, as Belk called it, the *extended self* by opposition to the *core self* (who we are, the body, mind, experiences). To illustrate this concept, Belk

studied the loss of objects and the subsequent grieving process, as well as the different ways to incorporate an object to the self. For example controlling the object or knowing it are ways of integration. The implications of his article are major, and the most preeminent one is perhaps the role played by the extended self in generating a meaning in life.

Ahuvia (2005) furthered Belk's research to stress that the opposition between the core and the extended selves is not clear. He inclined readers to see the self more as a continuum, and stated that 'loved' objects can be a strong part of the self. Ahuvia's ideas drew on Cushman's (1990) theory of the empty self. Cushman (1990) argued that consumers' selves are empty and that they endlessly try to fulfil themselves through consumption. Ahuvia's findings were more positive. To him loved objects have the ability to fill the self. Loved objects are defined by the energy and the time spent on them. Cars are traditionally loved objects: people take care of their car; bring it to a repair shop, to the carwash... That is the reason why cars are part of their owner's extended self. Having a strong relationship with the environment and the objects that are in it helps individuals build a strong sense of self.

Belk's research on the relationship between user and the object led to a new definition of the consumption product. For Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) researchers (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), the consumption object has become something that 'groups use' to construct 'practices, identities and meanings – to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experiences and lives' (Bettany, 2007). Bettany showed that objects are indeterminate, mutable, as they co-emerge with the user in action. By this she meant that the action of using an object changes the user (his identity) and the product at the same time (it becomes filled with meaning). This definition highlights the role played by goods in the creation of meanings in consumer's lives.

At the same time social psychologists like Tajfel (1974) studied the role of social groups in relation to identity construction. Tajfel found that a part of an individual's identity comes from the feeling of belonging to a group. He named this concept the social identity. According to Tajfel, behaviours could be located on a continuum, between completely interpersonal behaviour on one side to entirely intergroup behaviour on the other. Identity is thus built in part on possessions and in part on the feeling of belonging to a group.

### *The user at the centre of design focus*

Design today has responsibilities beyond visual culture. It focuses also on branding, service design, production, consumption, etc. (Julier, 2007). Hence, it is important for designers to understand who the consumers in today's society are. Designers make objects that will help individuals build their identity. Buchanan (2001) proposed a definition of design with a central role in the individual's identity construction: 'Design is the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes'. Therefore designers help consumers in the construction of their identity both as individuals and as individuals who are part of social groups. Consumers use products to bring meanings to their lives. How can design interact with identities is of crucial importance. Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) deconstructed the process of new identity construction around the Sony Walkman®. They showed how designers were able, through radical innovation, to transform cultural practices. As practices evolve, meanings and representations of the cultural world also change for consumers, leaving spaces for new identities to emerge. The Walkman encouraged people to listen to music outside of their homes: in public transports, public parks... These new practices lead to the emergence of new significations in the social space. People started to associate the Walkman to youth, technology, to being in movement. A space for a new identity, the 'urban nomad' was thus created.

Stories like the Walkman participated in a change of scope in the discipline of design. Instead of focusing solely on the product or its technology, designers started to centre their thoughts on the people who will use the product. The discipline of design, in its most recent conception, is interested in the actor of the object (Findeli and Bousbaci, 2005). Designers do not speak of consumers, but of project's carrier or users. There can be no design project without thinking about the user first. The design of a new product is an interrogative activity revolving around the question of how to design user experience. Who will use the product, in what context, when and how? Objects are made to answer the needs of a person, but that need has to be identified first. Dubuisson and Hennion (1996) even referred to designers as 'sociologists of the products' in their book studying the relationship between user, use and the object. Studying this relationship in the context of sharing changes the question a little. It is no more object-use-user; it becomes object-use-users. In this context designers have to think about how can different individuals use the same product.

### *Sharing: a new form of consumption*

One of the main trends shaking up traditional consumption today is the emergence of collaborative consumption. Consumers have started to move away from owning and having to using and sharing (Botsman and Roger, 2010). This is no longer a secondary phenomenon. Firms like Airbnb, Couchsurfing or BlablaCar have millions of users (11 millions for Airbnb, 7 millions for Couchsurfing and BlablaCar). A definition of this phenomenon can be found in Botsman and Rogers' (2010) book on the subject: 'Collaborative consumption occurs when people participate in organized sharing, bartering, trading, renting, swapping, and collectives to get the same pleasures of ownership with reduced personal cost and burden, and lower environmental impact'. The authors divided collaborative consumption into three categories: product services system, redistributive systems and collaborative lifestyles. Product service system is about transforming a good into a service, and this is the category where carsharing activities would fall. John (2012) used the term *sharing economies of consumption* to refer to collaborative consumption, and made a distinction between sharing personal objects with others and accessing a third party good. Because users drive cars owned by a company, carsharing would fall into the second type of these economies.

Not all instances of collaborative consumption are about sharing. Nonetheless they are the ones on which this research focuses, because they are likely to disrupt the established relationship between the owner and his possessions. Belk (2010) defined sharing as 'the act and process of distributing what is ours to others for their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use'. For Belk sharing is bound to exist more in close circles (like families or close friendships), yet it is more interesting to study this type of consumption when happening between strangers.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) put forth a new concept they called Access-Based Consumption (ABC). This form of consumption is similar to sharing because no transfer of ownership takes place, but differs from it in the lack of sense of ownership inherent to it. The authors focussed on carsharing as a form of access-based consumption. They studied the US company Zipcar, and found no relationship between the users of the service and the cars they used. Their conclusion was that cars in carsharing system could not participate to the identity construction of the users of the service. In other words, they found that these cars did not belong to the extended self of

their users. However there was no design involved in the project of Zipcar. All the cars used in the system are different; they were not made specifically for a carsharing system. The starting point of this research was to consider that the lack of a design project rendered the appropriation impossible by the users.

### *Research question*

The presented literature explores how design and the construction of consumer identities are linked. Designers know that consumers will use their products to build their identity. One of the current challenges for designers and design managers is to learn how to propose not a product for one individual, but a product shared by many consumers within a service scape. Appropriation of a shared product seems difficult (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) yet it is crucial for the sharing company in order to create a long-term relationship between its products and its consumers. How could design enhance the appropriation of a shared object? This research proposes to observe the role that design plays in helping consumers to build their identity within a sharing system (using both the product and the service). This research believes design to be the core element needed to a sharing system so that consumer can create a relationship with the shared product. How can design help to create a solid relationship between a shared product and its consumer?

## **Methodology**

### *The case of Autolib*

This research focuses on carsharing because it is one of the most visual examples of collaborative consumption. It today exists in many large cities in the Western world and keeps growing continuously.

It was important to focus on a carsharing system that involved a design project at its origin, which is why this research studies the French company Autolib in Paris. Autolib proposes a carsharing system like Zipcar, with the difference that all its cars are the same model. It was important to find a carsharing company that proposed homogeneous products. The models used by Autolib are the electric 'Bluecars' designed by Pininfarina. They are not cars that are seen everyday and everywhere; they are specifically associated with this project.

**Figure 1**



*Figure 1 A Bluecar in Paris*

*Source: Mariordo (Mario Roberto Durán Ortiz, 2012)*

Autolib is a concept that created new consumption practices in Paris, around a product and a service specifically designed for it. This research looks at the impact of the specific design of this shared object on consumer's identity.

### *Methodology*

The case of Autolib is interesting due to the importance of design at the core of the project. The subject was approached with an abductive method, which consists in constant back and forth movements between the field data and the existing literature. A Grounded Theory approach was followed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967); in its latest conception (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which consists in producing an explanation of a phenomena based on field data, while referring to the literature to bring order to the findings. The goal of the grounded theory is to observe the relationship between different concepts, to interpret the sense of the actors' actions. The use of this approach seemed appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research.

Four in-depths-interviews with Autolib users were conducted in Paris. Due to the difficulties in making contact with Autolib users, the respondents



were recruited via word of mouth. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in Paris. Out of the four, three were conducted in a café and one at the respondent's home (Marie). Three respondents were men (Oscar, Thomas and Jean), and all of them were in their mid-twenties. Interviews lasted between forty and seventy minutes. They were semi-structured; to allow new themes to emerge yet controlling that the respondents would not go too far from the research's topics. Interviews were centred on three main themes, to understand the relationships consumers have with the Bluecar, the service infrastructure and other users. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed with content analysis. First the interviews were analysed vertically to allow the researcher to grasp the specificities of each individual in its relationship to the car, the service and other users. Verbatims were sorted into categories and subcategories depending on the theme and subtheme they represented. Then a horizontal analysis was performed to understand the possible differences occurring amongst the respondents on each theme. The results presented below are split into two parts. First the results regarding the role of design in the appropriation of the shared car will be presented. Secondly the contribution of design in the building of a brand community will be addressed.

## Results

### *The Bluecar and the extended self*

This research focuses on the carsharing system Autolib because its products are homogenous. The cars are all the same and the model is called the Bluecar. With more than 2000 Bluecars, the likelihood of taking the same car twice is low. Yet, thanks to the uniformity of the cars users felt as though they were always driving the same car: 'To me it is always the same' (Marie); 'They are quite identical' (Thomas); 'I really feel that it is the same' (Oscar); 'It is always the same car... they have a certain identity inside' (Jean). Because they were always driving the 'same' car, they established a consistency in their use of the car.

The first thing that was remarkable in the interviews was that the four individuals declared to love driving the Bluecar. Jean said: 'I like to drive the Autolib... But otherwise I hate driving normal cars'. Why is driving a Bluecar different? They all referred to the fact that it was an electric car. Marie and Oscar both used terms associated to flying when describing their experience driving the car. The driving was uncommonly smooth because of the

absence of noise. At the same time the car appeared to be extremely reactive. All male respondents talked about how happy they were to be the firsts to take off after a green light.

The four Autolib users described the pleasure they took in controlling the car. 'You change completely your relation to the mechanical part of the car' (Oscar). It seemed as though the electric components allowed the car to become secondary and give way to user experience. The experience portrayed was a fun and entertaining one. References to the toy-like aspect of the car, the easy driving as well as the height of the driver's seat were made to reinforce the feeling of control and fun. Belk (1988) identified ways that allow an object to be part of the extended self of an individual. He recognised that *controlling* the object was one of them. Here, the Bluecar's characteristics gave control to the users, helping them enact an appropriation of the car.

Knowing an object is another way to take ownership of it (Belk, 1988). It means paying attention to details, such as the unusual three lights at the back of the car that allowed Thomas to recognise a Bluecar from afar. Jean described the inside of the Bluecar as being different from any other car, which had for consequence to change the body movement he usually associated with traditional cars. He knew that the doorknob for instance must be pulled up to open, whereas in classic cars it is to be pulled towards you. The respondents were quite proud to show that they mastered the Autolib. Thomas expressed that to him 'it is a little game, playing the guy who masters perfectly the Bluecar'.

The relationship users built with the Bluecar did not exist solely thanks to the car's design. The Bluecar belongs to a system, the Autolib system. Therefore the service also had its role to play. It is necessary to understand that mastering the Autolib for Thomas also included using the system in an efficient manner. Autolib was not just a car to them. It was a 'concept', 'an idea', 'a system', 'an infrastructure' that combined a product (the Bluecar) and a quality service system. As Marie expressed 'Nobody is going to say: 'I'm going to get my car'. We all say: 'I'm going to get Autolib''. Therefore it appeared that when studying the appropriation of the Autolib by its users, both the product design and the service design must be taken into account.

Jean spoke about a 'very intelligent service', which combined with the built-in computer contributed to give the image of a 'smart car'. To Marie it was 'the car of the future' due to the built-in computer that allowed you to book your parking place in advance. Autolib was a way of life for Jean and Oscar; it was 'the simple life' (Jean).

It appeared that the Bluecar and the service system that Autolib offers belonged to the extended self of the respondents. This appropriation seemed to be stronger when the users were driving the car. Thomas said that the Bluecar was 'my car for a limited period of time', Oscar expressed how when he was in the car 'It is mine, it is like if I had a disposable car' and Marie said: 'you see, during the moment I've got it, it belongs to me'. It appeared that there was a real feeling of possession of the car while driving.

The consistency and the particularity of the Bluecar's design (such as the driver's seat height and the silence of the mechanics), combined with the specificities of the services design of Autolib had for consequence to change user practices usually associated to driving. The appropriation of these new habits participated to the construction of a new representation of the driver's identity, revolving around phrases such as 'the smart car', 'the car of the future' and 'the simple life'.

### *Autolib and brand communities*

The research showed that Autolib's Bluecars belonged to the extended self of the individuals who used them. Yet they did not own the car. Autolib is a carsharing system in which they were using the cars, along with thousands of other individuals. Users were, of course, all aware that they were not the sole users of their car. However none of them felt that they were *sharing* it. To them, it was a very 'personal experience'.

Sharing, as Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) proposed, implies an altruistic dimension that here the respondents did not feel at all. None of them decided to join for ecological or social reasons. Hence it seemed that Autolib users did not considerate themselves as 'sharers'. The identity created by the use of Autolib's Bluecar was not built on sharing, it was rather built on the particular 'way of life' implied by the product and the service system as seen in the previous part.

Although the respondents did not feel the sharing part of using a carsharing system, the experience was nothing like having their own car. The other users, the service system and the Autolib brand were important in their discourses. Users were somehow bound by the fact that they shared the Bluecars. Indeed several clues were found indicating that they constituted the premise of a brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

A brand community, according to these authors is 'a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its

centre is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

#### **Shared consciousness.**

Shared consciousness is a feeling of being alike, a feeling that other members of the communities are 'sort of like myself', that members 'sort of know each other' (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). For some of the respondents these feelings are expressed clearly. Oscar said 'I have the feeling that all Autolib users use it for the same reasons as I do (...) I have the feeling that all other Autolib users are like me'. Oscar was the most involved in a community around Autolib. To him it was a 'social group'. Thomas said: 'I have a feeling of fraternity, yes, it's like the Bluecar community', before stating that of course he exaggerated, but did feel curious about the other users. There was for all respondents, except maybe Marie, a real pleasure in seeing other Autolib while driving. Jean would like for instance to incorporate a function in the car that could start an interaction when two Bluecars pass each other, 'like something that pops up on the screen, I don't know'.

Marie had been an Autolib user for a longer time than the other respondents. As it turned out, she showed less interest in the other users. She had been amongst the firsts users of Autolib when it started. She had also been amongst the firsts users of Vélib a few years' back (Vélib is the bike sharing service in Paris). More research is needed to understand if Marie's feeling towards other users qualified for what Muniz and O'Guinn called *legitimacy*. Legitimacy is when members of a community differentiate between true members and those who are not. Did Marie feel more legitimate because she was amongst the firsts to drive an Autolib?

#### **Shared ritual.**

The sharing of rituals amongst Bluecar users is perhaps where design can play its biggest part in the creation of a brand community around Autolib. The researchers asked respondents to describe their actions when taking a Bluecar. Manifest similarities were observed in their discourses. They all looked out for the seats at first, to see if they got a leather seat or a fabric one. They all liked to see their name appear on the board, and they all have registered their favourite radios on the built-in computer. They all appreciated the possibility of booking your parking space beforehand, and they all did so each time they used the car. The creation of shared rituals can

be enhanced by service design. It is crucial to think about the different steps through which users should go.

The rituals presented were very 'factual'. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) advanced that 'These rituals and traditions typically centre on shared consumption experiences with the brand'. After four interviews, one of the most striking finding was the pleasure of driving users shared. They all expressed real emotion of happiness when talking about driving an Autolib. The seat positioning, the electric battery and the silence induced by it were product design elements that made them feel this particular experience. To them it was like a game, like driving a 'toy' (the actual word came out in two interviews, with Marie and Jean). Driving a Bluecar appeared to be a very entertaining experience that users shared. To Marie and Oscar, it was close to the feeling of flying. Users could not have shared this experience if all Bluecars did not have the same design and if that design wasn't different from more traditional cars.

#### **A sense of moral responsibility.**

According to Muniz and O'Guinn, having a sense of moral responsibility in a brand community can be expressed in integrating, retaining and assisting members in the proper use of the brand. Marie joined Autolib after having used her mother's membership for a while. It was her mother who offered Marie her own membership, integrating her daughter into the community. Marie also described how at the beginning of Autolib, people did not know how to use the system very well and how they used to help each other's. She stressed that such examples of assistance are not common anymore.

The most prominent instance of moral responsibility occurred not amongst members, but between members, the brand and the product they shared. Unlike other brand communities, Autolib users actually share the same branded products. The sense of ownership towards the Bluecar may be the reason why all respondents expressed their will to take good care of the car they used. It was like their own car: 'I use it like my own car so I take good care of it' (Oscar). Another point is that they were all very satisfied with the service. They felt indebted: 'I feel that I am receiving, I'm benefiting from something (...) more that I give' (Oscar). They wanted to thank Autolib by taking care of the cars. It is the good service design of Autolib that created trust between users and the brand. The results were that users felt moral responsibilities towards the brand.

## **Limits**

This research presents several limits, notably methodological. Even with a grounded methodology, four interviews remain too little to be able to draw any definitive conclusion on the topic. This research is of exploratory nature and a deeper field study shall be conducted to answer to this limitation. It is also important to note the lack of triangulation of this research. This should be addressed in the future by interviewing design professionals.

## **Conclusion, discussion and future research**

Throughout the research it has been observed that product design and service design combined participated to the construction of consumer's identity. The particular design of the Bluecar created a new, enjoyable driving experience. Product design, joined by a very satisfactory service system, enabled users to feel a real relationship with the shared car. They felt responsibilities towards it, affection, had stories with it, were proud of its history, its infrastructure and were excited about driving it... It appeared that users adopted the Bluecar: thanks to its design a real feeling of appropriation existed. The Bluecar belonged to the extended self of its users: it was their car, always the same to them. When building new product and service scope, designers are creating new gestures for consumers. New habits emerge, new rituals occur and a new relationship between the consumer and the product is generated. More research is needed to deepen the understanding of the relationship between a consumer and a product shared. For instance interviewees in this research talked about how the car was theirs for a limited period of time. It seems that the shared car belonged more strongly to the extended self of the users while they were driving it. When not driving, the car appeared to still belong to the extended self, but less intensely, somewhere on the other side of the continuum (Ahuvia, 2005).

The research also provided results regarding the power of design to create brand communities. New product, new service produce new rituals which, in a sharing system have the ability to link users together. Designers think about ways to give responsibilities to users, by involving them in the good functioning of the system (plugging the car after use, checking for flat tires...). Such involvement from consumers inclines them to take good care of the product they share, which is one of the elements central to the

formation of a brand community. Those shared rituals bring the idea that in a sharing system consumer not only share a product but also have an experience in common. One product is use by thousands in the same service scape. The discipline of design in the context of shared products should move from a user-centred to a users-centred thinking. How to enhance the sharing of experience? This preliminary research has shown that users are curious about other users. Who's using 'their car'? The design process in this context could benefit from integrating users-thinking stages. The question lies in how to render the experience personal to allow for the appropriation of the product, while integrating a community system in which users can interact within one another.

Future research shall deepen the knowledge on the brand community around shared product. In the case of the Bluecar, for instance, more interviews should be conducted among the firsts users of Autolib to see if legitimacy can create hierarchies among users. It would also be interesting to conduct focus groups with several users to observe the sharing of rituals or brand stories between them.

Designers have power. They have the power to give a product meaning for its users. Most famous brand communities are built around a product that has a unique design (e.g. Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995); Apple (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001)). Marketers and designers shall benefit from working hand in hand to develop useful designs that consumers can use to create meaning.

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