Why do I love you Vaatelainaamo? Analysis of motivations, barriers and opportunities in a Finnish service for sharing clothes

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Why Do I Love You Vaatelainaamo? Analysis of motivations, barriers and opportunities in a Finnish service for sharing clothes

Rosana Aparecida Vasques*, Mikko Koria, Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos

*University of São Paulo, School of Architecture and Urbanism; Federal University of Paraná State, Design Department, Brazil
Institute for Design Innovation, Loughborough University London, United Kingdom; Aalto University Business School, Finland
University of São Paulo – School of Architecture and Urbanism, Brazil
*Corresponding author e-mail: ravasques@gmail.com

Abstract: Services for sharing are the next challenge in Economy as they configure promising sustainable solutions. This paper presents research on a Finnish service for sharing clothes, aiming to understand factors that could increase the adoption of consumer practices in the Sharing Economy, especially for those products of mass consumption and consumer identity. The research has its foundation on the interpretative paradigm and on the phenomenological study, using questionnaires and “Love & Hate Letters” as research techniques. Among the results, we highlight motivations for both choosing and keeping use of the service, as well as factors that damage the relationship of users with it. Hence, we claim that services for sharing should promote a sense of belonging, which is the fundamental factor for users to love the service even though some aspects can be improved. Thus, designing for the next economy is to design for belonging.

Keywords: Sharing Economy, Service Design, Sustainability, Consumption, Fashion.

1. Introduction

Services for shared usage are still poorly spread (Vezzoli, Ceschin, Diehl, & Kohtala, 2012) when compared to the wide range of companies whose business models are based on the logic of the sales and promotion of ownership. Nonetheless, they are promising sustainable solutions with great potential to reduce the environmental impact, due to presenting a smaller number of products that fits the needs of many people (Manzini & Vezzoli, 2002). These services are also associated with
potential improvements in terms of social cohesion, through the integration of different neighbours, generations, genres and cultures (Manzini, 2008; Vezzoli, 2008).

In this regard, Vezzoli, Ceschin, Diehl and Kohtala (2012) argue that the diffusion of Product Service Systems (PSS) in which shared use are embedded is still very limited because they are radical innovations that challenge consumer habits, besides organizational and regulatory structures. Piscicelli, Cooper and Fischer (2015) emphasize that individual consumer values influence, albeit partially, the acceptance, adoption and diffusion of collaborative consumer practices, based on research data about an online platform that promotes sharing in England, in a peer-to-peer model (P2P).

On the other hand, scholars from the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) highlight the construction of the self as an essential element to understand consumer practices and acquisition of goods (Belk, 1988). Lately, however, access instead ownership is becoming a new strategy in the construction of identity (Belk, 2013).

For this reason, we understand that the question of unsustainability levels of product consumption is, in essence, a cultural issue and a challenge for changing behaviours that are based mainly on human relations and feelings of attachment to products that mediate such relations. Given this perspective, it is evident the need to investigate subjective aspects, full of meanings, that are related to the action of sharing products, as well as the relevance of identifying barriers and opportunities to promote design in the context of the Sharing Economy.

Therefore, the objective of the research was to identify possible motivations, barriers and opportunities on consumption practices mediated by services, specifically regarding the product “clothing”, given its association with hyper-consumerism and rapid discarding in fashion consumption.

The case presented in this paper is about a Finnish service for sharing clothes that was analysed in depth from the perspective of its users who reported their motivations for choosing this service. Users also pointed out what they love or hate when sharing clothes, through letters addressed to the investigated company, that expose which aspects (economic, social, environmental, among others) are perceived as more relevant to the adoption of the sharing practices mediated by a service.

2. Research Method

This study is part of a doctoral research (Author, 2015) in which the main objective was to understand the meanings attributed to shared use and its implications for product and service design. The research was based on the interpretive paradigm (Moreira & Caleffe, 2006), with a predominantly qualitative approach and the phenomenological study (Creswell, 2014; Martins & Bicudo, 1989) as method.

Specifically regarding the service Vaatelainaamo, presented in this paper, we decided to make use of an open questionnaire with users as the data collection technique because it allows participants to answer without the presence of the researcher, thus reducing possible biases. The questionnaires were distributed in person, to be answered at home, in printed or digital format, which could be accessed through a QR Code. In case the user has opted for the printed questionnaire, the return was carried out the following week, along with the borrowed clothes.

The questionnaire included questions about:

1. Motivations for using the service;
2. Evaluation of the experience with Vaatelainaamo;
3. Elaboration of a "Love and (or) Hate Letter" to Vaatelainaamo;
4. The impact of the experience of sharing on other consumption practices.

The data collection technique called Love & Hate (or Love & Break up) Letters are based on letters written by users toward companies, products or services, in order to reveal what people value or expect from them or what are the reasons for breaking a relationship of usage. The SmartDesign consulting firm created this technique in 2009, for users to express thoughts and feelings about products and services in a format that is familiar to the respondents (Martin & Hanington, 2012). Mager et al. (2011) has also used this technique in a research on telephony products and services, and Gerber (2012) applied it to evaluate the relationship of users with technologic products, enlightening potential improvements applicable to the redesign of products and services in both studies.

For these reasons, the "Love & Hate Letters" technique was added to the questionnaire applied for Vaatelainaamo users aim to capture and reveal feelings and emotions expressed in the relationship with the service. As a consequence, it was possible to analyse which emotions emerged from the phenomenon studied, in order to broaden the understanding of what motivates the adoption or rejection of services designed for sharing practices.

The average age of the respondents is 29 years, and the maximum and minimum age ranging from 25 to 34 years, which corresponds to the general public profile of Vaatelainaamo. For most of the process, the respondents have been members for at least a year, which indicates acceptance in relation to the service provided.

3. Vaatelainaamo: the Finnish fashion library

Fashion is usually associated with consumption, luxury and unsustainability. However, the Finnish word Vaatelainaamo, which names the service analyzed, can be translated as a "fashion library", making it clear that ownership, attachment and disposal are not one-way routes to fashion. This Finnish service was created in 2011, aiming at avoiding hyper-consumption, by exploiting sustainable behaviour through sharing clothes. According to Hertta Päiväranta (2011), co-founder of Vaatelainaamo: "The message is simple: fashion can be consumed ecologically, ethically and socially."

The idea of the business came from spontaneous clothing sharing practices between two friends, who found a similar service on one of their trips to the city of Stockholm, Sweden. Katja Meriläinen, who did a market study for Vaatelainaamo, said in an interview that the habit of lending clothes is very popular in Sweden, where several companies operate on the model of libraries, lending free garments. However, the absence of monetization of these services results in a large number of inactive members:

“In Sweden for example lending clothes is popular, but loaning companies are mostly working like libraries, and not really doing business. Some of them have even cooperated with real libraries and have been able to use their technical solutions, like Klädoteket in Malmö. Since loaning is free of charge, these clothing libraries usually have a great amount of memberships, but many of them are quite inactive.” (Katia Meriläinen, 2013)

In an interview, Jere Vilo – an internship at Vaatelainaamo - explained that the service works on different types of associations and members could borrow clothes signed by about 50 young Finnish
designers who are starting their careers or even famous brands, which offer usually exclusive pieces for the service. In addition to this, service users can also bring their clothes and let them be available to others users of the service.

There are three membership plans offered by the company:

- **Basic**: €160/semester - allows borrowing two pieces per week. This plan can be purchased at a discount by students at a cost of 110€/semester.

- **Gold**: €260/semester - allows borrowing up to three pieces, being able to stay up to two weeks with them;

- **Platinum**: €460/semester - allows borrowing from three to four pieces per week, with no specific time limit for return.

It is also possible to try the service at a cost of €25/week, which allows borrowing a piece of clothing or an accessory. This way, the service differs from the traditional rents of social clothing by offering various options of associations that create a link between the company and the user of the service, as well as the possibility of trying the service before joining and even making own pieces available to be shared.

Vaatelainaamo has about 100 associations, ranging in age from 20 to 50 years and the majority of users aging between 30 and 35 years, who opt mainly for the Basic plan.
In 2013, the stock had almost one thousand pieces, among clothing and accessories assigned to the project by early-career designers or famous Finnish brands and those from associated families (Meriläinen, 2013).

4. Motivations, barriers and opportunities from Vaatelainaamo users’ perspective

4.1 Environmental awareness, experimentation and savings as drivers for detachment

As the main motivations for using the service for sharing clothes and accessories, respondents pointed to the saving of financial resources, as well as environmental awareness and concern about hyper-consumption, theoretically contradictory for a fashionist group. However, hyper-consumption people encounter financial and environmental restrictions, besides limits of space in their houses, as recorded in the users’ responses. Thus, a critical mind about hyper-consumption also influences the choice for access rather than ownership:

“I wanted to shop less. There was a point last year where I realized I can’t buy all the beautiful clothes I love for a. monetary and b. ecological reasons. This way every week brings a new piece of clothing without the wasteful practice of shopping ‘till you drop.’”
“To avoid buying more clothes to myself and to be able to wear more frequently expensive designer clothes & accessories without owning them (I couldn’t even afford to buy them anyway).”

“Sharing things instead of buying them all for yourself is an environment-friendly option, it lessens consumption.”

“Ecological and ethical choice: I want to wear Finnish designer’s clothes, but I hate shopping and it’s also expensive to buy everything to yourself.”

Access to clothing and accessories (shoes, jewellery, handbags, etc.) for a low fee instead of their possession for a high price is perceived as a benefit and as a convenience superior to the exclusivity of use. In addition, the possibility of trying out new styles, without the cost of ownership, was indicated as a positive aspect valued by the users.

“I also wanted to get new ideas on what to wear and to get more courage to wear unique ‘showstoppers’ that I wouldn’t normally wear or purchase."

“To experiment my style - To dress “freshly” into every event that I have (through my work I have quite much events) - So spare some money as I wouldn't shop so much.”

Both these evidences and the fact that the majority of users opt for the less expensive membership corroborates with the findings of Author (2016) about how much the cost influences the preference for sharing or ownership.

The service thus fulfils a specific demand, which transforms the burden of the ownership into the benefit of flexibility and experimentation, which are features of the intended audience.

As for the extent of sharing to other consumer practices, besides fashion, few respondents reported their participation in other services for sharing goods or collaborative consumer practices (exchange, redistribution and resale) with strangers. However, sharing and exchanging in groups of friends is very common among Vaatelainaamo users, through social networks such as Facebook.

The motivations to participate in similar services, which promote access rather than ownership, corroborate the individual values that lead to the adoption of the service studied, highlighting environmental awareness and criticism to hyper-consumption practices, besides the need to free spaces at home, and, in a complementary way, the easiness promoted by social networks:

“I like to share :-) and borrow things instead of buying them. There is enough ‘stuff’ already in this world. I also don’t mind buying old vintage and second hand items.”

“Sometimes I have extra stuff and I need to get rid off and sometimes I might need something and friends, Facebook groups are easy and fast.”

According to the participants’ answers, the change in thinking about one’s own practices based on aspects of materialism, possessiveness and the fear of contact with strangers were also mitigated from the experience of sharing, exchanging and reselling products that were little or no longer used.

“I feel content with not owning; since I tend to be too protective of the clothes I own myself i.e. they might stay in the closet and not in use, which is very sad. This way maybe I’ll learn to use also my own clothes, because that’s what they were meant for.”

‘Maybe I lost the fear to contact people that I don’t know after using more Facebook groups or such for giving and getting unwanted stuff for free. I used to be a bit scared to open our home for strangers and going alone for homes I didn’t know before, but now I’m getting a bit more relaxed about these kind of things.’
On the other hand, individual values such as detachment, generosity, reciprocity and absence of materialism were also found in the participants' answers, showing that the adoption of the Vaatelainaamo service echoes in people who previously had these values.

In summary, the main motivations for using clothes in a shared way through the Vaatelainaamo service are environmental awareness, the possibility of wearing several different clothes every week and saving financial resources. On the other hand, the initial barriers identified for the adoption of sharing are materialism and possessiveness, as well as the fear of the unknown, although the users' responses suggest that such feelings have faded as they participate in the fashion library and other services that promote sharing. It is also worth mentioning the preexistence of individual values in harmony with the values proposed by Vaatelainaamo: generosity and detachment associated with ethical, social and environmentally responsible consumption.

4.2. I love you Vaatelainaamo, but some things could be improved

For the most part, the letters were initiated with declarations of love and gratitude for the existence of the service or describing how much the users feel happy to be members of Vaatelainaamo, demonstrating pleasure in the use of the service.

“I have very much enjoyed being a member, and appreciate you for making this idea a reality, when I’m sure people might have been skeptical about its success. Thank you for giving visibility for Finnish designers and quality clothing.”

“Thank you for making this kind of action possible. I hope you energy and positive happenings for the future as well!”

“Thank you very much; you are doing a great job! Keep it up!”

“So far, I have been very happy with this service and I’ve recommended it to lots of friends. The clothes you lend out are beautiful, and I love the idea of sharing a wardrobe with other people.”

“I love Vaatelainaamo, of course. And I would love it even more, if there would be more new bees more often!”

The variability and quality of clothes, associated with good customer service, were also praised in one of the letters, noting that despite some inconveniences, the service, in general terms, promotes satisfaction among members:

“In Vaatelainaamo I love large amount of different items and the quality of clothes, designer pieces & accessories. Customer service is always so friendly!”

The environmental awareness briefly described in the motives for choosing a service for sharing clothes were more detailed in the letters, as well as the existence of a critical thinking of the members in relation to the culture of discard and materialism.

“A teeny tiny minus for a Monki dress seen on the rack. For me it represents a culture of disposability being owned by H&M. But if and when it's second hand, it may be forgiven. ;)

“Vaatelainaamo is particularly good for borrowing fancy dresses and other outfits you might only use once or twice. There's no point in owning clothes like that.”

The amount paid for membership was not reported as a problem by the participants and even the only complaint regarding this cost was justified by personal and possibly temporary issues. The
message in the letter makes it clear that the respondent's intention is to rejoin Vaatelainaamo, since her experience was "extremely positive" with the service.

"Unfortunately, even when my overall experience of Vaatelainaamo is extremely positive, I can no longer afford to use it due to my current financial situation... Maybe again in the future!"

Finally, the period of the day when the service was working were pointed out as one of the problems of the offer, since it was only between 2:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m., only on Thursday and Friday, which limited the time to choose and return the pieces.

"I would appreciate it if Vaatelainaamo was open beyond 5pm at least one day of the week, since it's a bit difficult for me to leave work before 5."

This problem has been solved by the company's change of address, when the doors of the Finnish fashion library were opened from 2:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m., from Wednesday to Friday, in response to user requests.

5. Conclusions

The research on motivations, barriers and opportunities about a service for shared clothes has allowed us to identify aspects that can be improved in this offer and to reflect on the possibilities of expanding the use of services that promote access rather than ownership, proposed by the Sharing Economy. In addition to that, the theoretical contribution from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which brings the understanding on the motivations to consume or not doing it, including the acquisition of goods and the sharing as a means to construct the self, worked as fundamental "lenses" for reading the studied practices.

The use of open questionnaires, especially the inclusion of the "Love & Hate Letters", as a research technique, revealed emotional aspects that translate the motivations for adopting the practice of sharing clothes, spontaneously, declared in phrases of love, gratitude and incentive for the continuity of the service.

Concerning the aspects perceived as most relevant for adopting the service for sharing clothes, Vaatelainaamo users make it clear that a new profile of fashion consumption is possible and that the construction of their identity can also be established through access to goods, by showing individual values of generosity, detachment and criticism about hyper-consumption. A second reason is the possibility of creating temporary identities: they can use some clothing again in another week, but they may not find it available anymore because someone always chooses it before them. On the other hand, they can try to be another person, in a process of greater liquidity in the construction of one's own identity, for a lower financial cost and without the burden of the stock of many pieces.

Therefore, we found out that the appetite for the new, typical of the hyper-consumption fashionist practices gains another dimension through Vaatelainaamo: the consciousness that it is not necessary (and sometimes not even possible) to have something in order to be someone. Moreover, Vaatelainaamo users have a strong environmental awareness and present critical thinking about the culture of discarding - perhaps because of the influence of the Finnish cultural context, where nature and sustainable practices play a relevant role.

However, because Vaatelainaamo is a service for sharing offered by a company, in which contact with other people is not mandatory, social interaction is not even mentioned by the respondents, corroborating Belk (2010; 2013) and Barthi and Echkard (2012) concerns regarding motivations more directed to the individual interests in practices of sharing that involve the use of financial resources.
Nevertheless, the analysis of the Vaatelainaamo users’ responses suggests changes in consumer behaviour regarding their possessions, with both greater openness to the detachment and the valuation of the "anti-consumption" characteristic of the service.

Concerning the impact of the experience with Vaatelainaamo on users’ consumption practices, we highlight the existence of a two-way road: the experience of sharing through Vaatelainaamo makes people more open to adopting sustainable consumption practices, as well as their choice for participating in Vaatelainaamo was based on pre-existing values of generosity, less appraisal on possessions and refutation for a culture of discarding.

Price adequacy, including various types of membership and even a less expensive option for students, integrated with the benefit of experimentation and use of quality clothing and incentive to local production foster the possibility of growth for this kind of service. On the other hand, the attendance in a limited period of the day and in few days of the week, besides the lack of co-ownership sense that results on less care with goods can retract users’ participation.

Finally, but not less important, the research revealed, notably from the "Love & Hate Letters", a strong sense of belonging, identified through gratitude and declarations of love to Vaatelainaamo for offering an extremely positive experience, even though some aspects of the service could be improved, according to users. It is worth mentioning that belonging was previously pointed out by Belk (2007; 2010), and Ozzane and Ballantine (2010) as one of the components of sharing practices. Thus, we state that belonging is fundamental for the development of products and services aimed at sharing, since belonging to a group or "tribe" whose values are common among the users, is also a way of building the self, rather than only through ownership. In this regard, we claim that to design for the next economy is to design for belonging. Thus, the next question we should ask ourselves is “How to design for belonging?”

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About the Authors:

**Rosana Aparecida Vasques**

Doctor from the University of São Paulo, School of Architecture and Urbanism (FAU USP), Brazil, with a period of research at Aalto University Business School, Finland; M.Des. and bachelor degree in Product Design from the Federal University of Paraná State (UFPR). Rosana has experience in design for sustainability and service design. She is currently teaching design management, business design and design for sustainability among other disciplines at UFPR and FAU USP. Her research interests are sharing economy, sustainability, consumer culture theory (CCT), service design and cultural diversity.
Why do I love you Vaatelainaamo?

Mikko Koria

After design & architecture studies at the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil, and Helsinki University of Technology, Finland, Mikko ran a design & consulting business for two+ decades with global projects. After curiosity really took over, Mikko did a design management MBA at Westminster, in London, and later on a PhD at the Aalto University School of Business, Finland. Currently Mikko does research, industry collaboration and teaching in design, culture and business as the Professor and Director of the Institute for Design Innovation at Loughborough University London, and as Visiting Professor at Aalto University Business School, Finland.

Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos

Philosopher and full professor of Design at the University of São Paulo, School of Architecture and Urbanism (FAU USP). MPhil and PhD in Aesthetics from USP. Post-doctoral visiting researcher at the University of California, State University of Campinas, Nihon University, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Visiting scholar at the School of Public Affairs, Department of Urban Planning, at UCLA – University of California, Los Angeles from 2007 to 2008. She has authored several articles published in Brazilian design magazines, international academic conference proceedings and peer-review journals. Author of several books, including the awarded ‘Modern Furniture in Brazil’ [Móvel Moderno no Brasil]. She is a scientific advisor and reviewer for the main Brazilian funding agencies [CNPq, CAPES, FAPESP, FAPEMIG] and leading international design conferences [European Academy of Design – EAD, Design plus Research, The International Association of Societies of Design Research – IASDR]. Her current research focuses on discarded products, design, homelessness, collectors of recyclable materials and social empowerment with deep commitment to social responsibility issues.

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