Communicating Access-Based Consumption: Company Framings of Home Furnishings Rental

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Abstract: Access-based business models such as product rental hold promise extending product lifetimes. However, a lack of consumer acceptance hinders these models from becoming mainstream in the business-to-consumer market. In order for rental models to resonate with consumers, they must be designed and communicated in a way that aligns with consumers’ needs. While a number of studies have addressed business model design, few have looked at how rental is promoted to consumers. Focusing on the growing sector of home furnishings rental, we use a qualitative content analysis of company websites to explore whether and how company messaging reflects consumer drivers for product rental found in literature. We find that, contrary to studies of sustainable business models that suggest emphasising sustainability aspects, sustainability is not widely communicated. In addition, while messaging does reflect broad drivers found in literature for a variety of consumer goods – including economic benefits, freedom from burdens of ownership, convenience, and novelty – home furnishings rental companies represent these drivers somewhat differently. This includes appealing to more intangible ideas such as aspiration, self-expression and homeliness, as well as citing benefits specific to home furnishings such as the literal burdens of transporting furniture when moving. Our study raises interesting questions about the role of sustainability in messaging and provides insights from companies actively engaged in rental that can potentially help ensure that company messaging resonates with consumers. We also contribute empirical findings on home furnishings rental, which has seen increasing engagement by practitioners but has received little consideration in academic literature.

Introduction

Access-based business models, in which people pay to use rather than own goods, have been put forth as one way to extend product lifetimes and contribute to more sustainable consumption. By enabling sequential use of products by multiple consumers, models such as rental have the potential to keep products in use for longer and ultimately reduce the number of new products that must be produced (Kjaer et al., 2019). Despite this potential, there is still a relative lack of rental models in the business-to-consumer market, in part due to a lack of consumer acceptance (Tukker, 2015).

In order for access-based business models to resonate with consumers, they must align with consumer needs (Rexfelt & Hiort af Ornäs, 2009). Companies need to have a good understanding of what drives consumers to engage in rental and to both design and communicate their offers in a way that aligns with these drivers (Rexfelt & Hiort af Ornäs, 2009). While some studies have addressed how companies can design their offers to meet consumer needs (Borg et al., 2020; Tunn et al., 2019), and others have highlighted the importance of framing for successful implementation (Day et al., 2020) or suggested how companies might position rental (Catulli, 2012), few have addressed how companies actually promote their rental offers (see Chamberlin & Boks, 2018 for a notable exception).

In this study we address this gap by exploring how different companies actively engaged in product rental frame their offers to consumers. We focus on the case of home furnishings (furniture and home accessories), which has seen a proliferation of companies offering rental, ranging from start-ups such as US company Fernish to incumbent companies such as IKEA. This thus allows us to study communications in practice. Consumers’ unfamiliarity with the concept of home
furnishings rental has also resulted in a need for some home furnishings companies to invest heavily in marketing and communications. (Schoonover et al., 2021). In addition, home furnishings is a sector ripe for product life extension, as the majority of products are disposed of before the end of their useful life (Arvidsson et al., 2016).

**Literature Review: Consumer Drivers for Product Rental**

A number of studies have looked at consumer drivers to engage in product rental. Due to the very limited body of academic research on home furnishings rental in business-to-consumer markets, our literature review also includes literature focused on other sectors, such as clothing, mobile phones, and baby products, as well as consumer goods rental more generally. The studies we reviewed primarily comprise empirical studies of drivers as perceived by consumers.

Studies of sustainable business models more broadly suggest emphasising sustainability in communications (Boeken, 2017; Vicuinaite, 2020). However, while some studies on product rental do find that environmental concerns influence consumers’ interest in renting (Armstrong et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2016; Mukendi & Henninge, 2020; Rousseau, 2020), others have shown a relatively low propensity of consumers to choose renting for environmental reasons (Gullstrand Edbring et al., 2016; Jones, 2019; Schallehn et al., 2019).

Economic benefits, namely potential cost savings resulting from the low (initial) cost of renting versus buying, are an important driver for consumers to engage in renting (Day et al., 2020; Schrader, 1999). This low initial cost can also give people access to higher quality and more expensive products than they would otherwise be able to afford (Fota et al., 2020; Mont et al., 2006). The predictability of monthly payments (Poppelaars et al., 2018; Rousseau, 2020) and avoidance of surprise costs for repair or replacement that can occur with ownership (Rexfelt & Hiort af Ornäs, 2009) have also been found to influence the decision to rent.

Freedom from burdens of ownership is one of the most frequently cited reasons for renting. These burdens can include risk of product obsolescence, risk of making an incorrect product choice, responsibility for maintenance and repair, and paying the full cost for products that may only be used infrequently (Berry & Maricle, 1973; Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010). In contrast, renting gives consumers the flexibility to change to their minds and to change products when needed (Poppelaars et al., 2018), and is especially appropriate when consumers may not be able to predict their needs (Rexfelt & Hiort af Ornäs, 2009).

In addition to responding to changing needs, renting gives consumers the opportunity to change products in response to changing ‘wants’. Although home furnishings have traditionally been considered more of a long-lived “workhorse” product (Cox et al., 2013), in recent years they have begun to more closely resemble the fashion industry, framed by both retailers and consumers more in terms of fashion and short-term trends (Leslie & Reimer, 2003). Renting can be a way to stay up to date with the latest products (Fota et al., 2020; Rousseau, 2020) as well as to satisfy a general desire for change (Armstrong et al., 2015, 2016). It can also allow consumers to experiment with different styles as a mode of self-expression and identity (Camacho-Otero et al., 2019; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020) and to seek status, even if only temporarily (Lawson et al., 2016).

Convenience is another driver for renting. Aspects of convenience include knowing that any need for repair will be addressed by the service provider and taken care of quickly (Cherry & Pidgeon, 2018; Poppelaars et al., 2018) or being able to have a variety of products without filling one’s closets (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020). Returning products at the end of the rental period also saves consumers the hassle of disposing of them, as well as transaction costs that they would incur if they were to try to resell them (Lehner et al., 2020).

While renting can be an end in and of itself, the opportunity to test a product before buying is also an important driver for consumers to rent (Rexfelt & Hiort af Ornäs, 2009). Renting can help consumers figure out what products they like (Gullstrand Edbring et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2016), or help them determine if they even want to commit to owning something (Durgee & Colarelli O’Connor, 1995).
Methods
To analyse company messaging, we performed a qualitative content analysis of websites of companies offering rental of furniture and/or home accessories to private consumers around the world. We focused on homepages because they feature the most prominent messaging and also represent the first point of entry for many consumers. As we were interested in how companies promote their rental offers, we only considered text that companies developed themselves, so did not include customer testimonials or reviews. To develop coding categories, we used a mix of deductive and inductive approaches, starting with categories reflecting the drivers found in the literature review, and creating new categories and subcategories as new drivers emerged from the data. Once we had coded approximately 25 homepages, we found the same drivers occurring repeatedly, and thus determined we had reached saturation.

Results
We found that home furnishings company messaging does roughly reflect many of the categories of consumer drivers previously found in literature on rental of consumer goods. These include economic benefits, freedom from burdens of ownership, novelty, convenience, and, to some extent, sustainability. However, furnishings rental companies represent these drivers somewhat differently than does literature, including introducing additional drivers.

In keeping with mixed findings in literature about sustainability as a driver for rental (Schallehn et al., 2019), company messaging around sustainability is not very prevalent, with a few key exceptions of companies that elevate it to the level of their taglines. Sustainability aspects that are mentioned include those found in previous literature, such as keeping products out of the waste stream and increasing the number of users per item (Armstrong et al., 2015; Lawson et al., 2016), as well as additional ones including lower emissions due to not transporting furniture when relocating long distances.

Although many companies communicate some aspect of economic benefits associated with renting, few communicate the low (initial) cost or compare the cost of renting to buying, as is highlighted in literature (e.g., Day et al., 2020). This could reflect uncertainties about whether renting may result in cost savings over the longer term (Gullstrand Edbring et al., 2016). Companies instead stress general affordability or access to higher quality products. They also go beyond a product-specific focus to appeal to the idea of aspiration more broadly, such as by inviting consumers to create their dream home.

Messaging around freedom from burdens of ownership also differs somewhat from drivers found in literature. Rather than addressing the commonly identified burdens of incorrect product choice, product obsolescence, or the need for repair and maintenance (Berry & Maricle, 1973), companies primarily focus on the difficulties of moving when one owns furniture. Flexibility is extensively communicated, and goes beyond presenting renting as more flexible than owning to also include flexible aspects of the rental offers themselves, such as the ability to swap products. Aspiration also appears here, with companies linking freedom from burdens of ownership to freedom to pursue new experiences or life opportunities.

Renting as an avenue for self-expression and style seems to be more prominent than the idea of being able to change products whenever one desires, although some companies do mention the latter. Expanding beyond renting being a way to keep up with current product trends (Fota et al., 2020), the idea of the act of renting itself being trendy adds an additional aspect to this driver.

Messaging about convenience is quite specific to home furnishings, focusing on delivery and assembly, which are presumably the most inconvenient aspects of acquiring furniture. Other aspects of convenience found in literature, such as repair and maintenance being covered by the company (Cherry & Pidgeon, 2018), are not as prevalent, perhaps suggesting that home furnishings are not as much in need of these services as products with more technical features or faster innovation cycles.

Trialability, in terms of renting being a way to try products before committing to owning them (Rexfelt & Hiort af Ornäss, 2009), is the one driver from literature that is not clearly reflected in company messaging. However, the fact that
Some companies allow consumers to buy out their rented products could imply that some consumers do use furnishings rental in this way.

One additional driver that companies communicate but that is not found in literature is that of homeliness. This contrasts with previous findings that renting cannot provide comfort in the same way as ownership (Durgée & Colarelli O’Connor, 1995), but could reflect the unique role of home furnishings in creating a home (Reimer & Leslie, 2004).

Discussion

One key finding of our research is that in contrast to suggestions of how to promote sustainable business models more generally (Bocken, 2017; Vicuinaite, 2020), sustainability is not a focus of most home furnishings companies’ communications. This could reflect broader findings that environmental features play only a minor role in most consumers’ purchase decisions (Davis, 2013). It also aligns with our previous findings that despite companies being motivated to enter the rental market for sustainability reasons, they have not found this to be a key driver among their consumers and thus tend to appeal to a diversity of other consumer drivers rather than emphasise sustainability when talking with consumers (Borg et al., 2020). This raises interesting questions about how best to encourage sustainable consumption practices such as renting. For example, if the end practice is ultimately more sustainable, does it matter why consumers engage in it? Relatedly, rather than trying to raise awareness of and concern about sustainability, does it make more sense to appeal to other consumer drivers as a way to increase sustainable consumption practices?

Looking across the other categories of consumer drivers reflected in company messaging, some other insights emerge. First, echoing findings that consumer drivers and decision-making can vary with product type (Baumeister, 2014; McDonald et al., 2009), much of the messaging is rather specific to home furnishings — such as literal burdens when moving — even though the broad categories of drivers do align with those found for other consumer goods. This could provide learnings for other sectors in terms of tailoring messaging based on the particular products involved. It also raises the question of whether a consumer’s motivations for renting would extend across different consumer goods sectors.

Second, we note that consumer drivers are often discussed in literature in quite tangible and functional terms, whereas company messaging tends to be about less tangible ideas. For example, home furnishings rental is promoted as a vehicle for aspiration, self-expression and homeliness. In addition, the finding that the act of renting itself might be considered trendy suggests that home furnishings rental goes beyond just fulfilling functional needs, which contrasts with some other examples of access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

Relatedly, it is also interesting that some of the consumer drivers that we saw reflected in company messaging deviate from previous findings regarding drivers for (and against) renting. For example, whereas some studies suggest that renting is not appropriate for products tied to identity and self-expression, including home furnishings (Cherry & Pidgeon, 2018), home furnishings rental is in fact marketed in this way. The increasing popularity of renting, not only for home furnishings but also for other consumer goods, also contrasts with previous studies that cite desire for ownership as a barrier to renting (Tukker, 2015). These findings may reflect larger trends such as more transitory lifestyles or a desire to own less “stuff”. They could also reflect changes in the rental market, as the variety of products available for rent continues to expand (Jones, 2019).

Finally, our analysis shows that few companies emphasise any one driver. Although many homepages have taglines that reflect one particular driver, the rest of the page often reflects other drivers. This could be because a company targets a wide range of consumers who may have different needs or desires. It also aligns with literature on consumer behaviour demonstrating that consumers consider many different factors when making a choice (Power & Mont, 2010). In addition, as home furnishings rental is a relatively new concept for many consumers, providing information about its multiple benefits may reduce uncertainty and increase trust, which have been found to be
barriers to access-based business models (Cherry & Pidgeon, 2018; Day et al., 2020).

Conclusions
Our study contributes to the growing literature on access-based consumption by providing insights on whether and how different consumer drivers for product rental are reflected in messaging by companies actively engaged in access-based business models. Such knowledge can potentially help ensure that company messaging resonates with consumers and in turn help increase consumer acceptance of rental models. Our study also contributes empirical findings on the growing and dynamic sector of home furnishings rental, which thus far has been little studied in academic literature.

While focusing our analysis on company websites allowed us to analyse messaging from a wide range of companies, it has been beyond the scope of this paper to examine the thinking behind these messages. For example, we have not studied if or what consumer research may have informed companies’ messaging or why certain messages were chosen. Future research could include interviews with representatives of these companies to better understand their messaging strategies, as well as what they see as their target consumers’ drivers for engaging in their offers. It could also include conversations with customers of these companies to understand why they have chosen to rent home furnishings and to see if their drivers align with those reflected in company messaging.

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References


