

Alternative Consumption: a Circular Economy beyond the Circular Business Model

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Abstract: Studies for the circular economy have focused consumption from the perspective of acceptance of business models. However, consumers can engage in waste prevention, reuse and reparation in modes of consumption outside existing market-networks. This paper proposes a shift in perspective for studies on the circular economy, from production to consumption. Taking alternative modes of consumption as its starting point, it explores what the circular economy may entail when explored from a consumption perspective. More specifically, it presents the results of a literature review in which literature on alternative consumption has been reviewed and analyzed based on circularity principles and a framework of six moments of consumption. In this review, two main modes of alternative consumption were identified – one based on the meaning given to purchases made within the existing market structure, and one centered on engagement in taking care of community commons. These two modes are relevant to reduction and slowing down of material cycles. Based on these findings, recommendations are made regarding how the results can be used in further theoretical and empirical research on consumption in the circular economy, beyond business models.

Introduction

The circular economy concept covers strategies and principles for the efficient use of resources (MacArthur et al. 2015). One of the most reproduced models of the circular economy is proposed by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). In this model, consumers are required to take responsibility on discarding and keeping goods in conditions for re-use, remanufacture, or recycling, while producers provide the infrastructure for recovery of material resources (Singh & Ordoñez, 2016).

Much existing research on consumers in the circular economy focuses on the acceptance of business models (Tunn et al., 2019; Camacho-Otero et al., 2018). Many of these models are based on reuse of resources in services that are accessed by consumers through fee-based schemes that modify ownership (Kjaer et al., 2019). Although consumption is the subject, it is studied from the perspective of production.

This paper proposes a shift in focus for studies on the circular economy, it begins an exploration on what a circular economy focused on consumption may entail, beyond the study of

business models. Material recovery networks have an important role in the transition to a circular economy. From a consumption perspective, the circular economy should focus on riddance, especially on waste prevention and preparation for reuse and repair, the most preferable activities in a waste hierarchy (Williams, 2015). These are activities which could be carried out by consumers without the intermediation of third parties (businesses). Doing so, also requires looking at how resource utilization serves consumers' everyday life, and not just the viability of alternatives focused on revenue or profit.

In this paper, we report on a literature review conducted to identify modes of consumption that challenge the currently dominant market-based commodity consumption mode (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.869). We focus on the concept of "alternative consumption" as a starting point. Alternative consumption modes are responses to established forms of consumption. Within a dominant market structure, alternatives are options given to individual actors enabled by multiple competing providers, where even sustainable alternatives

are in competition (Spaargaren, 2003). From the point of view of Toffler (1990), the economy is divided in two sectors, one dominant (or visible) comprising all production of good and services for sale or swap through an exchange network or market, and one passive (invisible) comprising all production done for self, familiar or community consumption.

In the following section a framework to approach consumption is presented. This framework is later used to review the literature on “alternative consumption”.

Consumption

Consumers and their reasons to consume are at the center of most literature about consumption. Images of the consumer as a rational purchaser of goods and services, as an exploited subject constrained by the market, as a constructor of symbolic value through goods, or as a creative producer of self-expression can be found (Campbell, 2005). But most of these images are inscribed and understood within the dominant market structure, and do not allow to see the process of consumption as one that unfolds in parallel to production.

According to Warde (2005) consumption takes place as part of social practices. Everyday life is constituted by social practices. Specific practices include activities required for consumption, in acquisition, storage, use and even riddance.

Warde (2005) distinguishes between three moments of consumption:

1) Acquisition: includes the activities for access, delivery, exchange and, even, production of material resources.

2) Appropriation: includes the activities that are enacted making use of the acquired material resource.

3) Appreciation: includes the meaning or motives that emerge from the use or access of material resources.

The set of moments of consumption is expanded by Evans (2018). These three moments complete consumption by extending it to the process of de-consumption (riddance). These are:

4) Devaluation: includes the negative meaning or motives that emerge during the use or access of material resources, as it loses its original value (even its symbolic one).

5) Divestment: includes the activities or non-activities that take place while the material is taken out of use.

6) Disposal: includes the activities of riddance.

These six moments can be used as a framework for the identification of alternative modes of consumption. The attributes of the moments of consumption influence the practices that take place in relation to them.

This framework of six moments can be better understood with an example: One can take a practice, such as running, and look at how it takes place within the dominant mode of consumption. The basic material element required in running is a pair of sneakers, and they are usually: 1) acquired from big producers, branded or not, as part of a provision system, in stores. At the moment of 2) appropriation, sneakers are evaluated by sport efficiency and by aesthetic judgement. It is in this evaluation that consumption is 3) appreciated. Over time, something in the use can change, or in the product or in an external affecting factor. This may result in 4) devaluation of the initial appreciation, and lead to 5) divestment from consumption (use), and eventually resulting in 6) disposal of the material resource.

Practice	Running
Consumption mode	Dominant – market network
Material resource	Sneakers
1) Acquisition	Bought from a store (money exchange)
2) Appropriation	Comfort when running or adequacy to fashion trend.
3) Appreciation	The sneaker is comfortable.
4) Devaluation	Sneakers' color is no longer in fashion.
5) Divestment	Sneakers lay stored in a closet
6) Disposal	Sneakers go to a waste bin

Table 1. Example of attributes of consumption moments.

These six moments of consumption are tightly related to the three phases of consumption framed by Evans & Cooper (2010, p.324) as acquisition, use and disposal. But to have these six moments as framework permit a separation of factors related to meaning, found in the moments of appreciation and devaluation, from the factors of use, found in appropriation and divestment. The other two factors, found in acquisition and disposal, are directly related to the existing structures of provision and collection.

The attributes that fill each of these six moments are dependent on a mode of consumption. Modes of consumption can be regarded as existing alternatives, and each of them includes a system of provision and riddance that influences the paces of material

replacement permitted. Faster production paces facilitate faster consumption paces, underpinning faster processes of devaluation and divestment.

In alternative consumption modes, at least one of the attributes in the moments is different from the dominant or conventional ones. For example, by replacing monetary exchanges for collective access, or by setting appreciation on wider benefits for the environment and not on personal satisfaction.

Method

For this literature review, the surveyed databases were Scopus and Web of Science. The search was limited to journal and conference papers, with no specific timeframe defined, but limited to the latest update on both databases by May 2019. The search was done with the key terms “alternative consumption” and “alternative consumption practices”. An overview of the search results is presented in Table 2. In Scopus the search results were filtered by “article title, abstract and keywords”, and “all fields”. In Web of Science the results were filtered by “all fields” and “topic”. In both databases the terms used were inside quotation marks to ensure that they appear as such in the text. The research results are limited to these key terms, which may have excluded out other relevant modes of consumption that could have been studied.

Key terms	“Alternative consumption”	“Alternative consumption practices”
Total papers	558	61
First selection	73	40
After elimination of repeated ones	80	
Final sample	47	

Table 2. Overview of search results from Scopus and Web of Science.

A sample of 80 papers were selected and reviewed to answer two questions:

1. Which moments of consumption (Evans, 2018) can be identified?
2. Which principles of circularity can be related to the moments of consumption?

After this, a total of 33 papers were rejected for not offering a description of a consumption case. The 47 remaining papers were qualitatively evaluated searching for aspects representing alternatives in one or more of the six moments of consumption.

As a final step, the papers were clustered according to the moments of consumption

identified. The clusters were used to identify topics that can concern strategic and structural aspects of the circular economy.

Results and discussion

In all papers, aspects considered relevant to the moment of appreciation, i.e. motivation or meaning of consumption, were identified. This indicates that consumption studies in general are oriented towards the meaning of consumption. An overview of the identified thematic clusters is presented in Table 3.

Moment identified	Number of papers	Considerations
Appreciation	8	Only meaning and motivations. Can be inscribed within the dominant structure.
Appreciation Appropriation	8	
Acquisition, appropriation appreciation	12	The provision structure is different from the dominant one. It is not possible to extract anything about what happens in riddance
Appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment, disposal	7	These studies offer aspects that fill almost all the moments but are based on regular consumption as purchase.
Acquisition, appropriation, appreciation, devaluation, divestment, disposal	12	These studies offer alternatives in the six moments. And connect the consumption and production by offering insights about the structure of provision and riddance.

Table 3. Overview of evaluated papers clustered by identified moments.

Only 12 of the 47 papers include aspects that can be considered attributes that modify all the six moments of consumption (Table 4). These are studies that relate consumption across practices within the lifestyle of individuals, even present in the formation of community and social bonds. Consumption mode cases found in these studies can be regarded as complete alternatives to the conventional market mode. This is a mode of consumption that is motivated by the formation of community commons (as shared values).

Authors (Year)	Topics
Edwards & Mercer (2007)	Freeganism
Casey, Lichrou, and O'Malley (2016)	Ecovillage and structural changes
Moraes, Szmigin & Carrigan (2010)	Consumption and Production Communities
Moraes, Carrigan & Szmigin (2012)	Consumption and Production Communities
Nelson, Rademacher, & Paek (2007)	Downshifting as Voluntary simplicity and Freecycle.org
Isehour (2010)	Sustainable consumption: rational reflections vs cultural conditioning
Lane & Watson (2012)	Material circulation, reuse and public stewardship
Vaughan, Cook & Trawick (2007)	Stewardship as a form of communal participation
Zademach & Annika Musch (2018)	Bicycle sharing systems, city mobility, public-private provision
Sabaté Muriel (2009)	Exchange circles and Freeshops as de-commodification outside markets
McArthur (2015)	Consumer to consumer sharing not mediated by money exchange
Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera (2012)	Free markets, community building, no monetary exchanges

Table 4. List of authors and topics of papers in which an alternative in all the six moments of consumption is identified.

At the opposite end, there are 16 papers (Table 5) in which only attributes corresponding to the moments of appreciation and appropriations are identified. These are based on market activities, such as buying ethical products, or acquiring products with fair trade labels, or by participation in product or brand boycotts and buycotts. These papers present the consumer as a subject of purchase decisions, a form of consumerism within the dominant market mode. In this mode of consumption, the alternative is in the product or service as an available option for purchase.

Authors (Year)	Topics
Gray (2017)	Food Activism
Grosplik (2017)	Organic Food
Haucke (2017)	Fairtrade and technology
Humphery (2017)	Commerce and ethical consumption
Adams & Raisborough (2010)	Ethical consumption and feeling good
Andorfer & Liebe (2013)	Ethical consumption and coffee Fairtrade
Baumeister, Scherer & Wangenheim (2015)	Branding of products that are not owned

Becker-Leifhold & Iran (2019)	Second hand clothes and sharing services
Brenton (2013)	Ethical consumer modes
Lyon, Ailshire & Sehon (2014)	Fairtrade as movement
Schmelzer (2010)	Fairtrade Labelling
Geysmans & Hustinx (2015)	Fairtrade as commodity
Balsiger (2014)	Ethical consumption in Boycotts and Buycotts
Hutter & Hoffmann (2013)	Carrotmobs as anti-consumption
Elias & Saussey (2013)	Fairtrade in commodification
Bryant & Goodman (2004)	Fair or socially responsible consumption in the North

Table 5. List of authors and topics of papers in which an alternative in appreciation or appropriation is identified.

The rest of the papers reviewed (Table 6) describe modes of consumption that do not offer a complete alternative to the dominant market mode, but that could be complemented to be complete alternatives if the acquisition and disposition attributes were replaced. There are two main alternative consumption modes that emerge from this review. One is based on the meaning given to products and services that are purchased. From the perspective of Spaargaren (2003), these can be regarded as alternative consumption options in the market. These options are appropriated as part of the lifestyle of individuals and allows them to maintain and reinforce identities based on ethical concerns about the social and environmental impact of consumption within the market structure.

Authors (Year)	Topics
Leiper & Clarke-Sather (2017)	Farmer Markets
Wided Batat (2016)	Alternative Food Consumption
Tchoukaleyska (2012)	Farmer Markets
Kajzer Mitchell, Low, Davenport & Brigham (2017)	Alternative Food Networks and Wild Food
Sarmiento (2016)	Alternative Food Networks
Pottinger 2013	Urban food spaces
Jarosz (2017)	Alternative Food Networks Rural/Urban
Watts, Little & Ilbery (2018)	Alternative Food Networks
Steinkopf Rice (2013)	Fair Trade, localism, co-operative: produce
Sonnino & Marsden (2005)	Alternative Food Networks
Guiot & Roux (2010)	Motivations for acquiring secondhand products

Williams (2008)	Paid provision of services by acquaintances
Catulli, Cook & Potter (2017)	Product service systems and ownership change
Marzella (2015)	Reuse in western societies driven towards new
Williams & Paddock (2003)	Motivation to participate in Second hand markets
Williams & Windebank (2005)	Motivation to participate in Second hand markets
Waight (2014)	Mothers providing of secondhand clothes to children
Fischer (2015)	Vintage clothes: second had
Park & Armstrong (2017)	Shared consumption and diffused ownership

Table 6. List of authors and topics of papers in which an alternative mode of consumption is not fully identified.

The second mode derives from the papers in which all the six moments of consumption were identified. In this mode, consumption requires the active engagement of the individuals for the acquisition and use of material resources, which are also shared values under the responsibility of a community. The active engagement also includes, to some extent, knowledge about production for the use of resources. This mode can be related to the concept of the prosumer (Toffler, 1990).

These two modes can serve as a departure point for studies on the circular economy. Keeping the cycles of the circular economy small means focusing on the strategies for reduction and reuse, which entails less resource use in slower paces of consumption. From the papers reviewed, the alternative mode of consumption that seems more adequate for resource use reduction is the one based on active engagement as part of a community. In this consumption mode, the centrality of consumption is the utilitarian value of resources and the care for shared commons.

Other forms of consumption in this review, that are not based on community shared commons, are also important for understanding the meaning of goods and structures of provision and riddance competing with the dominant ones.

Conclusion and proposal for research

Initially, a shift in perspective from production to consumption in studies on the circular economy was proposed. To approach this shift, a literature review was conducted on a

sample of papers containing the terms “alternative consumption” and “alternative consumption practices”. The resulting sample of papers were reviewed based on circularity principles and using a framework of six moments of consumption to find alternative modes of consumption. Although two modes of consumption were identified, an extended review is advised, including more search terms as well as extending the framework to include provision and riddance structures as part of the analysis.

A proposal of strategies for the circular economy cannot be reached with the present results. The modes of consumption identified do however represent two possible points of departure: 1) Reduction in material consumption as an ethical exercise when purchasing goods. 2) Reduction in material consumption as an effect of engaging in care for community commons.

For a circular economy the recognition of alternative modes is important for the establishment of consumption strategies based on the structuration of distribution and riddance systems that maintain products and materials in the use loop for longer periods of time. Consumers engaged in practices that blur the lines of production and consumption unifying what is seen as an ontological divide may shed light on how to deal with materials as resources and not as waste.

For further research, two paths are proposed:

1) Extend the literature review or focus on specific modes of alternative consumption that are known but did not emerge from the used key terms such as minimalism and self-sustainable movements.

2) Conduct field studies to observe the actual practicalities of the moments of consumption, and related practices in cases that are not framed by current market activities and its underlying logistics.

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