TOWARDS A THEORY OF SOCIALLY SHARED CONSUMPTION: LITERATURE REVIEW, TAXONOMY, AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increased sharing of consumptive practices, experiences and evaluations on social media platforms. Such socially shared consumption can range from electronic word-of-mouth to formal online reviews as well as automated product mentions facilitated by social media applications. Based on a review of extant emerging literature on this topic as well as of literature on relevant topics such as social influence, online reviews, theories of the extended self and conspicuous consumption, this paper proposes a new concept, "socially shared consumption", and a taxonomy for better understanding and analysing the growing phenomenon of consumers' social sharing of consumption on social media platforms. The taxonomy consists of five dimensions of socially shared consumption: Phase, Automation, Formality, Expressiveness, and Sentiment. The primary contributions of this research-in-progress paper are (a) description and definition of the new concept of socially shared consumption, (b) preliminary proposal of a taxonomy of socially shared consumption, and (c) outline of a research agenda to conduct theory-based empirical studies of socially shared consumption phenomena.

Keywords: *Social business, social media, social sharing, consumer behaviour*

1. Introduction

This paper is motivated by the increasing use of social media platforms that allow consumers to seamlessly share their consumption of products and services with their online social networks (Hoffman, Novak, & Stein, 2013). While the general phenomenon of consumers sharing consumption experiences is not new, the scale of it has been significantly amplified with the introduction of social media and integrated social sharing features such as Facebook's Open Graph, introduced in 2011. Prime examples of companies that utilise the Open Graph functionality are music service Spotify and media streaming service Netflix, which let users seamlessly post their music/film consumption to Facebook ("Person A is listening to Song B via Spotify"). As such, social media allows consumers to share consumption experiences way beyond what Granovetter (1973) calls one's strong ties. At the same time, not only do the socio-technical affordances (Vatrapu, 2010) of social media amplify the scale of potential reach of sharing, they also induce consumers to interact in new ways and share new types of consumption information, presumably not shared before (Hoffman et al., 2013). Furthermore, services such as Open Graph can be seen as serendipity enablers (Parr, 2011), implying that socially shared

consumption actions might represent not only an explicit mention but also some form of implicit endorsement of the consumed product. As such, this increased social sharing of consumptive practices has the potential to significantly affect how businesses gain competitive advantages, towards an increased focus on making customers interact with products and services, i.e. socialising the consumption of products, services, and experiences. This paper proposes a new concept, namely 'socially shared consumption' (SSC) to describe this practice of consumers sharing their consumption of products, services, and experiences with their networks via social media platforms. To the best of our knowledge, little research has been done on this exact topic, and more specifically, on determining the motivations of consumers to share their consumption online and the potential social impact and resulting business value created by offering a socialised consumption process. However, we find relevant existing research within a number of associated areas such as management, innovation, marketing, information systems, and human-computer interaction. By performing a literature review of the disjointed extant research on this new phenomenon as well as of supporting literature, the paper seeks to answer the following research question: *What is Socially Shared Consumption?* As such, it contributes to the field of information systems and to the emerging field of 'social business' (Vatrapu, 2013) by (1) introducing a new concept - SSC – to better understand the phenomena of consumers sharing their consumptive practices and experiences with online social others, 2) proposing a taxonomy for understanding this phenomenon and 3) offer new directions for further research. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents an introduction to the concepts of consumption and social media. Section 3 details the methodology for the literature review. Section 4 presents the main findings from the literature review. Section 5 proposes a conceptual taxonomy for understanding SSC, and Section 6 concludes the paper with an outline of a future research agenda.

2. **Foundations**

2.1 Consumption

Consumption is a complex concept that spans multiple academic disciplines (Miller, D., & Miller, 2005), and can, amongst others, be understood as a theory of choice (Lehdonvirta, 2009). As such, the phenomenon of consumption potentially spans over the consumer decision-making phase, the purchase of the good or service, the consumption of it, and finally the evaluation of it. Interestingly, it is actually quite difficult to find a definition of consumption *per se* in literature on consumption, and more specifically digital/online consumption. For example, Hoffman & Novak (2012) define consumption of content on social media platforms as to "*find, get, acquire, consume, download or receive content*" (Hoffman & Novak, 2012, p. 20) i.e. in line with a broader view of consumption including the decision-making process. Thus, this paper treats the concept of consumption as spanning across several stages: the consumer decision-making phase, purchase, the actual consumption, and potential mention and/or evaluation of the consumed product/service.

2.2 Social media

The term 'social media' has found its way into our everyday vocabulary as services like Facebook and Twitter have grown massively. Some definitions of social media lean towards the participatory element of users creating and/or interacting with content, (e.g. Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) whereas other emphasise the networking/social aspect (e.g. Hoffman et al., 2013). In this paper, we emphasize the notion of 'social' in 'social media', and use the definition offered by Hoffman et al. (2013, p. 29): *"The set of web-based and mobile tools and applications that allow people to create (consume) content that can be consumed (created) by others and which enables and facilitates connections"*. Finally, we also recognise that social networking sites can add a social layer to otherwise non-social sites. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, a site like Amazon is not considered social media *per se* because of its participatory features (e.g. user reviews). However if an integration to the individual users' social network (e.g. Facebook) is present, allowing users to share their purchases or see recommendations from friends – and thus in line with the definition above, enables and facilitates connections - we

consider this a social media context. In this sense, the mention and/or review of an Amazon product that is socially shared with the user's online social network (such as Facebook or Twitter) will qualify as an instance of socially shared consumption.

3. Literature Review: Methodology

The methodology of this literature review is as follows:

- Current research on the phenomenon of consumers sharing consumption experiences via social media platforms was identified. Search terms included contemporary use of the term 'socially shared consumption' as well as possible alternative terms, e.g. 'social consumption', 'visible consumption' and aspects of the socio-technical affordances such as 'Open Graph'.
- Foundational literature in related, established areas that may help to describe, understand, and explain the phenomenon was identified.
- The results from the foundational literature and current research searches were supplemented via backtracking and relevant popular articles were added, resulting in a pool of SSC papers.
- Finally, current research on the phenomenon and foundational literature from related areas were combined with the aim of conceptualising the new concept, socially shared consumption.

The criteria for being included in the pool of SSC papers were that the paper included both a consumption dimension (pre/during/post consumption) *and* a social media element. It was considered sufficient that the papers only briefly elaborated on SSC (e.g. as a topic to be further researched). The first search resulted in 22 papers, which, when supplemented via backtracking, resulted in a pool of 30 papers. As this is an emerging phenomenon, it is expected that this will be expanded over the course of the project. The rest of the papers were grouped into the following themes, serving as foundational literature. Finally, papers within unrelated fields (e.g. "social consumption of alcohol" in the public health domain) were discarded.

- Theme 1: Consumer motivations for and/or impact of sharing content on social media platforms (e.g. photos, likes etc.), however not specifically related to consumption of goods and services
- Theme 2: Consumer motivations for and/or impact of shared consumption, but in an offline context (e.g. consumers' use of goods to express their self-identity, social influence of others in social consumption contexts).
- Theme 3: Online reviews outside a social media context

The following figure illustrates how SSC is situated among foundational research, including examples of sub-themes.
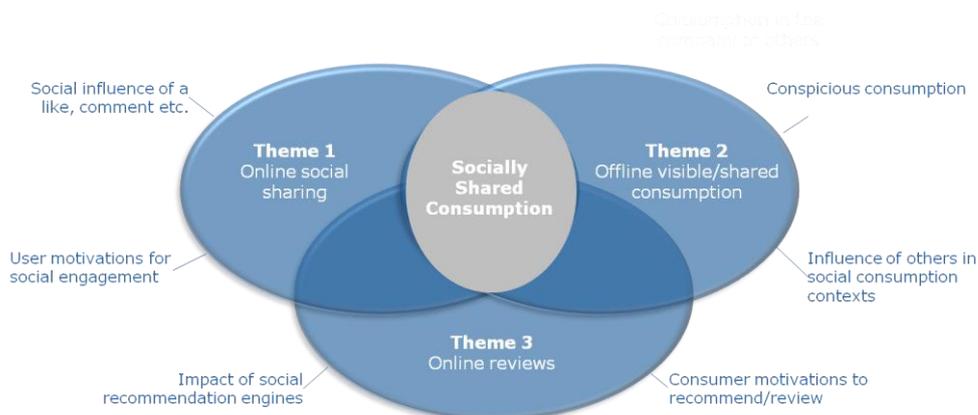

Figure 1.   Overview of Foundational Research for Socially Shared Consumption

4. Literature Review: Findings

Our search for current use of the term 'socially shared consumption', as expected, resulted in only a few papers, of which none qualified as having an element of both social media and consumption. We first analysed current research about the phenomenon of consumers sharing consumption experiences in a social media context and this informed the definition of SSC. We then synthesised current research on SSC and foundational literature in related areas (Figure 1) to create a conceptual taxonomy and propose a research agenda.

4.1 SSC: Scope and Definition

When isolating our search to the characteristics of the phenomenon of shared consumption in a social media context, we do get a few relevant results on the phenomenon of interest to this paper. However, a common definition of the phenomenon is lacking. Villi (2012) applies a "curation" view on content sharing, and as such SSC can be viewed as a form of socially oriented endorsement from the consumer side. Wang et al. (2012) use the term "consumption-related peer-communication", and investigate consumption sharing on social media platforms. Here, the concept is defined quite broadly and includes status updates asking friends for input on a particular product, reviews, comments etc. thus spanning over across several stages of the consumption process. This can be characterised as a quite active consumption dialogue, in the sense that the communication is generated manually rather than automatically posted to e.g. Facebook via an app. Similarly, a broad definition of consumption-related communication on social media platforms is found in Saenger et al. (2010) who include listing of favourite books and general pictures of one's lifestyle. From both academic research and entertainment industry perspectives, the term 'Social TV' has generated attention lately, essentially also expressing a form of SSC. Social TV is often described as the act of discussing or interacting with a live TV show, usually via hashtags on Twitter (Armano, 2011; Luger, 2013). Similar kind of real-time socially shared consumption is found in the automated actions produced by social media sharing applications (e.g. Spotify's Open Graph app). This new kind of SSC does however differ from past practices reported in extant literature due to its semi-or fully-automated nature (once the consumer has chosen to connect a particular service with Facebook, actions from this service are shared automatically). Finally, looking to the field of online reviews as an expression of post-consumption evaluation, we find that reviews can generally be divided into two types: Formal and informal reviews (Rad & Benyoucef, 2011). Formal reviews are posted on a dedicated third-party website (e.g. Tripadvisor) or a merchant's website (e.g. Amazon), typically at the request of the website/merchant, and within the formal review section of the product page. In contrast, informal reviews are unstructured and do not appear in a dedicated review context. Informal reviews typically consist of casual product mentions made on social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebok, and are usually created by the initiative of the consumer.

On the basis of the above review of current research describing various angles of the phenomenon of interest, the following holistic definition of SSC is proposed:

"Socially Shared Consumption (SSC) is an activity where consumers by means of social media platforms share their consumption of products, services, and experiences with their online social network(s). The consumption activities shared can be the very act of consumption itself, or it can be considerations leading up first to the purchase and consumption, as well as the subsequent evaluation of the good/service consumed. The consumption may be an individual act – and may take place offline or online - but can be said to be socialised by the online sharing of that act."

4.2 SSC: Consumer Motivations

One research theme identified in current research on the phenomenon of SSC is the consumer motivations for sharing consumption experiences on social platforms. Sharing one's consumption activities on social media platforms is viewed by Saenger et al. (2010) as a form of consumer exhibitionism.

This view situates consumers' SSC activities in the field of well-established concepts such as 'materialism' (e.g. Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006), the 'theory of conspicuous consumption'(Veblen, 1899 and Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012), and 'the extended self' (Belk, 1988), in all of which shared consumption experiences function as ways of constructing or expressing one's identity, self, or social class. While these concepts generally describe offline phenomena, they can be helpful in understanding and analysing the concept of SSC. Examples of such identity-building, reinforcing, or signalling of user motivations for social sharing of consumption are also found in the literature (e.g. Drenten, 2012). On the basis of an empirical study, Drenten (2012) concludes that photos of brands and consumption experiences (actual or desired) shared on social media platforms are important tools to identity construction among teenage girls. Furthermore, Belk (n.d.) presents a revised theory of the extended self, applicable in a digital world, which offers interesting insights into the possible consumer motivations and effects of engaging in SSC. Belk (n.d.) finds that digitalisation has led to a more extensive sharing of experiences with products/possessions, and that the resulting potential feedback from others can actually enrich that feeling of self and/or the feeling of belonging to a group. Different frameworks for analysing consumer motivations to engage in social media activities in general (i.e. not necessarily consumption-related) may also be useful for understanding consumer motivations for sharing consumption experiences on social media platforms (e.g. the "4Cs" of social media Hoffman & Novak, 2012). Interestingly, the 4C framework does not explicitly include the above mentioned motivations of self-expression, consumer exhibitionism etc. The authors do however point to the need for further research into the user motivations for creating content (e.g. what drives a user to write on Facebook about a coffee shop he just visited?) (Hoffman et al., 2013). A similar framework is presented by Muntinga (2011) who focus on motivations for brand-related social media use, including online reviews. The final relevant stream of research to understand consumer motivations to engage in SSC are theories of diffusion of innovations, popularised by Rogers (2003), Gladwell (2001), and Moore (1998), which theorise that different consumer segments are needed to spread new ideas, products, innovations, or knowledge and account for their differential adoption. Arguably, these different segments have different motivations to share knowledge such as an altruistic desire to help others (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004) vs. a concern for socio-technical capital (Resnick, 2002).

In summary, the relatively scarce literature on the phenomenon of SSC indicates that consumer motivations for SSC is an existing research theme, primarily explaining it as an identity building, reinforcing, or signalling activity.

4.3 SSC: Impact

The second overarching theme of SSC literature is the potential impact of consumers sharing their consumption on social platforms. Arguably, impact can be achieved on many different levels such as increased brand awareness/buying intention/sales etc. In the wider (i.e. non-social media related) area of recommendations and reviews, numerous academic studies have researched the value of online reviews (e.g. Amblee & Bui, 2011; Chen et al., 2004; and Duan et al., 2008), and the widely used Net Promoter Score (NPS) is built upon the insight that having a large amount of customers that are willing to actively recommend a company's product is directly linked to company growth (Reichheld, 2003). Moving to the field of SSC, the notion of social influence (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Kelman, 1958; Milgram, 1963) is of essence as the communication takes place between peers and/or trusted others given the other-orientation of social media. Generally, it is well known and accepted that a personal recommendation from a friend is much stronger than one coming from a stranger or a company (e.g. Xu et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2013) although variations in impact are seen among different consumer segments (Iyengar, Han, & Gupta, 2009; Munar & Jacobsen, 2013) and product categories (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Thus, it seems logical that Wang et al. (2012) find a positive impact from consumption-related peer-communication (made on social media platforms) on product attitude, product involvement, and purchase intention. Within the field of online reviews and more specifically recommendation engines, we see that incorporating social network information in traditional recommen-

dation engines has the potential to improve recommendation accuracy (Falahi, Mavridis, & Atif, 2012; Yang et al., 2013).

As stated earlier, the mere act of social sharing of consumption experiences is not a new phenomenon as such. However socio-technical affordances of social media platforms has magnified the potential reach, use, and impact of it. This poses an interesting question, also raised by Hoffman et al. (2013), namely how this increasing amount of day-to-day consumption information influences consumer opinions and decisions? Additionally, Hoffman et al. (2013) point to the importance of further research into how content "*containing thin slices of opinions on products shape viewers' opinions, albeit in ways that are less direct than full reviews do*" (p.33), adding the example of who is using a particular service. In contrast to this view of indeterminate impact of social sharing of consumption, Powers (2012) interestingly states that consumption of goods and services which are shared via social media platforms is increasingly falsely taken for product endorsement. These somewhat opposing views raise an important question about whether the mere (shared) use of a particular product/service may be perceived by one's peers as a form of endorsement of that product/service, and thereby influence consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviour. A number of established theories - from Leibenstein's (1950) 'bandwagon effect', Rogers' (2003) 'diffusion of innovations', to the theory of observational learning (Garg, Smith, & Telang, 2011) - help shed light on this question, in that they claim that an individual's or group's consumption can impact other people's consumption choices, preferences, and behaviours. Thus, socially shared consumption becomes a kind of user endorsement. A couple of studies support this view. Garg et al. (2011) find that peer influence (stemming from visible use behaviour) increases music diffusion with up to a factor of six. Similarly, Wattal et al. (2010) find that blog use among an individual's network increases one's own blog use. Finally, others' shared or visible consumption in social contexts (e.g. a restaurant visit) can also act as peer pressure to conform to certain consumption standards (Sotiropoulos & D'astous, 2012). That said, there are many open questions with regard to impact of SSC that need to be empirically addressed. For example, if the mere act of listening to a song (e.g. on Spotify) can be viewed as an endorsement, how is that potential endorsement weighted between endorsement of the service (Spotify) and the content (the song listened to)? Furthermore, if the mere shared use of a product/service can be conceptualised as a form of endorsement, how strong an endorsement is it? Finally, does a potential endorsement effect apply across consumer segments and across product categories? And what effect does it have on business KPIs such as brand awareness, consideration, and sales? These still remain unanswered questions of academic importance as well as practical relevance.

5. Towards a Taxonomy of SSC

Drawing from the literature discussed above, the following section outlines and discusses a taxonomy for understanding the phenomenon of SSC, and extant literature is grouped into the different (sub-) dimensions. As this is a research-in-progress paper, the dimensions are not necessarily exhaustive nor sufficient, and empirical validation is pending.

Dimension	Definition	Practice Examples	Total # papers
Phase	Refers to which phase of consumption is socially shared. It can be the actual act of consumption, but also the considerations leading up to the choice of product, as well as the subsequent evaluation of it.	**Pre**: Receiving input or asking friends for input on Facebook and Twitter, checking out recommendations from social others on Yelp, booking a restaurant table or concert tickets and sharing that story on Facebook.	**20**
		During: Real-time sharing of photos on Instagram of having dinner.	**14**
		Post: Writing a review of the restaurant on Tripadvisor or Yelp, available for friends and social others.	**19**
Automation	Refers to whether the platform, from which the sharing takes place, offers automation. Two major types are seen: Automation of the *sharing* (the sharing takes place without the user actively choosing to post) and/or of the *content* shared (predefined text, illustrations etc.)	**Low**: A consumption-related status update or tweet	**18**
		Medium: A user actively posts a Foursquare check-in to Facebook but without actively writing anything (automation of content, e.g. a map or photo)	**10**
		High: A user's music or film consumption is posted to Facebook from e.g. Spotify and Netflix (automation of both sharing and content)	**11**
Formality	Refers to whether the consumption shared has the format of a formal review or not. Often, this will be determined by whether the mention takes place in a review context or not.	**Informal**: A tweet about a product experience	**18**
		Semi-formal: Check-ins on Foursquare and recent purchases on Amazon	**16**
		Formal: Reviews on Yelp or Tripadvisor	**11**
Expressiveness	Refers to whether the shared consumption is accompanied by a distinct expression of opinion (either positive or negative) about the product/service consumed.	**Weak**: A photo posted of a new iPhone on Facebook, not accompanied by explanatory text	**13**
		Medium: A 'like' on Facebook	**15**
		Strong: A photo posted of a new iPhone on Facebook, accompanied by an endorsement of the phone's new design.	**21**
Sentiment	Refers to the direction of opinion expressed (positive, neutral, negative)	**Negative**: A tweet describing a disappointing restaurant experience	**16**
		Neutral: A restaurant check-in on Foursquare without any accompanying text	**19**
		Positive: A tweet about a good restaurant experience	**21**

Table 1.   Taxonomy of SSC

Some of the dimensions in the SSC taxonomy tend to follow each other while others are more unlikely to be combinatorial. For example, literature on the impact of reviews and other post-consumption activities tend to *also* have a pre-consumption *phase* element as the impact is exercised on consumers who are in the pre-consumption phase. Similarly, as the *formality dimension* stems from the literature on online reviews, literature on the motivations for formal mentions will typically take place after consuming the product. Additionally, the concept of a "review context" is in constant development. For example, while not a dedicated review site, Twitter's hashtag functionality does lend itself to a form of reviews (e.g. #mcdstories). An important note on the *automation dimension* is that it is heavily influenced by socio-technical affordances (Vatrapu, 2010). As such, technical features can induce new ways of sharing consumption. However, even for non-automated content there may still be a "template" steering the content in a particular direction – either technical (e.g. Twitter's 140 characters and emerging discourse conventions) or socio-cultural like the dominant use of Facebook's status update. With regard to the *expressiveness dimension*, expression of opinion can in some cases (e.g. irony)

presume access to implicit information about the context and/or the person sharing in order to fully evaluate what is being expressed. In our taxonomy, we assume that the relation to the sharing person stemming from being associated with one another on a social platform should form the needed background information in order to judge the particular expression of opinion. Finally, a noteworthy distinction across several of the five dimensions is that of the content consumed vs. the platform facilitating the content. For example, to what degree does a Foursquare check-in at a restaurant, shared on Facebook, communicate a message about the content (the restaurant) vs. the platform (Foursquare)? Or is it that the person engaging in SSC is the message? In a twist on McLuhan's (1964) famous dictum, it could be that "the messenger is the message".

6. Outline of a Research Agenda for SSC

In this paper we have identified disjointed extant research on the phenomenon of consumers sharing consumption practises as well as research in supporting research areas. On the basis of this, we have proposed a new concept, SSC, and a taxonomy for better understanding this phenomenon. In our future research on SSC we wish to refine our taxonomy and empirically transform it into a conceptual framework. The framework will be informed by our initial work of this paper as well as by empirical data collection and analysis hereof, and we aim to establish a conceptual framework for socially shared consumption, that empirically identifies how consumption can be socially shared across the entire consumption process. The work will draw on established models of consumer decision making and buying behaviour, which are expected to be enriched with a (digital) social sharing dimension. As such, besides the academic relevance of adding to established models and understanding a new phenomenon, the framework is expected to have a practical business relevance in terms of how to encourage consumers' sharing of consumption across the entire consumption process by use of socio-technical affordances. This leads us to the following research question for future research:

RQ1: What is SSC and how does it manifest on social media platforms throughout the entire consumption process?

Furthermore, on the basis of the literature review and the extracted taxonomy it becomes evident that the primary gaps in knowledge about SSC are centred on the area of the phase *during consumption*, with *medium to high automation* and a *weak expressiveness*. One reason for this could be the recent growth in social media platforms offering more or less automated consumption sharing. Even though papers within these categories do exist, none exclusively conceptualises and analyses this phenomenon. Thus, questions such as the following remain unanswered: Consumer motivations for sharing, potential endorsement effect and relative strength compared to more formal reviews, perception of content shared (e.g. a song) vs. the platform from which it is shared (e.g. Spotify), and socio-technical aspects of SSC: What impact the technological platforms offered have on how people behave in terms of sharing consumption - what they share, how often they share etc. This leads us to propose the following two research questions, which will specifically focus on the consumption in the phase *during consumption*, with *medium to high automation* and a *weak expressiveness*.

RQ2: What are the motivations for consumers to share their consumption of products, services, and experiences on social media platforms?

RQ3: What is the social impact and the resulting business value created from consumers sharing their consumption of products, services, and experiences on social media platforms?

In order to answer these questions, foundational literature will be used to form hypothesis for both consumer motivations and impact, which will then be empirically tested.

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