“When Sharing is Caring: Islam and Collaborative Consumption”

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In what might seem as a reaction to “recession, the green zeitgeist and a longing for community” (Kasriel-Alexander, 2013), collaborative consumption has evolved as a trend that intercedes with traditional consumption as we know it. The term was coined by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers (2010) in their book *What’s Mine is Yours*. In 2010, *Time* Magazine “named collaborative consumption as one of the 10 Ideas That Will Change The World” (Kasriel-Alexander, 2012). Collaborative consumption is also called “collaborative economy, the peer economy, the asset-light lifestyle and the sharing economy”. The trend has also been exacerbated by the plethora of social media and the million consumers who use online portals such as eBay, collaborativeconsumption.com, Freecycle, AirBnB, ZipCar, Resecond.com, Bookcrossing.com, etc. This system, although in commercial terms, was also implemented in services like Uber. Consumers have gone to sharing their products, renting them, and donating them which serves both “pocket and conscience” (Kasriel-Alexander, 2012; 2013; see also Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). In academic terms, Belk (2010: 715) highlights that sharing is an overlooked type of consumer behavior in the literature that stands as an antidote to “materialism and possession attachment”.

Many “peer-to-peer rental firms” were established in response to the global financial crisis of 2008 when people realized that they need to reduce their consumption and go for more solidarity and a sense of community (Kasriel-Alexander, 2013). Guru companies have not been far from capitalizing on the emerging trend. Aside from electronics trade-in initiatives, Puma’s Soles4Souls Corporate Social Responsibility campaign is one example where consumers are given incentives by the company to donate their shoes for less fortunate consumers. Second-hand markets like Oxfam are also not far from the trend (Kasriel-Alexander, 2012). In the US alone, the “market value for used children’s clothes alone is said to be between USD 1-3 billion” (Pedersen and Netter, 2015: 259). These initiatives serve to humanize brands in ways that take participating companies away from the capitalist profit-maximization connotation in favor of more humane perceptual associations for the participating brands.
Notwithstanding, the co-creation value eminent in brand communities presents a different view to the management literature which traditionally separates the firm from its customers. The creation of sharing brand communities and such “open business models” can actually present beneficial lessons for innovation and creativity in offering, use, and disposal of products (Abdelkafi, 2012; Schau et al., 2009). According to Pedersen and Netter (2015: 259), “collaborative consumption may (also) be a means to reduce over-consumption – one of the root challenges facing sustainability efforts in the fashion industry”.

**Islam and Collaborative Consumption**

Collaborative consumption and concepts of sharing and donating lie starkly in opposition to the selfish assumption/view and presentation of human nature in traditional neo-classical economics. In psychology and organization literature such as Maslow’s need hierarchy theory, giving behaviors for people who have not fulfilled their basic needs in materialistic terms as the theory postulates, remain unexplained. Yet, the warm glow that comes with sharing and donating is reported to enhance psychological well-being and “expand the aggregate extended self” (Belk, 2010: 715).

In Islam, the Qur’an highlights the need for moderation and avoiding extravagance in consumption and expenditure:

“And do not make your hand [as] chained to your neck or extend it completely and [thereby] become blamed and insolvent” (17: 29)

**Zakah** or Alms Giving to the poor, disadvantaged and needy is also one of the pillars of Islam:

“Zakah expenditures are only for the poor and for the needy and for those employed to collect [zakah] and for bringing hearts together [for Islam] and for freeing captives [or slaves] and for those in debt and for the cause of Allah and for the [stranded] traveler - an obligation [imposed] by Allah. And Allah is Knowing and Wise” (9: 60)

More importantly, Muslims are encouraged to collaborate in good deeds:

“...And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is severe in penalty” (5: 2)
It is safe to wonder if an extension of Islamic ethics would not only lead to a sharing economy but also to a caring one. Such caring economy can be based on values different from the consumption ethos of the traditional commercial economy. The creation and support of online alternative markets and marketspaces can be a starting point. In Europe, for example, “alternative (local) community currencies” are increasing and “their circulation is predominantly virtual” such as in Time Banks (Gowling, 2014; see also Ozanne and Ozanne, 2016). Enhancing the presence and expansion of caring communities is indeed encouraged from an Islamic perspective as it leads to sustainability in society, caring for less advantaged consumers and vulnerable groups, as well as more humane and meaningful consumption.

References


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1 English translation of the meaning of the Qur’an verses are adapted from http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/.