

**A Critical Framework for Examining Sustainability Claims of the Sharing Economy
Exploring the Tensions Within Platform Brand Discourses**

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Abstract

The sharing economy represents a market-driven response to the perceived inefficient resource use arising from materialism, and as such, offers the possibility of a more environmentally sustainable form of consumption. However, the sustainability benefits attributed to the sharing economy remain contentious and fraught with paradox. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of three sharing economy brands (Lime, Rent the Runway and BlaBlaCar) we identify that sustainability discourses compete with claims arising from the espoused benefits of immateriality and platform brands' desire for rapid growth. We identify and explore three platform brand discourses (disrupting unsustainable leaders, guilt-free choice, and non-commercial appeals) and their associated practices. In doing so we identify that tensions between these discourses and practices give rise to three sustainability-related contradictions: displacement of sustainable alternatives, hidden materiality, and creeping usage. Our findings contribute to our understanding of the sharing economy and its role in sustainability.

Keywords

sharing economy, sustainability, branding, access-based consumption, materialism, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

In response to the sustainability megatrend, a number of market-mediated solutions have been proposed to reduce humanity's impact on the natural world (Mittelstaedt et al. 2014). One of these is the sharing economy (Ahuvia and Izberk-Bilgin 2011; Eckhardt et al. 2019; Katrini 2018; Martin 2016). Encapsulating a range of access-based approaches to consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021), the sharing economy has the potential to reduce climate change emissions, waste, and overconsumption (Lang and Armstrong 2018; Rifkin 2000). Despite the intuitive link between owning less (i.e., materialism; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2012) and positive environmental impact, claims regarding the sustainability benefits of the sharing economy are complex (Schor 2016) and should not be taken for granted (Mi and Coffman 2019). Responding to Eckhardt et al.'s claim (2019, p. 19) that the "[t]he question of the value of the sharing economy to society is far from closed," and Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021's (2021) critical unpacking of the societal benefits arising from a neoliberal, market-mediated approach to sharing, we examine the discourses of three brands to develop a critical framework for assessing the sustainability claims of sharing platforms.

Eckhardt et al. (2019, p. 7) define the sharing economy as "a scalable socioeconomic system that employs technology-enabled platforms to provide users with temporary access to tangible and

intangible resources that may be crowdsourced," identifying five core aspects of this market system (cf. Layton 2009): an emphasis on temporary access, market-driven, reliance on platforms, reframing consumers as prosumers, and crowdsourcing. The sharing economy aligns with the developmental view of sustainability as megatrend whereby solutions to externalities are addressed through market and technical innovations, improved resource allocation and information flows (see for example Johnson (2012)). However, as several authors identify, unsustainability can also be inherent in a capitalist market logic, resulting in unforeseen consequences and counter-intuitive results (Campbell, O'Driscoll, and Saren 2013; Ekström and Salomonson 2014; Mittelstaedt et al. 2014). In a recent critical essay, Saravade, Felix, and Firat (2021) concluded that because of an underpinning market logic, the sharing economy was unlikely to represent an alternative

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mode of consumption, but rather compete horizontally with existing models including public alternatives (car sharing schemes, for instance, compete with public transport). Together, these observations call for further examinations into the relationship between sharing economy models and environmental well-being; a call we take up with a critical examination of three sharing economy brands.

This paper has the following structure. First, we review the relevant literature on the sharing economy and sustainability. This review helps frame our study by identifying the potential for tensions between sustainability claims arising from proposed decreases in materialism and the strategic logic of sharing platform models. Second, we report details of our critical discourse analysis of three sharing economy brands: Lime, Rent the Runway (RTR), and BlaBlaCar. Third, we present our findings, identifying the core discourses deployed by the three brands that are relevant to issues of sustainability (*disrupting unsustainable leaders*, *guilt-free choice*, and *non-commercial appeals*). We organize the findings around three unintended consequences for sustainability of the sharing economy: *displacement of sustainable alternatives*, *hidden materiality*, and *creeping usage*. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical contributions and implications for practice and future research.

Literature Review: The Sharing Economy and Sustainability

The sharing economy is predicated on immaterial or liquid forms of consumption whereby consumers access the services on an as-needed basis. This shift from materialism to immaterialism or liquidity is proposed to lead to a reduction in demand for goods and their more efficient use, resulting in positive sustainability outcomes. The first part of our literature therefore examines the theoretical underpinnings of the sustainability benefits arising from the sharing economy. We also review critical appraisals of this relationship and the emerging empirical evidence. The second part focuses on an emerging stream of research examining the business model needs of the sharing economy. As we identify above, the sharing economy is a market-mediated approach to sharing and as such there remains the possibility of tension between the competing needs of sustainability and business performance. This tension helps sensitize our critical discourse analysis of sharing platform brands.

Materialism, the Sharing Economy, and Sustainability

The materialism at the heart of capitalist economies compels consumers to own more and more things, and attributes greater status to those who have possessions (Martin 2016; Snare 1972). The sharing economy is grounded in more liquid logics, whereby consumers will prefer access over ownership and value-in-use over symbolic value (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012, 2017; Eckhardt et al. 2019; Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021). In particular, sharing economy models

represent a challenge to materialism and ownership, potentially rewriting rules around status (Botsman and Rogers 2010; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Gonzalez et al. 2009; Katrini 2018; Perren and Kozinets 2018; Rifkin 2000). As Rifkin (2000, p. 6) states: “In the new world, markets give way to networks, sellers and buyers are replaced by suppliers and users, and virtually everything is accessed”. The sharing economy is a means for consumers to get off what Schor (2007) identifies as the “consumer elevator,” or Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2012) label the “material trap,” in which status anxiety drives ever higher levels of materialism. This material trap has generated a crisis of materiality drifts, and caused three main forms of macromarketing society-level ills: environmental degradation, disintegration of the social bond and an individual and collective lifestyle based on hyperconsumption and accumulation (Habib 2012).

One of the benefits of the sharing economy relates to its potential to overcome the downsides of ownership or possession. Advocates of the sharing economy point out that much of what we own sits idle, a situation which makes little rational sense (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Those writing on the circular economy (which encompasses sharing) make similar claims, focusing on tapping into unused capacity (“sweating idle assets”) in pre-existing systems and goods (Esposito, Tse, and Soufani 2018). The critique of ownership by sharing economy advocates stems from Ostrom’s (1990) view of market inefficiencies (Rifkin 2000), and proposes that shifts in technology and the emergence of platform-based businesses can leverage this idle capacity more efficiently through sharing. Should ownership be dethroned as a consumer ideal, lower levels of materialism are predicted to lead to more sustainable outcomes as consumers experience less psychological ownership of, and emotional attachment to, goods (the feeling of “MINE”; Morewedge et al. 2021, p. 200), potentially leading to a decline in consumerism (Cohen and Kietzmann 2014; Eckhardt et al. 2019; Gonzalez et al. 2009; Martin 2016).

Assessments of the sustainability impacts of particular sharing models do indicate some sustainability benefits where the impact is to displace less sustainable alternatives such as private motor vehicle use, reduce pollution, and potentially reduce resource use, but the claims of intrinsic sustainability are unsupported (Curtis and Mont 2020; Mi and Coffman 2019; Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021). The move from ownership to access often requires consumers to modify their attitudes and behaviors towards consumption (Eckhardt et al. 2019). This does not always happen seamlessly, and can prompt behaviors that run counter to sustainability objectives. Campbell, O’Driscoll, and Saren (2013) suggest that sharing models may simply operate as “additions to” rather than “replacements of” existing services. Analyses of cycling schemes support this, identifying that consumers retain their own bicycle for personal enjoyment, while accessing the shared scheme for work-related commutes (Aldred 2013). Thus, these schemes may appeal to existing cyclists and walkers and take relatively few cars off the road (Ricci 2013). Similarly, others identify how transportation apps have driven demand for ride-hailing trips that previously would not have been made in a personal vehicle, or would

have been taken via walking, biking or public transportation (Clewlow and Mishra 2017; Schor 2018). Investigations of the impact of accommodation sharing applications such as Airbnb have also challenged sustainability claims, documenting that these brands have increased carbon footprints through their encouragement of more travel (Cheng, Mackenzie, and Degarege 2020) and encouraged more construction as consumers invest in accommodation to let through sharing apps (Frenken and Schor, 2017).

The decreased level of psychological ownership consumers experience when they access (vs. own) products can also attenuate the sustainability benefits of the sharing economy. When consumers feel that a product is “theirs,” they feel more responsible and caring toward the product (Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks 2003) and more likely to engage in practices such as maintenance and service that extend a product’s life because they expect to use it for longer and engage with it more frequently. With access, the temporary nature of the consumption experience attenuates consumers’ feelings of responsibility for the product and can even lead them to behave in ways that shorten the product’s life (see for example, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012)). Belk (2017) concludes that although sharing is likely to have environmental benefits, materialism inhibits pro-social goals such as sustainability. Others have identified that despite the sustainability claims of access-based logics such as the service dominant logic, demand for material goods has never been higher (Campbell, O’Driscoll, and Saren 2013). Schor and Thompson (2014) point out that the sharing economy may paradoxically result in a greater throwaway culture as the trend towards sharing makes people less attached to their possessions (Morewedge et al. 2021).

Together, these studies highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between materialism and sustainability (in the context of the sharing economy) (Eckhardt et al. 2019; Saravade, Felix, and Fuat Firat 2021). For example, the most common way in which sustainability claims are judged in relation to sharing platforms is life cycle analysis (LCA). LCA considers the impact on the environment of the provider’s entire operation and flow on impacts (Acquier, Daudigeos, and Pinkse 2017). Assessments of the sustainability of e-scooters for example, consider raw material and energy use involved in making the scooter (relative to alternatives), the impact on the environment of distributing and collecting those e-scooters, disposal and recyclability of component parts, and the impact of repairs (Temple 2019). When these impacts are taken into account, the promised benefits of less materialism become attenuated by the fact that sharing models rely on a material ecosystem to operate (Hollingsworth, Copeland, and Johnson, 2019; see also Campbell, O’Driscoll, and Saren 2013).

As the sharing economy is a market-mediated approach to access, it is also necessary to consider how the strategic needs of sharing platforms impacts on sustainability.

The Business of Sharing

With the sharing economy defined as the market-driven provision of sharing, understanding the business goals of sharing

economy brands is helpful for judging sustainability claims (Cohen and Kietzmann 2014; Frenken 2017; Martin 2016). However, research on business strategy in the sharing economy remains in a nascent form, often more speculative or normative in nature. This is in part because the sharing economy is relatively new, and in part because even the largest platforms such as Uber and Airbnb have struggled for profitability, while many others have filed for bankruptcy (Apte and Davis 2019). As such, to supplement the few papers that do address business strategy in the sharing economy, we will draw also on consumer research to identify further insights. Given the focus of the paper, we limit the review on those business activities that are likely to effect environmental sustainability, rather than drawing a general inventory of strategies and capabilities necessary for success in the sharing economy (e.g., customer databases, branding, pricing).

Central to many sharing economy models is the logic of access (Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021). Apte and Davis (2019) identify network size and economies of scale as being central to business success for sharing models (for both the supply and demand sides). For those consumers with a liquid relationship to possessions, providers need to be able to meet their demands for a state of “ever readiness” (Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012), which requires extensive network coverage (Eckhardt et al. 2019; Garud et al. 2020). Studies back this up, with analysis of ride-share schemes identifying a positive relationship between size, customer uptake, and economic viability (Ricci 2013). This has led car sharing firms to move towards owning their own fleets of vehicles to meet demand and, in eventually expand their fleet range and size (Chen and Wang 2019; Levine 2009). As a result of the need to be ever ready, sharing economy firms need to have significant resource slack (Curtis 2021). As Campbell, O’Driscoll, and Saren (2013) argue, access-based systems require an underpinning material architecture as products (and their upkeep) are essential to realizing the services offered.

In terms of strategy, growth and dominance are identified as essential for the success of sharing economy businesses. Apte and Davis (2019) note that in many categories, low switching costs for customers (and suppliers) lead sharing platforms to rely on aggressive acquisition and retention strategies. Sharing platforms are often subject to “winner takes all” dynamics, requiring businesses to adopt what Kumar, Lahiri, and Dogan (2018) describe as a fast acquisition, attention, and win-back strategy. Both sets of authors identify that managing demand and supply is critical, as both are essential for the network effects and economies of scale mentioned earlier. To ensure greater availability for customers and more attractiveness for suppliers, service platforms are encouraged to manage supply and demand growth concurrently, and at great speed (Apte and Davis 2019; Täuscher and Kietzmann 2017). On the supply side, exploratory studies indicate that the logic of network expansion and economies of scale drives sharing platforms to look for new sources of growth, increasing the supplier base and adding additional services (Guyader and Piscicelli 2019). This combination of aggressive market growth through acquisition and expansion of use is

essential because many sharing economy businesses require deep pools of financial resources to achieve dominance (Cusumano 2018).

Section Summary and Research Aims

The above review reinforces the general consensus that the sustainability benefits of the sharing economy require further research (Eckhardt et al. 2019; Frenken 2017; Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021), cannot be taken for granted (Rifkin 2000; Schor 2016), are rife with contradictions and conflict (Cohen and Kietzmann 2014), and may have unintended consequences (Frenken and Schor 2017; Schor 2016). Specifically, the review identifies that sustainability outcomes arising from efficient or even decreasing resource use may be attenuated by an emphasis on access and choice, and the strategic needs of sharing economy businesses for fast growth and category / geographic dominance. These tensions may also arise from the contradictory goals (and underpinning logics) and demands that arise when sustainability goals compete with models focused on offering greater user choice and on-demand services, and fast growth. Furthermore, different types of platforms may experience these tensions differently. Therefore, we aim to provide a critical framework for assessing the sustainability claims of sharing economy platforms through a critical discourse analysis of three major brands.

Method

Following Mele and Spina (2021) we used a case study research design, analyzing the data through a critical discourse analysis approach to unpack the “set of representations and ways of structuring reality that put strong imprints on cognition and attitudes” (i.e., discourses, Alvesson and Kärreman 2000, p. 1129) used by sharing economy brands. By analyzing how the brands present themselves (in terms of their stated intent as well as the narratives they use to describe their actions), frame their sustainability claims, and communicate practices with sustainability impacts (such as new service launches, new partnerships and programs) we sought to uncover underlying assumptions used by the brands in order to identify any tensions or contradictions.

Sampling

To ensure theoretical suitability we selected the cases among brands that met Eckhardt et al.’s (2019) definition of the sharing economy, and involved activities with substantial environmental impact. We also opted for brands that were well-known in their categories, had growth or disruptive ambitions, and had already reached a certain scale. As key players in their category, such brands are likely to set the tone of the overall category discourse compared to their smaller or emerging counterparts. We identified the following brands as our three cases: BlaBlaCar (ride sharing), RTR (fast fashion), and Lime (personal transportation). While RTR focuses primarily on the

USA in its operations, BlaBlaCar and Lime operate globally. The sample therefore covers multiple industries and countries, enhancing the transferability of our research.

Each case uses technology platforms as part of its sharing model. Lime and RTR are the providers of the shared object—e-vehicles and fashion items respectively. In contrast, BlaBlaCar focuses on marketizing consumer-to-consumer sharing, primarily providing a platform for buyers and sellers of automotive services. We identified that each case uses sustainability and materiality discourses, although they differ in their content, emphasis, and length of time used. All operate commercially, and therefore have, over time, engaged in a number of announcements detailing plans for growth. Table 1 provides examples of their claims, and the following sections will unpack these in more detail.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was carried out by all three researchers. Multiple data sources were used for each case, drawing on longitudinal data whenever possible to capture changes in discourse. Company websites and social media provided the bulk of the data for understanding how the brands presented themselves to various stakeholders and communicated their stance in relation to the sharing economy. We read the brands’ websites and associated social media pages in detail. We began by focusing on how the brands framed their vision and mission, articulated their history and values and described their offerings. We paid special attention to if, when and how they made reference to sustainability claims in their narratives. Drawing on the tensions raised in the literature review, we also examined announcements relating to benefits, be they for consumers, investors, employees, cities, the natural environment and other any other stakeholders. We examined practices, particularly those surrounding changes to operations, the launch of new services, partnerships with other organizations, and changes in each firm’s marketing mix. We also noted how the framing of sustainability claims changed over time, by placing our data in a historic timeline.

This data was combined with information originating from non-company sources such as news articles (including interviews with company management) and blog posts about the case companies to accommodate for different viewpoints on the companies’ discourses and increase data pluralism (Blanchet and Depeyre 2016). Since the emerging company discourses can only be interpreted within the broader historical, social, economic and political context, we also collected news articles and reports about the sharing economy in general to inform the analysis. These non-company sources allowed us to uncover the practices necessary to realize brands’ sustainability claims and the resulting tensions, and also provided a form of data triangulation. Table 2 gives an overview of the data sources used.

The coding process followed standard grounded theory procedures, namely open, axial, and selective (e.g., Strauss and Corbin 1998). When coding the data we focused on the content, form and presentation of texts, attending to the arguments and lines of reasoning employed rather than conducting a micro-

Table 1. Descriptive Details of the Three Cases (RTR, BlaBlaCar and Lime).

Factor / Brand	RTR	BlaBlaCar	Lime
Founding Year (Place)	2009 (New York, USA)	2006 (Paris, FRANCE)	2017 (San Francisco, USA)
Sector	Fashion	Car sharing	Urban personal mobility
Present coverage / size / financials	USA focus / 6–8 million customers (2018) / Revenue US\$100 million (2020)	22 countries (2019) / 70 million members (2019) / Revenue €80 million (2019)	135 cities across 5 continents (2020) / 55 million rides (2020) / Valuation approx. US\$500 million valuation (2020)
Disrupting unsustainable leaders: Attributing sustainability benefits to the innovative and disruptive character of the brand's offering.	<i>"Sustainable Footprint—Most clothes we buy end up in the back of closets or landfills. Power the sharing economy and rent instead."</i> (point four (of four) in RTR's "Power of Renting") <i>"... creating a new model of dynamic ownership rooted in sustainability."</i> (from RTR's LinkedIn description)	<i>"We bring freedom, fairness and fraternity to the world of travel."</i> (BlaBlaCar mission statement) <i>"Here are some ideas to make carpooling the new norm because the climate can't wait!"</i> (from company website, 2021)	<i>"Lime is founded on a simple idea that all communities deserve access to smart, affordable mobility. Through the equitable distribution of shared scooters, bikes and transit vehicles, we aim to reduce dependence on personal automobiles for short distance transportation and leave future generations with a cleaner, healthier planet."</i> (from Lime's "Our Mission" page)
Guilt-free choice: Highlighting the liquidity benefits (e.g., greater choice, accessibility, flexibility, adaptability, and being on-demand) of the brand's offering.	<i>"Change the way you get dressed with the largest shared designer closet—the choice is always yours."</i> (RTR's "The World is Your Runway" campaign) <i>"Total flexibility—Let's be real: your style, size, and budget change over time. Now, your closet can too."</i> (point three (of four) in RTR's "Power of Renting")	<i>"Looking at the average trip efficiency of journeys on BlaBlaCar versus the alternatives that would otherwise have been chosen by members, carpooling on BlaBlaCar is on average 29% more efficient."</i> (from BlaBlaCar's "Zero Empty Seats" report)	<i>"The benefits of a truly multimodal service cannot be understated. Lime rider survey ... The addition of e-mopeds to the Lime app will further improve reliability and provide a new option to attract a variety of rider demographics, while serving a wider breadth of trips."</i> (from Lime's blogpost announcing their new E-moped)
Non-commercial appeals: Highlighting the non-commercial benefits (e.g., empowerment, affordability, socialization, patriotism and contributing to a common goal) of the brand's offering.	<i>"Our mission is to power women to feel their best every day... with the Closet in the Cloud, women can more freely express themselves and dress for the incredible lives they lead."</i> (from RTR's "Our Vision" page) <i>"By making rentable fashion a more affordable option, she's [Hyman] hopeful that the vision will continue to spread."</i> (Bauck 2018)	<i>"The statistics are staggering: a car spends 96% of its time stationary and when it is running, 4 times out of 5, there is only one person on board! What a waste when we know that a car costs on average 5 to 6,000 euros per year to its user, that is to say 200 billion euros in total in France: it is the equivalent of 10% of the GDP."</i> (Lion, Valérie and Patricia Salentey 2015) <i>"Moments of genuine exchanges outside of one's close circles are rare. Carpooling creates a unique space, enabling exchanges between people who might have never met otherwise but who come together to share a ride. It removes barriers and creates social ties."</i> (from BlaBlaCar's "Bringing People Closer" report)	<i>"Cities globally are confronting a potential catastrophe, often referred to as 'Carmageddon,' anticipating that commuters who used public transport before the pandemic might opt for their personal cars out of fear once they return to the office. Yet, city streets are unable to accommodate hundreds of thousands of new car commuters, which would leave only crippling traffic, tons of carbon emissions and dangerous streets for pedestrians, cyclists and other users."</i> (from Lime's blogpost announcing their partnership with regional government in Australia)

linguistic analysis on the texts (cf. Yngfalk and Yngfalk 2015). Open coding involved a detailed reading of the texts (by the authors) and assigning open codes to material of interest. For example, announcements were coded as "sustainability claims," "competitive stance," "choice," "addressing sustainability

concerns" and so on. Axial coding saw the open codes clustered into more abstract categories based on their underlying properties and dimensions, resulting in broader themes that described the discourses used by the brands and the tensions between them. For example, open codes of "choice" and "no downside" were

Table 2. Overview of Data Sources by Case^a.

Data source	RTR	BlaBlaCar	Lime
Company website, blog(s) and social media	https://www.renttherunway.com/ https://rtrshift.com/ https://dresscode.renttherunway.com Facebook LinkedIn	https://www.blablacar.com/ https://blog.blablacar.com/ Facebook Twitter Youtube	https://www.li.me https://www.li.me/second-street Facebook LinkedIn
Non-company sources (news, analysis, reports)	Bloomberg Second Measure Business Insider Elle Fashionista Fast Company Forbes Huffington Post NBC News Raconteur The Ecobahn Wall Street Journal	L'Express Le Monde The Independent Teaching case: Sundararajan A., Caltagirone C., Billaud E. & Lakhan K.R. (2017), BlaBlaCar : The Road Ahead..., Harvard Business School Case, 617050-PDF-ENG.	Fortune Intelligent Transport Medium New York Times The Age Wired Youmatter

^aThis table does not include the academic sources cited throughout the text.

merged to form “guilt free choice,” while “competitive stance” and “sustainability” were merged (where appropriate) to form “disrupt unsustainable leaders.” Similarly, we identified tensions between these collapsed codes, which helped generate codes such as hidden materiality and creeping usage. Each researcher carried out the open and axial coding independently and compared codes. Disagreements were addressed through discussion and, in some cases, going back to the data. Finally, selective coding was used to saturate the emergent categories. For example, to strengthen the category “creeping usage” we looked at discourses announcing new initiatives and paid attention to the assumptions underpinning them. As the categories became saturated and the links between them became clearer, we subjected early versions of our findings to scrutiny at departmental research seminars and used the feedback to address unclear points and fine-tune our conclusions.

Findings

We present our findings around three tensions that emerged from our critical discourse analysis of BlaBlaCar, Lime, and RTR. These are: *disrupting unsustainable leaders versus displacing sustainable alternatives*, *guilt-free choice versus hidden materiality*, and *non-commercial appeals versus creeping usage*. These tensions undermine the sustainability of the sharing economy and result from sharing economy brands trying to address environmental and communal ideals which clash with neoliberal ideals of choice and market growth. Through an examination of each brand’s discourses (to different audiences and across time), we uncover goals, logics and practices that undermine the sustainability of sharing economy platforms.

Figure 1 provides a summary of our core findings on the relationship between sharing economy models and sustainability.

Sharing models promise sustainability without sacrifice through the logic of technological disruption. Our brands therefore claim to be sustainable alternatives to the dominant unsustainable solution in their category such private vehicle use and fast fashion. However, the tensions between these goals and the demands of guilt free choice and business growth results in displacement of sustainable alternatives such as public transport, cycling or walking, and alternatives to fast fashion. Guilt-free choice belies the extent to which promises of on-demand services are underpinned by a hidden material ecosystem, as well as a range of material practices, both of which need to be accounted for when judging the sustainability of sharing platforms. Finally, over time the sampled brands shift their position, drawing on non-market ideals of community, empowerment, and personal discovery to frame practices that lead to creeping usage. This usage derives from the needs of each platform for further growth.

Disrupting Unsustainable Leaders versus Displacing Sustainable Alternatives

All of the cases seek to disrupt what they view as the leading set of practices provided through ownership (see Table 1 for textual examples). RTR for example seeks to displace buying clothes every season with renting the same item on an as-needed basis. BlaBlaCar (recognized as one of last decade’s main disruptors in the mobility industry; Casprini, Di Minin, and Paraboschi 2019) desires to address what it sees as the “empty seat problem” arising from private vehicle ownership and an underutilization of that resource (BlaBlaCar 2019). Lime seeks to displace cars for short trips, focusing on what it calls “micromobility” or the first and last mile of each journey. On the face of it, these disruptions have obvious

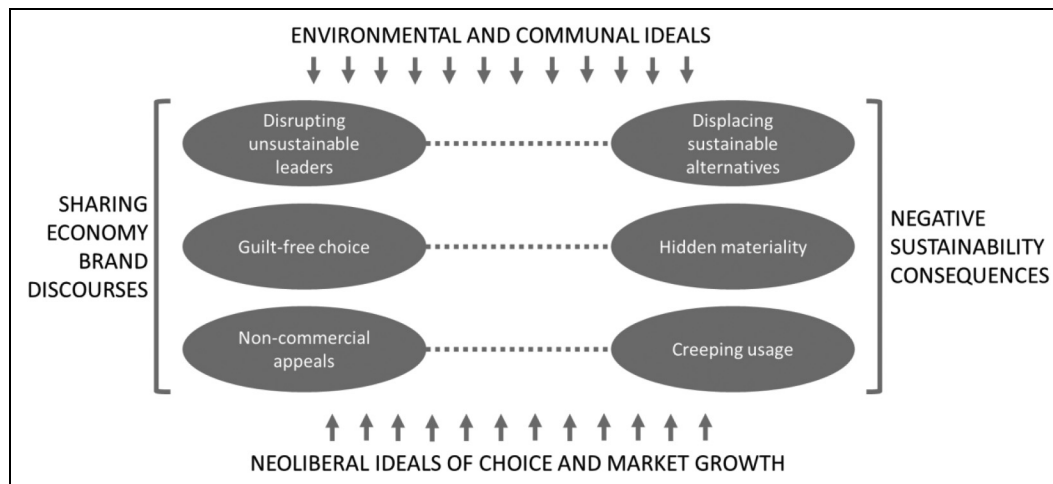


Figure 1. Sharing economy brand discourses and sustainability challenges arising from sharing economy models.

sustainability benefits. Fast fashion has a large climate footprint, generating enormous amounts of waste across its life-cycle, and often ends up discarded unused (Ekström and Salomonson 2014; Niinimäki et al. 2020). The majority of private vehicle use in large cities involves short-distance trips that could be covered through more sustainable means (de Nazelle et al. 2010; Neves and Brand 2019).

For the sampled cases the language of technological disruption is also married to sustainability claims. For example, Lime claims to be “reinventing multimodal transportation,” while BlaBlaCar’s stated aim is to “become the go-to marketplace for shared road mobility,” with the claim that “Carpooling on daily trips is practical, cost saving and ecological”. Similarly, RTR sought to disrupt fast fashion, emphasizing that it offers women personal empowerment through clothes, without the downsides of ownership. Although sustainability claims emerged later in terms of consumer messaging, the same sustainability through disruption mantra formed the basis of the firm’s public relations messaging:

“Sustainability is inherently part of the business model that we pioneered 10 years ago,” she [RTR CEO Jennifer Hyman] said. “We are one of the only companies out there that is telling you, telling our consumers, ‘Buy less stuff’ versus ‘Consume more.’ So that has always been at the core of what we do.” (Cain and Thompson 2020)

This emphasis on disruption of unsustainable leaders is reflected in how brands frame the reporting of their performance. For example, Lime reports its performance in terms of private car displacement, identifying (in their 2020 report) its “impact” in terms of car trips avoided (an estimated 13.5 million), fuel usage (575,000 gallons of gas), and reduction in private car use (with the claim that 70% of Lime users had reduced their use of personal vehicles and ride-sharing services due to micromobility). RTR frames its impact in terms of a reduction in subsequent spend on fashion, in monetary terms (at time of writing this was reported by RTR as four percent; Gessner 2019) and number of items (89 percent fewer

clothes). RTR frame its performance also as countering the throwaway culture at the heart of fast fashion, emphasizing that its turn rate (a measure of how many times an item gets worn) of 30 (at which point the garment is sent to charity or sold to customers) is substantially higher than the industry average of 10 (Bertoni 2014). In a report published on its blog on 27 March 2019 BlaBlaCar describes its performance in terms of reducing waste, through its emphasis on average occupancy rates:

By allowing drivers and passengers to share their journeys, BlaBlaCar raises the average car occupancy rate... by 105%, from 1.92 people to 3.93 people. That means doubling the number of people traveling whilst using the same number of cars...

However, analysis of the brands’ own discourse also reveals some contradictions in their sustainable disruption claims. For the most part, Lime is at pains to emphasize its complementarity with public transport options, comparing its own options of scooter plus transit (represented by a train symbol) with ride hailing and private cars alone. However, a video on the brand’s website features a St Louis Lime mechanic stating “now you don’t need a car, now you don’t need a bus pass...,” effectively suggesting the scooters as an alternative to public transport rather than a complement. BlaBlaCar is clearer on its intent, leveraging its supposed efficiency savings against other undefined “alternative” forms of transport, as explained in the aforementioned report:

BlaBlaCar doubles the occupancy rate of cars whilst operating a carbon-saving network. In total, 1.6 million tonnes of CO₂ were saved by BlaBlaCar carpoolers in 2018, thanks to the relative efficiency of filled cars versus alternative modes of transport, members’ improved driving behaviors whilst carpooling, and the informal carpooling inspired by BlaBlaCar outside the platform.

For RTR, while claiming to encourage consumers to buy less, and wanting to displace fast fashion, the brand’s founder

also expresses to business audiences a desire to become “the world’s largest designer closet” and, as described in the following interview with CEO Jennifer Hyman, to mimic online retailer Amazon:

“We started off with the goods that are the most difficult to rent because of the durability of the product and all the services you must build. Now we can rent any product in the world.” She envisions Rent the Runway as a marketplace for retailers and brands to rent unsold inventory instead of shipping it off to discount outlets. Or perhaps a high-end consignment store for the wealthy? At the very least, guys will be able to stream their ties and cuff links. “The idea,” she says, “is to build the Amazon of rental.” (Bertoni 2014)

The contrasting discourses offered by the brands suggests that disrupting unsustainable leaders is trumped by the desire for growth. Through an analysis of studies of the impacts of these models and each brand’s discourses, we find support for previous contentions that these platforms will compete with existing market offers, many of which are more sustainable (Campbell, O’Driscoll, and Saren 2013; Saravade, Felix, and Firat (2021)). Therefore we propose that disruption of unsustainable leaders also generates negative impacts for sustainability through the displacement of more sustainable options. This can occur at two levels: logics and practices. In relation to logics, RTR’s approach crowds out alternative models such as slow fashion (itself not without contradictions and challenges; Ertekin and Atik 2014). In relation to practices, it supplants alternative swapping schemes such as app-based platforms like Tulerie (that encourage closet-swapping), or encouraging consumers to simply connect with the clothes they have (Cline 2019).

Similarly, Lime and other e-scooter platforms have been criticized for displacing more sustainable forms of transport, including public transit options such as buses, cycling, and critically for businesses focused on the “last mile,” walking (Hollingsworth, Copeland, and Johnson 2019). Temple (2019) reports consumer data that identifies half of users would have walked instead, 11 per cent would have taken the bus (generally regarded as more sustainable due to multiple occupancy), and seven percent would simply not have made the trip at all. Based on this displacement, Temple (2019) estimates that scooters rented through sharing platforms generate two-thirds more emissions than the alternatives they displace. Interestingly, although Lime has undertaken a number of programs to address issues arising at the product and supporting infrastructure level (as has RTR with significant product durability testing and sustainable material use for packaging and cleaning), it has not responded to life cycle criticisms of displacement.

In summary, although the sampled cases use the discourse of disrupting unsustainable leaders or dominant designs, they also engage in practices that potentially lead to the displacement of sustainable alternatives. Although the brands studied did counter criticism in terms of the hidden materiality covered next, we found less evidence of countering claims of displacing

sustainable alternatives. BlaBlaCar and RTR both asserted the superiority of their business models, stressing that they are extracting better use out of pre-existing resources. Lime, perhaps aware of the dangers of displacement, have always stressed its complementarity with public transit systems, focusing instead on reducing car use. However, the brand remains silent on displacing more sustainable options such as walking or public transit (or indeed not taking trips), and as we cover in the section of creeping usage, have moved to expand its network beyond the last mile.

Guilt-Free Choice versus Hidden Materiality

The second discourse in which tensions emerged involved the sustainability benefits arising from access-based systems. Emphasizing immateriality or liquidity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012, 2017; Eckhardt et al. 2019) rather than arguing for less consumption, proponents of the sharing economy maintain that consumers can continue to gain the benefits of materialism, without the negative consequences for sustainability (Botsman and Rogers 2010).

The discourses used by the three cases underscored choice without the downsides arising from ownership (in terms of efficiency, materiality and sustainability). The brands made regular references to accessibility, being on-demand, offering greater flexibility, and adaptability to personal needs. This language reflects the neoliberal logic of consumer capitalism, in so far as sharing brands emphasize that they are better at meeting the ever-changing needs of consumers (Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021). However, to deliver this type of ever-ready, on-demand service, an underlying ecosystem of materiality is needed (Campbell, O’Driscoll, and Saren 2013). In the case of BlaBlaCar this materiality pre-exists because the vehicles are already owned by BlaBlaCar users (the company’s own fleets of buses excepted). To be able to offer choice, providers like Lime and RTR must first establish the necessary material infrastructure which is often hidden from users at the point of consumption. Establishing and managing the material infrastructure can generate unsustainable outcomes, some of which are acknowledged in various programs and announcements regarding product design and product service system improvements.

Of the three sampled cases, RTR and BlaBlaCar placed the most emphasis on the materiality benefits of sharing. The passage from RTR in Table 1 for example promises an infinite selection of styles entirely detached from the limits of materiality. In the brand’s official founding narrative, RTR was established to overcome consumers anxiety arising from too much choice: “having a wardrobe full of clothes but nothing to wear.” To address this anxiety, RTR offers a range of subscriptions, from four to 16 items per month. In the “Community” section of its website, the brand stresses how much consumers stand to gain as a result of being freed from the constraints imposed by materiality:

Rent Your Clothes. Change Your Life. For years, we’ve been limited by the confines of our closets and wallets—not enough

space, money or options to wear what we want and reflect who we are. Rent the Runway is changing that with the world's largest designer closet. 150—Days of the year that subscribers wear RTR; 89%—Buy fewer clothes than they used to; 52%—Experiment more with their personal style; 71%—Have discovered a new favorite brand.

Lime's offer of constant access under its slogan "Any trip, anywhere, anytime" (which frames the brand's 2020 Annual Report) is reflected in numerous partnership schemes and practices. For example, Lime's corporate partnerships, whereby it works with employers and building managers, emphasizes choice and convenience to staff and customers of retail businesses ("Your customers will be able to reliably find and use Lime scooters at your property") and building residents ("Tenants will be able to get around faster by having an immediate last-mile solution outside their doorstep"). Recurrent themes used in BlaBlaCar co-founder Frédéric Mazzella's discourse are low occupancy rates in private vehicles being framed as "waste" or an untapped resource. The promise is that leveraging this waste will enable more people to take trips without any impact on the number of vehicles being used (see Table 1). Further, like RTR, this efficiency argument is complemented with a more aspirational appeal to consumers. For example, the firm's own research program (entitled "Bringing People Closer") identified how BlaBlaCar enabled people to "get closer to beloved people and places, enrich their experiences, open up to others and change" (BlaBlaCar 2018).

However, this emphasis on efficiency, immateriality and on-demand service belies the materiality necessary to deliver on the promise of guilt free choice, and necessitates the implementation of practices that create unsustainable outcomes (cf. Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). At RTR for example, each "turn" involves packaging, cleaning and transport. To ensure customer satisfaction RTR sends two sizes of each garment to subscribers (Hollis 2021). As with Lime, material distribution systems are still necessary for RTR as it couriers clothes to and from users (in a small handful of major US cities, consumers can use drop off points in partner retailers). Sharing economy platforms also often have to address the impact of use on the material offer itself (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Campbell, O'Driscoll, and Saren 2013). For the likes of Lime this arises due to the possibility of damage, reductions in battery power, and the location of e-scooters and cycles in out of the way places (which require larger amounts of slack and generate energy use during collection). For RTR, the proximity of clothes to the body requires cleaning between rentals to overcome consumer concerns arising from contamination (Clube and Tennant 2020). The following passage describes the material investments made by RTR to deliver its service:

...getting dresses cleaned and ready to ship out as fast as possible is essential to RTR's model.... Stains have the potential to make Rent the Runway's otherwise tight operation, well, messy. About half of the dresses worn come back with smears, blotches, and smudges in

need of hand treatment. Imagine the potential bottleneck those items could create. Having skilled workers who can tackle stray steak grease fast, without compromising the integrity of a delicate dress, keeps the process moving at a profitable pace. (Greenfield 2014)

RTR also uses machines to mist wash clothes, a steam tunnel to remove wrinkles, has separate processes for animal-based clothing and for particular types of stain. Since the company's business model is focused on extending the turn rate of a garment from 10 to 30, the impact of intensive cleaning is subsequently multiplied. Dry cleaning each item between rentals reduces the lifecycle of each garment due to fiber damage and also involves intensive energy and chemical use. In contrast, for owned items, recommendations for dry cleaning depend on use and skin contact and can range from every use (in the case of dresses worn close to the skin) through to annually for outerwear (Stitchfix.com, n.d.), although this varies according to material construction, storage, and climate.

These material needs all impact on lifecycle assessments of sharing platforms, and receive a lot of attention from the three brands as part of a desire to reinforce their sustainability credentials. RTR for example stresses the use of environmentally friendly chemicals, programs that ensure the cleaning regime comes at the lowest cost to garment life, and partnering with retailers and other sharing brands such as WeWork to offer drop off boxes to customers (Scott 2020). Other practices include a RTR garment bag to replace cardboard packaging for shipping, making items available for sale or donation when they can no longer be rented ("Revive by RTR: our growing program that extends the life of garments"), launching an influencer co-brand made out of recycled materials, and encouraging "smart buying" which focuses on selling high quality classics that last multiple seasons. The firm also frames the impact of less sustainable plastic protective packaging in lifecycle terms: "Plastic sealing also helps preserve the quality and life-span of a garment, bolstering the sharing economy and ultimately leading to less clothing waste."

Of the sampled brands, Lime has received the most attention from LCA. The widely cited North Carolina State University study on e-scooters (Hollingsworth, Copeland, and Johnson 2019) identifies that the sustainability impact of present-day e-scooters is negative. This is exacerbated by the costs of vandalism, the limited battery life, the potential for wear and tear, and conflict with local by-laws prohibiting cluttering of footpaths and leaving scooters in public places overnight (which requires more transportation and collection; Cowie 2020; Griffith 2019). Lime has responded to these criticisms in a number of ways, including holistic programs to ensure that its distribution network is 100 per cent electric and powered by renewables by 2021–2023, improved durability of its scooter design, setting targets for the use of recycled materials in scooter manufacture, and enhanced battery life. In March 2021 Lime announced (on its blog 2nd Street) its' use of modular production to further improve the lifecycle of its vehicles:

The interoperability of the battery is a game changer. It means we'll be able to streamline operations across vehicle types and reduce the frequency of charging and rebalancing vehicles, meaning more fully-charged vehicles on the street when you need them. The swappable battery also provides tremendous environmental benefits by cutting down car trips from our operations vans, further enhancing an industry-leading commitment to sustainable service that's central to our mission.

In summary, despite the claims of sharing economy brands to offer guilt free choice through models built around liquidity, delivering these promises relies on an ecosystem of material practices which are not neutral in terms of sustainability. This tension is evident in the discourses detailing programs that ultimately aim to address life cycle impacts of operations. These operational challenges arise not only from the material ecosystem essential to delivering goods to users, but also from the impact of users on the material products at the heart of each offer. Only BlaBlaCar suffers less from the impacts of hidden materiality, as it utilizes the untapped resource of empty seats in its users' private vehicles (although in April 2021 new fundraising was focused on doubling the size of its own bus network). However, exploiting this resource leads to an emphasis on private vehicle usage and creeping usage.

Non-Commercial Appeals versus Creeping Usage

The sampled brands drew on a number of non-commercial appeals in their discourses. These appeals included empowerment, personal discovery, connection, localism, safety, and indeed, sharing. However, despite drawing on the communal logic of sharing (Belk 2010; Frenken and Schor 2017), each of the sampled brands is part of the sharing *economy*, and therefore desires (and even requires) growth (Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021). In some cases, these non-commercial appeals were necessary to overcome cultural norms that inhibited the adoption of sharing practices (sharing with strangers is taboo in France, for example) or to reduce damage, cleaning, and recovery costs for access-based ridership models (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). However, it was also clear that non-commercial appeals were regularly used to frame the expansion of services, be they the addition of line and category extensions or strategies to encourage greater use, all of which may be motivated to attract more investor funding as sharing economy companies are heavily reliant on venture capital (Cusumano 2018).

For example, BlaBlaCar has adopted the language of sharing and sociability in an attempt to expand usage. What started as an emphasis on solving a perceived inefficiency ("the empty seat problem"), and a subsequent emphasis of sustainability (from 2015–2016 the firm began promoting its calculation of the amount of CO₂ saved per shared-ride), shifted to a focus on convenience ("convenient, easy, simple" with trusted third-party (or driver) verification). In 2021 the company defined its aim "to become the go-to marketplace for shared road mobility." BlaBlaLine's (an extension focused on daily carpooling) claim, "Carpooling on daily trips is practical, cost saving and

ecological," reflects the combined discourses of sustainability with guilt-free choice, but provides the framing for further growth and usage. More recently, BlaBlaCar has positioned itself in a more aspirational way, encouraging users to share their experiences on the brand's social media pages:

We continue our series of beautiful carpooling stories... In your anecdotes, carpooling is often a moment of spontaneity and sharing, which sometimes leaves room for the unexpected... We love reading your anecdotes, they are real rays of sunshine in our confined days! (Facebook, November 3 2021)

What started as free of charge model in 2006, moved to a for-profit model in 2011–12 (when the BlaBlaCar name was adopted). This change resulted in expansion and diversification to include a fleet of business for intercity travel in 2017, and further line extensions such as BlaBlaCar Daily (short-distance carpooling) and BlaBlaRide (e-scooters). We label this "creeping usage, which arises from a tension between non-commercial logics and the business model of each case. Lime for example has expanded its original focus on the first and last mile to, one-to-five miles, and subsequently in 2020, "medium-length trips." Lime's history is presented by a graphic showing the growth in miles served which, along with number of trips, are also used as key performance indicators in its corporate communications. Recently, Lime stressed how it measures performance in terms of increased trip length and ride time.

Furthermore, Lime's emphasis has shifted from servicing the first and last mile via e-bikes and scooters to building an "integrated network" that encompasses e-scooters, bikes, mopeds, and potentially vehicles such as cars and vans:

Lime is building on its existing scooter and bike service to develop a suite of electric vehicles that serve all types of trips under five miles with shared, carbon-free transportation—all in one place. Lime's real-time integration with Google Maps—the world's most popular trip planning app—and Uber, along with our partnership with Citymapper, enables riders to easily locate Lime vehicles in cities around the world. These apps show both public transit and Lime vehicles, nudging people to take micromobility rides for short trips instead of rideshare or personal vehicles.

Lime's announcement above (part of its 2020 end of year report released on its blog in February 2021) continues an expansion of micromobility to now encapsulate "any urban journey" and "multiple trip types" and is underscored by the brand's promise of providing for "any trip, anywhere, anytime" in its corporate communications. The expansion gathered speed in 2019, when Lime partnered with Google to enable users to locate available Lime vehicles. This was followed by the announcement of the Lime E-moped, described by Lime as "a truly multimodal service." In the announcement, Lime explained how its own data identified that through adding more modes, not only could car and ride-sharing use be reduced, but that over half of Lime riders would expand their usage, enabling the firm to serve "a wider breadth of trips." More recently, network expansion has been connected to the

need to rebuild more sustainable cities in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (see Table 1 for a 2021 blog post about a pilot program in Sydney). In its January 2021 blogpost introducing the Lime E-moped, the company explains:

The addition of electric mopeds to our fleet of e-bikes and e-scooters is another major step in our goal of ensuring access to affordable, carbon-free shared transportation in cities around the world” said Wayne Ting, CEO of Lime. “As the first micromobility provider to offer three vehicles on one platform, we’re excited to help cities and riders get moving again with safe, sustainable, and socially-distant transportation to serve any urban journey. Lime now offers a ride for any trip, at any time, in nearly any major city in the world, furthering our mission to foster people-first cities.

Like RTR and BlaBlaCar, as Lime grew its language shifted away from functional benefits, to more aspirational, but non-commercial attributes. As part of a post-COVID-19 recovery strategy, Lime placed itself at the heart of a “people first” logic for large cities. For example in January 2021 the firm claimed, “Healthy, vibrant, people-first cities are core to our mission and we’ll continue to work alongside city partners and local community-based organisations to build back better and more sustainably.” In Berlin for example, Lime identifies how its network has enabled users to visit a local business “at least once a week” while also suggesting that it has a role to play in retaining “the street safety improvements made during COVID-19” that residents report.

RTR’s desire to emphasize access and choice has seen it expand through same strategies deployed by many fast fashion retailers. For example, RTR partners with designers to offer its own exclusive collections, allows designers to launch collections exclusively through the RTR platform for purchase, and in 2020 announced the decision to launch its own recycled brand that would be developed in partnership with social media influencers (Cain and Thompson 2020). Notably, it has also shifted towards encouraging ownership. In 2020 RTR offered loyal customers the option of purchasing clothes instead of rental and then planned to extend this option to all customers, regardless of whether they rented clothes at all, in 2021. In the same year, RTR launched *Revive* in partnership with thredUP, a marketplace for second hand designer clothes, bringing to fruition the RTR founder’s vision for the brand to become the go-to place for sellers looking to get rid of unwanted fashion items.

In 2016 the fashion sector began its own conversation about its environmental impact (led by then market-leader H&M Group) as evidence emerged of the sector’s extensive sustainability challenges (Harrison 2016). However, fast fashion is embedded within a system that reinforces disposability and ever-increasing cycles of change, where even many high-profile brands such as Burberry have now done away with seasonal releases in favor of “see now buy now models” (Salonga 2017). This logic of fast fashion is reflected in the RTR’s own discourse:

It’s an accepted fact that a more ethical fashion industry—i.e. one that doesn’t damage the planet, or does so significantly less—is

going to require a massive change in consumer behavior. And while many sustainable fashion advocates lean heavily on the idea that consumers need to buy less, as well as choose timeless, trend-immune pieces when they do buy, Rent the Runway CEO Jenn Hyman has a different idea. “We’re encouraging people to rent inventory that they never would think about buying—things that are printed and trendy and colorful and completely of-the-moment,” Hyman explains. “Things that people want to wear on rotation, but you don’t actually want to be stuck with in your closet.” (Bauck 2018)

Fashion supply chain experts have noted that an emphasis on an endless choice is simply maintaining fast fashion (albeit via access rather than ownership), with all the attendant life cycle costs being borne by the likes of RTR rather than traditional brands (Wolfe 2020). Likewise, writers in fashion media outlets such as *Elle* have identified that RTR and other like-minded sharing brands may actually increase consumers’ appetite for clothes (RTR currently works with 650 design partners to create looks for its customers’ closets; Cain and Thompson 2020), which runs counter to the moves from slow fashion advocates who desire more materiality usually through the appreciation of heirloom or classical pieces (Fletcher 2016).

In summary, we identify that despite the desire to stress non-commercial logics or motives, sharing platforms remain embedded within the market economy. This leads to a desire for further expansion, which reflects an inherent commercial logic. These growth activities exacerbate some of the displacement of sustainable alternatives covered in the first tension, while also adding further levels of hidden materiality and subsequent lifecycle problems. Taken together these lead to unsustainable outcomes, even while the growth being described is framed in sustainable terms. Our analysis shows that, over time, growth leads to a change in discourse, moving away from pragmatic, efficiency, and even sustainable motives and benefits, to vaguer, more aspirational positioning such as personal discovery, identity, authenticity, and empowerment (RTR for example now emphasizes “sisterhood” to encourage community among users). This shift in position then provides a broader symbolic platform for further growth, and in some cases, expansion into the ownership economy.

Discussion

Our findings make three main macromarketing contributions to our understanding of the sharing economy and sustainability. Our first contribution addresses the call for more research to examine the complexity of sustainability claims in the sharing economy. Our second contribution identifies a critical framework for examining the sustainability claims of the sharing economy. Our third contribution, arising from the sampling of different cases of sharing economy brands, is to identify the possibilities and limits of market-responses (i.e., the developmental approach; Mittelstaedt et al. 2014) for reducing negative sustainability consequences arising from the sharing economy. We conclude the paper with an agenda for future research.

Our first contribution responds to calls from Eckhardt et al. (2019), Saravade, Felix, and Firat (2021) (and others) to unpack the sustainability claims of the sharing economy. Drawing on three cases of major sharing brands in different categories, we find that the actual environmental benefits of brands' sustainability claims, no matter how well intended, are likely to be much less than imagined. We confirm and extend Saravade, Felix, and Firat's (2021) proposition that the impact of the sharing economy will be horizontal. That is, it will compete with the ownership economy rather than replace it. We demonstrate that this horizontal competition has the potential to crowd out more sustainable public options, alternative non-market logics (e.g., slow fashion, peer-to-peer sharing), and non-marketized practices (i.e., walking). This occurs despite the expressed intentions of sharing economy brands to disrupt unsustainable dominant models, because they remain bound within the neoliberal market logic predicated on continued growth (Campbell, O'Driscoll, and Saren 2013). The horizontal shift also relates to claims of immateriality and liquidity, particularly for product platforms (Lime and RTR), as materiality simply shifts from the ownership economy to the sharing economy, generating similar and/or new unsustainable outcomes.

Our second contribution is the provision of a critical framework for assessing the sustainability claims of sharing economy brands. This arises out of the process we deployed, which resembles a modified grounded theory approach (Fischer and Otnes 2006) whereby pre-existing theory sensitizes the findings, and dialectical tacking between data and the literature help generate novel frameworks. Thus, we identify that the discourses deployed by the sampled brands reflect theoretical claims of technology-enabled, choice-on-demand, without environmental downsides; whereas the three unsustainable outcomes reflect tensions and paradoxes at the heart of marketized sharing. Our framework sensitizes us to these contradictions, by unpacking the assumptions that underpin how sharing economy benefits are framed. In particular, we identify how technological solutions to so-called efficiency problems are not without consequence for the natural environment, and that the combination of these efficiency claims with a neoliberal emphasis on choice and growth, generate rhetorical strategies that draw on a range of non-commercial logics that reinforce and expand unsustainable systems.

This contribution furthers debates in macromarketing around the impact of various immaterial models (i.e., access, service-dominant logic, liquidity) have on resource use. Campbell, O'Driscoll, and Saren (2013) identify how these models in effect *invisibilize* material, rather than reduce any impact on the environment of material use. Our framework identifies that for product-based access systems, materiality cannot be escaped, and in fact generates a lot of work for sharing brands. Although brands such as RTR and Lime attempt to address these challenges by adopting other more "holistic" concepts such as the remanufacturing or remarketing (Esposito, Tse, and Soufani 2018), the impact is either relatively small (Lime's successful Kickstarter partnership with Gomi to reuse their battery was given prominence in media releases but had just 246 backers) or passes responsibility for waste onto

others. Those writing on the circular economy have identified that addressing the challenge of waste requires ensuring that the responsibility for the materials is retained by the originating firm, suggesting that logics that deal with materiality are more attuned to addressing market-sustainability challenges (Kalverkamp and Raabe 2018).

However, the challenges and tensions arising from different logics in the sharing economy did not affect the sampled brands equally. This leads to our third contribution, which speaks to the sustainability as megatrend debate in macromarketing. Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) identify that macromarketing debates regarding sustainability fall into two camps: the development view and the critical view. The development view argues that sustainability problems arising from the market can be corrected through improved informational efficiencies, property rights, technology, and so on. In this regard, our analysis identifies two possibilities: that certain types of platforms may be more or less susceptible to unintended consequences, and that paradoxically, it is the material impacts of the sharing economy that can best be addressed through more developmental means.

Although our analysis identifies that the sharing economy has much in common with the ownership economy, is it possible to make it more sustainable? We identify that both product-focused platforms respond to criticisms about sustainability through attempts to address LCA concerns. These can involve improvements in efficiency of use, durability, the life of the product, material inputs, end-of-life practices, and the impact of material infrastructure. Similarly, unsustainable outcomes arising from local ordinances requiring e-scooters to be collected and stored overnight can be addressed through working more closely with local authorities. Furthermore, partnerships between public and private providers may have positive sustainable outcomes through imaginative transportation policies that involve greater integration between short trip options and longer commutes.

However, the findings also highlight the limitations of developmental approaches. Sharing economy models such as the ones examined here are examples of developmental responses to sustainability, in so far as they attempt to disrupt dominant ways of operating judged to be unsustainable. However, as marketized responses they also do little to challenge the logic of choice, growth, and return on investment inherent in the market system, and as we show, this significantly undermines their sustainability claims. For example, while extensions to product lifecycles may reduce the negative impacts for sustainability of product platforms (Luo et al. 2019), we identify that such moves are also framed within discourses on expanded use, which themselves give rise to further unsustainable outcomes. Similarly, displacement of sustainable alternatives either via deliberate design or as a consequence of a logic that requires creeping use, tend to get addressed more symbolically, often by being framed in terms of non-commercial brand benefits, which aim to increase the appeal of the sharing economy brands, fueling further opportunities for growth. This suggests that marketized forms of sharing like the

models studied here, fall short of engendering higher-level alternatives to conventional modes of consumption and may therefore have less sustainability benefits than thought (Saravade, Felix, and Firat 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

Our findings are based on exploring the discourse of three sharing economy models from two broad categories of provision. As such, they are exploratory and more aimed at generalizing to theory than a broader population *per se*. We therefore encourage further investigation of different models, in different sectors, and local/national contexts to generate a more complete account of the veracity of sustainability benefits of the sharing economy. Although our analysis enabled tracking of discourse shifts over time and to a lesser extent, external influences (such as desire for investor injection of funds, or in response to COVID-19), we would encourage the development of longitudinal studies of the sharing economy, both in terms of shifting discourses, but also internally, in terms of decision making and strategy shifts. A study of shifting discourses could benefit from an institutional theory lens that enables greater understanding of the role of different audiences, and the impact of particular movements or events (Humphreys 2014), for example local political pressure on the clutter created through an oversupply of e-vehicles. The internal approach could benefit from two logics: strategy as practice (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007) and sensemaking (Brown 2000). The former would enable one to get a greater sense of how multiple goal tensions generate specific strategies, and the latter could evaluate how decision makers in sharing firms make sense of evolving tensions and pressures.

Future research could also focus on how the tensions we identify can be addressed. Developmental theorists could consider the impacts of improved information systems and resources allocation within the system, to limit the need for hidden materiality, or gain greater efficiencies in the use of products during periods of low use (exploratory analysis suggest that scooters are subject to the same peak usage times as other vehicles and therefore lay unused most of the day even in high ridership areas; Jiao and Bai 2020). Responding to calls for regulation of sharing schemes to align sustainability, public and private goals and to ensure sharing networks are more resilient and less susceptible to externalities (Cohen and Kietzmann 2014; Martin 2016), developmental theorists could examine policy options for public-private partnerships to integrate sharing models within stretched public transit services to generate benefits for commuters, taxpayers, and cities alike. Critical theorists on the other hand could investigate alternate systems of sharing, and their ability to be scaled up to enable system-wide sustainability benefits. Promising policy solutions may arise from the combination of these perspectives, to understand the role sharing models have in addressing climate change, and what policy instruments are needed to alleviate any unintended consequences (Vith et al. 2019).

Consumer research can investigate how higher levels of psychological ownership can be fostered among consumers participating in the sharing economy. Fritze et al. (2020) find that when customers develop feelings of psychological ownership toward the service offered by a sharing economy brand, they are more likely to adopt the service in favor of the material possession alternatives. To achieve this, they recommend sharing economy brands to foster stronger identity links and promote a sense of communal identification. RTR, BlaBlaCar and Lime already draw on such non-commercial appeals in their brand discourses. Future research can extend this line of inquiry and investigate the extent to which leveraging the psychological power of ownership feelings in brand discourses can also help resolve the tensions identified in the present study. In the case of brands that rent products, such as RTR, fostering higher levels of psychological ownership can lead customers take more care with the products (reducing need for repairs) and keep them for longer (reducing frequency of postage). For micromobility providers such as Lime, engendering psychological ownership could prompt citizenship behavior such as not leaving the vehicles on in public places that obstruct traffic (reducing transportation for retrieval).

We also believe that future research should examine the particular sustainability impacts of individual sharing economy models. For example, service platforms like BlaBlaCar may create less impact arising from producing new vehicles, but their impacts will likely arise from displacement of more sustainable options such as public transport. Furthermore, with product-based systems, are there differences between those focused on high churn items such as fast fashion than, say, transport? Lime for example is able to ameliorate its life cycle impacts through better build quality and design, and also does not have the model churn for its e-scooters in the way a fashion brand like RTR does. Although both expand the lifecycle of their products through greater use, one is more durable and less subject to replacement than the other. This could lead to a typology of sharing economy models and sustainability trade-offs / benefits.

Finally, although we examined the sustainability claims of the sharing economy, future researchers should also attend to the other claims of such models. For example, Lime notes that residents want to retain the lower levels of congestion and higher levels of street safety arising from the reduction in commuting during COVID-19. These benefits are of interest to macromarketing scholars in terms of quality of life and alternate market systems (Layton 2009). We therefore suggest that future research to focus on integrating the sharing economy, and its counterparts (e.g., the circular economy), into macromarketing discussions focused on social and economic benefits.

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