

Green Recovery Dialogues

[Professor Giana Eckhardt](#), Professor of Marketing, Centre for Research into Sustainability Marketing, Royal Holloway University of London - Transcript

See the video at <https://youtu.be/vFY93SfjAM8>

Hi, my name is Giana Eckhardt. I'm a Professor of Marketing at Royal Holloway University of London and I'm also the Director of the Centre for Research and Sustainability there. Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this important conversation and I am looking forward to sharing some ideas with you now and then continuing the conversation in person in a little bit as well. I'm going to share my screen here... here we go.

SLIDE 1: Rethinking consumption to increase sustainability: a focus on access based consumption and the digital.

So I want to just share some ideas with you about rethinking consumption to increase sustainability - our topic for this conversation - and share a little bit about some research and ideas focused on access-based consumption and the digital with you. OK, so – oops, sorry there we go.

SLIDE 2: Shift from ownership to access based consumption (ABC)

- **Began after the financial crisis of 2008/9**
- **Is part of a larger shift from a solid to a liquid society**
 - **Liquid consumption ephemeral, access based, dematerialised**
- **Relieves consumers of the burden of ownership**

Basically from about the, from since the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, since then - so for about the past decade, a little bit longer than that - there's been a shift away - from a consumer behaviour perspective - away from ownership and towards access based consumption. So what I mean here is, in the past, where it had been an important aspiration to own a home, own a car and these types of things, were, kind of, consumer goals that people would save up for and that demarcated important points in their life, this became largely unaffordable for a lot of people beginning around the time of 2008 and 09 and this has only really increased since then. And so this this notion that consumers are striving for ownership started to go away a little bit and accessing things rather than owning them became more of a reality in people's lives, and also became something that people wanted to do to a larger extent. And so ownership started being framed as kind of the burdens of ownership rather than what the benefits of them were. So, for example, you know you saw the introduction of Zipcar where people would be able to access cars for short periods of time rather than owning cars. All sorts of things like this started to, these types of platforms started to pop up, and, of course, turned into what we know as the sharing economy. Yeah, to a large extent, as I mentioned, owning furniture, for example, in your apartment was no longer as something that you, something that was positive because you had to move so often in relation to finding new jobs all the time that that it became more of a burden to have to pay to move things like this. So being able to just access things like this became much more desirable and you can even see companies like IKEA, for example, offering services where you can access furniture rather than buy it in response to this. All of this is part of a larger shift from what the sociologist Sigmund Bauman has called the shift from a solid to a liquid society. So a solid society would be one in which people, you know, had the same job for their whole careers, maybe lived in the same house, raised a family for 20 or 30 years, that type of very solid life: you're embedded in your community, you go to the same place of worship with everyone else in your community. He talks a lot about how this, kind of, dematerialised and turned much more

liquid, meaning that where you live, the people who you have relationships with, your identity, your job has become much more short-term; dematerialised, and precarious really. So some of the work that I've done which has taken inspiration from this has looked at what liquid consumption would look like, which is basically people wanting to access rather than own, have short-term relationships rather than long-term relationships with brands, for example, and a shift from the material to the de-material. So listening to music, you know, wanting to have all of your music in digital form rather than carting around CDs or something like this. So access-based consumption has been a part of this larger shift towards, away from solid consumption towards liquid consumption. There were a lot of hopes that this shift that I'm talking about was going to lead to more sustainable consumption because if people are accessing cars rather than owning them that's going to reduce the overall kind of CO2 footprint of people in general, right? And so, yes, there's very much this idea that that this shift was going to go hand in hand with more sustainable consumption. This has not really happened to a large extent and what are some of the reasons for that? There's a couple that we can highlight here.

SLIDE 3: Why has the shift to ABC not led to more sustainable consumption?

- **ABC can lead to increased materialism**
 - **Fuelled in part by the attention economy**
- **ABC can be a substitute for other sustainable behaviour**

The first is that access-based consumption can lead to increased materialism. So what do I mean by that? If we look at platforms like Rent the Runway, or Bag, Borrow or Steal, Girl Meets Dress, these are platforms in which you can access clothes or handbags, for example, for a short period of time and then send them back and get your next clothes or handbags mailed to you. So it allows you to try out a whole bunch of different brands, all sorts of different clothes, objects etc without the huge price tags that buying, you know, a new Chanel suit or something like that would come with. So in that sense it kind of fuels this materialistic outlook of wanting to have more stuff and more things and to a large extent this is fuelled by the attention economy. So what I mean by that is that in online spaces, for example, consumers can accrue what's called attention capital through gaining kind of views, likes, shares, forwards, comments, and you typically do this by having new things. So, for example, if you're in the fashion space online you would never want to appear wearing the same thing twice and so always having something new is kind of why these types of platforms like Rent the Runway, for example, have been so successful. The second point here is that access-based consumption can be a substitute for other sustainable behaviour rather than unsustainable. So what do I mean by this? So as I mentioned before, a lot of people thought that 'oh when car sharing, you know, now exists, you know, we can ride-share with blah blah car, for example, people will stop buying their own cars and this will reduce single car ownership'. Well, what the research has shown in the kind of past decade is that most often the people who are utilising these types of ride-share or car-share services, what they're substituting it for is taking the bus, for example, or taking the train, other forms of transportation that actually have lower carbon footprints. It's not a substitute for single car ownership. So these are kind of some of the main reasons why this shift away from ownership hasn't really resulted in the type of sustainability results that we would have liked to have seen. So we can, kind of, move on to what the main point of our discussions are going to be which are what are some of the ways that we can try and facilitate more sustainable consumer behaviours, and, as I said, through the lens of access-based consumption.

SLIDE 4: What are some of the ways that ABC can lead to more sustainable consumer behaviour?

- **Reduce the anonymity of the sharing systems/platforms**
 - **Localize**
- **Understand the nature of the capital that is accrued in the digital space and cater to it.**

So one thing that my research has shown is that the anonymity of a lot of these platforms is important in terms of having the effects that I've been talking about that aren't necessarily sustainable. So what do I mean by this? So what drives a lot of the consumer behaviour on these platforms tend to be utilitarian things like cost and convenience. So, in other words, if I use a bike-sharing system in a city, it's not necessarily, the main motivators aren't necessarily because I'm trying to be more green. It's more that, if I own a bicycle, my apartment isn't kind of large enough to store it and so, if I use a bike-share system, it can be stored much more easily, or it's cheaper than taking other forms of transportation. And those things tend to be the main motivators. When you see motivation coming from being more green, it tends to be when the other people who you're sharing the platform with aren't necessarily anonymous but people that you know. So what do I mean by this? If we think about things like clothing libraries or library of things, which are becoming more common in neighbourhoods, you tend to know the other people who are using these libraries. This has a lot of effects. First of all, you treat the things within the system better but from a sustainability perspective you can, kind of gain cultural cachet from engaging in these green behaviours and the people that you know in your neighbourhood know that you're doing this because they see you at the clothing libraries or they see you wearing the clothes from the clothing libraries and the same with, maybe tools at the library of things that you might borrow, or things like this. So you, in other words, you can kind of gain a lot of the cachet that you can gain anonymously online through the attention economy but you can do it in your own communities. And so the point here is to localise. So the more that a lot of forms of these types of access-based consumption can be localised where people know the other participants in the systems, the more successful they tend to be. So the second point here is also understanding the nature of the capital that is accrued in the digital space and catering to it. So the first recommendation is almost in a sense non-digital because if you're engaging in neighbourhood clothing libraries and things like this, you don't even necessarily need the digital platform. You're physically going to a space to access these things but if we are talking about the digital, specifically understanding what the attention, how the attention economy works and how you can accrue attention capital. So there's a lot of value in newness, which I mentioned already, and how can that be catered to in a sustainable way? So there's a lot of really interesting digital clothing options that are becoming available. So if, for those of you not familiar with digital clothing, it's clothes which are not produced - they exist in digital form only - but what you can do - you as a consumer - is you have a particular photo of yourself and you can buy these digital clothes and then the clothes are altered to suit your exact pose in that photo so they're fitted to you really. So it's a way for you to post yourself in all sorts of different clothes and handbags, and with different skis, and whatever it may be, in all sorts of different photos and accrue this attention capital that comes from newness without necessarily engaging in the production cost of actually making these things. So this is what I mean about instead of trying to say to people 'oh you don't need to buy new things, you have enough', and 'just wear the things that you already have' that tends to be unrealistic because it doesn't it's not in line with the type of capital that people need to accrue to be successful in liquid societies, which to a large extent includes this attention capital. So just understanding what that is and thinking about how solutions can accommodate that rather than rather than trying to push back against that tends to be ways that are more successful in my view. So I look forward to discussing a lot of this with you when we have our sessions. This is my email address and I would love to stay in touch and hear from you. Thank you very much.

SLIDE 5: Please stay in touch! giana.eckhardt@rhul.ac.uk