

Could renting be the 'new buying'? Perspectives on consumers' role in prolonging product lifetimes

Abstract

The circular economy (CE) has caught the interest of different stakeholders recently as a response to many of the current 'grand challenges' exemplified by the UN sustainable development goals. Whilst CE research outputs have increased exponentially, micro level studies focusing on the role of users in the CE are limited to date. A lack of understanding of consumers' attitudes is one of biggest challenges facing companies wishing to transition towards more circular production forms. This paper empirically examines consumer attitudes and perceptions towards renting everyday durable consumer goods (e.g., clothes, toys, baby clothes, leisure equipment) and explores online rental business owners' perspectives of the challenges linked to these circular business models. It comprises an online survey with a large UK sample of 18-54 years (n=1,300) and 10 semi-structured interviews with platform owners. Drawing on and extending two established key frameworks to explain pro-environmental behaviour, i.e. the Norm Activation Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, we demonstrate that personal norms (i.e. perceived moral obligation to choose renting consumer goods), perceived behavioural control (i.e. perceived ability to renting consumer goods) and outcome efficacy (i.e., perceived feeling to be able to address environmental problems) are the main direct predictors of the intention to rent consumer goods for a fee. We provide empirical support for the role of personal norms as mediator and further provide insights into how personal norms are activated in the context of access-based consumption. This study has important managerial and policy implications for the transition to circular economy.