



**LUND UNIVERSITY**

**School of Economics and Management**

**Department of Business Administration**

# **Ownership - a challenged Consumer Ideal**

*A Study of two Collaborative Consumption Practices:*

*Clothes Swapping and Clothing Libraries*

-Master Thesis-

M.Sc. in Globalization, Brands and Consumption

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# **I. Abstract**

**Title:** Ownership - a challenged Consumer Ideal. A study of two Collaborative Consumption Practices: Clothing Libraries and Clothes Swapping

**Research topic** ownership

**Keywords** ownership, possessions, collaborative consumption, sharing economy, political consumerism, Millennials, clothing library, clothes swapping, CCT

**Purpose** This research is a theoretical contribution to CCT and existing literature on ownership, investigating whether ownership has become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture. We explore how Millennials negotiate issues of ownership and sharing in the context of collaborative consumption. Consequently, the study provides insights on new consumption forms, and more specifically swapping and access-based consumption.

**Methodology** The study has a constructionist and interpretivist stance, looking to understand the consumer worldview, why hermeneutical phenomenology is used. Qualitative research is thus applied in order to gain consumer insights, and eleven semi-structured interviews with participants of clothes swapping and clothing libraries are conducted. The analysis of the data follows the approach of the hermeneutic circles.

**Main findings** Findings show that ownership has not become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture, as consumers continue to strive for ownership for certain possessions. We present four object categories for which ownership is highly valued: intimate possessions, frequently used possessions, possessions with emotional attachments, and the home. However, consumers are politically motivated to seek other, more sustainable consumption forms. In addition to being compatible with their political views, clothes sharing offers consumers cost savings and opportunities to experiment with style, access to communities with like-minded users, and ultimately happiness, given by the act of sharing with others. We find that consumers identify with the services as well as with the shared clothes. In other words, while ownership is so far not an out-dated ideal, it is a challenged one.

## II. Acknowledgements

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This Master Thesis is the final academic project in the Master of Science in Globalization Brands and Consumption at Lund University School of Economics and Management, 2015.

Lund, 27 May 2015

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# Table of Contents

<b>I. Abstract .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>II. Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Theory .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1. Ownership and Possessions.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2. Possessions in Liquid Modernity .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.3. Collaborative Consumption .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.3.1. Product Service Systems / Access-based Consumption.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.3.2. Redistribution Market: Swapping .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3. Methodology .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.1. Research Philosophy.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.2. Research Strategy .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.3. Research Method .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3.4. Collection of Primary and Secondary Data.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.5. Data Collection: Interviews .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>3.6. Designing and Conducting the Interviews.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.7. Analysis of the Interviews .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.8. Assessing Quality .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>4. Analysis .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.1. Ownership is still a preferred Consumption Form for some Objects.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.2. Society needs new, sustainable Consumption Forms .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>4.3. Identifying with Collaborative Consumption Services and shared Objects.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>4.4. Affordable Access with Possibilities of Experimentation and Change .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.5. Sharing is Happiness .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>5. Discussion.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>6. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>7. Implications .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>8. Limitations and future Research .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Reference List .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>57</b>

**Table of Figures**

*Figure 1: Concepts of sharing .....11*  
*Figure 2: Overview of Interviewees .....23*

# 1. Introduction

*“I have thought a lot about what collaborative consumption really means and if I look at our generation [...] it’s not about ownership anymore, it’s about happiness!”*

- Ryan, 24, reflecting upon the relevance of ownership today

Ownership has for long been considered the “ultimate expression of consumer desire” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 881). However, new alternative consumption forms are emerging and consumers are increasingly collaborating by sharing goods and services (Botsman and Rogers 2011). Collaborative consumption, also referred to as the sharing economy (Thomsen 2015), is evidently a growing phenomenon (de Lecaros Aquisé 2014; Sundararajan 2013; The Economist 2013a; Walsh 2012). A shift from ownership to collaboration is particularly evident among the ‘Millennial generation’ (Owyang et al. 2014), born between 1980 and 2000 (Tanenhaus 2014). Consumers, in particular the Millennials, are increasingly swapping, renting and borrowing consumer goods, which raises a highly relevant question of whether ownership has become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture.

Belk (2014b) argues that the relationship between ownership and identity is changing. In his study from 1988, Belk states that “[o]ur possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities” (ibid.: 139). Building on the ideas of philosopher Sartre (1943), he continues: “the only reason we want to have something is to enlarge our sense of self and [...] the only way we can know who we are is by observing what we have” (Belk 1988: 146). However, in his more recent research, Belk (2014b) suggests that we are moving from being what we own, towards being what we share. He claims that we might even be at the start of a ‘post- ownership economy’. The author argues for this shift, by pointing to the fact that social media has enabled consumers to construct identities without having to own physical products. In addition he emphasises how emerging collaborative consumption practices are challenging the concept of ownership as we know it (ibid.). Altogether, Belk (2014b) sees social media and collaborative consumption as important signs of ownership decreasing in importance.

Collaborative consumption is defined as “an economic model based on sharing, swapping, trading, or renting products and services, enabling access over ownership” (Botsman 2013). Thus, collaborative practices either replace ownership or enables temporary ownership. Central in Botsman’s (2013) definition of collaborative consumption, is access as an alternative to

ownership. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) argue that access is becoming a strong competitor to ownership. They coined the term ‘access-based consumption’, for “transactions that can be market mediated but where no transfer of ownership takes place” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 881). Examples of access-based consumption are car sharing, toy libraries, *couchsurfing*<sup>1</sup> and online media streaming services such as Netflix (ibid.).

Another activity mentioned in Botsman’s (2013) definition is swapping, despite the fact that it entails ownership. Swapping has become popular in recent years and is “particularly common with clothes, [...] not only through privately or publicly organized clothes swap parties, but also increasingly as a business model in the form of shops and online swapping platforms” (Herrmann 2013). Smithers (2010) goes as far as stating that “[c]lothes swapping [...] is the new shopping”. It is an activity based on the ‘one in - one out principle’ (Herrmann 2013), where consumers are willing to give up possessions in exchange for others. Swapping thus represents a new transient form of ownership, contradicting previous theory on possessions as enduring anchors for identity (Belk 1988). Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012: 511) acknowledge that consumer research has generally described consumers as forming “salient, enduring, and strong attachment to possessions because of the roles that possessions play in singular identity projects”. In other words, ownership and possessions have previously been strongly interlinked in the research. Nevertheless, collaborative consumption has come to change this fact by making possessions temporary rather than permanent, thereby challenging the ownership concept.

Scholars within consumer culture theory, CCT (Arnould and Thompson 2005), have acknowledged a declining importance of ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012; Belk 2014a; Belk 2014b). Previous research has looked at how globalisation and mobile lifestyles affect consumer relationship to ownership and possessions (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012). In addition, attention has been paid to new alternative consumption forms, outlining the differences between collaborative consumption practices and ownership (Belk 2014b), as well as contrasting ownership with access-based consumption and describing the dimensions and nature of access (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). However, there is an apparent need for further research on new consumption forms (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2014a; Möhlmann 2015) and new relationships to possessions. More specifically, we know little about

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<sup>1</sup> *Couchsurfing* is an Internet-based house-sharing service, which connects users and places worldwide and enables travellers to stay with locals (Couchsurfing 2015).

how consumers relate to ownership in times of collaborative consumption, as no scholars have looked explicitly at consumer views on ownership in this context. Thus, there is an evident gap in the research, where new findings are needed to understand ownership's current role in consumer culture.

We see collaborative consumption as a phenomenon challenging the role of ownership. Thus, our objective is to investigate whether ownership is an out-dated ideal in consumer culture. In order to meet this objective we will answer the following research question:

*How do consumers negotiate issues of ownership and sharing in collaborative consumption?*

To understand the research phenomenon we will look at two different forms of collaborative consumption, namely access-based consumption and swapping. We consider both of the consumption forms as highly relevant for exploring ownership, since they enable us to investigate what possessions mean to consumers when there is either a lack of, or a transient form of, ownership. As ownership is intimately linked with identity politics, and “commercially produced objects play a central role in theories of consumer self, identities, and communities” (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012: 523), we will investigate the consumer-object relationship in collaborative consumption.

The studied context will be the clothing industry, since clothes is the third most popular product category in collaborative consumption (Owyang et al. 2014). Thus, clothing libraries will represent access-based consumption and clothes swap shops and events will represent swapping. Using more than one consumption form will help us gain a more thorough understanding of ownership and possessions in collaborative consumption. The clothing libraries offer consumers access to a certain number of items during a limited period of time in exchange for contact information and most commonly a membership fee. Ownership is thereby replaced with access to a shared pool of clothes. Swapping services on their part facilitate a frequent exchange of ownership either for free or for a membership fee (Botsman and Rogers 2011). This transient form of ownership challenges Belk's (1988) view on possessions as enduring. Moreover, in the field of CCT, research on collaborative consumption has mainly looked at the car- and accommodation industry (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2014a; Belk 2014b; Möhlmann 2015). With a focus on the clothing industry we will contribute with unique findings on ownership and consumer-possession relationships in collaborative consumption.



## **Introduction**

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This thesis consists of eight chapters. In the first chapter the topic was introduced and a general overview of the topic was given. Moreover, after a short analysis and problematizing of the literature, a research gap was identified and the objective and research question of this thesis were formulated. In the next chapter the relevant theory on the core topics of ownership, liquid modernity and collaborative consumption are reviewed. This theory section gives a better understanding of the research area and forms the theoretical lens for the analysis. In the third chapter the methodology is described. Following is the analysis of the collected data and the identified findings, presented in themes in chapter four. Next, the findings of the data will be discussed, and an answer to the initial research questions will be given. In the seventh and eighth chapter the conclusion and the implications of the research findings will be outlined. Lastly, the limitations as well as recommendations for further research will be elaborated.

## 2. Theory

In this chapter we present the theoretical frameworks that are used for exploring ownership. They will work as theoretical lenses and help us analyze our findings from a consumer culture perspective. We start by discussing our theoretical point of departure, the research stream of CCT, and then specify three frameworks that are used to understand ownership in the sharing economy: ownership and possessions, liquid modernity and collaborative consumption.

The objective of this research is to investigate whether ownership has become an outdated ideal in consumer culture. As we will explore how consumers negotiate the issues of ownership and sharing in collaborative consumption, the theoretical frameworks used are derived from CCT. Arnould and Thompson (2005: 868) describe CCT as “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings”. The research tradition of CCT makes up an approach to investigate ‘cultural complexity’ (ibid.). When studying ownership, CCT thus enables us to explore its various “meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings” (ibid.: 869). Thompson and Hirschman (1995: 151) argue that consumers can choose between a wide selection of different self-concepts by the act of consumption and describe it as an “ongoing consumption project”. Consequently, in our study we focus on individuals who participate in collaborative consumption and how they relate to ownership and competing alternatives. By expanding the understanding of ownership in times of collaborative consumption, we add to existing theory on ownership and possessions.

### 2.1. Ownership and Possessions

Consumer research has paid significant interest to the areas of ownership and possessions (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). One frequently cited author in the field is Belk (1988: 139), who refers to a number of previous research findings (Feirstein 1986; James 1890; Rosenbaum 1972; Tuan 1980; Van Esterick 1986), when claiming that “we are what we have [...] is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behaviour”. When arguing for the accuracy of this statement, Belk (1988) uses the concept of ‘the extended self’. The extension of the self incorporates possessions as part of people's' identity. That is, when objects turn into possessions

consumers see them as a part of who they are (ibid.). Belk (1988) discusses two ways in which possessions can extend the self. The first regards the way in which possessions enable us to do physical tasks which require the help from specific objects, such as tools. The second is an extension in a more symbolic way, referring to when possessions are used to construct a wanted image or sense of self towards others and ourselves. Within the field of consumer culture research, some possessions have been found to “carry important experiential and symbolic value for the owner” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 888). Possessions are thus considered invaluable to identity, regardless of whether they have mere use-value or symbolic values.

The strong connection between ownership and identity does not only exist on the individual level, but possessions help in shaping group identity as well: “shared consumption symbols [...] help identify group membership and define the group self” (Belk 1988: 152). Moreover, control is an important factor within the concept of the extended self. A higher degree of control over objects means a higher likeliness for the objects to be part of the extended self. As a consequence, objects are more likely to be part of someone’s identity than are people, since people have a free will and are thus harder to control (Belk 1988). With ownership comes a freedom to use possessions however one pleases, as well as controlling who else gets to use them (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). This would, due to a lower level of control, imply that borrowed and rented objects are less likely to be part of consumer identity.

Belk (1988) further argues for the importance of possessions, by pointing to the anchoring effect that these have on identity. He claims that they secure and endure our identities and define who we are over time. Possessions become important for identity early in life, as children learn to recognise the difference between mine and yours and what to protect from others (ibid.). As we grow older, possessions remind us of our past and make up a part of our history and are thus a part of our identity (ibid.). Belk (1988: 159) claims that “[t]he possessions in our extended self [...] give us a personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and how we have changed.”. However, in order for possessions of the past to be highly valued by consumers, they need to be associated with good memories and/or proud moments, rather than bad experiences (ibid.).

Another argument for the importance of ownership for identity concerns the strong feelings associated with losing possessions. Belk (1988) argues that such circumstances as theft exposes a person to a loss of objects which were part of the sense of self, thereby diminishing

one's identity (ibid.). This can provoke strong negative feelings of loss and grief (ibid.). While the case above refers to involuntary loss of objects, the situation is different when consumers deliberately give up possessions. This might be the situation when an object is conflicting with someone's self-image (ibid.). Consequently, a possession that does not entail any positive associations could easily be disposed of. Furthermore, consumers may be prone to give up possessions that no longer represent their identities. This would imply that objects which are considered important for self-image and which carry positive associations and memories, are more likely to remain in ownership.

Peck and Shu (2007) have showed that consumers can develop a psychological sense of ownership when they touch and use objects, without legally owning them. In addition, in one of his more recent studies Belk (2014b: 1595) claims that "you are what you own" changes with the digital world, which has an impact on the extended self. When consumers are no longer dependent on physical products for constructing identities (Belk 2014b), the concept of ownership is challenged. Nevertheless, this major shift in consumer culture is not unique to social media and online behaviour. The sharing economy and the growing number of collaborative consumption practices point to a new way of relating to possessions (ibid.). When consumers engage in collaborative consumption, ownership is replaced by sharing, renting, borrowing and swapping. Hence, as new phenomena appear and make us question old established assumptions within consumer research, it is necessary to contribute with theoretical knowledge to the currently limited work on these phenomena.

In order to contribute to existing theory on ownership and possessions and investigate its changing role in consumer culture, we will use a theoretical lens appropriate for placing the object of research into a larger societal context. Next is an outline of what is termed 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000), a theoretical framework used to explore the current role of ownership.

## **2.2. Possessions in Liquid Modernity**

Since we want to understand how consumers relate to possessions and ownership in current society, it is necessary to take on a larger perspective and look upon the research area in the context of our globalised world, characterised by flows of information and people (Appadurai 1990). According to Bauman (2000), we are currently living in an era of 'liquid modernity' and

have thus entered a new phase in the history of modernity. Preceding the liquid era did solid modernity, which lasted throughout most of the 20th century (Binkley 2008). Typical for this epoch was instrumental rationality and the economic order serving as the “‘basis’ of social life” (Bauman 2000: 4). Liquid modernity on the contrary, is characterised by capital no longer being “fixed to the ground” (ibid.: 58), by globalization and ‘universal comparison’, and a world of endless choices for the individual (Bauman 2000). Ulver and Ostberg (2014: 834) describe liquid modernity as “a state of loose social structures and constant social change in late capitalism where new complex rules of domination force consumers to, despite uncertainty, compete for status positions on a global arena”. Furthermore, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) mention objects, social structures and institutions among things that are getting increasingly less solid and more ‘dematerialised’ in liquid modernity. Bauman (2000: 62) explains that in this “post-Fordist, ‘fluid modern’ world” the possibilities are many and exciting and the system, the ‘Big Brother’, is no longer there to control the “freely choosing individuals”. However, with multiple choices comes the agony of choosing, and in absence of a controlling system, there is nothing to guide and protect us in the decision-making processes of life (ibid.). Hence, in liquid modernity the individual stands alone in deciding what to do and what to have, in a strive for “the greatest conceivable satisfaction” (ibid.: 62).

In today’s liquid society we are consumers more than we are producers (Bauman 2000). This has the implication that we have left the ‘keep up’-thinking typical for the producer, where one merely strives to reach the norm, to instead be driven by “ever rising desires and volatile wishes” (ibid.: 76). In liquid modernity we are constantly moving forward, always looking for new and better things. As Bauman (2000: 62) puts it we are “[l]iving in a world full of opportunities - each one more appetizing and alluring than the previous one, each ‘compensating for the last, and providing grounds for shifting towards the next’ [Miller 1998]”. This unstable social condition affects identity construction and according to Ulver and Ostberg (2014) the consumer is no longer satisfied with simply *being*, but is always striving to *become* somebody. The authors further argue that in liquid modernity, having enduring identities is not feasible due to frequent shifts in status. However, a continuously changing self-concept is now in itself a way of expressing status (ibid.). The countless opportunities for constructing identity provide a “freedom to become anybody” (Bauman 2000: 62) and the authors Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) even argue that long-standing life projects have little competitive advantage in liquid modernity, as the latter calls for “mobility, flexibility, and openness to change” (Tomlinson 2007

in Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012: 513). Consequently, identity projects have become liquid (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012).

Previous research has primarily looked upon possessions as solid, but Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) argue that liquid identity projects make it hard to be attached to possessions. The authors refer to Appadurai's (1990) notion of the globalised world as consisting of different flows of "capital, information, images, ethnicities and consumer goods" (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012: 513). When people and objects are in constant movement, consumers start relating differently to possessions. In liquid modernity possessions become a constraint, holding us in a grip and reminding us of the past that we are moving away from, thus preventing us from living a flexible life with on-going identity projects (Binkley 2008).

Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) claim that the anchoring value of possessions is outmoded when consumers move from one identity project to another. Thus, the authors develop Bauman's (2000) concept of liquidity to be one of a liquid relationship to possessions. Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012: 510) explain that such a relationship entails a "detachment and flexibility" towards objects, and it enables consumers to handle the "challenges of globalization and liquid modernity" (ibid.: 525). Moreover, Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) suggest that today, the value of 'stuff' is generally leaving room for the value of experiences. Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould's (2012) findings are based on the three authors' study of 'elite global nomads' but they argue that a liquid relationship to possessions is likely to be valid in other conditions where possessions are temporary. One emphasised example is access-based consumption. Whereas ownership entails attachment, access instead permits consumers to be flexible about their identities (ibid.).

As previously mentioned, possessions have been looked upon as enduring identity constructors and something that "fixes one to place, time, and culture, and [...] may protect or buffer the self from change" (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012: 511). However, just like the liquid consumption patterns of elite global nomads contradict these previous ideas, collaborative consumption signals a liquid relationship to possessions (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012). In the sharing economy objects are no longer permanent but constantly exchanged. Liquid modernity, and more precisely a liquid relationship to possessions, therefore makes a good theoretical lens for studying possessions in collaborative consumption (ibid.). Liquidity enables us to explore and develop existing knowledge on materiality (ibid.) in a situation of temporary

possessions. In sum, we will investigate the role of ownership in times of collaborative consumption, using the perspective of liquid modernity.

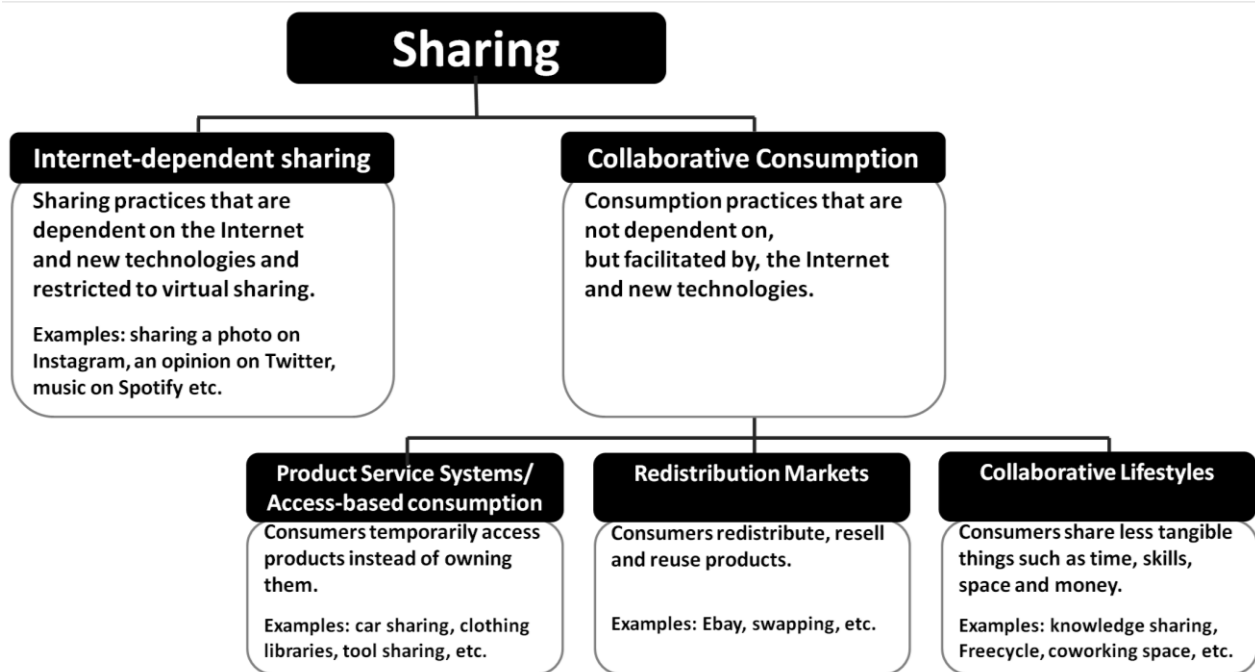
### 2.3. Collaborative Consumption

According to Botsman and Rogers (2011), collaborative consumption could be as much of a turning point in the history of owning as the Industrial Revolution was in the 19th century. Just like Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012), the authors argue that ownership is no longer the ultimate desire, and that we “want not the stuff but the need or experiences it fulfils” (Botsman and Rogers 2011: 97). Thus, the sharing economy could also be described as an ‘experience economy’, where doing is valued over having, as suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1999 in Belk 2007). Furthermore, Möhlmann (2015: 9) argues that collaborative consumption is no longer merely a ‘niche trend’ and claims that it “is radically changing consumer behaviour”.

Botsman and Rogers (2011) divide collaborative consumption into three main systems: ‘Product Service Systems’, ‘Redistribution Markets’, and also the ‘Collaboration Lifestyle’ (see Figure 1 on page 11). In the Product Service System people “pay for the benefit of a product [...] without needing to own the product outright” (ibid.: 71) which corresponds to the definition of access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). The second system, the Redistribution Markets, is based on the activities of reusing and reselling goods, thereby maximising utility (Botsman and Rogers 2011). The authors explain that redistribution entails free exchange, exchange for financial compensation and swapping. Lastly, Botsman and Rogers (2011: 73) describe the ‘Collaboration Lifestyle’ to be an exchange of “time, space, skills and money” between people, which “generate[s] a myriad of relationships and social connectivity”. Our study focus is on ownership of physical products, why we investigate the two first categories, Product Service System, as well as Redistribution Markets, to get a good understanding of different alternatives to ownership. Moreover, collaborative consumption can be differentiated by the involved actors, whether it is commercial sharing between businesses, B2B, (Tjoa 2015) or between business and consumers, B2C, or non-commercial sharing between peers, P2P (Botsman and Rogers 2011). However, as pointed out by Möhlmann (2015: 2), P2P is often “facilitated by an external provider”, such as online platforms.

Collaborative consumption is a rather new phenomenon. It was made more convenient with the Internet Age (Belk 2014b; Botsman and Rogers 2011) and new technologies (Botsman

and Rogers 2011; Dowling and Simpson 2013; Piscicelli, Cooper and Fisher 2014; Thompson and Weissmann 2012) by enabling people to connect and to reallocate resources more easily (Botsman and Rogers 2011). Due to these new possibilities of connectivity, sharing went from a family context (Belk 2014b) to be a large-scale collaboration between strangers (Botsman and Rogers 2011). Nevertheless, collaborative consumption is not necessarily technology-based. Community gardening (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), physical swap shops, libraries, co-working spaces (Botsman and Rogers 2011) and car sharing services (Belk 2014b), are some examples of collaborative consumption practices that are not dependent on technology, but facilitated by it. Belk (2014b) further differentiates between collaborative consumption and sharing dependent on the Internet, where the latter refers to virtual sharing such as online file- and music sharing. As mentioned, this study will exclusively investigate activities relating to collaborative consumption, as the research focus is on ownership of physical objects.



**Figure 1: Concepts of sharing: own illustration based on theory from Belk (2014a; 2014b) and Botsman and Rogers (2011)**

Besides technology, there are other important factors that are said to have contributed to the rise of the sharing economy and collaborative consumption (Belk 2014b; Botsman and Rogers 2011; Gansky 2011; The Economist 2013b). Among other things, Gansky (2011) argues



that as a result of a growing population and increasing re-urbanization, people have less space today and consequently cannot own as much things as before. In addition, a rising awareness of overconsumption and environmental issues have made consumers more positive towards collaborative consumption (Belk 2014b; Botsman and Rogers 2011; Gansky 2011; The Economist 2013b). Moreover, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) mention how the latest financial crisis has come to affect consumers' views on ownership and question its importance for wellbeing. The crisis has resulted in a sceptical attitude towards capitalism, which according to Möhlmann (2015: 2) has made consumers eager to find new “alternative forms of sustainable consumption”. All in all these factors are connected to the concept of ownership in that they make it less affordable and/or sought-after. They further show that the phenomenon of collaborative consumption concerns various aspects within consumer culture and that the sharing economy has implications for numerous areas, and thus make it an omnipresent and highly relevant topic.

Due to the relative newness of collaborative consumption as a phenomenon, it has only recently become more widespread and therefore this area has not yet been researched in depth and especially not from all points of view. A quantitative study by Möhlmann's (2015) is one of few looking into consumer motivations for participating in collaborative consumption. The author argues that previous studies “have a number of shortcomings” (ibid.: 1). She sees the need for distinguishing between different industries and practices within collaborative consumption, something she argues existing research has generally failed to do. This study will meet this need and explore the influence that collaborative consumption has on consumer culture and specifically the understanding of ownership. Our study will focus on the clothing industry, as clothes make the third most popular product category in collaborative consumption (Owyang et al. 2014). We will further contribute with findings from two different collaborative consumption practices: access-based and swapping, which are examined below.

### **2.3.1. Product Service Systems / Access-based Consumption**

Product service systems, from now on referred to as access-based consumption, enables access instead of ownership and ownership-transfer is completely excluded from the concept (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). The emphasis is on the temporary experience of objects and services that access provides (ibid.).

According to Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012), access has gained a new role in consumer society. It was previously a consumption form mainly associated with either the public sector, such as parks and book libraries, or conventional renting, such as housing. The reason for choosing access was often financial constraints, why this consumption form was of a lower status than ownership (ibid.). Nevertheless, this fact has come to change. Today, access-based consumption “is gaining symbolic capital as a more economically and ecologically viable, flexible, and freeing consumption mode” (ibid.: 895) and consumers may join access services to share ideals and hobbies within this community (Botsman and Rogers 2011). Thus, access has become an attractive alternative to ownership and is not necessarily a choice made from financial constraints.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) differentiate ownership from access on especially two parameters: the relationship between object and self, and the rules surrounding this relationship. They argue that ownership is more long-term than access and may be important in identity construction. In addition, ownership entails a large level of control. Access on the other hand, does not and neither does it provide the opportunity for constructing identity over time. However, it gives a “flexibility and adaptability suitable for liquid consumer identity projects” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 883). In addition, access-based consumption is “not necessarily altruistic or prosocial [...] but can be underlined by economic exchange and reciprocity” (ibid: 882). The socio-psychological concept of reciprocity is a feeling of obligation to repay what is given to us by others (Cialdini 2000).

Rather than the objects having symbolic values, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found that the symbolism of access-based consumption was in fact related to the act of accessing itself. The consumers did not identify with the cars in the car sharing service, but the consumer-object relationship was instead based on utility. The authors refer to Baudrillard’s (1981) ideas concerning use value and how it has socio-culturally come to be a “part of the reflexive symbolic repertoire of things in consumer culture” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 890). Access is considered a “trendy [...] green consumption alternative to ownership” (Botsman and Rogers 2010 in Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 890) and thereby gives the user sign value or ‘symbolic capital’ (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). However, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) did not find political consumerism, such as environmental concerns, to be a motivator for participating in car sharing.

In addition to Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2012) study, Möhlmann (2015) recently investigated motivations for participating in access-based consumption, specifically looking at

satisfaction-level and likelihood for continuous use. Möhlmann studied a B2C service, the car sharing *car2go*, as well as a P2P service, the accommodation marketplace *Airbnb*. In the study 10 determinants were analysed, which were expected to positively affect consumers' choice of engaging in collaborative consumption. However, four of them - internet capability, smartphone capability, trend affinity and environmental impact - did not show any significant effect on neither satisfaction with the collaborative consumption practice nor likelihood for using it again. Cost savings, familiarity, trust and utility on the other hand, were shown to have an impact on both satisfaction and continuous use, and for both B2C and P2P. The two last determinants, service quality and community belonging, only had a significant effect in the B2C service.

Ultimately, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) emphasise an important advantage that comes with access: it allows consumers to be flexible about lifestyle and identity, which they, referring to Bauman (2000), argue is something that is more and more sought-after in our modern society. They state that “access is becoming a symbolic resource for identity construction” (ibid.: 895). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) agree with Belk (2014b) that the role of ownership is changing and access-based consumption is one important indicator of this fact. Thus, consumers engaging in access-based consumption are most suitable for our research on ownership.

### **2.3.2. Redistribution Market: Swapping**

Along with access-based consumption, swapping makes an interesting context for researching ownership in collaborative consumption. Nissanoff (2007) argues that the redistribution of things implicates a new understanding of ownership. He states that society is changing and that the objective is to “have, but not to hold” (ibid.: 109). Instead of keeping objects, increasingly more consumers discover the possibility of redistribution (Nissanoff 2007). It is a way of saving or making money, or gaining new items in exchange for old ones. It enables consumption without wasting additional resources (Botsman and Rogers 2011; Gansky 2011). Nissanoff (2007: 7) claims that redistribution facilitates a new temporary ownership, described as “the continuous replacement of our personal possessions”. Furthermore, Botsman and Rogers (2011: 125) explain that “used goods have been exchanged for centuries” but argue that this practice was “redefined through technology and peer communities” (ibid.: xv). In other words, just as with collaborative consumption in general, the Internet Age has come to boost redistribution and exchange of used goods, making it more convenient and easier to coordinate

(Botsman and Rogers 2011). As stated before, within the redistribution market the focus of our study is on the consumption practice of swapping.

Swapping is defined as “[g]iv[ing] (one thing) and receiv[ing] something else in exchange” (Oxford Dictionaries 2015). Today there are swapping activities in various product categories, ranging from clothes and books to toys and games (Botsman and Rogers 2011). A product can either be swapped within the same product category, or for a product of similar value (ibid.). As in the case of access-based consumption, swapping can be either B2C or P2P. One example of B2C swapping is swap shops, where members either swap for free or pay a small fee (Østergaard 2013; Swap.com n.d.; SwopShop.se 2015). Besides such shops, which exist both offline and online, there are also single swapping events (Botsman and Rogers 2011). These range from big public events to small private parties among friends (ibid.). As swapping activities offer the possibility of frequently exchanging possessions, they make an excellent example of Bauman’s (2000) liquid consumption, and Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould’s (2012) concept of a liquid relationship towards possessions. When swapping becomes increasingly popular (Botsman and Rogers 2011; Herrmann 2013), opportunities arise for consumers to easily trade their objects, thereby enabling liquid identity projects. When possessions are no longer kept as markers of history (Belk 1988), but instead cut loose in order to gain new ones, ownership becomes liquid rather than solid. Swapping thus represents an interesting case of a new form of ownership, which makes it suitable for our study purpose.

### 3. Methodology

Our objective is to investigate whether ownership has become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture by exploring consumer perspectives on ownership and specifically looking at how they negotiate issues of ownership and sharing. In this chapter we argue for why the hermeneutic phenomenological stance is appropriate for the purpose of gaining consumer insights about ownership and for answering our research question. We will further discuss the implications of this stance for the study findings. Moreover, we will present the collection of secondary and primary data and explain in detail how the latter was gathered. Thus, we will argue for the selection of our participants and for the chosen design and conduction of our interviews. Lastly we will explain how the collected data was analysed and outline the implications of assessing qualitative research.

#### 3.1. Research Philosophy

In researching the phenomenon of ownership within the research field of CCT, we depart from the idea that there are multiple truths and that “facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012: 19). For this reason social constructionism is chosen for our study, as we look upon reality as “socially constructed and given meaning by people” (ibid.: 23) rather than being “objective and exterior” (ibid.: 23). Connected to constructivism is the theoretical perspective of interpretivism (Gray 2014), which allows an “understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman and Bell 2011: 386). As we want to explore our phenomenon by looking at it through the eyes of consumers who are participating in collaborative consumption practices, interpretivism is thus applied. Consequently, we are aware of the fact that the interpretations do not represent a general truth but are unique to the individual’s context. This is referred to as ‘self-interpretation’ (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). In addition, the interpretation process of our research will be in two stages, with the first representing the ‘self-interpretation’ of the interviewees, and the second our own interpretations of the interviewees’ worldview (ibid.). The findings will thus not represent an objective reality, but a two-step interpretation.

In order to gain consumer insights concerning ownership, we will use a phenomenological stance. According to the principle of phenomenology, the social reality is understood by studying people's lived experiences of that reality (Gray 2014: 24). Thus, the required data is in the form of described experiences from people's own perspectives (Goulding 2005) and natural settings (Gray 2014). The phenomenological approach is advantageous since the collection of large amounts of data gives an opportunity for findings that were not necessarily the initial research focus (Gray 2014). As ownership and possessions is a broad area concerning various dimensions of a consumer's life, we thus have a possibility to gain unexpected insights. Furthermore, the hermeneutic approach in phenomenology is a 'standard reference' in CCT (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) since it focuses on the meanings that are created "from the interpretive interaction between historically produced texts and the reader" (Lavery 2003: 16). This approach will be applied in our research, as we are interested in the "historical meanings of experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and social levels" (ibid.: 15). In hermeneutic phenomenology, all interpretations are thus made on the basis of the interpreter's own historical context (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). The fact that hermeneutic phenomenology investigates lived experiences (Lavery 2003) enables us to fully explore consumer experiences with collaborative consumption practices, investigating the meanings that they assign to ownership from their own perspectives and contexts. It is in other words a highly appropriate stance for our research.

Having discussed the philosophical approach of our study, we will account for the research strategy in the following chapter.

### **3.2. Research Strategy**

As the aim of our study is to explore the viewpoints of our interviewees and draw conclusions from their experiences, we apply an inductive approach (Bryman and Bell 2011). Conducting a qualitative study, with an interpretative approach (Bryman and Bell 2011; Gray 2014), enables us to explore interviewee viewpoints and understand and "discover how [our] respondent[s] see[] the world" (McCracken 1988: 21). In accordance with our phenomenological stance, we apply a holistic research strategy, where consumer experiences are related to each other as well as to the larger 'life-world' (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). Moving on to the research design, we assume that there is no absolute truth, and therefore a constructionist

research design is appropriate for our study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2011). Due to research constraints regarding “time and resources” (Gray 2014: 35) a cross-sectional study will be used, which offers the researchers “a ‘snapshot’ [...] where the data are collected at one point in time” (ibid.).

The research objective of understanding and exploring different experiences with and perspectives on ownership for people participating in collaborative consumption, guides the applied research method, which will be elaborated next.

### 3.3. Research Method

As we have a phenomenological approach and aim at understanding our phenomenon through consumer interpretations, interviews will be conducted. This method allows us to explore and understand the world of our respondents, as we are given the opportunity to access their ‘mental world’ and see our phenomenon the way they see it (McCracken 1988). Interviews further enable us to collect data in the form of spoken words and descriptions, and to get “deeper, fuller conceptualizations” of the aspects that we want to understand (Miller and Glassner 1997: 103 in Alvesson 2003: 16). Words are appropriate to communicate meanings (Bryman and Bell 2011) and “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs” (Gadamer 1960/1998: 389 in Lavery 2003: 10). Moreover, hermeneutic research looks at how ‘cultural viewpoints’ are embedded within a person’s language (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). Hence, interviews are chosen because of the superior qualities of language for understanding consumers and their worldviews. Interviews are according to Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) superior for gaining an in-depth understanding of consumer experiences, why they will provide us with the data needed for answering our research question. In addition, the applied philosophy of “phenomenology makes use almost exclusively of interviews” (Gray 2014: 24-25) due to the possibility of an interview “to stay as close to the lived experience as possible” (Lavery 2003: 19). Consequently, using existential phenomenological interviews allows us to explore consumer experiences (Thompson, Pollio and Locander 1994) and thus gain insights on our phenomenon, making it the most suitable research method for our study.

The appropriate extent of structure depends on the objective of the research. Due to the fact that we want to get a deep understanding of the interviewees and see the world through their

eyes, a proper design would give room for follow-up questions and reactions to interviewees' answers (Bryman and Bell 2011). Thus, semi-structured interviews will be conducted (ibid.). This allows us to on the one hand use an interview guide in order to cover the important topics, and on the other hand to ask further questions and react to responses (ibid.). As recommended by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012), laddering will be used as a technique to ask further questions and to get a better understanding of the interviewees' experiences.

Since interviewees are not always "aware of their own motives" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012: 129), the chosen research method demands very good interview skills. Our role is to assist the interviewees in order to explore their insights and their understanding of the world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012). We should never be too blunt and always remain confidentiality (McCracken 1988). Overall it is important that trust is established, because absence of trust would influence the quality of received responses (Alvesson 2003; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012). Trust is therefore a "prerequisite in order to be able to explore the inner world (meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions) or experienced social reality of the interviewee" (Alvesson 2003: 16). Besides these social skills, we also have to be aware of the influence of the question formulations, which can easily bias the interviewee (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012). In accordance with Thompson, Locander and Pollio's (1989; 1994) recommendations for phenomenological research, we will therefore strive to ask open questions and the follow-up questions will be based on the interviewees' own words. This will help us in "remaining unencumbered by conceptual predilections." (Thompson, Locander and Polio's 1989: 138) and thus avoid bias.

### **3.4. Collection of Primary and Secondary Data**

In order to find relevant literature about ownership within the context of collaborative consumption, we used academic databases on the Internet as a starting point. The initial step was a search for previous research within the fields of ownership and collaborative consumption, using the word 'ownership' together with other relevant buzzwords such as 'possessions' 'sharing', 'sharing economy' and 'collaborative consumption'. For this secondary data, we attempted to use peer-reviewed primary sources exclusively, in order to maintain trustworthiness and reliability for our research. Secondary sources were only used when we could find the original text or the source was considered as reliable. Literature sources were mainly found



through the academic databases of Emerald, Ebsco and JSTOR and the Lund University database LibHub. Academic research was complemented with recently published media articles to get a better overview of the many various collaborative consumption practices. The literature search was a continuous process during the whole research project.

Due to the relatively newness of the phenomenon of collaborative consumption, new research was needed in the field of CCT in order to fully explore the area of ownership. Our primary data was therefore gathered through interviews with participants suitable for the specific purpose.

### **3.5. Data Collection: Interviews**

Before explaining in depth how the data was collected, some general aspects regarding the interview conditions will be discussed. First of all, both researchers were present in all interviews in order to generate the same conditions in every interview and thus allow a comparison of the findings. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in English to enable both researchers to participate despite their different mother tongues, as well as to avoid translation bias (Bryman and Bell 2011) since the thesis is written in English.

Our initial aim was to collect data from interviews with participants of pure P2P collaborative consumption services. The reason for this is that Belk (2014a) points to differences concerning consumer-community identification depending on whether the service is P2P or B2C. As our aim is to extend the literature on Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) concept of access-based consumption and the authors studied a B2C service, which is why it would be valuable to compare and contrast their findings with a study of P2P services. As the authors argue, the consumers in their study did not identify with the accessed objects partly due to the market-mediation of the service, which resulted in a lack of community-feeling (*ibid.*).

There is an issue however, concerning the fact that neither Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) nor Belk (2014a), provide a specific definition to distinguish between P2P and B2C sharing. A further issue regarding the narrow focus on P2P involves difficulties in getting access to such communities. Due to B2C services being market-mediated, they are naturally more visible both online and offline, and much easier to access for an external party. Thus, whereas Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) use an obvious B2C form of access, our study will instead focus on collaborative

consumption services that are market-mediated but largely non-profit driven. This implies that they are based on different values than B2C, and we expect them to be more similar to the values in P2P sharing. Consequently, we expect the motives for engaging in these services to differ from the motives of the *Zipcar* users.

In addition, we consider it relevant to focus on possessions that just like cars, are known to have symbolic meanings. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) discuss the strong symbolic meanings of car ownership and how this symbolism affects consumer identity. By studying another object category known for carrying strong symbolic meanings, we anticipate that the motives for wanting to own such objects will be high. Thus, a study on access and swapping in relation to a symbolic object, will add valuable and interesting insights to our research on the changing role of ownership. We therefore decided to focus on clothes, since they make an exemplary case of objects carrying symbolic meanings. Corrigan (1997: 176) states that “[p]erhaps more than any other element of consumer culture, clothing is the most efficient at announcing one’s status to the world”. The author refers to numerous scholars, Davis (1992), McCracken (1988) Sennett (1978) and Veblen (1975), to mention a few, having studied the underlying symbolism of clothes and fashion throughout the history of consumer culture. In the context of collaborative consumption and ownership, clothing libraries and clothes swapping services therefore suit our purpose very well, as clothes are expected to have similar implications for identity construction as cars. Not least clothes swapping is advantageous to study, due to having grown in popularity lately (Herrmann 2013; Luna 2014; Maheshwari 2012; Ryzik 2006). More than being a phenomenon on the rise and therefore an interesting research area per se, our search- and access process was facilitated by a currently large number of clothes swaps and clothing libraries. The restriction to clothes as the only category of consumer objects allowed us to better compare the different values and experiences of our interviewees.

Clothing libraries and swapping services were found online and users and organisers were contacted via *Facebook* or e-mail. To get insights from lived experiences, it was crucial to find consumers who were “willing to talk about their experience” (Polkinghorne; van Manen 1997 in Lavery 2003: 18), and our focus was on Millennials using these services. Through an initial contact with some users, we were later able to reach other users in the same services in a second stage. The snowball sampling method was hence applied, which Bryman and Bell (2011: 192) describe as “the researcher mak[ing] initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others”. Lastly, in order to

transcribe the interviews without any discrepancies (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012; McCracken 1988), the interviews were recorded, given consent from the interviewees.

For our study McCracken's (1988) principle of 'less is more' regarding the quantity of conducted interviews was applied. He argues that it is more important to work long and intensive with the interviewees than having a large number of interviews. Bryman and Bell (2011: 408) support McCracken's position by arguing that "the people who are interviewed in qualitative research are not meant to be representative of a population". Thus it can be said that the outcome of the interviews "is not so much concerned with generalizations to larger populations, but with contextual description and analysis" (Gray 2014: 30). Accordingly, after having conducted seven interviews, we had gained a good understanding of the phenomenon. However, we felt the need to conduct some more interviews in order to get a more thorough understanding and further insights. Hence, four additional interviews were conducted. After these interviews it was not expected that further data collection would provide any additional insights about whether ownership has become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture and how consumers negotiate issues of ownership and sharing in collaborative consumption. Consequently a saturation level (Lavery 2003) was reached with these 11 conducted interviews. The interviews allowed us to explore ownership in depth within the specific context of our studied services.

In the table below the profiles of our interviewees are summarised, as well as their experience with the two investigated collaborative consumption practices and the date and location of the interviews.

Figure 2: Overview of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Residence	Occupation	Community, consumption practice	Experience in the other practice	Interview date and location
Luca*	male	35	Hungarian	Malmö, Sweden	Self-employed	Streetbank, Access- based	Yes	30.03.2015 in Malmö
Erica*	female	21	Swedish	Uppsala, Sweden	Student	Klädbiblioteket <sup>1</sup> Uppsala, Access- based	No	01.04.2015 via Skype
Ryan*	male	24	German	Groningen, Netherland	Student & Entrepreneur	SwapStories*, Swapping	No	02.04.2015 via Skype
Sofia*	female	20	Swedish	Uppsala, Sweden	Student	Klädbiblioteket <sup>1</sup> Uppsala, Access- based	No	02.04.2015 via Skype
Franziska*	female	23	Swedish	Malmö, Sweden	Student	Klädoteket <sup>1</sup> Malmö, Access- based	No	08.04.2015 in Lund
Martina*	female	23	Swedish	Göteborg, Sweden	Employee	Klädbiblioteket Göteborg <sup>1</sup> , Access- based	Yes	09.04.2015 via Skype
Hannah*	female	20	Swedish	Uppsala, Sweden	Student	Klädbiblioteket <sup>1</sup> Uppsala, Access- based	Yes	14.04.2015 via Skype
Felicia*	female	20	South African	Groningen, Netherland	Student	SwapStories*, Swapping	No	16.04.2015 via Skype
Alex*	male	26	Turkish	Malmö, Sweden	Employee	Klädoteket <sup>1</sup> Malmö, Access- based	Yes	16.04.2015 in Malmö
Susanna*	female	26	Portuguese	Malmö, Sweden	Student	Kontrapunkt Malmö, Swapping	Yes	17.04.2015 in Malmö
Julienne*	female	27	Swedish	Göteborg, Sweden	Employee	Klädbiblioteket <sup>1</sup> Göteborg, Access- based	Yes	29.04.2015 via Skype

\* The names were changed in order to guarantee the interviewees anonymity; <sup>1</sup> Klädbibliotek is the Swedish word for clothing library.

### 3.6. Designing and Conducting the Interviews

After establishing a research context for exploring ownership in the sharing economy, we immediately started the data collection. Due to time-, budget- and geographical constraints, in-person interviews were complemented with online interviews via *Skype*, an online communication software (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). All interviews provided important insights and a good understanding of the interviewees' views on ownership, why they were all considered valuable for our purpose and thus included in the analysis. Since body language and social interactions are an important part of a person's communication (Bryman and Bell 2011), we used video calls for all *Skype* interviews. Deakin and Wakefield (2014: 607) argue that “the only differentiation between *Skype* interviewees and face-to-face interviewees [is] geographical proximity”. Moreover, online interviews enabled us to access interviewees from different services, avoiding a limitation of our scope to Malmö and its surroundings. They were invaluable for reaching a saturation of insights and hence a restriction to face-to-face interviews only, would have diminished the research quality. However, we are aware that the medium of *Skype* limits the ability to create a personal and intimate atmosphere, as well as to create a sense of confidentiality. This was compensated for as much as feasible, by for instance small talk and personal introductions. Furthermore, we believe that participating in our interviews via *Skype* from the safe place of home, contributed with creating a relaxed setting for the interviewees. Such a setting is important to prevent the interviewees from fearing a ‘loss-of-face situation’ (McCracken 1988) and thus increased the chances that the interviewees revealed their inner thoughts. The in-person interviews were conducted in Lund (1) and Malmö (3) and the interviewees were offered to select the location, in order to have a setting where they feel comfortable (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012). The interviews were on average 50 minutes long.

The interviewees belong to the Millennial generation, thereby representing the main user group of collaborative consumption (Owyang et al. 2014). All of them further have a higher educational background. The majority of the interviewees (7) were chosen because of their active use of clothing libraries in Sweden, and some of them were also involved in the organising of the libraries. In addition, four of these interviewees engaged in clothes swapping. The remaining interviewees (3) were chosen because of their active use of clothes swapping services, either in Sweden or in the Netherlands. One of them was Ryan, a user as well as founder of a clothes swapping service in the Netherlands. The eleventh interviewee, Luca, had used several

collaborative consumption services such as car sharing and *Streetbank*, a service for sharing and accessing all kinds of goods and services such as tools or lawn mowing with neighbours (Bearne 2015). Even though Luca had not used any services relating to sharing and swapping clothes, he provided us with very interesting insights into collaborative consumption and the world of the sharing economy in general. Furthermore, the interview with Luca touched upon the topic of clothes sharing, why we see this interview as a valuable contribution to our research and include it in the analysis.

Before the interviews were conducted, an interview guide was formulated and we had a test run with people from our personal network. This was done in order to practice and improve our interview skills, so that we were able to create a good atmosphere during the interviews. In addition we wanted to prove the flow of the questions and the comprehensibility of the topics as well as our used language. Lavery (2003: 19) argues that in order to collect good data “safety and trust [...] needs to be established at the outset and maintained throughout the project”. An appropriate use of language is a key issue during an interview, in order to guarantee that the interviewee understands all the questions and is not confused by “too many theoretical concepts” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012: 138). Therefore we tried to use everyday-language and to explain potential concepts that were brought up during the interview.

Furthermore, we started every interview with an introduction of ourselves and signalled a relaxed conversation rather than a strict interview in order to create a friendly and trustworthy atmosphere. Moreover, ethical concerns such as confidentiality and anonymity emerge when conducting interviews and should be ensured (Bryman and Bell 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012). McCracken (1988: 27) argues that “when the interview is relatively anonymous, the respondent is blessed with the opportunity for candor”. Therefore we used Thompson, Locander and Pollio’s (1989) recommendations of sharing the purpose of the study, asking for consent to record the interview, and informing the interviewees that their anonymity will be ensured.

As suggested by McCracken (1988), we opened the interviews with some biographical and easy to answer-questions, so that safety was created and the risk for interviewees fearing face-loss was reduced. Following these initial questions did the so-called ‘grand-tour’ questions, covering the major topics relevant for our research (ibid.). They were phrased to call for descriptive answers (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989) of lived experiences and formulated

to cover the main areas of ownership, possessions and sharing. Follow-up questions were asked using the language and words of the interviewees, as the aim was not to steer them in a desired direction nor confirm theoretical hypotheses (ibid.). Moreover, we tried to avoid simple ‘why’ questions, because they are usually “ineffective for generating descriptions of lived experiences” (ibid.: 138) and thus would not contribute to our research purpose. After having discussed how the interviews had been designed and conducted, we will explain the analysis process of the collected data in the next chapter.

### 3.7. Analysis of the Interviews

The interviews were transcribed immediately after being conducted. We were hence able to remember and include our impressions of nonverbal communication, such as body language and face expressions, of every interviewee. Such observations were bracketed in the transcripts. The aim of transcribing interviews is to bring them “into a format which tells a story in a way that is fully convincing to others” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012: 162). All the interviews were conducted in English and the interviewees had overall very advanced English skills. The language is therefore not seen as a limitation for the collected data. In total the transcripts of the 11 conducted interviews resulted in 83 pages of empirical data.

Since we apply the phenomenology approach, the analysis of the gathered data is built on the concept of ‘hermeneutic circles’. In this process every transcript is analysed for itself and the subparts of a transcript are related to other parts (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). In a second step “separate interviews are related to each other and common patterns identified” (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989: 141). In other words, the analysis of the data is a process of moving back and forth between the various parts and the whole of the collected material. By “relating the parts to the whole” (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989: 141) when interpreting, we aimed at finding patterns of commonalities, referred to in hermeneutics as ‘global themes’ (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989). These themes work as ‘thematic descriptions’ of consumers’ experiences (ibid.). To fully represent the world-views and experiences of our interviewees, our interpretation of the data and the themes “rel[y] on the respondent's own terms and category systems rather than the researcher's” (ibid.: 140). This contributes with a better understanding and more accurate analysis of the phenomenon of ownership within the context of new consumption forms, emphasising the consumer perspective. However, the three areas of

ownership, possessions and collaborative consumption supported our coding of the data, working as overarching categories. We looked upon the dimensions of ownership and sharing in every transcript and first interpreted the data from the specific context of every interviewee. In a second step these dimensions were then looked upon from the overall context of the interviewees' gathered experiences.

### 3.8. Assessing Quality

We acknowledge that this study, like all research, carries certain assumptions. These mainly concern our approach to epistemology and ontology (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012; Gray 2014), and thus our view on knowledge, our focus on the individual perspective and our take of interpretivism. These approaches are expected to influence the study interpretations, and as a consequence the end-result. Furthermore, whereas validity and reliability are used to assess the quality of quantitative research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson 2012), it has been debated whether these quality measures are suitable for qualitative studies (Bryman and Bell 2011). We are aware that our qualitative research does not represent an objective truth, but the findings will be largely dependent on their context. Rather than using validity and reliability, we will therefore assess the research quality using four criteria that Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue are better suited for measuring qualitative research. These are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (ibid.). A way of achieving credibility is to share the research findings with the interviewees, and have them confirm the accuracy of our interpretations (ibid.). This will however not be feasible for our research due to time constraints. Nevertheless, our aim will be to have the interviewees verifying that we understand them accurately throughout the interviews. To improve the transferability of our findings, we provided detailed information about the services that we study, in order to give other researchers an idea of whether our findings could be applied to other contexts (ibid.). Moreover, as recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1994), we documented the research process thoroughly to achieve dependability. Lastly, we strive for confirmability by constantly questioning our own and each-others' objectivity and thereby avoid biased findings (ibid.). All in all we are aware of the limitations of qualitative research and thus consider transparency as very important. Therefore we tried to be as transparent as possible and documented the whole process of data collection.



## 4. Analysis

In this chapter we present the insights that were drawn from the empirical data, collected through 11 semi-structured interviews. Applying the approach of hermeneutic circles (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989), the interviews were first thoroughly processed and analysed separately. The material was thereafter treated as a whole, and five common patterns, global themes (ibid.), were identified. These five themes will be developed below and a profound analysis will be given. Previous research in the field of CCT and the theoretical frameworks of ownership and possessions, liquid modernity and collaborative consumption, enabled us to explore our research phenomenon and to analyse the themes from a consumer culture perspective.

### 4.1. Ownership is still a preferred Consumption Form for some Objects

The first prominent pattern found in the collected material concerns the importance of ownership on the individual level of the consumer. When interviewees describe ownership, they portray the consumer-object relationship in a positive way, associating it with freedom, rights and security. Hannah explains that *"[Ownership] would be the possibility of what I really like to do with the item -whatever it is...So for example I'm free to give it away, or I'm free to change it"*. Martina is another interviewee expressing freedom, as well as control: *"the main part is that I want to be able to use it [...] whenever I want"*. Belk (1988) identified control as a key factor in ownership, strengthening the identification with objects. A sense of control and superior rights is further expressed by Franziska: *"it means that I have more right than someone else to take a possession and hold it"*. Furthermore, when Felicia explains what ownership means to her, she refers to the ideas of objects showing signs of usage and thus becoming a part of her. Ownership for her is when:

*"[it] really feels like it's mine. Like if I get a new camera for instance, I don't really like it to be completely shiny and new because then it doesn't really feel like mine. When a trace of me is left on it, when I go through something with that item in life and I can remember it. I can look at it and have a memory. Yeah, the attachment it has in my life". – Felicia*

She describes a relationship to ownership that Belk (1988) refers to as 'the extended self', where possessions are an important part of a person's identity. In addition, her statement is evidently supporting Belk's (1988) view of possessions as anchors for identity and reminders of our past.

Moreover, Susanna thinks that ownership provides people with a feeling of safety. She explains that this is due to the fact that owning things may result in a more secure, and thus easier, future where possessions are guaranteed. Lastly, Alex describes ownership as something you achieve:

*"when you buy it it's your own, this is mine- so I don't have to share it with anybody or, I mean I could share, but it feels like you work, you save money and you deserve it."* - Alex

He expresses an idea of control as well as freedom, which he is rewarded with after having bought something. All in all, when defining what ownership is on an individual level, the concept carries positive associations for our interviewees.

Interviewees admit that there are things they prefer owning over sharing. Four object categories were identified for which ownership was particularly valued. These categories are intimate possessions, frequently used possessions, possessions with emotional attachments, and the home. Firstly, our interviewees prefer to own intimate possessions where hygiene is an issue. Common examples are a toothbrush and underwear, but also for instance cutting boards and plates. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012: 888) discuss the impact of 'contagion' on the consumer-object relationship, which is the "disgust that consumers feel when they are aware that an object has been physically touched by someone else". In our study, we can see that contagion makes consumers choose ownership over other consumption forms when objects are intimately linked with hygiene matters. Secondly, our interviewees feel that it's more practical to own objects that are used often, for instance a TV, or objects that they are dependent on, such as a phone for communication or a laptop. Luca says that we can own things we use daily, but should "*share stuff which [we] use occasionally, like a driller or ladder – these things which you only need once in a while*". The emphasis seems to lie on the word 'underutilised' in Botsman's (2013) definition of the sharing economy, as our interviewees want for society to use resources more efficiently. When there is maximised utility however, as in the case of objects that are used regularly, ownership is preferred. In addition, it is more convenient to have a permanent access to frequently used things. The third category has to do with objects that entail emotional attachment, which is why interviewees prefer not to share them with others. This relates to the concept of the extended self (Belk 1988), where possessions are seen as carrying memories or for other reasons being important for identity.

*"I think it depends on the relationship you have with the clothes. I don't think I would ever lend my traditional costume, because I really love that one."* -Martina

Even Ryan, who has used various sharing services and who states that he has a sharing mind-set, admits that there are possessions he would never let go of: *“I do have this one jacket, I would never give away”*. Furthermore, Felicia highlights the memories that some possessions carry and explains that there are things she would not swap: *“that’s because the stories are...I’m too attached to them”*. This illustrates that possessions work as anchors for identity (Belk 1988) also for someone who is engaging in collaborative consumption. Lastly, the home itself was given its own category, as it stood out as something for which ownership was either highly desirable or where reluctance to sharing was expressed:

*“[O]wnership doesn’t mean much to me. But I do admit that there is almost always these one or two items, which are a dream of yours, where you really want to have that and I have that as well, of course. So I for example wish, that I could live on a houseboat one day”* - Ryan

*“I would say that it’s hard for me to grasp the concept of for example not having my own home. I really like having my own room in the world, where I can go.”* – Franziska

In their study of young adults’ aspiration for homeownership in Australia, Colic-Peisker and Johnson (2012: 740) argue that the found strive for ownership is culturally explained, referring to the “great Australian dream”. Similar thoughts can be identified in our study, as Alex and Franziska describe homeownership in their respective cultures:

*“I think- but it also depends on the culture! [...] in Turkey [...] there are things, which are very important- for example a house is very important to own”* – Alex

*“[Y]ou read about different cultures, for example the antique...greek or roman cultures where they had a lot of public spaces that were for everyone, which is very different to what we have. We have a lot of private places that we just have for ourselves”* – Franziska

All in all, we confirm previous research stating that ownership implicates control (Belk 1988) and also show that ownership is associated with freedom and security. Furthermore, ownership is shown to be a preferred consumption form for certain possessions. There are object categories where such matters as hygiene and emotional attachment are more important for the owner than the flexibility offered by alternative consumption forms. This finding illustrates that although the literature has looked upon possessions as constraints in liquid modernity (Binkley 2008), consumers do strive for ownership for some objects. We add new theory on ownership and possessions by presenting four categories, namely intimate possessions, frequently used

possessions, possessions with emotional attachments, and lastly the home, for which ownership is highly striven for even by consumers engaging in collaborative consumption.

### 4.2. Society needs new, sustainable Consumption Forms

#### Collaboration is a greener way to consume

Interviewees seem to agree that ownership is a strong norm in consumer culture, but they believe it is no longer a feasible ideal to strive for. The primary reason is the negative environmental impact of ownership; mass consumption is not considered sustainable. Ownership thereby stands in contrast to their care for the environment and interest for reducing waste. Susanna says: *“the constant production of new things can collapse the whole thing”*. Collaborative consumption is thought of as a solution to get around the problem of limited resources and a way to consume with a *“green mind”* (Susanna). Julienne argues that the Millennials make a suitable target group for collaborative consumption because: *“it is like a generation coming - that cares more about the nature”*. Furthermore, Martina is convinced that sharing has to replace ownership as the earth becomes overpopulated: *“everyone can’t own everything- because then there would be nothing left. We have to share to be able to live as many as we are on this planet”*. Interviewees argue that collaborative consumption is a good alternative to ownership, and describe it as an opportunity to access and use the things they desire. They claim that that they hoard clothes but only use or need a small percentage of them. At the same time they express a dislike for having plenty of underutilised clothes at home, as it contravenes the idea of maximising object-utility (Botsman and Rogers 2011) and feels wasteful.

According to theory on liquid modernity, consumers constantly strive for new things (Bauman 2000), and this desire is found among our interviewees. They talk positively about the ‘newness’ of borrowed and swapped clothes. Newness in this context has nothing to do with the item being recently produced, but instead being new to the users. Borrowing and swapping clothes is compared with the feeling of buying something new. Collaborative consumption thus offers a *“good compromise”* (Julienne) where consumers can acquire the things they want and need, but making smaller environmental footprints. Julienne explains: *“you can have or use all the cool things, but still do it in a sustainable way”*. Martina emphasises that what really matters is having the selection, it is of less importance whether the objects were attained through a purchase or if they were swapped or borrowed. This finding is thus in accordance with

Nissanoff's (2007: 109) notion of "[to] have, but not to hold" as the new way of relating to possessions in consumer culture. It further confirms Roger and Botsman's (2011) claim that what matters today is not so much the objects, as the experiences they bring. Consumers value the opportunity to access and use things without having to own them.

### **Resisting a societal Pressure to 'own more'**

In agreement with the above mentioned environmentalist attitude, our interviewees share an aversion to mass production and fast fashion. In addition, they express a concern for what they perceive as an external pressure to consume. Sofia explains that collaborative consumption is growing because:

*"people can feel like this stress we have generally in the society. All the things you have to do to be someone and also the things you have to own and they feel the consequences and just want to take a step back".- Sofia*

She is supported by Susanna, arguing that *"[i]t's like society pushes you to own more- and you feel socially more accepted when you own more stuff and you think you then have more friends"*. Along this line, Julienne further emphasises the pushing role of commercial interests and advertising in shaping a need for ownership: *"all these commercials, which still try to push everybody to consume and that everybody needs to have this and that"*. They feel a pressure from society to own and to consume more, in other words the driver of mass consumption and capitalism (Botsman and Rogers 2011). Julienne admits that she sometimes feels guilty towards buying too much and argues that *"some things are just waste for the environment or money"*. In addition, Susanna does not see the purpose of accumulating possessions:

*"I'm pretty sick and tired of all the consumption... yeah you know, that we're just buying like machines [...]and I really, like the idea that you can share instead of owning. Cause it's like, you just pile up a lot of stuff! And then...why?"- Susanna*

In accordance with the critical attitude towards mass consumption, Franziska states that: *"we have to rethink our living standards and how we produce stuff and how we consume stuff"* and she thinks it is problematic that in today's society *"people are seen as customers more than citizens"*. Franziska points to the advantages of collaborative consumption when stating that *"I really like the concept of not buying everything new. Especially stuff that is existing in plenty somewhere else"*. Thus, our study shows that collaborative consumption can be a way to consume things without supporting the capitalist ideal of mass consumption. Moreover, Botsman and

Rogers (2011: 71) argue that people participating in collaborative consumption still “believe in the principles of capitalist markets and self interest”. However, the strongly negative attitudes towards mass consumption that are identified in our study, contradict this view by showing that people actively oppose the capitalistic system and mass consumption.

In conclusion, even though ownership is described to entail freedom and control towards singular possessions for the individual, it is evident that when ownership is seen in a wider perspective, it conflicts with the environmental concerns of our interviewees. They see the need for a change in attitudes towards ownership in society, since they are profoundly critical towards the damage mass consumption is making to the planet. They therefore think it is necessary for people to start owning less and sharing more and see collaborative consumption as a good compromise, since it allows them to consume and at the same time meet their ideals of a sustainable living. Having access to a selection of clothes becomes more important than the ownership itself. Although collaborative consumption is often presented as a sustainable practice (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), previous research has not been able to identify political consumerism, such as environmental concerns, as motivational factors for participating (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Möhlmann 2015). Our study thereby adds new theory on motivational factors for engaging in collaborative consumption within the clothing industry, since our interviewees are highly motivated by political consumerism.

### **4.3. Identifying with Collaborative Consumption Services and shared Objects**

#### **Differentiating with shared Clothes**

Interviewees express a disinterest for ‘fast fashion’ and for keeping up with trends, instead seeking originality. Simmel (1957 [1904] in Corrigan 1997) explains society as a result of tensions between social equalization and the need for individual differentiation. The author differentiates between two types of individuals, the imitator and the teleological individual, where the latter “is ever experimenting, always restlessly striving, and [reliant] on his own personal convictions” (1957 [1904]: 543 in Corrigan 1997: 170). Our interviewees are thus examples of the teleological individual, striving for individual differentiation. They value high quality and uniqueness of clothes that enable them to express their own styles and differentiate from others. Felicia states that she is more proud of her swapped clothes than she would be of mass-produced clothes, referring to the originality of the swapped pieces:

*"Much prouder than saying I got this from H&M or Zara [...] because it's more original. It's different. You know, you can talk about your clothing, you can have a conversation about your clothing [laughs]. You don't do that often, like 'oh I got this from H&M' end of story."* - Felicia

There is in other words uniqueness to the clothes that she swaps, which she is proud of and happy to show and talk about with others. On the same topic, Alex expresses distaste for unoriginal mass brands and the lack of uniqueness with mass-produced clothes. He says: *"Everybody wants to be original, but everybody has the same H&M scarf- that doesn't make sense for me!"*. Interviewees argue that the fact that clothes have been used by other people and already have their own story makes them special and adds value, compared to clothing items from a store.

Interviewees describe how they like to dress up and appreciate when people notice their new items. Clothes are said to "indicat[e] the personal characteristics of its carrier" (Corrigan 1997: 161) and interviewees use clothes to express themselves and communicate something to their environment.

*"I don't keep up with any style tips or the latest trends or nothing like that. I just sort of wear what I feel. During the day, if I feel a certain way then I'll wear something more revealing, if I'm feeling a little bit more sexy that day you know. Or happy or sad, you know, I think that can really show in what you wear."* - Felicia

Interviewees declare that the swapped and borrowed clothes signal their values, confirming theory on the symbolic value of possessions (Belk 1988). Their swapped and borrowed clothes become symbols of an actively chosen stance against mass consumption, and are in line with their personal convictions. Furthermore, a general preference for vintage clothes is noted, and wearing second hand items is thought to signal environmental awareness. Hannah says: *"I [...] think that people who wear second hand- that kind of also shows something. Ehm, that the people are conscious about the environment or consumerism"*. Bourdieu (1984 in Corrigan 1997) argues that there are two forms of capital enabling consumers to socially distinguish themselves from others: economical and cultural. Whereas the former is about expressing wealth, the latter is based on the superiority of the educated consumer. Cultural capital is a way for consumers to distinguish themselves by showing their knowledge through consumption choices (Bourdieu 1984 in Corrigan 1997). Applying this theory on our findings, unique second hand clothing enables our interviewees to distinguish themselves through consumption with cultural capital, from people who conform to mass consumption.

### Identifying with shared Clothes

Previous research has shown that consumers do not identify with objects in access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). However, our study of clothing libraries showed that consumers get attached to borrowed clothes, as well as with swapped clothes. Furthermore, users of clothing libraries express a desire to keep some favourite items permanently. Martina describes that she was sad to have to return a sweater she had become attached to:

*"I remember my favourite item, that might have been the first actually- it was a grey kind of long sweater, ehm, it was really comfortable and fitted me really well and had pockets and everything. So I really wanted that one, but I couldn't buy it so I had to give it back"*  
– Martina

Franziska clearly identified with one pair of trousers that she liked and called them 'hers', even though the access was limited: *"I was sort of like "Oh my pants aren't in here today [sounding disappointed], but I'll get them next time"*. Furthermore, relating to the idea of possessions constructing identity by reminding us of our past (Belk 1988), Alex describes a memory with the favourite item he has ever borrowed, a beige leather jacket:

*"[W]hat is interesting is to see yourself for example with this jacket on a picture- that you can never have it again. It's like you see yourself in a picture, when you were a child and you remember- oh that was me when I was a child. [...] and for example you don't remember all your clothes- but you can remember that jacket like 'ah yes, this jacket I've bought in that time'."* – Alex

The jacket serves as a marker of time, and it does so by simply being captured on a picture and existing in Alex's memory. It seems as if the jacket, without being physically present, can contribute to constructing identity this way. This is the case even though the jacket is borrowed and not owned. In contrast to Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) study, we found that the temporality of borrowed and swapped clothes does not prevent consumers from identifying with the clothing items. In the case of swapping, Felicia explains that a piece of clothing is *"yours when you make it yours I guess. If you wear it and feel comfortable in it"*. For her it is the usage that matters, rather than time frame. Furthermore, Erica explains that shared clothes tell us as much about someone's identity as owned clothes, since the emphasis is on the choice of items, not on how they were attained: *"You would still share the type of things that you like. So then I guess it's pretty much the same"*.

Belk (1988) states that control is a crucial factor for incorporating possessions into the extended self. All the same, the interviewees demonstrate that even though they value the control



that ownership offers, a lack of control does not prevent them from identifying with objects. Furthermore, whereas the users of access-based consumption in Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) study showed carelessness towards accessed objects (ibid.) explained by a lack of identification, our interviewees describe a completely different situation. They tend to treat borrowed clothes equally attentive or even better than their own. Hannah explains that the clothes are not always clean, but instead of letting this fact prevent her from treating the clothes well, she does the opposite:

*"I would say that I treat the borrowed clothes a little bit differently and care more about them. But actually it's kind of the same thing. In Klädbiblioteket they don't have like a really strict guideline- but I feel, I want to wash them, before I give them back, because I also would like to borrow fresh clothes."* – Hannah

Thus, an important finding is that consumers treat temporary possessions well and are able to identify with them, sometimes to the extent that they wish they could keep the clothes permanently.

### Identifying with the Collaborative Consumption Service

Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) research on access-based consumption did not find any sense of community feeling among the users of car sharing. Consumers did not identify with the service provider, but merely with the act of accessing (ibid.). On the contrary, we found that consumers identify with the collaborative consumption services in the clothing industry, due to their values. It is evident that our interviewees are proud to use clothing libraries and clothes swapping services. Three of them chose to wear clothes that they had gotten from these services for our interviews, and were more than proud to show them to us and talk about them. In addition, Susanna argues that shared clothes *"can say something about the community, where they come from"*, which relates to Belk's (1988) notion of possessions as constructors of group identity. Erica further emphasises that what identifies you are *"the people you hang around [with]. The community that you get involved in"*. The groups we belong to are important parts of our identity, as we *"define ourselves through group identity at various levels"* (Belk 1988: 152). Interviewees were either introduced to clothes swapping services or clothing libraries by friends, have become friends with the organisers, or are even volunteering to work there themselves. Hannah mentions that for her *"it's like a community"* and an identified pattern is that it is not unusual for interviewees to just *"hang out"* (Hannah) at the services, socializing and seeing

friends, and sometimes even without borrowing or swapping any clothes. Erica acknowledges that “[she] actually see[s] the clothing library as [her] own wardrobe” and other interviewees also perceive the clothing libraries or swap shops as their ‘own closet’ or a ‘community closet’. Susanna supports the perception of a personal atmosphere by claiming that “it’s more local and there is the possibility to share things with people that are not far away from you”. Moreover, Franziska says that the visitors of the clothing library she volunteered at were her age and “kind of a homogenous area of people”. The interviewees describe the users of clothing libraries and swapping services as a certain group of consumers who are very similar to them. Frankie mentions that she “meet[s] some really cool people, like-minded people”. In other words, the local, personal feeling of the services and the like-minded users help to create a feeling of community which interviewees identify with.

In conclusion, we find that interviewees perceive the collaborative consumption services as communities, and identify with them as they represent their ideals. We thereby provide new insights to theory on collaborative consumption. In addition, they use borrowed and swapped clothes to differentiate themselves from the mass, signalling their values of environmentalism and sustainability. The clothes are seen as unique and as carrying stories, which makes interviewees proud to use them. Thus, in contrast to previous research on access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), our study shows that interviewees identify with borrowed and swapped clothes, sometimes to the extent that they would prefer owning them. These are new and important findings on the consumer-object relationship in collaborative consumption, which we add to existing theory on ownership and possessions.

#### **4.4. Affordable Access with Possibilities of Experimentation and Change**

##### **Financial Incentives for collaborating**

Apart from environmental concerns, interviewees mention economical restrictions as something that prevents them from regularly buying new things. Susanna for example, reasons that collaborative consumption is more common among young people, as students have a bigger need to share things compared to older people who have more money. Except for Luca, our interviewees are either students or recently employed. Möhlmann (2015: 8) argues that “[u]sers pay attention to the fact that collaborative consumption helps them save money and that respective service is characterized by a high utility, in a way that it well substitutes a non-sharing

option.”. In agreement with her statement, our data shows that money is an important incentive for choosing collaborative consumption instead of ownership. The low or non-existent costs of the clothing libraries and clothes swaps are mentioned throughout the interviews as a large benefit, and an important reason for using the services. Alex argues that “[m]oney is also an important factor, because you don’t have to buy all the clothes, but still have them at home and can just change, whenever you want”. He expresses an appreciation for flexibility and change, something that characterises consumers living in liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and which he is offered as a result of the low costs of collaborative consumption. On the same topic, Susanna states:

*“[W]ith clothes I have the impression that after a while you are bored and want to move on. So I understand that people want to have a diversity of items, because it’s good to change. I suppose like for a period of time you are attached, but then after a while you change”.*- Susanna

The quotes above signal an ease to let go of old possessions and a need for change. According to previous theory on possessions and identity, consumers are willing to voluntarily give up possessions that contradict their self-image (Belk 1988). This can further be put in the context of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and a liquid relationship to possessions (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012). Clothing libraries and clothes swapping seem to fill consumers’ need for change, as they offer access to a large amount of options, perfectly fitted for liquid identity projects (Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012). Collaborative consumption allows the interviewees to make temporary decisions rather than definite decisions as in the case of purchasing clothes. This flexibility is comparable to previous theory on collaborative consumption and to Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2012) study findings, where the ‘freedom of lifestyle’ played an important role for car sharing users. Having access to different car models allowed users to adapt the choice of cars to their current needs and to experiment with various models. The authors therefore describe it as a ‘flexible lifestyle accessory’ (ibid.). The same appreciation of liberty and flexibility can be found among our interviewees in the case of clothes. In sum, even though the interviewees have economical restrictions they want to have new things. Collaborative consumption thus enables them to be flexible and adapt to their needs.

### **It is the Selection that matters, not the Ownership**

Participating in collaborative consumption give interviewees access to a wide range of clothes either for free or for a cost that is independent of how frequently and how many items are borrowed or swapped during a certain period. This is compared to shopping, where interviewees would not afford the same selection or would not want to own it all (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). They state that having access to such a - in relation to the low costs - large selection of clothes is a great advantage of collaborative consumption. Ryan argues that if you “*want to remix your style and want to bring fashion into your closet you're restricted by lack of opportunities, you know, or lack of money*”. Borrowing or swapping allows them to bridge this gap and Erica admits “*it's nice to have some variation in your closet, without having to put out too much money*”. Martina further explains that “*you don't really need that many clothes in your wardrobe and you only want to have the selection*”. They can hence fulfil their wish to have a large number of options, despite financial constraints.

Having access to clothes instead of owning them is especially beneficial when a clothing item is needed only once or a few times. Our interviewees mention that they often go to the clothing library or swap shops when they know there is a special occasion, such as a ball or a theme party where they want to wear something appropriate. Knowing that they will only use the clothing item a few times makes the purchasing of these outfits and their consequential ownership even more redundant for the interviewees than for daily wear clothes. This is in consonance with Botsman and Rogers' (2011: 72) stated advantages of the ‘Product Service System’, where especially the utility of products with an “often limited usage is replaced with a shared service that maximises its utility” as in the case of clothing libraries. It is further in accordance with the ‘Redistribution Market’ of swapping, where objects are reused and thus the utility is maximised (Botsman and Rogers 2011). However, besides borrowing and swapping clothes for special occasions, interviewees use the services for daily wear<sup>2</sup> as well, showing that these services are used differently from traditional rental shops for evening dresses or costumes. Due to offering both daily wear and clothes for special occasions, these services consequently replace the necessity to buy and own clothes.

One pattern among our interviewees is that having access to such a wide range of clothes allows them to experiment with their styles and try new things. The fact that they will not have to

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<sup>2</sup> except for underwear.

spend extra money for trying something unfamiliar, results in a lower transaction cost (Möhlmann 2015) and a lower hurdle to venture a new style. This is supported by Erica's statement that "*without spending a lot of money on it- you can explore your fashion sense*". After having picked an item they can simply just give it back or swap it again, without loss. Hence, they become braver to try new styles and experiment more. This goes in line with the above-mentioned 'freedom of lifestyle', where the possibility of trying a new car or using one according to current needs and mood, was valued by the car sharing users (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). In the same way the majority of our interviewees named this freedom as a nice side-benefit of having access to such a large quantity of clothes, as can be seen in the statement below.

*"I got a little bit more brave. Like in a clothing store it's like 'ah is this really gonna fit, am I gonna pay so much money for it" and in the clothing library it was like 'Hm, I'll try this one'." - Franziska*

All in all it can be said that the generally lower cost for participating in collaborative consumption compared to ownership is a main driver for our interviewees to engage in borrowing and swapping clothes. This finding is supported by Belk (2014b) who argues for the economic sense of participating in sharing from a consumer perspective. It is further in agreement with both Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) and Möhlmann's (2015) studies, which found economic concerns as one reason to participate in collaborative consumption. Our findings are thus a continuation of previous research on collaborative consumption, supporting that costs are a major determinant factor for participation. We add to theory on collaborative consumption by confirming that this is the case also for clothing libraries and clothes swapping.

### **4.5. Sharing is Happiness**

Our interviewees' experiences of collaborative consumption is so far most commonly restricted to the area of clothes, cars and accommodation, but they express a general wish to share more things in the future. Julianne says that when you start engaging in collaborative consumption, you think about ownership "*in a different way*". This supports Botsman and Roger's (2011) view that once consumers start participating in one collaborative consumption practice, their mind-sets change and they become more open towards other forms of collaboration and sharing and towards 'collective solutions'. Botsman and Rogers (2011: 217) state that "the acts of collaboration and giving become an end in themselves". Thus, the concept of happiness in

consumer culture is changing, moving from the idea of accumulating possessions to collaborating with others to achieve individual goals.

The interviewees all have strongly positive attitudes towards sharing. Although they sometimes find it hard to return clothes that they are very fond of, they welcome and appreciate the fact that another person gets the opportunity to use the same items. The act of sharing is in other words associated with pleasant feelings. In this context Ryan explains that for him authentic sharing is based on happiness, which he wants to be the foundation of his swap shop. He condemns businesses that are only riding on the sharing trend to make money. He states that:

*“the underlying assumption is that, [...] you don’t give something, because you want something back. You give something, because you’re bored of it, because you don’t need these clothes anymore. And you - it would make you happy to see that another person wears it. And if every person has this underlying assumption and this subconscious mind of ‘Hey- I give this clothing item, because I want to make someone happy’ then automatically these things circle.”* -Ryan

The interviewees enjoy the fact that they are sharing something with others and even argue that it is one of the main advantages of collaborating. In addition Hannah states that:

*“actually that is kind of the charm of the thing. You get to use it for a little period of time and then somebody else gets this possibility.”*- Hannah

The idea that something that is no longer attractive to the interviewees might make another person happy, delighted them. Hannah says: *“I kind of like the idea that somebody else will have better use of them, than I have”*. They appreciate that someone else gets the opportunity to use and enjoy the items. When comparing ownership and collaborative consumption, the latter thus offers something unique: the happiness obtained from the act of sharing. In contrast to Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) who explicitly exclude ‘caring’ and ‘love’ as important factors for engaging in collaborative consumption, we find that consumers see sharing in itself as the charm of collaborative consumption. Furthermore, collaborative consumption is a joyful experience in itself, a way to socialise and share things and ideas with both friends and strangers. Martina describes how sharing among other things can give new spark to old friendships:

*“I also think that people see the beauty of sharing, because in the sharing process you also meet people. That’s like, if I want to have a piece of clothes I borrow it maybe from a friend and then we realise ‘Oh we have the same taste in trousers and we have the same size- that’s nice and we have something new to talk about!’ or you put up something on Facebook and say ‘Oh I would like to use a drilling machine’ and you meet a person that has a drilling machine and maybe you haven’t talked to the person so much before and*

*then when you are borrowing from that person- than you talk. So, yes, it's a really nice way of meeting people.” - Martina*

Moreover, Ryan believes that the Millennials have a different mind-set than their parents. He argues that Millennials strive for happiness rather than material things, which explains their attitudes towards sharing.

*“For the generation of my parents it was all about consumption, so all the people always had their car, their fridge, their TV, yes - like all these things. So you didn't have the need to really connect to other people, to share items and all that stuff [...] And if I look at our generation [...] they prefer happiness over ownership.” – Ryan*

Thus, Ryan does not believe that ownership is related to happiness. He continues:

*“I think I'm really a representative of this new mind-set of 'ownership doesn't mean so much to me'. I have - I give you an example - I don't have any affiliation to cars, houses, new clothing items, and very rarely anything where I say - this is mine and I don't wanna give this away.” - Ryan*

The same regards Luca, who for a long time thought that material things made him happy, but came to realise that they actually do not. This is an example of the ‘hedonic treadmill’, a misunderstanding that economical wealth generates happiness, which results in a continuous seek for more things (Botsman and Rogers 2011). Botsman and Rogers (2011: 17) argue that “people work hard to acquire more stuff but feel unfulfilled because there is always something better, bigger and faster”. Luca explains that “*I rather go for experiences [...], rather travel the world instead than having a better car. I don't need it, it's just a car. And it won't make you happy at all*”. Experiences are what matters to him, which goes in line with Pine and Gilmore's (1999 in Belk 2007) opinion that the economy of today could be described as an ‘experience economy’, in which experiences are higher valued than possessions.

In sum, the interviewees show a willingness to increase their activities within collaborative consumption and collaboration is perceived as a joyful experience. Moreover, a common theme throughout the interviews is the notion that possessions and material things are not crucial for happiness. We show that giving others the possibility to enjoy things, the act of sharing, brings happiness and thus prove Botsman and Roger's (2011) notion. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) found users of car sharing to be primarily driven by self-interest. We present a new finding in the particular context of clothes, as we show that caring is one important motivational factor for sharing.

## 5. Discussion

Our research adds to CCT by exploring whether ownership has become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture. CCT examines the relationship between “consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings” (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 868), which we address through looking at the consumer perspective on ownership in the context of new consumption forms. More specifically, we investigate how Millennials negotiate issues of ownership and sharing in collaborative consumption and thereby add unique theoretical findings on the cultural meanings of ownership in liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). We further add insights to the research on new consumption forms. In order to contrast our findings to previous research, we base our discussion on existing theory on ownership and possessions, as well as theory on collaborative consumption.

Scholars within CCT have acknowledged a declining importance of ownership (Belk 2014a; Belk 2014b; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012). New alternatives are on the rise and collaboration is becoming increasingly common, challenging ownership’s previously strong role in consumer culture (Botsman and Rogers 2011; Belk 2014b; Belk 2014a). Does this mean that ownership has become an out-dated ideal? Our research showed that for consumers actively engaging in collaborative consumption, ownership carries positive associations. These concern the consumer-object relationship, such as control and freedom in relation to possessions. We further discovered that ownership is highly valued for some objects and presented four categories for which ownership is highly preferred. Possessions thus continue to work as identity constructors in consumer culture, by enabling an extension of the individual self. Ownership is still striven for to some extent, even in times of collaborative consumption.

Nevertheless, consumers are evidently willing to give up ownership of a diverse range of objects, instead participating in collaborative consumption practices. Our study contributes with an understanding of why consumers, despite their apparent positive view on ownership on the individual level, choose other alternatives and thus how they negotiate issues of ownership and sharing. Just like Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2012) and Möhlmann’s (2015) studies, which highlight the self-serving aspect of saving costs, we find cost savings to be one reason for engaging in collaborative consumption. Cost savings implicate an affordable access to a wide range of clothes and the possibility to experiment and to adapt the borrowing and swapping to the consumers’



current needs and desires. Liquid identity projects and flexibility are thus enabled, something which is striven for in our globalised world of constant change (Bauman 2000).

In addition to the financial motivator, we found that as a result of consumers' ideological and political convictions, they feel the need to change their behaviour towards owning less and sharing more. They thereby prevent waste and maximise the utility of resources. The emphasis on ideological and political convictions as contributing factors for engaging in collaborative consumption, highly contradicts Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) and Möhlmann's (2012) study findings. Their studies did not find any political consumerism and Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) emphasised cost reduction and convenience as primary drivers for users of car sharing. A possible explanation for the disparity between our and their findings could be that the cost factor is of a different dimension in car- and accommodation sharing than in clothes sharing. Cars and apartments are usually big investments and entail maintenance- and insurance costs. Whereas users of clothes sharing see cost reductions as a benefit and strong motivational factor, it is likely that costs are not the main driver since mass-produced clothes are inexpensive today to the extent that shopping has become a "cheap, endlessly available entertainment" (Bain 2015). Political consumerism on the other hand, is a new finding and crucial factor for consumers' negotiation of issues of ownership and sharing in the context of clothes.

Moreover, this study expands theory on ownership and possessions, by contributing with entirely new and important findings concerning the consumer-object relationship in access-based consumption. Previous research on possessions has shown that consumers are able to feel a psychological sense of ownership towards objects, without legally owning them (Peck and Shus 2009), and Belk (2010) suggests that shared objects can generate a shared sense of ownership. Nevertheless, in their study of possessions in collaborative consumption, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) were not able to find any consumer identification with the accessed cars, nor with the community. Our study highly contrasts these findings since we discovered that consumers can in fact get attached to, and identify with, accessed and swapped objects. In addition we illustrate that borrowed and temporarily owned objects can be as important carriers of symbolism as enduring possessions, signalling the political convictions of the user. We further show that temporary objects can be incorporated into the extended self, which changes the role and importance of ownership. Objects do not have to be owned in order to have a substantial effect on identity. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) explained the lack of identification in their study on primarily three dimensions: the access was market-mediated, anonymous, and temporary. This

prevented users from feeling obligations and moral responsibility towards the cars, the service provider and the other users (ibid.). The authors argue that findings are expected to differ depending on where a particular access practice is situated along these dimensions. Using them in our context, the clothing libraries and clothes swap shops differ from *Zipcar* on all three dimensions. First of all, *Zipcar* was determined as a clear B2C practice, whereas our investigated services are more similar to P2P services as they are largely non-profit driven and users sometimes work there voluntarily. Thus, the services in our study are less market-mediated. The second dimension is anonymity. As opposed to the users of *Zipcar*, the consumers in our study describe clothing libraries and swap shops to have highly personal atmospheres and the majority is acquainted with other users and/or organisers. Consumers refer to the services as communities and are proud to be part of them as they represent their ideals and anti-mass consumption values. The communities work as subcultures (Holt 2002), which we argue enables consumers to identify with them. Lastly, whereas possessions are temporary in our study, they are not as temporary as the shared cars in *Zipcar*. Rented and borrowed clothes can be kept for a few months and swapped clothes for as long as the consumer pleases, but the shared cars are accessed during a few hours at a time. Altogether, the variation on these dimensions result in new, different and important study findings. We show that consumers sometimes identify with borrowed clothes to the extent that they wish they could keep the clothes permanently. However, by focusing on the positive outcomes of collaboration, they seem to learn how to handle feelings of loss when returning and exchanging clothes. Thus, there is a continuous negotiation of on the one hand emotional attachment and loss, and on the other being part of the sharing community.

In conclusion, our research shows that consumers consider it a necessity to replace ownership with collaborative consumption as much as feasible, due to political convictions. When negotiating issues of ownership and sharing, we find that both consumption forms can offer the same possibility for identification with objects as well as identification with a consumption community (Holt 2002). However, consumers weigh the freedom, control, and security associated with ownership, against criticism towards mass consumption and negative environmental effects. We further find that collaborative consumption enables consumers to cut costs, to consume in accordance with their ideals and political convictions, and to share things and values with like-minded people. In addition, sharing further creates feelings of happiness. In other words, we show that there are many incentives for consumers to share possessions, which helps in explaining why collaboration is increasingly chosen over ownership. This study clearly

goes beyond Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) and Möhlmann's (2015) studies on collaborative consumption, and provides new insights into how consumers negotiate ownership and sharing.

When answering to whether ownership has become an out-dated ideal in consumer culture, we start by confirming previous research that the importance of ownership is decreasing (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012; Belk 2014a; Belk 2014b). We emphasise however, that it is only in the sense that consumers are willing to reduce the *quantity* of owned objects. They are satisfying with owning less due to political convictions, but they are not prepared to replace ownership entirely. We therefore argue that ownership is not an out-dated ideal in consumer culture, as it continues to be strongly preferred over other consumption forms for some possessions.

### 6. Conclusion

Our findings show that ownership continues to have a strong role in consumer culture. For certain possessions, it remains the “ultimate expression of consumer desire” (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012: 881). We present four categories for which ownership is highly aspired and argue that even for consumers engaging in collaborative consumption, ownership is associated with freedom, control and security. This confirms previous research on ownership and possessions (Belk 1988). Nevertheless, when ownership is looked upon in a larger societal context, it is associated with mass consumption and negative environmental impacts. Due to this, the Millennials see a need for new sustainable solutions. We thus identify political consumerism as a strong motivational factor in collaborative consumption and add to existing theory on collaborative consumption in the specific context of clothes. The Millennials express a willingness to own less, but they live in a world of liquid modernity, where constant change creates a desire for flexibility and new things (Bauman 2000). Collaborative consumption offers them access to the products they desire, while meeting their demand for sustainable consumption.

We add theory on ownership and possessions and more specifically on the consumer-object relationship in collaborative consumption, by showing that consumers identify with accessed possessions as well as with temporary owned possessions. Furthermore, in the negotiation of issues of ownership and sharing, affordable access to special and unique clothes, the happiness brought by the act of sharing, and access to communities with anti-mass consumption ideals, are in favour of sharing. With these findings we contribute to filling a gap on the current role of ownership within the context of collaborative consumption, arguing that it is decreasing in importance but so far remaining a consumer ideal. Furthermore, we provide new insights on motives for participating in collaborative consumption, thereby extending the literature on new consumption forms.

### 7. Implications

Collaborative consumption is “radically changing consumer behavior” (Möhlmann 2015: 10), since consumers are replacing shopping with collaboration and increasingly identify with actions, experiences and values rather than possessions. Belk (2014b) suggests that we are moving from being what we own towards being what we share. With background of our research, and the current emphasis on experiences in the literature (Belk 2007; Botsman and Rogers 2011; Nissanoff 2007), we expand this view, by proposing that we are not merely the things we share, but more importantly what we do and experience. From a consumer distinguishing perspective, this implies that consumer culture could be moving back to conspicuous leisure, something which Veblen (1975 [1899] in Corrigan 1997) reasons was replaced by conspicuous consumption with urbanisation and city life. With conspicuous leisure people had been able to show their societal standing with leisure activities (ibid.). However, in times of anonymization of the society they needed things that were easier to show off, enabled by conspicuous consumption and possessions (ibid.). Although we still live in an anonymous society, social media has enabled us to display our activities to others. We therefore reason that it has re-enabled conspicuous leisure to be communicated to the public, why experiences and behaviour are again becoming crucial means for differentiation. Consequently, ownership and possessions become less important.

Ultimately, we are convinced that collaborative consumption will gain in importance in the next years, further challenging ownership’s role in consumer culture. Thus, these findings have not only theoretical-, but also managerial implications in the sense that consumers show awareness of the societal implications of their consumerism. They are proving with their actions that they are prepared to make a change for the better. Companies from various industries will benefit from adapting to the new sharing behaviour, as it will likely result in less traditional purchases (Belk 2014b). With increasing globalisation and flows of information, people and objects (Appadurai 1990), and with liquid modernity continuing to generate desires for flexibility (Bauman 2000), we expect sharing to move from opportunity to necessity. It enables consumption and change under conditions of limited resources and an increasing population.

We also expect the new generations, having grown up with collaborative consumption, to detach even more from ownership and possessions and we are excited to see what the future brings for this research area.

## **8. Limitations and future Research**

Our interviews provided rich and useful consumer insights that helped us answer our research question and contribute to existing theory on ownership. However, we want to acknowledge that our research has some limitations.

When investigating ownership in the sharing economy, we had some issues with finding appropriate literature and theory, due to the novelty of collaborative consumption as a research area. Moreover, previous studies are most commonly restricted to a few industries and practices, especially focusing on car sharing and accommodation sharing. Consequently, there are a limited number of peer-reviewed articles about collaborative consumption, and within this context none have focused explicitly on consumer perspectives on ownership. While this fact on the one hand enabled us to fill an important research gap, these limitations are important to acknowledge because our study is mainly influenced by a limited number of scholars. Furthermore, one of our main references is the book ‘What’s mine is yours’ by Botsman and Rogers (2011). We are aware that this literature is not academic research, however the book can be seen as guiding literature in the field of collaborative consumption and the authors are frequently cited in the research (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Belk 2014a; Belk 2014b; Möhlmann 2015; Piscicelli, Cooper and Fisher 2014).

Our study, as well as previous findings (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Möhlmann 2015), have shown that motivations for participating in collaborative consumption depend on the type of shared objects. Further research is therefore needed in order to confirm our findings in other industries. As accounted for above, our study is limited to one industry, namely clothes and fashion. Clothes were chosen because of their symbolism, why studies of objects more associated with utility, such as tools, would be interesting additions to theory on ownership. Research with a focus on other industries, as well as with a larger number of interviewees, is expected to give further insights and a better understanding of ownership in collaborative consumption.

We want to point out that all our interviewees are Millennials, an age group dominating collaborative consumption. They further have similar educational backgrounds and have attended higher education. Thus, a study of consumers from different generations as well as with non-academic backgrounds would provide more thorough insights on consumer views on ownership in consumer culture. In addition, the interviewees are European citizens and as Bardhi and

## **Limitations and future Research**

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Eckhardt (2012) and Colic-Peisker and Johnson (2012) suggest, ownership ideals are strongly affected by culture, why consumers of other nationalities would contribute with a better understanding of the research area.

This study provides a starting point for further research, due to its focus on a so far largely unexplored field. We highly welcome a quantitative follow-up study of our research in order to verify our findings and to get more generally valid results. However, we are happy to be able to contribute to an existing gap in the research, and hope that we inspire other researchers to investigate the interesting and dynamic area of collaborative consumption and its implications on ownership.

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## Appendix

### A: Interview Guide with Users of Clothing Libraries and Clothes Swapping

1. Introduction Thesis and Researchers

2. Introduction Interviewee

- Can you tell us something about yourself?

3. Collaborative Consumption

- Please tell us something about your experience with the clothing library/ clothes swaps?
- How do you treat your borrowed/swapped clothes?
- How do you feel when you wear the clothes?

4. Other collaborative consumption practices

- Do you have you experiences with other collaborative consumption services?

5. Ownership and possessions

- How would you describe ownership?
- Do possessions tell us something about who we are?
- Are there any limits to what you would share with others?

6. Finishing off:

- What do you think about the future of collaborative consumption?
- Is there anything you would like to add?