

SUSTAINABLE BENEFITS IN PEER-TO-PEER PLATFORMS: A CUSTOMER-CENTERED APPROACH

1 INTRODUCTION

Models of sharing for consumption emerged after the global financial crisis in 2008 and due to new social and environmental needs arising from urbanization, combined with the ubiquity of the internet and technologies (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014; Heinrichs, 2013). These factors challenged the existing perspective on how resources can be offered and consumed, with the sharing economy inhibiting unsustainable hyper-consumption practices and promoting new business models based on technologies and social networks (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Gansky, 2010).

Among the configurations of sharing businesses, such as Business-to-Business (B2B), Consumer-to-Business (C2B), and Business-to-Consumer (B2C), Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C), also known as Peer-to-Peer (P2P), stands out. The P2P model has become an important sociocultural phenomenon for consumption due to its community-based benefits and interactions, as well as being considered more environmentally friendly (De Canio et al., 2020; Gordo López et al., 2020; John, 2013; Wirtz et al., 2019).

Hansmann and Binder (2023) assert that P2P sharing has the potential to foster sustainability in an integrated manner by saving resources, reducing costs, and meeting consumer needs while strengthening social connections. The optimism surrounding the sharing economy, especially regarding sustainability, is widely discussed in the literature from a business perspective (Lai & Ho, 2020). However, the P2P business model essentially depends on the continuous participation of its members (Stofberg et al., 2021).

Therefore, this study adopts the concept of “customer-centered sustainability” developed by Sheth et al. (2011), aiming to improve the effectiveness of sustainable efforts and align them with customers' perceptions of economic, social, and environmental well-being. Understanding the user's perspective allows one to explore the dynamic interactions between the consumer, the object, and society (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Gordo López et al., 2020; Hamari et al., 2016).

This theoretical essay aims to investigate how the integration of the economic, social, and environmental benefits attributed to P2P platforms can promote customer-centered sustainability in the context of the sharing economy. The analysis will be conducted in light of the established relationships between P2P sharing, its benefits, and the concept of customer-centered sustainability, seeking to understand how these platforms can not only meet consumers' needs but also contribute to a more sustainable future.

The study expands the existing literature on sustainability in sharing economies by providing an integrated view of economic, social, and environmental benefits. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for P2P platform managers, helping them align their business strategies with consumers' sustainability demands. It proposes that the operation of P2P platforms be central to their business ecosystem, allowing constant interaction with other agents and placing the customer at the center of this arrangement.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The growth of P2P platforms has been driven by the internet, social networks, and mobile technologies, along with advancements in artificial intelligence and big data, disintermediating industries such as taxi systems and hotels (Wirtz et al., 2019). The notion of P2P sharing, according to John (2013), leverages the idle capacity of items, suggesting an absence of hierarchy and egalitarianism among peers. Various platforms meet customer needs

such as accommodation, transportation, food, investments, and loans (Wirtz et al., 2019), with significant potential for social, economic, and ecological growth (Hansmann & Binder, 2023).

The sharing-based business model challenges ingrained consumption habits with the potential for positive economic, environmental, and social impacts, promoting resource efficiency and lower costs (Frenken & Schor, 2017). P2P platforms are strategic for sustainability, promoting sustainable consumption through frequent social interactions between individuals (Plewnia & Guenther, 2018). They also reduce access costs to products and services and promote social mixing by sharing with strangers (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Frenken & Schor, 2017).

P2P platforms stand out for green advertising and carbon reduction, presenting sharing as environmentally beneficial (Frenken & Schor, 2017). Heinrichs (2013) notes dimensions that connect the sharing economy to the sustainability discourse, promoting cultural changes where consumers share access to assets, and guiding new economic practices and social interactions (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Frenken & Schor, 2017). The study by Böcker and Meelen (2017) highlights the economic, social, and environmental motivations in P2P sharing, indicating positive effects on the three dimensions of sustainability (Hansmann & Binder, 2023).

Gomis et al. (2011) emphasize the integration of social, environmental, and economic domains for ethical sustainability. This approach develops a critical sense of nature, oneself, and the community, influencing consumption behaviors (Lim, 2017). The concept of customer-centered sustainability considers the impact of consumption on the environmental, personal, and economic well-being of the consumer (Sheth et al., 2011). Stead and Stead (2013) highlight the challenge of sustainability in offering products and services designed sustainably throughout their life cycle.

The literature on the sharing economy and sustainability tends to neglect the role of the customer (Lai & Ho, 2020). Sheth et al. (2011) argue that an insufficient focus on the customer can limit the effectiveness of sustainability efforts. In this context, customer-centered sustainability can align sustainability efforts with sharing economic trends and optimizing resource utilization (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014; Gansky, 2010).

The discussion is complex and requires a deeper understanding (Martin, 2016). Although the sharing model promises advances in sustainability, its real impacts are still poorly understood (Mont et al., 2020). Ertz and Leblanc-Proulx (2018) suggest that the specific relationship between sustainability and the sharing economy is nascent but of growing importance. Therefore, a continuous effort is necessary for an integrated approach that considers the complexities and interrelationships of sustainability.

3 IMPLICATIONS FOR CUSTOMER-CENTERED SUSTAINABILITY

Some studies show that economic benefits are predominant, reinforcing that financial incentives are one of the main drivers for the adoption of collaborative consumption practices. In scenarios where efficiency and cost-benefit are highly valued, this trend is even more pronounced (Nascimento et al., 2018). Adherence to P2P platforms is significantly influenced by the expectation of savings, aligning with consumers' pursuit of optimizing expenses on goods and services.

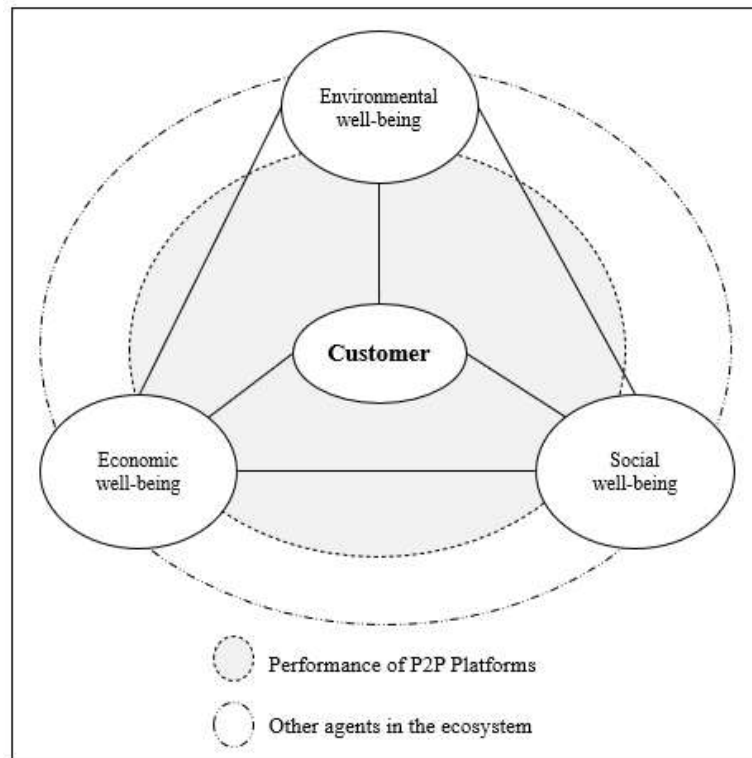
The inclination towards economic benefits is strongly associated with consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions, making shared consumption particularly attractive to those concerned with prices (De Canio et al., 2020; Hamari et al., 2016; Kim & Jin, 2020). Consumers' perceptions of economic benefits encompass a broad assessment, including costs relative to gains, non-monetary technical aspects, and the costs associated with information seeking (Lamberton & Rose, 2012).

Additionally, social dynamics combined with economic benefits can drive the intention to use P2P platforms (De Canio et al., 2020). Mattia et al. (2022) point out that the social benefits of interactions on P2P platforms are conditioned by trust, which is crucial to mitigating opportunistic and inauthentic behaviors (Celata et al., 2017). Trust plays a crucial role in social change facilitated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), enabling virtual connections to replace physical interactions (Vaclavik et al., 2020). Shared economy platforms promote their services as facilitators of “sharing”, “trust”, and “community building” (Köbis et al., 2021).

For Toni et al. (2018), consumption and sustainable development can be achieved through changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors. Shared consumption tends to attract consumers with high environmental and ecological awareness (Hamari et al., 2016). Consumers recognize that sharing is more ecologically responsible due to the excess availability of goods (Kim & Jin, 2020). Thus, environmental sustainability complements other motivational factors, influencing consumer intention (De Canio et al., 2020).

Promoting sustainability on P2P shared economy platforms requires initiatives that leverage economic benefits. However, emphasizing financial advantage can overshadow other goals. Therefore, the acceptance and success of these platforms depend on how they integrate social and environmental issues. It is necessary to develop strategies that foster trust and inclusion, aligning with broader social values. Furthermore, the environmental impacts of each sharing modality should be carefully considered, along with promoting practices that minimize wear and resource renewal and educating consumers about the benefits and environmental responsibilities. In this way, we propose an integration of the benefits applied to customer-centered sustainability, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Actions to promote benefits related to customer-centered sustainability applied to P2P platforms



Source: authors.

With the discussion of implications for customer-centered sustainability, it is clear that integrating benefits in this context emerges as an innovative proposal for P2P platforms. This study adopts the concept of a business ecosystem, which involves all stakeholders that orbit around a given business and adapt to customer preferences and technological innovations (Parente et al., 2018). This occurs in the sharing economy, where various interest groups coexist and interact in a dynamic environment (Leung et al., 2019). It is proposed that organizational structures foster efficient exchange and resource integration, culminating in value co-creation (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017).

The activity of agents in this ecosystem is crucial for the widespread diffusion of platforms, as pointed out by Parente et al. (2018). Leung et al. (2019) identify these agents as providers, consumers, and the platforms themselves, forming a symbiotic triadic system that includes partners, competitors, governmental entities, and the global community.

It is proposed that the focus be on the customer, indicating their centrality in building sustainability. Around the customer, there are three main circles of benefits for environmental, economic, and social well-being, which are interrelated. The larger circles encompass the actions of P2P platforms and other agents in the ecosystem.

3 CONCLUSION

This theoretical essay investigated how the integration of economic, social, and environmental benefits of P2P platforms can promote customer-centered sustainability in the context of the sharing economy. The proposed model places the customer at the center, interlinking the three primary benefits: environmental, economic, and social well-being. These interactions highlight the holistic nature of sustainability, where improvements in one aspect can positively influence the others.

P2P platforms are crucial intermediaries that facilitate the delivery of these benefits to customers, while other agents in the ecosystem play complementary roles. This demonstrates that P2P platforms are not merely transaction facilitators but also significant agents of change for sustainability. Furthermore, cooperation among multiple stakeholders is essential to achieving customer-centered sustainability, challenging traditional approaches that prioritize business or regulatory aspects.

Theoretically contributing, this innovative model underscores the importance of considering consumers' perceptions and needs to promote sustainability. The holistic approach of the three benefits aligns with the Triple Bottom Line concept, extending it to a practical context where benefits mutually reinforce each other.

Practically, P2P platforms are identified as key facilitators for delivering benefits to customers, acting as catalysts for sustainability, and promoting practices that benefit consumers, society, and the environment. Recognizing the necessary collaboration among different agents in the ecosystem can guide the formulation of public and business policies that promote customer-centered sustainability.

This theoretical study has limitations, such as the absence of empirical validation and reliance on existing literature to formulate the model. Future studies should consider measuring the interactions among the benefits and exploring how different sharing economy business models impact these benefits, aiming to optimize P2P platforms to maximize sustainability.

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