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Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science

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The London School of Economics and Political Science

MSc Psychology of Economic Life

PB417 – Consumer Psychology

Summative Assignment

Candidate Number: 45406

Case background

On average, a U.S. household contains 300.000 items (Macvean, 2014). A majority of these goods, in particular those predominantly valued for their functional value, are only used several times a year or even over their lifespan – a situation that is hardly the most sustainable use of the resources involved. In light of the climate crisis and growing awareness of the need to avoid unnecessary CO² emissions, Belgian start-up Usitoo has made it its goal to put these items to a more efficient use: Having built an inventory of commonly used functional goods (e.g. pressure cleaner, party tent, hiking gear), Usitoo users can rent them for a temporary period through their website, making the company an example of the access-based economy. Specifically, it can be classified as a market-mediated access-based consumption model (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012); in other words, the access to goods is professionally managed by a firm. Founded in 2016 as a for-profit cooperative with the opportunity for anyone to become co-operator, i.e. co-owner of the company, Usitoo has shown initial success at promoting its service in and around Brussels. However, as outlined in a pitch in 2019, they require substantial user growth in order for the business to be self-sustaining (EIB Institute, 2019).

Like other access-based business models, the evaluation of Usitoo as a sustainable business is based on three arguments: Firstly, temporarily accessing otherwise underutilized objects makes for a more efficient use of resources (Muñoz & Cohen, 2017). Secondly, accessing can avoid overconsumption (Seegebarth et al., 2016) and thirdly, has the potential to change consumer habits to the sustainable (Leismann et al., 2013). Hence, it is evident that Usitoo is a sustainable solution that demands user growth in order to become an impactful business; this is where consumer psychology can prove conducive.

Memorandum

Dear Mr Chomé,

Please allow me to first express my admiration for having founded and grown your company Usitoo to its current level. It is reassuring to see courageous entrepreneurs like you building businesses that offer a solution to today's most pressing issue: the climate crisis. Addressing overconsumption and excessive resource usage by changing rather than restricting the way people consume is a considerate and fruitful approach.

Yet, being an alternative to the current status quo of human behaviour brings with it its challenges. Having become aware of your need for user growth in your pitch at the EIB Institute, I would like to offer some recommendations grounded in consumer and social psychology. Outlining my proposal, I will first premeditate the fundamental growth strategy to then provide a four-item action plan to boost Usitoo's growth, focused on marketing, the product itself and the user community.

Fundamental growth strategy

For Usitoo to achieve the desired growth, I believe a double track approach to be appropriate: Growing the user base by attracting new potential customers while at the same time making sure to reduce existing user churn by raising user satisfaction. The recommended action plan is based on this proposition, with the individual measures designed to cater to at least one, if not both tracks to ultimately help Usitoo grow.

Recommended action plan

Implement marketing strategy

While your current marketing activities are already correctly emphasizing functional over social aspects, I advise a more nuanced marketing strategy based on the motives of your current and potential users. Social psychology research has shown that people consume not merely for the functional value of a product but also to solidify their own identity and communicate this to others. In this light, three identity-shaping motives (and thus consumer profiles) can be singled out which should form the basis for your marketing activities aimed at encouraging user growth:

1. *The smart consumer*

Smart consumers pride themselves in being savvy when it comes to consumption choices; they are focused on functionality and, above all, cost-efficiency through their rejection of ownership and choice of access. Consequently, this ought to be explicitly reflected in the marketing messages geared towards this group of consumers:



Figure 1. Sample billboard and social media ad geared toward smart consumers.¹

2. *The variety-seeking consumer*

Variety-seeking consumers cherish the opportunity to flexibly switch between pastimes and enjoy a multitude of experience without the troubles and risks associated with the ownership of all the required products. What is more, the ability to present themselves and the variety of their activities in the open to others is a driver for them to participate in access-based services. These considerations are to be included in marketing communication:

¹Image credits: www.saforum.org

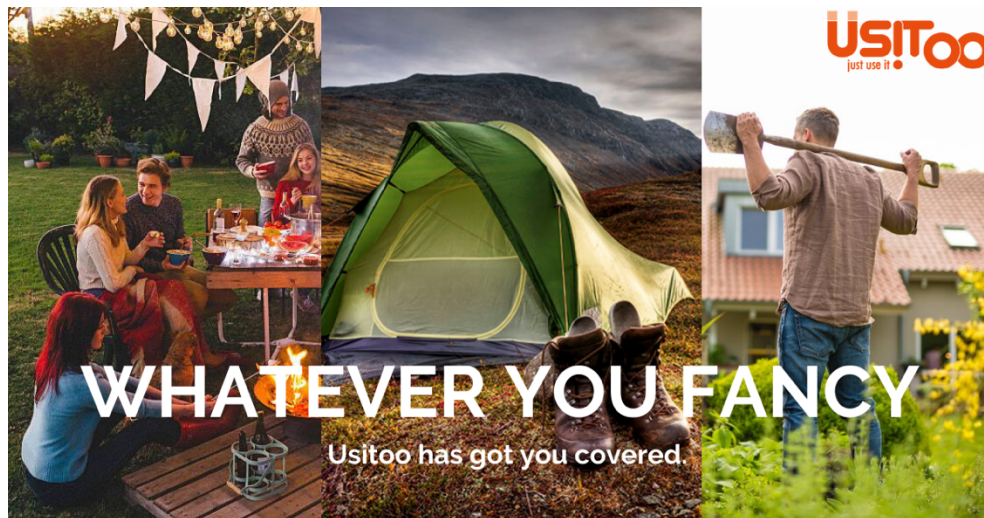


Figure 2. Sample billboard and social media ad geared toward variety-seeking consumers.²

3. *The ecologically conscious consumer*

Ecological consciousness is a motive less pronounced in access-based service users; however, with regards to their attitudes, sustainability-minded consumers show many resemblances to accessing consumers. Hence, specifically addressing this customer group could open up a new user cohort. To do this, I propose for Usitoo to primarily procure sustainably manufactured products and communicate this explicitly in advertising and the product catalogue:



Figure 3. Sample billboard and social media ad geared toward ecologically conscious consumers.³

² Image credits: www.gettyimages.com; www.redmoose.co.nz; www.volmary.de

³ Image credits: www.pixabay.com

Reduce contamination concerns

Products that have been used by other people run the risk of being considered contaminated because of this usage. These concerns have substantial negative effects both on the attraction of new and the satisfaction of existing users and thus hinder growth. Accordingly, I advise to emphasize cleaning procedures on the website as well as include a note of recent cleaning in or attached to every rented item:



Figure 4. Sample note to be included in/attached to product.⁴

Build branded mobile app

Given the ubiquitousness of smartphones, Usitoo ought to develop a branded mobile app that allows users to use the service on-the-go. Usitoo's use case lends itself well to this as real-time information about a user's location are very relevant for your operations (e.g. nearest pick-up spot). In addition, mobile apps have been shown to increase trust and user experience, ultimately affecting satisfaction in a positive way. Considering Usitoo's limited resources, a rather simple mobile clone of the website should suffice to reap initial benefits of this for the business.

Reduce (the risk of) consumer misbehaviour

With growing numbers of users, the utilisation of the items in Usitoo's stock will increase, making proper care of the products paramount to avoid negative user experiences due to broken items and high expenses for replacing them. Unfortunately, research on access-based businesses has shown that the absence of ownership can lead users to misuse products and/or return them in damaged condition. To minimize these tendencies, I propose a twofold

⁴ Image credits: www.canva.com

approach: First, to reduce anonymity and create accountability, Usitoo is to introduce user profiles for each account, making users select an avatar and input basic information about them. For this measure to be effective, it is important not to allow incomplete profiles. Second, framing the user-brand-relationship in a way that resembles a friendship and emphasising the corresponding norms can enhance the sense of community and counter consumer misbehaviour. This can be realised by including a norm-invoking note in every item rental, irrespective of the individual product or context:

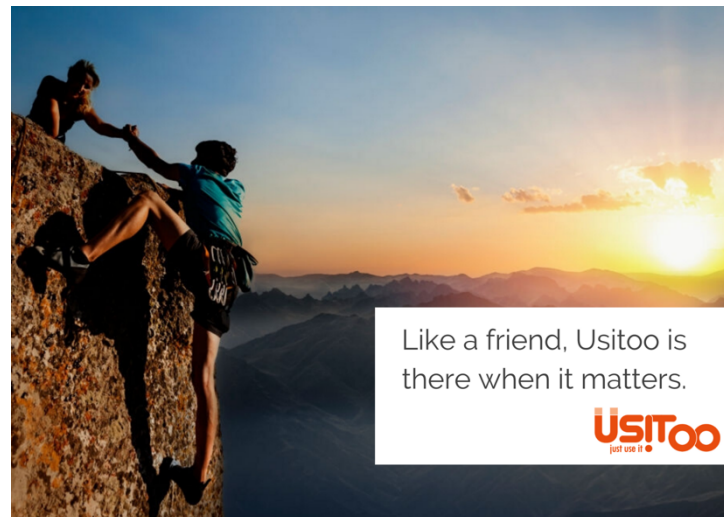


Figure 5. Sample friendship norm note to be included in every rental.⁵

In light of the looming climate crisis, I believe that Usitoo can play an impactful role in enabling the transition towards more sustainable consumption practices. I hope that you will consider my proposal as an attempt to support you in achieving just that.

Yours sincerely,
Marian Krüger

⁵ Image credits: www.gettyimages.com

Theoretical justification

As evident from Usitoo's own communication, the company requires a growth in user numbers in order for it to expand to other cities and reach break-even. The recommendations offered here are based on the premise that company growth is built on two pillars (Maurya, 2016): attracting new users and retaining existing users, i.e. reducing user churn by keeping users satisfied; with the latter actually feeding into new user growth through word of mouth effects (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). In consequence, the overarching goal of the recommended actions is twofold: new user growth and increased satisfaction among existing users.

What Usitoo has gotten right

With regard to their business model, Usitoo has correctly identified functional, seldomly-used products as particularly conducive to shared consumption (Gullstrand Edbring et al., 2016). These items are typically consumed for their utilitarian value. Thus, making sure that this value is realized effectively is of utmost priority for a service provider (Habibi et al., 2017); Usitoo has done this by creating a network of convenient item pick-up stations. Similarly, they have focussed its marketing messaging on economic rather than social aspects (Habibi et al., 2017). In addition, the company has been set up as a cooperative in an attempt to forge a sense of community and avoid mistreatment of products (EIB Institute, 2019).

Action plan

Implementing marketing strategy focused on three main motives

In addition to the current general focus on economic considerations in Usitoo's marketing, it is proposed to specifically target the three most prominent motives for people to engage in access-based consumption. This recommendation is based on the premise that consumption goes beyond its mere functional value to a symbolic level (Levy & Rook, 1999). In fact, people create, enhance and communicate their identity through consumed goods, thereby extending their selves to include these possessions (Belk, 1988; Berger & Ward, 2010). Products are thus purchased in part because they are perceived to allow an extension in line with one's identity. Marketers have been aware of this and reflected it in their marketing messages (Wang et al., 2000).

As objects are not owned by the consumers and the relationship between them and the products is temporary and circumstantial, consumption practices differ from this in access-

based contexts (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Studies have found hardly any incorporation of the product into the self for their symbolic value (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017). Yet, while individual objects themselves might not extend the self beyond their functional value, the overall form of consumption, i.e. accessing instead of owning, has the potential to do so (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012); to solidify the self internally and communicate it externally (Eastman & Eastman, 2015). Consequently, the recommended marketing strategy focuses on conveying this potential for symbolic extension and communication beyond the products' utilitarian qualities. To achieve this, three consumer profiles are established based on the three most prominent and promising motives for access-based consumption: cost sensibility, variety and ecological consciousness.

Firstly, it has been consistently shown that utilitarian motives with foci on convenience and, above all, cost-savings predominate among access-based consumers (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Hamari et al., 2016). In particular, accessing instead of owning seems to provide people with an opportunity to establish for themselves an identity as a “**smart consumer**” (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, p. 890) able to make savvy consumption choices. Given this importance, Usitoo's marketing messages should stress the potential for users to solidify this identity.

Secondly, besides this commanding motive, access-based consumption also allows consumers to flexibly experience a variety of goods without having to bear the costs or risks of purchasing them (Hazée et al., 2020); in this way, it can function as a “lifestyle facilitator” (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, p. 890) of the **variety-seeking consumer**. The fact that many of the products offered for access by Usitoo are used in the open (e.g. gardening tools, party equipment) creates ample opportunities for the users to showcase this variety to others, thereby engaging in signalling of their identity (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2015). Both, the variety and signalling potential to others outdoors, should become apparent in Usitoo's advertisements.

Thirdly, while less pronounced in the studies, environmental consciousness has been found to be a motive as well (Hamari et al., 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) and is particularly relevant as the overlap in attitudes between **ecologically conscious consumers** and collaborative, i.e. access-based, consumers could open up new potential user groups (da Silva Nascimento et al., 2018). In order to attract these users effectively, I propose for Usitoo to prioritise the procurement of items for their inventory that have been produced by companies which fulfil ESG-criteria. Communicating this in marketing and the product catalogue lends the ecologically focused messages more credibility and enables accessing consumers to engage in signalling practices by using sustainable products.

Reducing the risk and fear of contamination

Contamination is a substantial deterrent to the adaptation of collaborative and access-based consumption practices (Kim, 2019). According to consumer contamination theory, people feel disgusted by the apparent usage of products by others, leading to negative emotions towards the products (Argo et al., 2006). This re-use of objects is in the nature of access-based business models, however. Thus, if not properly addressed, expected contamination is a barrier to new user growth and can lower satisfaction among existing customers (Koppenhafer, 2014). Fortunately, the market-mediation in access-models such as Usitoo reduces contamination concerns to a neutral level because no direct contact between users occurs and products are managed and cleaned professionally after usage (Kim, 2019). It has been shown that these facts ought to be communicated explicitly in marketing messages and product descriptions as well as become apparent on the products themselves, to avoid contamination to affect the product experience (Koppenhafer, 2014).

Building a branded mobile app

With access-based services being mainly used for their utilitarian value, making the user experience as efficient and easy as possible is critical to increase satisfaction (Habibi et al., 2017). Given the prevalence of mobile devices (Statista, 2019) and the geotemporal nature of many access-based services (e.g. finding the nearest pick-up/drop-off location for a Usitoo item), branded mobile applications have become widely adopted in the sharing economy (Key, 2017). Not only can a company provide its services with less friction using an app (Mondal & Chakrabarti, 2019), apps also have a positive impact on purchase behaviour (Kim et al., 2015) and can increase trust (Key, 2017). Trust is of particular importance as access-based services are still new to the market and familiarity with the business model as well as the individual companies is low. In this situation, creating a feeling of trust among potential customers is of great significance and has been singled out as the biggest hurdle to growth (Hawapi et al., 2017).

For these positive benefits and the widespread adoption of apps in the access-based economy, Usitoo ought to develop a simple mobile app that basically replicates its website in terms of functionality. Being aware of the company's budget constraints, the app need not go far beyond the website's functionality; rather, its mere existence is expected to already be a driver of user growth and satisfaction.

Mitigating user misbehaviour through reduced anonymity and salient communal norms

With user numbers growing and customers mainly using the individual products for utilitarian purposes, the potential for a tragedy of the commons (TOTC) situation (Hardin, 1968) arises (Belk, 2010). In such a case, the overexploitation of a shared good by users in an attempt to maximise their own short-term self-interest goes to the long-term detriment of said good for all (Meyer & Hudon, 2019). In fact, evidence of overexploitative tendencies in access-based businesses exists (Schaefer et al., 2016), even though the common good is privatised in these contexts, which has been proposed as a potential solution to TOTC situations (Shultz & Holbrook, 1999). These effects pose great potential risks for Usitoo as over- and misuse of products would decrease products' lifetimes and hence incur higher expenses for re-purchasing broken products. Beyond this, lower product quality would negatively affect satisfaction among users and thus ultimately growth.

Therefore, it is in Usitoo's interest to avoid the development of TOTC situations and mitigate their potential effects. The problem has been a well-known phenomenon in renting contexts (Koppenhafer, 2014), with many companies adopting a strategy of creating a community among its users as remedy; after all, a sense of community has been shown to increase care for the product (Koppenhafer, 2014; Shultz & Holbrook, 1999). However, in contexts where utilitarian motives predominate, the access-grantor (e.g. Zipcar, Usitoo) is considered a service provider, not a community facilitator, causing community-building attempts to fail (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). It is also for this focus on functional considerations that Usitoo's establishment as a cooperative, while well-intended, is likely not to achieve significant community-building effects. Hence, it is not recommended for Usitoo to further attempt to create a community among its users.

Having said this, two proposals to mitigate the effects and instil a degree of community sense are offered that go beyond the injunctive social norms of product care communicated on Usitoo's website: Reducing anonymity and shifting the brand relationship to communal norms.

Feelings of **anonymity** reduce the sense of community (Koppenhafer, 2014) and the regulatory function of norms (Davis, 2002), and increase inappropriate behaviour (Ellison-Potter et al., 2001) – all direct antecedents of a TOTC situation. Thus, it is recommended to reduce levels anonymity by introducing user profiles and having users choose an avatar (Koppenhafer, 2014). When creating profiles, apathetic participation, i.e. not completing one's profile, is to be forbidden as this decreases feelings of community (Koppenhafer, 2014). Given the utilitarian nature of Usitoo's access-based business, further anonymity-reducing measures towards forming a community (e.g. online user forum) are not suggested.

According to social relationship theory, interactions between people are governed by the norms of behaviour salient in the relationship; the same holds true for behaviour towards brands (Aggarwal, 2004). In this regard, two fundamental types of norms exist: While exchange norms are premised on reciprocity, **communal norms** go beyond self-interest (Aggarwal, 2004), albeit noting that the distinction is a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Campbell & Winterich, 2018). Shifting the norms salient in a consumer-brand interaction to communal norms has been proposed as a solution to TOTC situations (Schaefer et al., 2016). In order to achieve this for Usitoo, users are supposed to be primed with communal norms by increasing the salience of this relationship norm in a context not directly related to the service (Aggarwal & Law, 2005). In practice, a note framing Usitoo as the user's altruistic friend is to prime the communal norms of friendship without explicitly stating injunctive norms of behaviour (e.g. treat item with care).

Limitations

The present recommendations are an attempt to provide growth opportunities for Usitoo's sustainable business model. However, certain limitations remain with regards to the company's sustainability, the individual measures and their implementation. Firstly, concerns have been raised about the presupposed assumption of sustainable merit of access-based business models (Laukkanen & Tura, 2020). In fact, scholars have warned of "Jevon's Paradox", i.e. a situation where the facilitated accessibility of goods increases their usage, thus creating negative rebound effects (Acquier et al., 2017). This is particularly relevant as the recommended development of a mobile app facilitates access even more and could exacerbate the problem. In essence, this exemplifies the general tension between a company's need for growth in an unsustainable economic paradigm it is operating under (Martin, 2016).

With regards to the proposed actions, the recommended shift to communal norms deems further examination. As research has shown, the mere presence of a price inevitably leads to exchange norms dominating a relationship (Campbell & Winterich, 2018) – a problematic finding, in particular as Usitoo's marketing messages at least partially stress cost-savings and thus emphasize this norm. In an attempt to mitigate this, communal norms are only then reinforced when the monetary transactions have already taken place, i.e. in the usage context.

Usitoo's resource constraints also pose a limitation. In order to mitigate unnecessary expenditures, the suggested marketing messages ought to be tested on a small scale to fine-tune and discard if proven inefficient. A similar approach should be taken with regards to

mobile app development to initially come to a stage that is good enough to provide value for the users.

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