Theorizing the self-service economy: a case study of do-it-yourself (DIY) activity

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ABSTRACT
Recently, it has become increasingly recognised that self-servicing is a growing rather than declining phenomenon. To explain this, a range of competing theories have emerged which variously portray those engaged in self-servicing either as rational economic actors, dupes, seekers of self-identity, or simply doing so out of necessity or choice. This paper evaluates critically the validity of these rival explanations. To do this, the extent of, and reasons for, self-servicing in the domestic realm is empirically evaluated through an internet survey of 5,500 people living in the city of Sheffield in England. This resulted in 418 valid responses (a 7.6 per cent response rate). The finding is that three-quarters of all domestic tasks surveyed were last conducted on a self-servicing basis. Turning to why self-servicing is used, the finding is that all the previous theorisations are valid to differing degrees, and through a process of induction, a theoretically-integrative typology is offered which combines the existing theorisations by differentiating between various ‘willing’ (rational economic actors, choice, identity seeking) and ‘reluctant’ (economic and market necessity,
dupes) participants in the self-service economy. The outcome is a call for further research on the wider applicability of using this typology to explain self-servicing across other retail and distribution activities (e.g., food retailing, organising travel and holidays) is now required.

**Keywords:** self-service economy; household services; domestic work; consumer motives; consumer behaviour; consumption; do-it-yourself.

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, it has been increasingly recognised that across a range of retail and distribution activities, consumers do not always acquire goods and services from external providers but sometimes participate in self-servicing activity (Bittman et al., 1999; Gershuny, 1978, 2000; Leyshon et al, 2003; Marcelli et al., 2010; Williams, 2005, 2007, 2008). For example, many consumers now self-checkout at supermarkets with no till operator present, pay bills by telephone and the internet, track home deliveries via their home computer, manage their own finances online; organise a holiday themselves online, book theatre tickets, purchase airline tickets, check-in and select a seat online, as well as engage in a whole raft of do-it-yourself (DIY) activities in the domestic sphere ranging from everyday household tasks to home improvement and maintenance work.

Until now, a range of competing explanations for the growth of self-servicing have been proposed. These variously depict those engaged in self-servicing either as rational economic actors, dupes, seekers of self-identity, or simply doing so out of necessity or choice. The aim of this paper is to evaluate critically these rival explanations for self-servicing. To do this, a case study is presented of consumers’ motives for engaging in do-it-
yourself (DIY) activity in the domestic services realm, ranging from everyday household chores to home improvement and maintenance work. The intention in doing so is to begin to develop an understanding of the reasons for engaging in self-servicing which can then be tentatively applied when explaining self-servicing across an array of other retail and distribution activities.

To commence, therefore, the first section will briefly review the literature on the self-service economy in general and do-it-yourself (DIY) activity in the domestic sphere more particularly, along with the various rival explanations for self-servicing. To evaluate critically these competing explanations, a case study of self-servicing in the domestic services realm will be then reported. The second section will report the methodology used in a 2007 internet survey of the extent of, and reasons for, participation in DIY when conducting domestic tasks in a UK city, namely Sheffield whilst the third section will report the results. This will reveal that all the supposedly competing theorizations of self-servicing apply to different groups, and therefore through a process of induction, a typology is offered which combines these existing theorisations by differentiating between various type of ‘willing’ and ‘reluctant’ participant in the self-service economy. The paper then concludes by calling for evaluations of the wider validity of this typology when evaluating self-servicing across other retail and distribution activities.

At the outset, however, the self-service economy needs to be defined. Here, a self-service economy refers to an economy in which a substantial and growing proportion of household expenditure is invested in durable goods (e.g., tools, information technology, machinery) which enable consumers to produce services for themselves rather than outsourcing the work to external service providers. For example, the washing machine enables people to do laundry themselves, while the internet allows consumers to check-in at airports, withdraw money from banks, organise holidays and so forth on a self-servicing
basis. Self-servicing activity in the domestic realm, therefore, often called do-it-yourself (DIY) activity in the British context, and the focus of this paper, here refers to tasks conducted on an unpaid basis by household members on their own household ranging from everyday household chores to home improvement and maintenance work.

THE SELF-SERVICE ECONOMY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Over the long run of history, there is little doubt that goods production has shifted away from self-production in the home and towards production en masse in factories (Rifkin, 2001; Smuts, 1971) and that the outcome has been a separation of the home from production (Braverman, 1971; Reid, 1931). In that sense, it is wholly appropriate that those involved in retail and distribution research have focused upon how goods produced in factories are then distributed through formal retail outlets to the final consumer. It is wholly correct in a world in which goods are supplied via retail environments that research should focus upon issues such as internal design and work organisation within retail stores (Jayawardhena and Farrell, 2011; Gajjar and Adil, 2011), retail location (Reynolds and Wood, 2010), the internationalisation of retailing (Alexander and Doherty, 2010; Amine and Lazzoumi, 2011; Tarnovskaya and de Chernatony, 2011) and the transformative effects of virtual retail environments for goods provision (Çelik, 2011; Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick, 2010; Eastlick and Lotz, 2011).

Compared with goods production, however, it is perhaps the case that the shift of service provision away from self-servicing in the home to outsourcing to external providers has been not so all-inclusive. Even if goods production is now largely outsourced to the factory and the final distribution of goods to formal retailers, it is perhaps precisely the widespread availability of cheap and mass produced durable goods, as well as innovations in the nature of these goods, which has enabled the growth (rather than decline) of self-

For example, consumers now dial a telephone number themselves instead of using a telephone operator, press a button in an elevator rather than using an elevator operator, push their shopping cart around a food store rather than request a salesperson to collect each individual item for them, and self-checkout rather than use a till operator. Similarly, and in the realm of household services, whilst laundry was for many decades in the early and middle of the 19th century ‘sent out’ to external service providers, especially amongst the middle classes, the washing machine has today returned this task to the self-servicing realm, and similarly, the advent of cheap easy-to-use tools, equipment and goods, consumers now engage in a wide array of do-it-yourself (DIY) activity in the home improvement and maintenance realm. The externalisation of goods production to the marketplace, therefore, seems to have been only partially matched by the outsourcing of service provision (Williams, 2005; Williams and Windebank, 2000, 2001).

Indeed, the anecdotal evidence is that quite the opposite seems to be occurring in many service activities with a widespread trend towards in-sourcing, rather than outsourcing, services across a whole range of retail and distribution activities. Consumers now put together their own furniture once they receive their flat-pack deliveries from retailers. The emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT), meanwhile, means that activities that were previously outsourced to an external service provider are now completed on a self-service basis. Consumers self-checkout in retail supermarkets, pay bills by telephone or check their bank balance themselves via an automated phone system or the internet, track home deliveries from retailers via the internet, manage their finances online, self-organise their holiday online rather than going to a travel agent, book theatre tickets, as well as purchase airline tickets, check-in and select their own seat online. Indeed, these new
technologies that enable self-servicing seem to have rapidly transformed entire service and retail industries. ATMs in the banking industry, for example, have moved cash withdrawals near enough entirely into the self-servicing realm, as has the internet transformed the travel industry.

Despite this anecdotal evidence of the apparent resurgence of self-servicing, few have so far sought to estimate the proportion of various retail and distribution activities delivered on a self-servicing basis, nor whether the share that is self-serviced is increasing, stable or decreasing. Neither is much known about why consumers engage in self-servicing. Although Gershuny (1978, 2000) argues that self-servicing is in major part due to the availability of cheap manufactured goods that raise household productivity (e.g., convenience foods, dishwashers, washing machines) and growing labour costs in the service economy, little detailed research has so far been conducted on the reach of self-servicing or the reasons for doing so.

Self-servicing in the domestic services sphere

One of the few spheres in which any research has been conducted on the reach of self-servicing and the reasons for using self-servicing is the DIY market in particular and the sourcing of domestic services more generally (Gurtoo et al., 2011; Mintel, 2010; Williams, 2004, 2008). To estimate the magnitude of self-servicing activity in this realm, Mintel have produced regular market reports which analyse the changing size and nature of the DIY retail market as well as who participates in DIY (Mintel, 2004, 2006, 2010). In relation to the UK, the site for the empirical research reported later in this paper, these reports reveal that although the DIY retail sector rapidly grew between 2000 and 2004 (see Williams 2008), between 2005 and 2009, sales by DIY retailers grew just 4 per cent, reaching £9.8
billion in 2009 (Mintel, 2010). Mintel (2010) also highlight the declining levels of participation in DIY from 61 per cent of the population in 2004 to 56 per cent in 2009, which it is asserted means that such endeavour is being increasingly outsourced, a trend referred to as ‘do-it-for-me’ rather than ‘do-it-yourself’.

When explaining the motives for self-servicing in the domestic sphere, there have been two broad sets of literature. On the one hand, wider theorisations of consumption and the consumer have been applied to explaining such self-servicing in the domestic realm. On the other hand, and focusing on DIY, there has been a literature which focuses upon whether participation is economically determined and/or which distinguish between those conducting DIY out of economic necessity or choice. However, both of these sets of literature for explaining self-servicing suffer from intractable problems, as will now be revealed.

Those applying broader theorisations of consumption and the consumer to explain self-servicing in the domestic realm have adopted three contrasting theoretical approaches. Firstly, there is the rational utility maximisation model of consumption and the consumer which derives from neo-classical economic thought. Here, the participant in self-servicing is represented as somebody viewing their home as a business investment and as participating in home improvements so as to maximise the market value of their property by measuring the costs of their DIY against their investment return. Brodersen (2003) in his study of DIY in Denmark, for example, depicts those engaged in self-servicing as rational economic actors who calculate the money saved by doing-it-yourself and as pursuing projects to maximise the value of their home, despite the evidence gathered elsewhere that self-servicing is more about increasing the comfort than value of the home (Littlewood and Munro 1996).

A second theorisation of consumption and the consumer applied to self-servicing in this realm is that which depicts the consumer as a dupe or passive subject whose aspirations are formed and manipulated by the mass media, and served and fuelled by retail businesses
(Slater, 1997). Here, home improvements are represented simply as a response by passive subjects seeking the latest media-inspired fads for their home. Such a representation is found in the reports by Mintel (2002, 2005, 2006) who emphasise the rise of television makeover programmes and property development shows as the primary driver for the expansion in DIY.

A third and final broader theorisation of consumption and the consumer sometimes applied to DIY are the postmodern approaches that represent consumers as manipulating commodities to produce symbolic meanings and constitute identities (e.g., Campbell, 2005). Seen through this lens, self-servicing is undertaken to realise effects which convey individuality and self-identity. Woodward (2003) in Australia, for example, argues that those participating in self-servicing prioritise aesthetic ideals, and Clarke (2001) reads self-servicing as primarily about the construction of self-identity and home improvements as an attempt to reconcile who people are with their image of who and what they would like to be.

The problem when attempting to apply these broader theories of consumption and the consumer to explaining self-servicing in the domestic realm, however, is that they focus upon why people undertake home improvements (e.g., installing a fireplace). They do not consider why a particular practice, such as self-servicing, is used rather than other practices (e.g., outsourcing to an external service provider). Installing a fireplace may of course be a product of: a rational economic person seeking to improve the market value of property; a consumer responding to media inspired aspirations of interior design, and an attempt to express individuality by acting as a manipulator of symbols. However, one does not need to use self-servicing to achieve these ends. They could just as easily be achieved by employing a tradesperson to realise them. These theories thus tell us little about why self-servicing was used.
Those seeking to explain why people engage in DIY, meanwhile, have so far focused on whether participation is economically determined and/or whether people are driven more by economic necessity or choice to do so. Earlier studies, that is, evaluated whether DIY was conducted out of economic necessity such as because they could not afford to outsource the task to a tradesperson. Analyses of the American Housing Survey (Pollakowski, 1988; Bogdon, 1996) and the Scottish House Condition Survey (Littlewood and Munro, 1996), however, reveal that the relationship between income and participation in DIY is not clear cut. Consequently, recent years has been studies distinguish between those engaging in DIY out of economic necessity and those who do so more out of choice (Davidson and Leather, 2000; Mintel, 2002; Munro and Leather, 2000; Williams, 2004). The intractable problem, however, is that this distinction does not exist in practice. As Williams (2004) identifies in a study of DIY in urban England, in over 80 per cent of instances where DIY was used, both economic necessity and choice were co-present in the participants’ motives.

Neither do any of these theorisations fully explain participation in DIY. A recent market report by Mintel (2010) reveals that all lack full explanatory power. The finding that only 10 per cent of respondents agree that DIY is motivated by the desire to increase the value of their home challenges the representation of DIYers as rational economic actors. Similarly, only 18 per cent agreed with the statement ‘I’m opting to do more DIY/home improvements myself to save money’, challenging explanations based on ‘economic necessity’. Whilst this could indicate that DIY is therefore primarily driven by ‘choice’, the finding that only 8 per cent of respondents agree with the statement ‘I do a lot of DIY, it’s a hobby of mine’, indicates that the theoretical dualism of economic necessity versus choice is perhaps too simplistic. Neither do Mintel (2010) find that those engaged in DIY are dupes or passive subjects. Only 4 per cent of participants were influenced by ideas found in magazines, which, coupled with the demise of television makeover programmes, casts doubt
on the representation of participants in DIY as cultural dupes whose aspirations are formed and manipulated by the mass media. The desire for a new look/colour scheme (indicated by 40 per cent of respondents), along with the desire to up-date the house because it looked shabby/dated (indicated by 30 per cent of respondents) may offer some support for post-modern explanations of self-servicing, but more detailed data is needed before it can be concluded that such reasons are expressive of deeper aesthetic ideals concerning individuality and self-identity.

Given this, attention here turns towards some inductive research that has sought more grounded explanations for participation in this form of self-servicing from face-to-face interviews using open-ended questions.

**EXAMINING SELF-SERVICING IN SHEFFIELD**

To understand the extent of, and reasons for, the self-servicing of domestic tasks, in September 2007 a survey was conducted of 5,500 respondents living in households with at least one person in employment. These respondents were all employees of one of the largest employers in Sheffield. This sample was chosen because previous research reveals that these households are more likely to engage in DIY than no-earner households (Williams, 2004, 2008). Of these 5,500 respondents invited by e-mail to complete an internet questionnaire, some 418 produced valid responses, a response rate of 7.6 per cent.

It should be noted that this survey did not include no-earner households and is not a nationally representative sample. As such, the data on the extensiveness of DIY and the reasons for participation cannot be read as nationally representative. This, however, is perhaps not problematic. The primary intention here is to simply begin evaluating the reasons for participating in self-servicing so as to evaluate the validity of contrasting
theorisations so far propounded. By showing that no one theory wholly explains participation in self-servicing even across this relatively narrow sub-group of the population, the intention is to highlight the need for more integrative approaches both when studying DIY in particular, and self-servicing more generally. In that sense, the fact that a relatively narrow sub-group of the population has been surveyed is not important. If even amongst this narrow sub-group, no one theorisation is universally applicable, it reveals that it is even more salient to pursue a theoretically-integrative approach when extrapolating out to wider populations and/or other forms of self-servicing.

To gather the data on the self-servicing of domestic tasks in Sheffield, an internet survey was employed. Until fairly recently, internet surveys were not widely used in the social sciences. However, a reason this survey method has gained in popularity and has been used here is because it is highly efficient in terms of the time and resources needed for data collection. To gather data on the extent of, and reasons for, the self-servicing of domestic tasks, the first section of the internet survey collected basic socio-demographic data on the households in which respondents live while the second section investigated how households last conducted a range of regular home improvement and maintenance tasks, including cleaning, laundry, ironing, gardening or similar activities in their home to explore the extent to which self-servicing is used. The third section then addressed on the one hand, those who had employed people on a regular basis in the past but no longer did so and evaluated why they had stopped employing them and on the other hand, those who had never employed somebody on a regular basis to undertake domestic tasks and analysed why they had never done so. The fourth and fifth sections then investigated the source of labour used to complete a wider range of both regular and less regular domestic tasks. This evaluated firstly the type of labour usually used to conduct 21 domestic tasks, secondly, the main reason for using that labour and thirdly, how they would choose to get the job done in an ideal world.
This enabled tasks to be identified where the work was being self-serviced and their reasons for doing so. For each task, interviewees were asked whether the task had been undertaken during the past five years. If conducted, first, they were asked who had last conducted the task (e.g., a particular household member, a relative living outside the household, a friend, neighbour, firm, landlord). Second, and if the task had been externalised, they were asked whether the person had been unpaid, paid or given a gift. Third, and if paid, they were asked whether it was ‘cash-in-hand’ or not and if so, how much had been paid. If given a gift, its nature was requested. This allowed self-servicing activity to be identified along with the source of labour used when the task was externalised. For each task completed, moreover, the respondent was asked ‘what was your primary reason for using (the source of labour) to do this task?’ so as to elicit in an open-ended manner their principal reason. Following this, a further probe was used; they were asked ‘is that the only reason?’. In addition, 10 relatively unstructured follow-up interviews were conducted with a range of people engaged in self-servicing. These focused on their reasons for engaging in self-servicing activity. Although this internet survey and the follow-up in-depth interviews resulted in a wide array of data on household work practices as well as the diverse reasons for outsourcing, this paper focuses upon the extent of, and reasons for, engaging in self-servicing activity. Below the results are reported.

EVALUATING SELF-SERVICING IN SHEFFIELD

Extent of self-servicing

To what extent is self-servicing used to undertake home improvement and maintenance tasks? Table 1 reveals that the last time households undertook these 21 tasks ranging from everyday household chores to home improvement work, some three-quarters (74 per cent)
were conducted primarily on a self-servicing basis. The implication is that in the domestic services realm, self-servicing is the major mode of provision used. The surveyed population is more a ‘do-it-yourself’ rather than a ‘do it for me’ culture. This is an important finding. It is often assumed that ‘subsistence’ production in the form of self-servicing is some minority practice in commodified western economies and that the outsourcing of services to commercial service providers is becoming ever more dominant as previously unpaid subsistence work disappears and moves into the market economy (Williams, 2005). This survey, however, reveals that self-servicing remains the dominant practice in this population, signifying the slow and shallow penetration of commodification in this realm. When tasks are outsourced to external service providers, moreover, this survey also reveals that these activities are not always externalised to the formal market economy. Only two-thirds (65 per cent) was externalised to service providers in the formal market economy. In 19 per cent of cases, it was outsourced to unpaid labour (kin, friends or neighbours) and in the remaining 16 per cent of cases to the ‘cash-in-hand’ economy.

Not all tasks, furthermore, are equally likely to be conducted in the self-service economy. Indeed, significant variations prevail across different domestic tasks signalling not only the shallow but also uneven penetration of outsourcing across different domestic tasks. As Table 1 reveals, those tasks most likely to have been conducted in the self-service economy the last time that they were conducted were daily maintenance tasks such as shopping, cooking, washing-up and paying household bills (100 per cent), everyday tidying, putting out rubbish and washing clothes (99 per cent), making-up flat-pack furniture (97 per cent), ironing (90 per cent), gardening (88 per cent), setting up IT equipment (85 per cent), household cleaning (75 per cent) and painting and decorating (67 per cent). Those least likely to have used self-servicing were pet care when away from home (5 per cent), installing a bathroom (11 per cent), fitting a kitchen (17 per cent), baby-sitting (21 per cent),
joinery (34 per cent), landscape gardening (47 per cent), cleaning gutters (53 per cent) and tree pruning (55 per cent). Whether a task is conducted primarily on a self-servicing basis, therefore, appears to be closely related both to whether it is a major or smaller project as well as the level of competency or skills required to conduct the task.

Table 1 
Types of labour last used to undertake domestic tasks in Sheffield employed households, 2007 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did not do it</th>
<th>Of households doing task, % who use:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do-it-yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing-up</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying household bills</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday tidying</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting out rubbish</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing clothes</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making-up flat-pack furniture</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironing</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up IT equipment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household cleaning</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting and decorating</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tree pruning</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning gutters</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape gardening (e.g., laying a patio)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joinery</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby-sitting</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting a kitchen</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installing a bathroom</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet care (when away from home)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All 21 tasks</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some households, nevertheless, display a greater propensity to engage in the self-servicing of domestic tasks than others. As Table 2 reveals, the lower-income households surveyed
outsourcing tasks to a greater extent than the higher-income households who conduct a larger proportion of tasks on a self-servicing basis. As can be derived from the data in Table 1, households in the highest-income quartile also conduct a greater number of tasks on a self-servicing basis (29 per cent more tasks) than households in the lowest-income quartile. At first, this appears to be counter-intuitive. One might, after all, expect higher-income households to outsource tasks to a greater extent than lower-income households since they have more money to pay others. However, to more fully understand this finding, one needs to analyse the nature of the self-servicing being undertaken in higher- and lower-income households.

Table 2 Forms of labour used to undertake domestic tasks: by household income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of the 21 tasks conducted</th>
<th>% last conducted using:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-servicing</td>
<td>Unpaid external labour</td>
<td>Paid informal labour</td>
<td>Formal labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All households</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest-income quartile</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-middle income quartile</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-middle income quartile</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest-income quartile</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lower-income households, that is, not only undertake a narrower range of tasks on a self-servicing basis but these tend to be smaller mundane jobs. Their greater reliance on outsourcing, meanwhile, is primarily because more of the tasks they undertake are urgent maintenance and repair jobs, such as mending a broken window or repairing a broken tap, that often need to be outsourced in order to be completed. Relatively affluent households, in contrast, outsource a smaller overall proportion of tasks but these tend to be for larger home improvement projects, such as an attic conversion, building an extension and so forth. Meanwhile, the wider range of tasks they undertake using self-servicing is again because they undertake a wider range of home improvement tasks, such as installing bathrooms,
and these tend not to be largely repair tasks as found in lower-income households. Indeed, there is some evidence that these higher-income households are quite deliberately in externalising some of the mundane routine domestic tasks to external service providers in order for them to create some free time to engage in more rewarding home improvement projects on a self-servicing basis. Hence, there is a qualitative difference in the size and nature of the self-servicing and outsourcing activity of higher- and lower-income households.

**Rationales for self-servicing**

Why, therefore, is self-servicing used to conduct domestic tasks? Rather than design the survey so that their responses had to fit into pre-defined categories (e.g., cost, choice), the decision was taken at the survey design stage to generate more grounded theory using an open-ended question and a follow-up probe, namely ‘what was your primary reason for using (the source of labour) to do this task?’ and ‘is that the only reason?’ Having generated these qualitative responses, the next task was to group them together according to the common phrases and terms used to explain the reasons for participation in self-servicing. Table 3 displays examples of the responses given along with how they have been clustered together into groups of explanations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of motives</th>
<th>Reason for using self-servicing</th>
<th>Type of self-servicing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I did it myself to save money’</td>
<td>Economic necessity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I didn’t have the money to pay others’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘You cannot find trades people to do such jobs’; ‘Nobody tradesman was available to do this job’</td>
<td>Reliability of tradesperson to turn up</td>
<td>Reluctant self-servicing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradesman don’t do a good enough job’</td>
<td>‘I don’t trust tradesmen’</td>
<td>‘Tradesmen don’t do a decent job’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We did it to increase the value of our house’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I like doing DIY’, ‘I enjoy learning new skills’; ‘You get satisfaction from doing it yourself’; ‘Because doing it yourself is what you should do’; ‘To show myself I could do it’;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘To create something unique and personalised’; ‘Because tradesmen wouldn’t do what we wanted’; ‘To express of who we are’; ‘So our home displays our personality’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The outcome of this inductive approach is that a more grounded typology of the motives for engaging in self-servicing activity has been generated. Analysing the responses, the overarching picture to emerge is that respondents represent themselves as engaged in either ‘reluctant’ or ‘willing’ self-servicing. Those viewing themselves as engaged in ‘reluctant’ self-servicing do so either because they cannot afford to outsource the task or due to problems with regard to finding and using trades-people, such as getting a tradesperson to turn up, the perceived inferior quality of the end-product and trust issues related to leaving them alone in the home. In consequence, the use of self-servicing was often not their first choice but their chosen option. For those representing themselves as engaged in ‘willing’ self-servicing, meanwhile, the self-service economy was more often their first choice and conducted for reasons ranging from an economic desire to maximise the value of their home (akin to the neo-classical model of the consumer), the pleasure they get from self-service activity (akin to the choice model) or the satisfaction received from creating an individualised end-product, completing a job, mastering a skill or simply doing something for oneself (supporting post-modern theories of the consumer).
Having constructed this typology of motives for self-servicing, Table 4 investigates the results. Until now, there has been a tendency in DIY market research (Mintel, 2006, 2010) to emphasise the ‘willing’ and to negate the existence of ‘reluctant’ self-servicing. However, this study displays that the likelihood of a task being conducted on a willing or reluctant self-servicing basis is about equal. There were, however, marked variations in the ratio of willing-to-reluctant self-servicing across different household-income levels. Amongst higher-income households, people are markedly more likely to be willing participants in self-servicing, whilst lower-income households are more likely to reluctantly engage in self-servicing. Extrapolating this to the wider population, therefore, one might tentatively expect that a nationally representative sample would find a slightly lower ratio of willing-to-reluctant self-servicing, since no-earner households were excluded from this sample who one might assume will be more likely to be reluctant self-servicers.

Unravelling further the motives for self-servicing, 40 per cent of all such activity was conducted for reasons associated with economic necessity, although this rose to 48 per cent in the lowest-income households studied. Just two in every five self-servicing tasks, in consequence, are conducted out of economic necessity, such as because the household cannot afford to outsource the task to trades-people. Although this explanation, as might be expected, is more relevant in lower-income populations, the motive of economic necessity does not explain all self-service activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for engaging in self-service activity (%)</th>
<th>All households</th>
<th>Lowest income quartile</th>
<th>Lower income quartile</th>
<th>Upper-middle income quartile</th>
<th>Highest income quartile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reluctant self-servicing</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic necessity</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradesperson access</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another reason given was the shortage of trades-people, including plumbers, electricians, plasterers and so forth. Although there has been some discussion about the problem of trust when outsourcing home improvement and maintenance work (de Ruijter and Weesie, 2007), the shortage of reliable trades-people has not been theorised as an explanation for self-servicing, meaning that the degree to which this is a major driver for self-servicing has not so far been evaluated. In this survey, the finding is that 10 per cent of self-servicing was primarily undertaken because of the problems associated with finding a tradesperson and getting them to turn up, and a further 4 per cent due to problems with the quality of tradespersons and associated issues related to trust. In total, therefore, 14 percent of self-servicing was conducted by reluctant self-servicers primarily due to problems with using trades-people. Examining whether this is more of an issue in some populations than others, this study reveals that tradesperson reliability is slightly more frequently raised as an explanation in higher-income households.

For neo-classical economists who read every aspect of personal and domestic life as operating according to market rationality, participation in self-servicing is a rational economic calculation pursued to maximise profits or save money (e.g., Brodersen, 2003). In this study, however, less than 1 in 10 instances of self-servicing were premised on this rationale. This clearly displays that self-servicing is not always embedded in market-like
profit-motivated rational economic calculations on the part of the consumer. They do not view their home as a commodity (cf. Hochschild, 2003).

Recently, previously economic approaches towards consumption have been increasingly replaced by a ‘cultural turn’ that puts greater emphasis on agency. The notion that self-servicing is conducted primarily out of choice, such as due to the pleasure gained from the process, however, is found to apply to around 1 in 6 self-service activities (16 percent) in this survey and such an explanation is more prevalent amongst higher-income quartiles.

Similarly, when evaluating the post-modern argument that self-servicing is conducted by willing participants seeking to individualise the end-product for reasons associated with their self-identity, the finding is that 1 in 5 self-service activities (20 percent) are motivated by such an objective and this is particularly the case amongst higher-income households. To impute that such rationales are more widely relevant, therefore, would be to impose the rationales of higher-income groups onto the wider population.

CONCLUSIONS

Until now, participants in the self-service economy have been explained as rational economic actors, dupes, seekers of self-identity, or simply doing so out of economic necessity or choice (see Williams, 2004, 2008). To evaluate which, if any, of these theories apply as reasons for self-servicing and to develop more grounded theory, a study has been here reported which investigated reasons for self-servicing in the domestic services realm.

The finding is that no one theorisation for self-servicing is universally relevant but all theories are sometimes valid. For a fuller and more comprehensive explanation to be achieved, therefore, there needs to be a move beyond using one theory and treating the
others as rival competing theories, and towards using them all. This has been here achieved by inductively generating a new typology to explain self-servicing which is theoretically-integrative. This differentiates between ‘willing’ participants in the self-service economy who choose to engage in self-service activity either to improve the value of their home (reflecting the rational utility maximisation model), for pleasure (the choice model) or to seek self-identity from the end-product (post-modern theory), and ‘reluctant’ participants forced into such self-servicing either for economic reasons (economic determinism model) or due to problems with finding and using trades-people (a new market failure model not so far considered).

The overall finding is that although the likelihood of being a willing or reluctant self-servicer is about equal amongst the households surveyed in this English city, in higher-income households, people are markedly more likely to be willing participants, while in lower-income households they are more likely to be reluctant participants. Future research, in consequence, will need not only to provide a more national representative sample to explore the overall importance of each of these explanations but also to evaluate the validity and applicability of this typology when explaining participation in the other realms where the self-service economy is prominent, such as the food retailing sector and the transport and tourism sectors. Such a theoretically-integrative approach will provide a greater understanding of not only the degree to which and why consumers are reluctant self-servicers in these realms but also the extent to which and why they are willing self-servicers (e.g., when booking and checking-in for flights online, purchasing their own holidays and managing their finances online, booking theatre tickets). If this paper stimulates such research into the extent of the self-service economy, and consumers’ motives for engaging in self-servicing, then it will have achieved its objective.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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