Relocating Profane Consumption Into Sacredness: Consumer Redemption and Resurrection Through Practice of Disposal

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This study aims to improve our understanding of the relationship between intentional disposal and changes in consumption lifestyle. The hermeneutic analysis of twelve in-depth interviews with self-proclaimed voluntary simplifiers shows the practice of disposal organized around three main themes: redemption, resurrection and sacredness. The study concludes with insights on the concept of sacrifice for questions of disposal and calls for further research on the gain, rather than the loss, affiliated to letting go of our material possessions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This study focuses upon the role of disposal in relation to changes in consumption lifestyle. It argues that adopting a voluntary simplicity lifestyle can lead consumers to experience disposal as a sacrificial ritual. Grounded in anthropological studies, sacrifice is conceptualized as both a liberating act and a process of moving toward sacredness.

The data consists of existential phenomenological interviewing with twelve informants who identify themselves as voluntary simplifiers and have, at one point in their lives, voluntarily lowered the amount of their material possessions. The interviews offer descriptive details on their process of disposal and its relation to a change in values and consumption lifestyle. The hermeneutic analysis shows informants’ practice of disposal organized around three main themes: redemption, resurrection, and sacredness.

The theme “redemption” describes informants’ practice of disposal as a way to redeem themselves from the social norm to own and display countless objects. Similar to a sacrifices, each informant was a bearer of pollution and sins. According to the interviews, they had accumulated and owned objects in excess. Disposing of the material surplus provides the means for cleansing the self of material pollution and sins. Under this theme, disposal is described as a purifying act, focusing on the termination of a self that had been polluted by the ideology of consumer culture, with its emphasis on material success, accumulation, holding on and storing goods.

The second theme “resurrection” shows disposal as a necessary ritual for self-transformation. Disposing of material possessions was for the informants a rite of passage from the termination to the recreation of personhood and lifestyle. Like a sacrificial rite, informants found in the practice of disposal a way to repair equilibriums between their self-concept and their environment, which involves both a deliverance from the slavery of material accumulation and a reconciliation with their self-concept. Re-creating this equilibrium called for the disposal of material accumulation by giving to others, including friends, charity organizations and strangers.

Finally, “sacredness” notes disposal as a transcendental experience that prefigures the death of profane consumption and the birth of sacred consumption. The act of disposal represents a gift informants made to others, to nature and/or to God. Impetus for the gift is the informants’ understanding that their objects are passed on to others and that their meanings are regenerated in the process. The gift and the regeneration of meanings prolong the life of objects and infuse characteristics of eternity and sacredness within the material.

Just as a sacrificial rite opens doors to sacredness, disposal provides the means to participate in the circulation of objects and to enact sacred consumption practices.

The three themes support that disposal entails both a process and an act. It is not just an act of letting go of our belongings, but also a process of becoming (Cherrier and Murray 2007; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Ozanne 1992; Price and Arnould 2000; Young 1991; Young and Wallendorf 1986). This study also notes that consumers do not necessarily divest the private meanings attached to particular objects prior to disposing of them. Instead, informants reflected on broad societal and sacred meanings. It is the reflections on interconnectivity between people and the circulation of objects that lead informants to dispose of their possessions and engage in sacred consumption practice. Furthermore, this study on voluntary simplifiers shows relevant similarities between practices of intentional disposal and the concept of sacrifice. The majority of anthropological studies recognize sacrifice as a personal renunciation of a human life, an animal or a material object that nourishes a higher purpose. In this study informants felt being polluted by material surplus and letting go of their possessions offers the means for cleansing and elevating themselves to higher beings. From this perspective, the personal renunciation of objects nourishes a quest for meanings and sacredness. Here, the accent lies no longer on the suffering and the burden of disposal but on the engagement to a meaningful existence through which, similar to a sacrificial ritual, “a man can find himself anew” (Jung, 1969, p. 260).

This study turns on the very question of disposal as a gain rather than a loss for the owner. For the informants, disposal bears an ontologically promise of value, a promise that motivates and underwrites the process of disposal. Disposal redeemed informants from sins of material accumulation and resurrected them into a transformed state of sacred participation. In a more general sense, disposal was for the informants a symbolic instrument for self-realization. From this perspective, we may question whether the practice of disposal is linked to Mauss’ concept of societal obligation for which individuals have to give, to receive and to reciprocate (Mauss 1954).

REFERENCES


Mauss (1954), *The Gift*.


