



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **I Own What I Control - the Influence of Object Size on Psychological Ownership**

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Objects that I control feel more like “mine” than those that I cannot control. One major aspect determining the amount of control over an object is its size. Three studies show that manipulated and self-chosen product size influences psychological ownership.

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# I Own What I Control

## The Influence of Object Size on Psychological Ownership

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### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The feeling that something is “mine” (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001) i.e. psychological ownership (PO) is a powerful feeling. It has been shown to predict perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards various types of objects (e.g., Kamleitner, 2011; Reb & Connolly, 2007; Shu & Peck, 2011; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004).

However, for PO to develop it is important that the target object can be controlled by the individual (Furby, 1978; Prelinger, 1959). The more control over it I can experience, the more likely it becomes “mine” (Dittmar, 1992; Rudmin & Berry, 1987). Consequently, objects that are difficult to control, are unlikely to be psychologically owned.

A key feature that determines the extent of control an individual can exercise over an object is its physical properties, like size. We argue that perceived control over an object emerges from the actual capability to physically handle it. In turn, we suggest that the physical properties of an object bear the potential to increase the likelihood of it being psychologically owned. Specifically, we focus on size as key influencing factor of perceived control and, in turn, PO. In three studies we find support for our assumption.

In study 1 we manipulated the size of a wooden cutting board. Three boards were manually constructed, a small, a normal and a large board. 121 participants (49% female students) randomly received one of the three boards. Then they were asked to pretend to do functional, usage oriented tasks. In the subsequent questionnaire, each participant had to estimate the actual size of the board in cm. The following items were assessed on a 7-point scale (1=totally disagree, 7=total agree): perceived control exercised over the board (3 items,  $\alpha=.88$ ), PO for the board (adapted from Shu & Peck, 2011) (3 items,  $\alpha=.88$ ), participant’s estimation of the boards size (diagonal in cm) and weight (gram). Weight was kept constant throughout the entire analysis.

All three boards were perceived significantly different from each other in terms of size ( $\eta^2=.32$ ). A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of size on perceived control, ( $\eta^2=.09$ ), indicating that larger boards elicit less perceived control. In order to see whether PO is indirectly effected by object size we ran mediation analyses using PROCESS: The hypothesized indirect effect of size on PO via control turned out to be significant.

To test if the effect can be generalized to another product category we replicated the study in the context of a blanket (Study 2). 106 participants (53.7% female students) were asked to do functional tasks with either a small, medium, or large blanket to which they were randomly assigned.

All three blankets were perceived significantly different from each other in terms of size ( $\eta^2=.15$ ). The same measures as in Study 1 were used. An ANOVA showed a significant effect of blanket size on perceived control ( $\eta^2=.36$ ). Mediation analyses again provide support for the assumption of an indirect effect of size on PO via perceived control.

Results of Studies 1 and 2 support the assumption that size influences PO via control. However, findings are based on usage simulations only and the object under investigation was not self-chosen. In study 3 we, hence, extended our inquiry to a real life context with a more meaningful object – cell phones. On top of that we took into

account that the controllability of a specific object size may also be a function of the physical make-up of the person.

In Study 3, 211 students (49.3% female) drew the outline of their own phone on a sheet of paper to enable us an exact measurement of phone size. In addition and to account for the fact, that the optimal size might depend on a person’s own physical make up we also asked participants to draw the outline of their hand. Perceived control (4 items,  $\alpha=.92$ ) and PO (4 items,  $\alpha=.95$ ) were assessed with similar items as in study 1. To thoroughly account for individual differences we established an indicator representing the fit between phone and individual, namely, a thumb length/phone width ratio. This individualized size measure functioned as main predictor.

A mediation analysis using PROCESS showed a marginally significant effect of this ratio on perceived control and a significant effect of control on PO. The indirect effect did not become significant (95% CI [-0.11, 1.4]). But why? Assuming that there may be an ideal size for each person, deviations in both directions could lead to a reduction of perceived control and, in turn, PO. Consequently, we tested for a curvilinear, inverted U-shape on top of a linear relation between size/thumb and perceived control and PO. We ran the analysis using MEDCURVE (Hayes & Preacher, 2010).

In line with the idea of an ideal size per person, we found a significant quadratic effect of the phone/thumb ratio on perceived control and a linear effect of control on PO. Results indicate that larger and smaller sizes than a phone/thumb length ratio of  $\sim 1$  come along with lower control and, in turn, PO.

Concluding, our results attest to the assumption that PO can be deliberately influenced by the physical properties of an object. The reason for the relation between PO and size is that size influences perceived control. For many objects it seems that in particular increases in size lead to reduced control and PO. However, for some – most likely small - objects, there likely is a decrease in size can also reduce control and PO. Altering a products physical makeup is not just a matter of design but also affects the bond between product and individual.

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