Agency, Objects and the Dead: Can Consumer Culture Speak?

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Today, the mass accumulation of objects in one’s lifetime means that objects take on new meanings after death. And yet, the treatment of ‘death-objects’ in Consumer Culture Theory remains largely unexplored. Our paper aims to extend our understanding of the symbolic consumption of objects beyond death by asking, firstly, how do the dead exercise agency over objects they leave behind and, secondly, how do the living deal with the objects of dead persons? We argue that these questions pose new challenges for consumer culture researchers and lead us to a better understanding of the role of material objects in, and beyond, death.

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Whereas the man in the Middle Ages were “very acutely conscious that he had merely been granted a stay of execution, that this delay would be a brief one, and that death was always present within him...” (Ariès, 1976: 45), death in the twentieth century has become the greatest taboo, out of step with an essentially death-fearing culture. A paradox arises: whilst the post-modern man or woman is deeply consumerist, he or she is also ambivalent about how to dispose of the objects of those who have died. The act, art and science of death-disposal of objects becomes a source of considerable anxiety for the consumerist families that are left behind.

How do we do the objects of someone who has died? When someone dies, they leave their goods and material possessions behind, and it then falls to others to assume responsibility for disposal or redeployment. And it is usually those material possessions that the deceased actively resisted inevitable disposal and decay while alive which retain the most significance and symbolic value for the living.

All people die and when they are dead their rights of ownership cease to be enforceable. Indeed their rights of ownership of their own materiality—of their body—cease to exist and it is therefore inconceivable to imagine how the wishes of the dead in relation to their possessions could be anything other than a vicarious legacy for others to either fulfil of disregard. Of course not all goods that were cherished by the deceased are valued by their inheritors and visa versa. It is perfectly possible to imagine a situation in which objects that were held with little regard or value by now deceased owners can come to assume particular significance for those coming into their possession. Likewise possessions that were important to people prior to death can and often are considered worthless by their new owners.

To what extent do the dead exercise agency over the objects they leave behind? And how do the living exert their influence over the objects they choose to accompany the dead they bury or cremate? The agency of these objects is scarcely explored by consumer culture theory. Death objects are a class of goods which have some kind of coherent permanence and presence beyond the boundaries of their owner’s inevitable mortality. They are objects that were once loved, more or less, but become orphaned. And yet, it can be argued that these ‘death objects’ do not die a natural death like they would in pre-modern times. One feature of contemporary mass consumption is that people acquire much more—thus leave behind much more—than those that lived before them.

The requirement to dispose and distribute the accumulated goods of the dead is therefore a singularly significant feature of modern life. It is difficult to determine exactly what those near to death think about the accumulated material for which they are responsible. There is limited research on this, at least in the consumer research canon.

Examples of measured and planned- for divestment of material possessions after death (Miller, 2008) only illustrate further the perceived anxieties that one’s material remains can and do create unless managed and co-ordinated in some way.

Based on our provisional in-depth narrative interviews with the recently bereaved, it is clear that the possessions of the deceased assume different types of meanings and significance than those they were endowed with in life. The living relate to the objects of the dead in contradictory ways: while there is evidence that the death taboo is alive and well, there is also a new kind of materialistic discourse surrounding death objects which is akin to the commodity-fetish. Another set of interviews with ‘death service-providers’ reflect, and also shed light on, the commodification of desire: ashes into diamonds, luxury coffins, customised crystal and glass jewellery, gold carriages, dove displays, elaborate and expensive memorials and so on. A new discourse about the agency, the ‘voice’ and ‘desires’ of the dead person(s) emerges from our findings. Is this discourse evidence that the living are intent upon erasing the marginalisation and criminalization of the dead or, on the contrary, further proof that postmodern men and women are so divorced from death that we feel we need to speak on its behalf?

Douglas and Isherwood (1978) famously described how goods serve to make stable and visible categories of culture, and death-object-relations make stable and visible categories of death culture. All value is placed on life, and as a corollary only the living are entitled to exercise material value and ownership. It is not simply a case of recognising that it is not normal to be dead, but further, that it is a crime to be dead, a crime for which one is punished for, by having one’s goods and possessions taken away, one’s assets frozen and seized, and one’s consumer rights removed. It was not always thus. Kellner (1989: 103) writes:

“Things were quite different, Baudrillard claims, in other societies. In so called primitive societies there was no real distinction between life and death. One lived with the dead—their spirits, memories and achievements—and was early on initiated into the realm of the dead oneself, dying a symbolic death and being reborn into a symbolic world in which there was no difference between life and death. In these societies, symbolic exchange between life and death continuously took place, with gifts and ceremonies honouring the dead and favours or hostilities being visited on the living by the dead.

Is a ‘good death’ for the contemporary consumer, then, a gesture of defiance against modernity and a postmodern reaction to reclaim one’s death rights? If so, who speaks on its behalf? How can Consumer Culture speak about the desire to decriminalize death and the dead, to re-appropriate the agency of the objects of the dead and thus to reassert one’s rights to one’s own material wealth and symbolic value in death, and, ultimately, to acknowledge objects as agents to be revered, respected and cherished after death?

References
Ariès, Philippe (1976), Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present, Patricia M. Ranum (trans.), London: Marion Boyars.
“Written Just for Me?!” The Role of Consumer-Related Factors in the Persuasiveness of Personalized Communication
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Abstract
This study examined the effectiveness of personalized email newsletters in terms of increased attention, processing, attitude, intention, and behavior by means of an experiment (N=194). Participants randomly received either a newsletter containing one of three personalization strategies (identification, raising expectation of personalization, and contextualization) or a nonpersonalized one. Neither of the personalized messages was found to be superior to a standard message. However, a comparison of the personalization strategies showed that they were effective for different stages of the persuasion process, and the effects were moderated by consumers’ need for uniqueness, trust, and privacy concerns.

Does the Distribution-Sales Relationship Differ Between Channels and Countries? An Empirical Analysis
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Although it is intuitive that retailers should increase coverage of products that are selling well, it is somewhat less intuitive that retailers should take the risk of increasing coverage before sales increases have materialized in an effort to push these products on consumers. We use a simultaneous equation model to analyze sales and distribution coverage of two brands of an innovative new consumer durable in competing types of distribution channels in four European countries in order to examine whether retailers in different countries make their coverage decisions for a new durable product in the same ways.

A Typology of Consumption Value: Teasing out the Unique Properties of Utilitarian, Symbolic, Experiential, and Aesthetic Consumption Qualities
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In response to ambiguous and unclear conceptualization of well-known perspectives on consumption value, this research develops a typology of consumption. Based on a reading of relevant literature, essentially two dimensions give themselves—the purpose of the value and the nature of its attributes. In terms of purpose, value can be defined with respect to its ability to serve as means to some further ends versus its ability to serve as an end in itself. In terms of attribute nature, the attributes providing the value can be either immediately available for judgment through the consumers’ perceptual receptors or they may need to be construed in order to be judged properly.

Although consumers still, and to a considerable extent, derive value from bundles of attributes in terms of their ability to provide utility in relation to a consumers’ particular goal, other sources of value have been identified. Both symbolic and experiential or hedonic consumption have emerged and are now household names in the domain of consumer research, and more recently, the aesthetic aspects of consumption are receiving increased attention among consumer researchers. Unfortunately, these concepts are understood in diverse and sometimes overlapping ways.

This proposed research therefore seeks to identify unique categories of consumption value, including aesthetic value, that are distinguishable from one another and presumably have differential effect on consumer behavior. The current research develops a typology of consumption value bottom-up. Essentially, two dimensions present themselves, the purpose of the value (quality) and the nature of its attributes. In terms of purpose, value can be defined with respect to an object’s ability to serve as means to some further ends and its ability to serve as an end in itself. In terms of attribute nature, the attributes providing the value can be either immediately available for judgment through the perceptual receptors or they may need to be construed in order to be judged properly.

UTILITARIAN VALUE
Utilitarian value refers to something’s value as determined by its use or function. In this perspective, an object has utilitarian value to the extent that consumer find it useful to accomplish a goal they might have and the consumer’s endeavors are motivated by this extrinsic goal (Bettman 1979; Ratchford 1975).