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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Perpetual Dispossession: an Exploration of Ownership Without Possession

Matthew Hall, University of Nebraska - Lincoln, USA

Xin Zhao, Lancaster University Management School, UK

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Perpetual Dispossession: An Exploration of Ownership without Possession

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ABSTRACT

We examine disruptions in the consumption cycle as possessions are divested of meanings but never disposed. This perpetual process of dispossession results in legal ownership of objects without explicit incorporation into the self. Through an ethnographic approach we examine factors contributing to perpetual dispossession and discuss implications for the extended self.

INTRODUCTION

The consumption cycle is a process consisting of object acquisition, consumption, possession, and disposition (Arnould and Thompson 2005). A separate process called dispossession is used to remove meaning from objects prior to their disposition, which is the final act of physical and/or legal severance of control over an object (Roster 2014; Young and Wallendorf 1989). This study examines factors that disrupt disposition, as well as the processes by which consumers indefinitely retain dispossessed objects. We refer to this process as perpetual dispossession, in which an object is emotionally or psychologically dispossessed but never physically disposed. This understudied phenomenon results in a disruption of the consumption cycle causing objects to enter a purgatory-like state in which they are neither incorporated into the self nor discarded.

Previous literature has examined intrinsic individual factors contributing to object retention. However, this stream of research has failed to consider extrinsic factors that deter disposition of unvalued objects. Likewise, previous research has examined objects incorporated into the extended self without legal ownership (Chen 2009), but the inverse relationship remains unexplored. This paper attempts to address these gaps by examining multiple factors that disrupt disposal causing unvalued objects to be legally owned but perpetually dispossessed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption Cycle

Previous work has conceptualized the consumption cycle as a process of acquisition, consumption, possession, and disposal (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Possessions are often consumed and/or incorporated into the extended self as a function of their value. Such objects derive value in a number of ways including acting as props for social roles and identity narratives (Ahuvia 2005; Kleine and Kleine 2000), and by signifying relationships (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). Other important factors in determining an object's value are its associated feelings of attachment, meaning, and satisfaction (Kleine and Baker 2004). High-attachment objects are closely linked with the possessor's self-worth, which increases the strength of the self-possession link and serves as a deterrent to disposal (Ferraro, Escalas, and Bettman 2011). When attachment, meaning, and satisfaction begin to decrease, objects decline in value and typically become candidates for disposal (Jacoby et al. 1977; Parsons and Maclaran 2009).

Prior to disposal objects are dispossessed, which entails the use of various processes to psychologically or emotionally detach oneself from a possession (Roster 2001). Once an object is removed from the self, it is ready for disposal, which signifies the final physical and legal severance of control over an object (Roster 2001). Objects are often disposed if they no longer provide utility, meaning, or satisfaction (Vanier et al. 1987), fail to contribute to the owner's

identity or self-image (Belk 1988; Phillips and Seago 2011), and during role transitions (Young 1991).

While we believe this traditional view of the consumption cycle is accurate, we show that there may be disruptions in the cycle that prevent objects from reaching the final disposal stage. In this study, we focus on disruptions in the liminal process between dispossession and disposition, in which objects are psychologically and emotionally dispossessed, but not physically disposed for an indefinite period.

Intrinsic Traits Influencing Object Retention

Nearly all prior work on object retention has examined how intrinsic personal traits increase the likelihood of object retention. Most recently, Haws et al. (2012) introduced the concept of product retention tendency as a "consumer lifestyle trait that reflects an individual's general propensity to retain consumption-related possessions." This is similar to what Coulter and Ligas (2003) refer to as a "packrat". Additional traits including consumer frugality (Lastovicka et al. 1999) and materialism (Richins and Dawson 1992) can also deter disposition. Similarly, Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong (2009) found that individuals retain unneeded objects in order to maintain a sense of security. While these previous studies examine how individual differences can contribute to object retention, we add to the literature by examining how object or storage characteristics can contribute to perpetual dispossession.

Hoarding

Hoarding is a psychiatric disease recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (Herring 2014). It is important to distinguish the behaviors of our informants from those of clinically diagnosed hoarders (Haws et al. 2012). Hoarding is characterized by holding on to possessions too long, cluttering the home, failing to clean, and harboring too many things (Herring 2014). These possessions are typically "stored" in non-marginal living spaces causing clutter and disorganization (Maycroft 2009). In this study, we spent considerable time in informants' homes and made efforts to identify characteristics of hoarding as described in previous literature (Herring 2014). No hoarding behaviors were observed in our participants.

METHODS

This study employed an ethnographic approach combining observation and depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews (McCracken 1988) were conducted with 16 informants (10 female, 6 male; age range from 24 to 75). Each interview lasted from 40-80 minutes. All interviews were conducted in informants' homes and were audio recorded. Informants were recruited through personal networks and snowballed through the networks of initial informants. Informants were purposively selected to gain insight into the phenomenon and provide a diverse range of perspectives.

Each long interview began with grand tour questions (McCracken 1988) about storage and disposition habits, followed by a discussion of each informant's storage spaces. Next, the interviewer was led on a tour of the informant's storage spaces, during which the informant identified objects with little current value in terms of associated meanings and attachment (Sivadas and Venkatesh 1995). When an object was found in the ambiguous state of being neither currently valued nor disposed, it was discussed in detail to understand the processes by which the object was dispossessed but re-

tained. This process was repeated with multiple objects to elicit various discourses regarding the meaning associated with these objects, factors contributing to retention, and the potential for future disposal.

Our data collection and analysis were iterative. Initial interviews were analyzed to develop understandings of emic motifs by allowing the “emergent nature of the phenomena reveal its characteristics to the researchers” (Tadejewski 2006). Comparisons were made to refine, challenge, and modify these themes during subsequent data collection and analysis (Spiggle 1994).

FINDINGS

While the objects we found varied greatly across informants on a number of factors (acquisition, length of ownership, monetary value, etc.), they were all discussed as having little sentimental or functional significance causing owners to express uncertainty about retention. Previous studies have discussed how intrinsic personal characteristics can increase the likelihood of retention. Our findings replicate this work by showing that individual traits such as high product retention tendency, materialism, waste reduction, and collecting tendencies can lead to object retention. In addition, our findings also show that certain properties of the object or disposal situation can prevent disposition

Object Disruption Factors

Our findings indicate that certain characteristics of the object can influence retention, even if the product is not incorporated into the owner’s extended self.

Investment Guilt

Investment guilt occurs when past investment in an object disrupts disposition by creating feelings of guilt associated with disposal. In these situations, individuals did not place current value on the object in terms of incorporation into the self, but rather felt some connection to its past valuation. Grace offers an example:

“I bought this this blender like 5 years ago...I used it a few times and realized it wasn’t going to work for what I needed. Since I had already used it, I couldn’t return it...since it was so expensive, I didn’t feel right about getting rid of it...That being said, it hasn’t moved off that shelf in probably 5 years...”

Relational Guilt

Previous research has explored the relational significance of possessions (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Such objects can serve as mementos of key relationships in the life narrative (Ahuvia 2005) and as sources of “inalienable wealth” in the case of heirlooms (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004). However, in these situations, the object is still incorporated into the self. Our findings suggest that a dispossessed object’s value is often not derived from the object itself or from the relationship it signifies. Rather, its significance can stem from the value the third party places on the object. Ellie discusses how disposing of such objects might evoke feelings of guilt:

“This is a bunch of my old stuff from when I was a kid. I will probably get rid of most of it when my mom dies, which sounds terrible, but it’s the truth. I know she loves that I have it, so in my mind it is better to keep it for her sake than to throw it out. [I: So do you feel any attachment to the objects because of your mother?] Not really. I don’t even know what most of it is. I just keep it because I know mom likes that I have it.”

Connell and Wong (2011) also found that individuals use consumption relationships with close others as an attempt to extend their personal identity. If that extension is rejected, it can cause feelings of resentment or abandonment from the extender. Thus, our informants felt guilt over the potential resentment that would accompany disposal.

Future Value

Informants also reported keeping objects for their potential future value. In each case, the object either had been stripped of value through dispossession or was never incorporated into the self upon acquisition. However, these objects were retained for future use if the need should arise.

Frank: “These [golf clubs] used to be my uncle’s...I always wanted to get into golf so he gave them to me. I’ve probably had them for 15 years. I just never got around to playing but always wanted to keep them just in case I ever decided to give it a try.”

Frank reported keeping his golf clubs because they signify an ideal role he hopes to one day assume. Other informants reported keeping objects for roles they plan to assume in the near future. Previous studies have found that individuals keep objects because of their potential future value for themselves or others (Coulter and Liggas 2003) and that possessions can act as props or signifiers of past, present, and future roles (Kleine et al. 1995). Prior research has also discussed identity-related possessions as objects an individual perceives to be useful for enacting a particular identity or role (Kleine et al. 1993) and that objects play various roles in different life stages (Gentry, Baker, and Kraft 1995). Our findings show that objects providing no value or significance for the current self may be kept for their value in a future role, even if the individual is uncertain when, or if, this future role will be assumed.

Passing on the responsibility of disposal

When feelings of guilt were associated with the thought of disposal, informants discussed their plans to pass the responsibility of disposal on to others.

“My mother in law gave me this handmade [item]. I think it’s hideous, so of course I don’t put it out. It just sits in a closet. [I: Will you ever get rid of it?] I never could. I will probably give it to one of the kids. Whichever one of them is [lucky] enough to get it can figure out how they want to get rid of it.”

Alice’s response shows that her actions will free her from the guilt of disposal by making another individual responsible for disposition. This guilt is relational in nature, and respondents self-regulated their behavior in order to avoid guilt associated with transgressing against another (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994).

Effort Disruption

We also found that various factors can prevent disposal when ongoing value assessments are conducted (Roster 2001). The first is effort disruption, in which owners compare disposal effort with retention value.

Ellie: “I guess I could have a garage sale, but that sounds like a lot of time and energy that I don’t have. I guess I could just donate them...but who knows if I’ll get around to it. It just seems easier to leave them where they are as long as we have the space. I know that’s a terrible explanation, but it just seems so much easier than the alternatives....”

Ellie's motive for retention is greater than the effort required for disposal. Although some individuals may inherently be more likely to expend effort for disposal, our findings suggest that there are characteristics about the object and the storage location that can increase the perceived disposal effort.

Locational Disruption

Linda: "I mean, I don't know why I would throw any of this stuff away as long as we have the space to keep it. If we did throw it away, then our basement would just be empty."

As shown in Linda's discourse, the availability of storage space was also found to significantly influence the intrinsic, object valuation and disposal effort factors that disrupt disposition. This relates to previous work on the rise of consumerism and increasing average house sizes in America (Jacobs 2015). As available space and the desire to accumulate possessions increases, it becomes more difficult for individuals to dispose of things, even unvalued objects.

In addition, an object's storage location can deter disposition by preventing ongoing value assessments from occurring. Many informants described objects as "out of sight, out of mind". This metaphor often described objects kept in marginal storage locations (McCracken 1986).

Beth: "I need to put those things on a garage sale or take them on my next trip to goodwill. But the next trip or the next sale will come and go and I'll never remember to get them. It's kind of an out of sight out of mind kind of a thing. I see them periodically, but not often enough to remember to do something with them."

Informants also reported that objects in storage tend to hide in plain sight. An object's location can become so seemingly natural that the owners fail to notice them.

Ellie: "See, when I said that I don't even notice this stuff, I meant it. Here sit two old, metal sifters that we have probably had for three years sitting on this shelf...I think they have just been sitting on that shelf for so long that I think they belong there...It's like they aren't even there. The only way I would notice them is if they weren't there. You know, if they weren't in their spot."

Ellie's discussion of the sifters show little attachment, nor do they serve as a link to other people, yet they have sat in the same spot on the garage shelf for years. The absence of explicit significant meanings indicates the sifters are not part of Ellie's current sense of self. They have been divested of meaning but not disposed, resulting in perpetual dispossession. Ellie's discourse also indicates that dispossessed objects seem to have a "place" in their storage location (Strasser 1999). Therefore, not only do objects blend into their environments, but owners also feel that they belong there. This blending effect was common across most informants and was more prevalent in high traffic storage areas. Clearly disposition cannot occur when the owner is not aware of the object's existence. This reinforces findings by Korosec-Serfaty (1984) who found that consumers often lose track of their accumulated possessions.

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that the process between dispossession and disposition is often disrupted, causing objects to enter a state of perpetual dispossession, in which they are legally owned but not explicitly incorporated into the owner's sense of self. In other words,

objects become mired in this purgatory-like state when they are divested of meanings, but not disposed. While previous research indicates that dispossession occurs only after possessions are selected for disposal, our findings show that objects can be dispossessed when disposal is not the ultimate intent. In these situations, meaning is removed from an object in terms of its contribution to the owner's current extended self, but the object is retained due to characteristics of the object or its storage location.

The objects we examined did not explicitly contribute to the owners' current senses of self. Rather, objects were valued for something they once contributed in the past or may contribute in the future. This indicates that objects can have liminal significance as they once contributed to a past role, become obsolete in current roles, but may again be needed in some future role. This relates to the notion of liquid modernity, as individuals have more fluid and less well-defined extended selves through the assumption of various identities, roles, and relationships (Bauman 2000). Thus, product retention may occur due to anticipated or potential future shifts in identity. If an object is retained due to one of these aforementioned factors, owners often experience feelings of guilt associated with disposal. When individuals experience such guilt, the object is dispossessed indefinitely until the disposal responsibility can be passed on.

Available storage space also disrupts disposition by initially causing owners to retain divested objects or by preventing objects from being evaluated as candidates for disposal. The increasing availability of storage space and its importance to the American consumer is a sociocultural phenomenon influencing consumption in the United States as the household is seen as a "box to be filled with commodities" (Hayden 1984). This phenomenon can be traced to post-World War II America as the government established policies encouraging urban dwellers to move to new suburban developments with larger houses, creating an association between dwelling space and affluence (Jacobs 2015). This caused house size and the accumulation of possessions to become synonymous with success and prosperity, resulting in an increasingly materialistic culture. This has also resulted in what Cushman (1990) refers to as the "empty self", an identity in which individuals are soothed by consumption, but are never satisfied. The combined effect of these phenomena is increased retention of dispossessed objects, regardless of their current value or contribution to the self.

In addition to increasing storage space, lack of object visibility can also disrupt disposal. In some instances, visibility was low due to storage in inaccessible or marginal locations. Additionally, many informants reported that objects in more accessible locations tended to blend into their storage environments. Many informants reported not noticing objects in plain sight or that objects had a "spot" in the storage space. This is similar to Coupland's (2005) findings on the "Invisible Brand" in which "household members are so habituated to the stable presence of the brand over time that it recedes into the background... [and] can go unnoticed for lengths of time" (Coupland 2005). Our findings show that Coupland's framework extends beyond household brands and includes dispossessed objects kept in storage. One possible explanation for this lack of visibility is increasing clutter in the American home (Arnold and Lang 2007). Clutter is more common because the average American household has accumulated double the possessions as their counterparts 25 years ago (Schor 1991). Increased accumulation results in a mismatch between the amount of owned goods and amount of space in which to store them (Whybrow 2005), resulting in increased difficulty when selecting objects for disposal.

Our findings also show that the effort associated with disposal is another significant factor that impedes disposition. Disposal effort

is very complex, consisting of intrinsic traits like procrastination and laziness, cognitive factors like object valuation, and situational factors like the storage location (Senecal, Lavoie, and Koestner 1997). The perception that much effort is required for seemingly simple tasks such as disposing of small, mundane objects may result from increasing consumer busyness. This sociocultural phenomenon results in Americans associating high levels of busyness with success or affluence (Greenfeld 2005). As individuals create the illusion of self-importance through busyness, mundane tasks like the disposition of unwanted goods may seem too menial to warrant valued personal time. Thus, goods are retained through perpetual dispossession.

In addition to the retention of dispossessed objects, our results can have broader implications in regards to our understanding of the extended self. Belk's (1988) original conceptualization of the extended self suggested that all things considered "mine" are considered "me", or incorporated into the extended self. Subsequent work has distinguished between possessions that are "me" and "not me" in terms of their relevance to particular identity narratives (Kleine et al. 1995). Our findings support Kleine et al.'s position that certain owned objects are incorporated into the extended self while others are not. We refer to the latter as a state of owning without possessing.

While previous studies have examined the use of possessions and consumption to help solidify identities during transitional periods (Mehta and Belk 1991; Noble and Walker 1997), we find that objects are often purposely held in a state of perpetual dispossession as owners wait for various identities to be assumed. Our findings also further develop this conceptualization by presenting the extended self as a fluid state in which objects are incorporated and dispossessed as they do or do not provide value in terms of functionality, sentiment, and attachment (Ball and Tasaki 1992; Kleine and Baker 2004), contribution to roles and identity narratives (Ahuvia 2005), and relationships (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). In other words, while our findings do support previous research that possessions have value to the self in these various ways, they also suggest that this contribution can be temporary in nature. Possessions can be incorporated into the self for a period as they provide value, but then be dispossessed when this value diminishes or is no longer relevant to the owner.

Our findings also indicate that divestment of meaning, or dispossession, is not an end-all process only used to prepare an object for disposal. Rather, divestment processes (McCracken 1986) may be used to temporarily or indefinitely remove meaning. Objects often stay in this state of perpetual dispossession until their value is rediscovered or assumed in a different role or identity, at which point the object is reincorporated into the self (Noble and Walker 1997). Further research should explore the repeated dispossession and reincorporation of possessions into the self as a result of various roles and identities being assumed.

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