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## **Neither Wasted Nor Wanted: Theorising the Failure to Dispossess Objects of Ambiguous Value**

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What happens to things when they are neither wasted nor wanted? When their meaning is at best ambiguous? This invisible product category is stored, sometimes indefinitely, embedded in the cultural values of cleanliness, frugality and altruism. This vast but untapped resource urgently needs to be brought back to the market.

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# Neither Wasted nor Wanted: Theorising the Failure to Dispossess Objects of Ambiguous Value

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## INTRODUCTION

Consumer research has traditionally presented the consumption process in three stages – acquisition, consumption and disposition (de Coverly et al. 2008; Jacoby, Berning, and Dietvorst 1977) and it is assumed that consumers will naturally move through the process (Cross, Leizerovici, and Pirouz 2017). Whereas commodity acquisition and utilisation have been researched extensively, disposition has received scant attention – a curiosity given its ubiquity and significance in consumer's lives (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Disposition is a significant issue. Whether it is a painful process, during which individuals endure an experience akin to the death of some piece of themselves or the joyful shedding of objects imbued with an unwanted self, disposition is an integral part of modern life (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price et al. 2000). There are exceptions to this process, for example, hoarders, collectors and particularly frugal consumers retain commodities beyond their expected life cycle (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Coulter and Ligas 2003; Haws et al. 2012; Lastovicka et al. 1999). Indeed, there are certain categories of goods which are retained indefinitely either due to their emotional or financial value (Belk et al. 1989; Jacoby et al. 1977). Epp and Price (2010) ask why some valued items are banished to storage while others remain in active use. Items which are no longer useful may also be kept, living indefinitely in nooks and crannies around the home. These items are particularly interesting for consumer researchers because their retention in consumer homes reveal that assumptions regarding disposition processes need to be re-examined. As such, this paper asks what happens to things when they are neither wasted nor wanted, when the little meaning they initially held was tied to another, more valuable object or when they have been replaced.

This paper stems from a larger project exploring technological waste disposition. Analysis revealed a kind of object which is retained indefinitely, which does not hold special meaning, is not particularly valuable or personal. These objects are of ambiguous value to the owner (including obsolete cell phones, laptops, unused cables, lockless keys, long paid bills) – objects that seem to hover between being wanted and wasted - they hold the ghost of meaning or the possibility of (re)use.

## DIVESTMENT IN THE LITERATURE

Divestment serves as our point of departure, drawing on the current understanding of how a commodity's meaning, and thus value, typically defines its terms of possession and eventual disposal (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price et al. 2000). Disposition literature can be broadly divided along three fault lines: the disposition process (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; McCracken 1986; Young 1991), meanings and self-reference (Belk 1988; Richins 1994) and buyer-seller relationships (McCracken 1987; Price et al. 2000).

Jacoby, Berning and Dietvorst (1977) described three kinds of disposition behaviour, keeping the product, permanently disposing of the product or temporarily disposing of the product. Subsequent research revealed disposition as an ongoing process (rather than a discrete event), composed of emotional and physical detachment (Cherrier 2009; Young and Wallendorf 1989). The process of disposition entails several stages – distancing (the object is moved to

the homes extremities), critical events (major life events) and value assessments (where the financial, utilitarian, symbolic value of an object is assessed) (Hirschman, Ruvio, and Belk 2012; Roster 2001). This is particularly pertinent when individuals are facing a "role transition" or a change in their life when objects with particularly significant symbolic meaning are discarded (Young 1991).

Meaning is the source of an object's value, both that ascribed by the owner (private meaning) and that which is ascribed by society (public meaning) (Grayson and Shulman 2000; Richins 1994). Disposition research tends to focus on positively valenced objects, "special" or "favourite" things (Price et al. 2000; Roster 2014; Schultz, Klein, and Kernan 1989). However, there are exceptions, Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) address items which are negatively valenced. How an individual experiences detachment from an object is determined by that object's associated meaning (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Young and Wallendorf 1989). It is long established that objects hold both functional and symbolic meaning, symbolically things maintain a connection between possessions and their possessor's history, values, and relationships (Belk 1988).

Divestment rituals manage these meanings (McCracken 1986; Rook 1985) allowing individuals to part with their possessions. A number of rituals have since been uncovered; the transference a vessel's private meaning's essence to an icon eases the vessel's divestment as consumers can retain part of the positively charged meaning held in the vessel, reducing the need for emotional detachment. Alternatively, an item can be moved item to a "transition place" thus eroding private meaning associated with the item and preventing contagion. Cleaning and organising items before they are divested serves two functions - removing the private meanings which became attached through personalisation (Belk, 1989) and reassembling the public meaning of new store-bought commodities by mimicking the condition in which the item was bought (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price et al. 2000).

The final ritual described by Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) is the rendering of private meanings public - this occurred where the other rituals had failed or had not been attempted, here the sellers explained the importance of the item to a potential buyer. Positively charged or sacred artefacts may never be sold (Belk 1989; Belk, Sherry, Jr., and Wallendorf 2002), however, where necessary older consumers tend to seek heirs/buyers with whom they then share the history of various artefacts to create a legacy (Price et al. 2000). Disposing consumers seek buyers with common identities, a shared sense of self, to ensure that conveyed meaning is fully understood and appreciated by the potential buyer (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005).

According to Belk (1988) objects to which individuals are no longer attached, things which no longer represent their desired selves, represent their undesired selves and those things which have fallen into disuse typically face disposal. Exceptions to this rule include hoarders and "packrats" (Coulter and Ligas 2003; Orr, Preston-Shoot, and Braye 2017) however, the tendency or hoard may also be associated with the nature of the object, evidence suggests that certain disused or obsolete objects tend to be stored (Saphores et al. 2009) but good estimates of the volume of e-waste stored by US households are still unavailable. In this context, we make two contributions

based on a national random survey of 2136 US households. First, we explain how much e-waste is stored by US households using count models. Significant explanatory variables include age, marital and employment status, ethnicity, household size, previous e-waste recycling behavior, and to some extent education, home ownership, and understanding the consequences of recycling, but neither income nor knowledge of e-waste recycling laws. Second, we estimate that on average, each US household has 4.1 small (???)10 pounds.

## METHOD

This research explored the disposition processes of obsolete and/or broken electrical and electronic items. Drawing on twenty-six in-depth interviews with thirty participants aged between 19 and 60, in which each one was asked a series of questions concerning their relationship to electronics, experiences with technological waste and dispositional routines. Typically the participants were known to the interviewer ensuring an open discussion of their possessions and related meanings (Hirschman et al. 2012). To move beyond richly textured descriptions, the majority of interviews involved walking with participants around their homes, including visits to their garages and attics and other spaces in which unused technological items were located. This modification on the walking interview (Hein, Evans, and Jones 2008) was ideal as it exposed parts of the home generally not considered by consumer researchers and offered researchers further opportunity to query the participants "collections". In so doing an array of objects were revealed which seemed to be connected only by their place of rest. Indeed, it seems goods of ambiguous value are stored throughout the home including in drawers, boxes, bags and on shelves.

The interviews were intended to address certain broad topics and were largely unstructured. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, they lasted between 30 and 120 minutes. The transcriptions, supplemented with field notes and photographs comprise the data drawn on for this research. Researchers conducted thematic analysis generating "thick description" (Geertz 1973) and "thick interpretation" (Denzin 2001). Given the paucity of research concerning e-waste disposition this kind of exploratory research was deemed most appropriate (Deshpande 1983; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Emergent interpretations were triangulated across researchers (Miles and Huberman 1994) and interrogated in light of extant literature. This method illuminated the subjective (emic) consumer experience of waste disposition (or retention) and the cultural (etic) meaning of that experience. This process elucidated three prominent cultural values as discussed below.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first being that the objects in question, despite being obsolete or broken are *clean* and therefore do not offend order— this is captured by the cultural value of *cleanliness*. Second, participants will keep things which may be useful in the future, this is a form of waste aversion described by Lastovicka et al., (1999) as *frugality*. Finally, individuals retained items which may be useful to members of their social network, this we termed *altruism*. Cleanliness, frugality and altruism are, what Nicosia and Mayer (1976) describe as cultural values - "(a) they are widely held beliefs, (b) they affirm what is desirable, and (c) they have some impact on activities" (p. 67).

*Cleanliness* is determined by existent cultural values, blueprints which govern appropriate behaviour (McCracken 1986; Nicosia and Mayer 1976). Participants reported storing significant quantities of clean but broken or obsolete "stuff", Lexi's (F26) parents ignore her urgings to divest old electronics:

Lexi: Five boxes filled with this stuff... Then I put them all outside of their door. So, they literally had to fall over it in the morning to get away from this thing so that they wouldn't avoid it and pretend that it doesn't exist. They just moved it out of the way, and now they continue to walk past it. This was four years ago. They still don't acknowledge the boxes of stuff. I have been like, look through it, tell me what you want, throw it out. They just walk past it. They don't acknowledge it.

These boxes of "stuff" can simply be pushed aside, they are not perceived as *dirty*, they are not "clearly out of place" and therefore they do not offend order (Dion, Sabri, and Guillard 2014, 584). "Dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder... Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment" (Douglas 1966, 2). The contents of these boxes are of ambiguous value, they linger in the margins of our homes, although no longer actively wanted they are not imbued with the definitive property of "waste", they are *clean*.

"Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as, ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (Douglas 1966, 36). Martin clearly expresses the idea that his family's "technological garbage" is not a contaminant, rather it is clean:

Martin: I feel that there is a lot of technological, like, garbage in our house now. There are also a lot of chords, like flying around, it's not like they are lying around everywhere or it's messy, it's all in, like, a place.

The European understanding of defilement pertains to hygiene and aesthetics, pathogens and disease. Contaminants or contagions are *naturally* defined by their visible state of cleanliness, thus items such as these unused electronics, things which will not decompose, will not offend the symbolic order, and thus they can be retained (McCracken 1984). Product retention is "a consumer lifestyle trait that reflects an individual's general propensity to retain consumption-related possessions" (Haws et al. 2012, 225). Here, we argue that consumer will retain products despite no longer wanting them if they do not offend order.

The second theme, *frugality* is a dominant theme across the data:

Mae: I was just absorbing electronic devices until I could no longer keep them. And then when I moved... We just hoard things, that's what we do. Like, once we have something, we don't like to get rid of it, because we are never going to get it again... But, yeah, disposing of electronics comes pretty hard for me. Like, even if something doesn't work quite right like, I don't want to get rid of it.

For some, Mae included, actually owning (almost) functioning electronics offers some comfort, she views any sort of disposition as a lost opportunity, it is disappointing and ominous, in the past, she has sold electronic items in times of need. Mae's discomfort in divestment is embedded in frugality – defined as restraint "in acquiring and in resourcefully using economic goods and services to achieve longer-term goals" (Lastovicka et al. 1999, 88) offspring number, size and energetic investment, larval planktonic period, morphology and survivorship. This paper reviews a decade of research into the control and consequences of the traits associated with planktonic and lecithotrophy in *S. benedicti*. The dominant control on

reproductive and developmental characters is genetic. Significant additive genetic variance has been detected for egg diameter, fecundity, larval planktonic period and aspects of larval morphology. However, environmental factors such as temperature, food quality and photoperiod, and intrinsic factors such as maternal age, exert considerable influence on non-trophic developmental traits (e.g., offspring number, size and energy content. People in this situation may be less likely to divest unless under real pressure to do so or the items resurrection is impossible (Saunders 2010). Other participants described the joy in fixing old objects, in problem-solving using the “tools” in their collection. Haws *et al.*, (2012) link creativity and frugality arguing that frugal consumers tend towards creative reuse of their stuff and, where possible, it is this creative frugality which will prompt individuals to distribute their unwanted electronics amongst their social network to ensure their continued use (Coulter and Ligas 2003; Price *et al.* 2000).

Reuben embodies the third cultural value underlying the retention of objects of ambiguous value; *altruism* is key to social integration, it is considered to be the foundation of human friendship and is at the heart of kinship (Brañas-Garza *et al.* 2010; Curry, Roberts, and Dunbar 2013).

Reuben: The [bits of an old PC] are currently stored in a box to go to my brother-in-law, who really wants to get into playing PC games and does, he is after going back to College as well, and works in [name of fast food store], and doesn't have the money to do it. So, I am waiting to get one or two final pieces and then give him the machine. If he will get the use out of it, rather than it going to a landfill or trying to make sure that it gets recycled properly like, it's way better.

Kin altruism features heavily in this research, electronic items move readily through family networks (sharing in). However, items do move to acquaintances and, even, strangers (sharing out) (Belk 2010). This practice is unproblematic unless these items are stored indefinitely for the potential use of another. Product retention has been researched in the context of “packrats” and hoarders, individuals who keep things beyond their functional or symbolic use (Coulter and Ligas 2003; Guillard and Pinson 2017).

**CONCLUSION**

This research explicates the cultural context in which consumers store objects of ambiguous value, indefinitely. Importantly, this kind of product retention is not limited to “packrats” or hoarders (Coulter and Ligas 2003; Guillard and Pinson 2017), rather, it is commonplace amongst typical consumers. In conceptualising the cultural blueprints for product retention we contribute to the divestment literature, adding a category of product which is “hoarded” by typical consumers and we aim to influence policymaking in this area. As technology progresses the volume of obsolete products is quickly increasing, as are the items which will fall into this invisible category. Thus, it is argued that, in this time of resource depletion, hyperconsumption and growing environmental concern these hoarded technological products are a vast and untapped resource. There is an urgent need to bring these items back to the market. Indeed emergent economic models such as the Sharing Economy and the Circular Economy rely on consumers sharing, gifting or recycling of their unwanted resources (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013; Scaraboto 2015).

Etic Theme	Quotation 1	Quotation 2	Quotation 3
<p>Cleanliness: This theme was developed via thematic analysis - participants described their technological waste in terms of “junk” or “defunct” but did not consider their collection to be a contaminant.</p> <p>The perceived cleanliness of technological and electronic waste means that it can be stored in the home for extended periods.</p> <p>Steve, Gramme and Rory all expressed having stored defunct or obsolete items in their homes.</p> <p>Frugality presents as waste aversion. Frugal consumers are creative. Marjje describes her husbands endeavours to reuse broken items in an effort to avoid waste.</p> <p>Consumers retain defunct objects as a consequence of perceived frugality.</p>	<p>Gramme: Yeah. Like that is a Bluetooth thing I got off a boyfriend once, that you stick up in the car. It didn't really ever work very well. Now some of these things aren't mine, they are just left here. I think that is some kind of internet connection. This is an old camera. That's just general, kind of, junk. [Broken] headphones, yeah, I just leave them in here.</p> <p>Marjje: He would keep toasters and kettles. He would keep everything, do you know what I mean. A lot of the electric stuff, he hates, old electrical stuff, he hates to part with, because it could be used for something. It will make something else. It will be adapted to do something else. Nuts, I know, but he does.</p> <p>James: My memories might be a little bit blurred because I seem to remember giving at least one TV to a family that Catherine is friendly with. Okay. They are just a really nice family. The Dad is like a Pastor in the African Church in Cobh</p>	<p>Steve: There was a lot of crap in my room and things all tangled up. And I would have kept lots of things and but once you realise that they are completely defunct! And I checked the phones and these are all dead. I would have gave to Jack and Jill also.</p>	<p>Martin: Three weeks ago, I saw a pair of headphones on the floor that were broken, and I took it, and I threw it in the bin. Save the Planet... It's better than when it's rotting somewhere in nature like. I think there is still a difference between throwing something away and burning it, that's not environmentally friendly, but there is still a difference to just throwing it out into the woods like. It's just unnecessary. I don't know</p> <p>Derdrie: My second [laptop] was intermitted working so I kind of thought maybe that is fixable because that was one I had bought a couple of years ago, but I didn't actively need it because I was able to do everything that I needed through the laptop that I have for work. So it still works.</p> <p>Gramme: The previous one, I gave to my friend's husband, because he wanted a phone, so I said he could have my old phone because I was getting a new one. So, I just cleaned it out and I just gave it to him.</p>
<p>Altruism: Participants often described sharing their unwanted products either with family and friends or with strangers. This is linked to frugality in that many participants articulated a desire that their products continue being used.</p> <p>Where frugality and altruism meet consumers tend to share these possessions with family members, friends and strangers.</p>	<p>Pete: I had a yogurt maker of all things. Yeah. I think I had an old VHS cassette recorder, a few bits like that. What I did is, in the UK we have this Network called “Freecycle” or “Freegal”. They are community-based boards whereby you can say that you are giving, you've got these items here to give away for free, and interested parties might want to say, “okay, I will message you to arrange an appointment”, we will meet up and then they will just take away the items</p>		



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