Disposing of the Self: The Role of Attachment in the Disposition Process

Sara Loughran Dommer
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 16802

Karen Page Winterich*
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 16802; kpw2@psu.edu

Current Opinion in Psychology

*Denotes Corresponding Author.
Abstract

It is well established that individuals have strong attachment to many possessions, but they cannot keep all these possessions forever. Disposition has received relatively limited attention in the literature though it is clear that disposition is significantly influenced by attachment. We review the burgeoning number of studies examining how possession attachment influences disposition. Attachment is influential at each stage of the disposition process, from the decision to stop using an object, the decision to dispose of an object, and the choice of disposal type. We end with a call for further research on disposal, particularly that which considers the role of object attachment at earlier stages of the disposition process.
“Discard everything that does not spark joy.” – Marie Kondo

"True wealth is the ability to let go of your possessions." – Unknown

The above quotes suggest that individuals should regularly dispose rather than retain their possessions. On the surface, disposal might not seem like a difficult process. We live in a throwaway society, where many things are readily disposed of. And yet the difficulty of disposal is evidenced by the rise in storage units and an entire industry devoted to home organization, much of which entails disposition of existing goods. If individuals could easily part with their goods, Marie Kondo would not be a best-selling author and have a hit Netflix series. While it may be easy to discard those possessions to which one does not hold attachment, disposition becomes much more challenging when there is emotional attachment to an object. In such cases one must both physically dispose of the good but also emotionally divest themselves of their attachment to the good [1,2].

Individuals acquire an extensive number of possessions, many of which play a significant role in their lives, as they signify one’s identity, status, relationships, memories, and more [3], but they cannot all be retained forever. Given the obvious challenge that individuals face when seeking to dispose of possessions to which they are attached, research has started to investigate disposal, acknowledging the influential role of attachment [4]. We review this literature, focusing on that since 2015, considering the role of attachment at each state of the disposition process and the research questions that remain to be explored.

THE DISPOSITION PROCESS
Disposal is the process of getting rid of something or dealing with it conclusively. Key to this definition is that disposal is a process [5,6,7] as one first must stop using an object, then determine whether to retain the item or dispose of it; if the decision to dispose is made there are a variety of options for disposal, with the selected option influenced by attachment to the object. In other words, the disposition process is like a decision tree with three decision points (Figure 1). We consider each decision point and the role that possession attachment plays in each decision.

Figure 1: Disposition Process

Note: Dashed lines indicate the path that is more likely to occur for objects to which one holds attachment.

ATTACHMENT EXTENDS USAGE
“The first step of product disposal takes place when the consumer stops using (or does not use) a product that still maintains its ability to function” [4]. If an individual is attached to an item, she is likely to use it longer. A t-shirt to which an individual has no attachment may sit in a closet unused (unworn) for years, but the t-shirt to which she is attached is worn over and over again even after becoming tattered. When objects are relevant to an identity, individuals satiate more slowly, which results in continued use of objects [8]. Indeed, mobile phone users who received emotional value from their phone were less likely to feel satiated, thereby continuing to use their phone longer before replacing it [9], even beyond effects of brand and price [10].

Usage may be influenced not only by attachment to a particular good, but also by a consumption identity such as frugality more generally. Frugal individuals tend to continue using products longer than average, even finding alternative uses for items they currently own [11]. However, they can be motivated to dispose of products when ownership conveys a negative image [12]. Similarly, when newer, upgraded options are available, individuals are motivated to stop using them, even behaving carelessly to justify disposition [13].

However, when object attachment is high, individuals are more likely to repair their products for continued use, extending usage [14,15]. Individuals are also more likely to find creative uses for existing objects to which they are attached [16]. Individuals may even delay usage of nondurable objects to which they are attached so as to retain the possession value of the objects for a longer period of time [17].

ATTACHMENT INCREASES RETENTION
Once an individual stops using an object, it is not guaranteed that she will dispose of it. The t-shirt that has been worn until tattered and is beyond use may still be retained in a box in the attic or a storage unit rather than discarded. The decision to retain and store, rather than dispose of, an item is more likely when an individual is attached to the object [18,19]. Disposition is more stressful for individuals with close attachment to their possessions [20]. Because disposition can be so difficult, individuals may store items they are no longer using in purgatory, or consumption limbo, in their home [21].

Indeed, packrats (or keepers [22]), who retain their possessions, tend to have stronger attachment to possessions [23]. Such retention results in hoarding behavior, which is greater among those with high attachment tendencies who rely on possessions for emotional comfort [11,24,25]. Additionally, individuals higher in procrastination tendencies tend to have more clutter because they are less likely to dispose of goods but, notably, procrastinators also tend to have greater emotional attachment to possessions and perceive their possessions to reflect their identity to a greater extent than those with lower procrastination tendencies [26]. When packrats do decide to dispose of a possession, they tend to experience guilt or sadness whereas purgers, or discarders, tend to feel relief [23]. When the possession-self link is strong, due to how the object defines self-worth, loss of the possession can elicit grief [27].

Individuals may also choose to retain possessions for seemingly rational reasons such that they cannot obtain their perceived value of the object from buyers when selling it, which is referred to as the endowment effect. Owning a good leads to higher valuations due to attachment [28,29],
and such attachment that arises from ownership can lead to selective and biased processing about
the owned item [30]. When an individual is attached to an item, the item can serve as self-
affirmation. Thus, selling the object can result in an implicit self-threat, which increases the
perceived value of the object to the owner [31].

However, it is possible to help individuals overcome the retention tendency for objects to which
they are attached. Because individuals want to retain the memories and associated identity the
object represents, taking a picture of the object can move individuals from retention to
disposition via donation [32]. Increasing disposition can be beneficial as unused goods can re-
enter the marketplace for others to use via resale or remanufacturing. To shift consumers from
retention to disposition, companies can offer emotional support to aid in the emotional
divestment needed for voluntary disposition to return used goods (such as smartphones) to enter
the circular economy [1]. Trial separation and physical cleaning can also help to reduce the
emotional attachment needed to spur disposition [1]. Alternatively, providing an emotional
reward, such as promising to donate the collected products or give proceeds to charity, can also
aid in disposition as it can frame disposition as an altruistic behavior that is helping society
[33,34,35].

Of course, there are instances when disposition may be more likely. Individuals who are high in
distinctiveness concerns become motivated to dispose of a possession rather than retain it when it
is mimicked by similar others, particularly among those who are characterized by independent
self-construal [36]. Additionally, individuals choosing to engage in voluntary simplicity or a
minimalist lifestyle are much more likely to choose to dispose of goods, rather than retain them
Such downsizing efforts tend to result in an identity shift from having to being [39]. For example, when individuals voluntarily dispose of a car, they redefine themselves [40]. The extent to which object attachment influences such lifestyle choices should be examined in future research.

ATTACHMENT INFLUENCES DISPOSAL METHOD

Even once a consumer has decided to dispose of an object, attachment influences the method of disposal. After deciding to dispose of the special t-shirt, it is unlikely that t-shirt will be placed in the trash. Though attachment can result in negative outcomes like hoarding, it also increases the likelihood of choosing a more sustainable disposal method [16,41]. Although donating, gifting, selling, and recycling may take more effort than trashing objects, when individuals are attached to an object, they will invest in such effort because they care more about the object’s continued use after their disposal of it. As such, packrats or keepers are more likely to donate or gift objects than purgers or discarders, who are less attached and are concerned with the efficiency of disposition [23]. Specifically, individuals seek to pass on the meaning of objects to which they are attached when they dispose of them [2,18,42]. This concern is so strong that individuals are willing to sell an object for a lower price when the buyer has appropriate usage intentions for the object [33].

Individuals may also dispose of objects through non-monetary transactions such as donation to a charity [32], gifting to relatives, friends, and acquaintances [43], or social recycling, also referred to as freecycling, by transferring the product within a community of donors and recipients.
These disposal methods may be used to pass on the meaning of the object to others as well as to offer the emotional reward of altruism that can help to assuage the loss from disposing of meaningful possessions [33,34,35,46]. Because trashing an object to which one is attached can be threatening [31,33], individuals are more likely to recycle rather than trash the object, even when the object no longer has use to others and therefore cannot be sold, gifted, or donated [41].

CONCLUSION

Though individuals may desire less clutter in their homes and lives, disposing of objects to which one is attached not only requires physical effort but also emotional energy. Much of the existing disposition research considers frugality and waste aversion as factors hindering disposition. However, just as attachment is critical in the acquisition process, attachment is also critical in all three stages of the disposition process. While the bulk of previous research has focused on the effect of product attachment at the retention and disposal stages of the disposition process, the earliest stage of the disposition process, when consumers decide whether to forgo usage, could benefit from additional research [17], particularly as this step in the process could deter unsustainable disposition of objects.

Some research has started to consider voluntary disposition, based on movements such as minimalism and voluntary simplicity [37,38,39,40], but more work is needed to understand how individuals address object attachment when voluntarily engaging in the disposition process, particularly as a lifestyle change. Research is also needed to understand the consequences of
involuntary disposition of goods to which one holds attachment such as in the case of
displacement through fires, downsizing, and other life experiences. At the same time, the
disposition process may become a more positive experience when disposing of highly attached
objects frees one’s self from undesired identities, such as in the case of divorce or other life
transitions [47], and when the psychological benefits of having fewer possessions can be
recognized to aid the disposition process.

Of course, disposition may have other consequences as individuals use it to influence status and
social order [35,47]. Future research should also consider cultural differences as the meaning that
individuals attach to objects is determined in part by the surrounding culture [4,29,43], which
itself may be undergoing shifts in the norms regarding object attachment. Lastly, much of the
current research considers the disposition process for a sole decision-maker but there are likely
differences in dyadic or family disposition processes [22].

Regardless of the reason for disposition, more research is needed to help consumers shift the
disposition of objects with attachment from a negative to a positive experience. We challenge
future research to identify and convey the benefits of disposition so that individuals will indeed
find true wealth from letting go of their possessions.
References


**This paper reviews 62 articles on disposition following the consumer behavior model. A variety of factors, including attachment, that affect disposition are covered and areas for future research are discussed.**


*Based on responses from 245 mobile phone users, this survey found that mobile phone replacement is determined by emotional and social value rather than functional value. Emotional value alleviates satiation that drives replacement but social value increasing satiation, spurring replacement.


**This is one of a few papers examining the first state of the disposition process: the usage decision. Six experiments demonstrate that consumers are less likely to use nondurable identity products compared to nonidentity products because there is greater value in possessing (and retaining) identity goods.


*This qualitative research study is the first to acknowledge a less conscious stage of disposition in which individuals create purgatories where they store collections of items they no longer use in their homes.


*This qualitative research assesses deviations in the acquisition, consumption, and disposition model of consumer behavior that result in hoarding behavior. Deviations include perceptions of value and time that result in perceptions of a limitless product lifecycle, loss of consumption control and consumption efficiency, and consumption anxiety which can result in risky behavior for the individual and society more generally.


**This review paper covers 52 articles on hoarding behavior, recognizing the challenges in successfully treating hoarding disorders that arise from pathological attachment to possessions. The paper draws upon attachment theory to propose that insecure relationship attachment may drive possession attachment that results in hoarding, which could be useful in treating individuals with hoarding disorders.


*In three studies, this paper assesses how emotional rewards can overcome the psychological tendencies of attachment and frugality that lead to increased retention in order to encourage disposal of products for reuse.


