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# “God, I have so many ashtrays!” Dependences and dependencies in consumer–possession relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Tourist souvenirs are a typical example of special possessions that may convey deep meanings to consumers' life. Prior studies assume that consumers have enduring and stable relationships with such possessions resulting from their role in identity construction. They tend to neglect the influence of passing time and moving spaces and fail to provide a network perspective, predominantly focusing on the consumer–possession's dyad. This research aims to bring a holistic and dynamic perspective to the relationships between consumers and their special possessions, referring to Hodder's concepts of entanglement (dependence) and entrapment (dependency). In a naturalistic interpretive perspective, we examine the three stages of the consumption cycle, namely acquisition, consumption, and disposal. The findings suggest that consumers may not only develop enduring relationships with their tourist possessions but also liquid ones, depending on whether they are in entangled or entrapped situations. Relationships are 'liquid' in the sense that they are temporary, more detached, and less special.

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## 1. Introduction

In consumer research, previous studies have found that the relationships people have with their things are more than functional and utilitarian; these relationships can be deep and meaningful (Ahuvia, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Curasi, Price, & Arnould, 2004; Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Levy, 1959; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Most of these studies focus on consumers' special possessions, which convey deep meanings to their life (Wallendorf, Belk, & Heisley, 1988), and assume that the deep meanings attached to special possessions last forever. Researchers tend to emphasize that consumers have enduring and stable relationships with their possessions because of the latter's role in identity construction. However, all consumers do not have the same relationships with their special possessions and a single consumer does not give the same meanings to his/her whole range of possessions. Some relationships may remain special, while others will change. Whatever the relationships consumers have with their possessions, they are likely to change over time. Therefore, this research addresses the following questions: how do consumers' relationships with possessions evolve over time? Why do some of their possessions remain special whereas others do not? What factors influence the evolution of these relationships?

The meanings attached to possessions are not fixed but dynamic. Objects have “social lives” (Appadurai, 1986) or “biographies” (Kopytoff, 1986), as their meanings are flexible and fluid. Attachment to possessions is dynamic as well. The person's self and the autobiographical function of the object play a role in the meanings given to a possession and the intensity of attachment (Kleine & Baker, 2004). After some time attachment may vanish, which may lead to the disposal of possessions (Kleine & Baker, 2004). In addition, objects may acquire different meanings depending on situations or on (social) contexts (Belk, 1975; Eckhardt & Houston, 2008; Kleine & Kernan, 1988; McCracken, 1986; Richins, 1994). As highlighted by Eckhardt and Houston (2008), meaning is a “subjective interpretation on the part of the consumer, which allows a dynamic rather than static nature, as consumer's interpretations of products can change over time and in varying contexts” (p. 485). Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould (2012) suggest that consumers may develop a “liquid” relationship with their possessions. In the context of elite global nomads (i.e., deterritorialized consumers who engage in serial relocations and frequent short-term international mobility), these authors identify three characteristics of a liquid relationship: situational value (i.e., the value conveyed by an object in a specific context), instrumental use-value (i.e., the functionality of an object, as opposed to its symbolic value), and immateriality (e.g., consumers often value flexible, light, or virtual possessions such as e-books, mp3 music, and digital pictures). In short, elite global nomads are more detached from possessions and relate to objects more flexibly; they value objects temporarily because of their functionality and immateriality.

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Consequently, a few studies acknowledge the importance of a dynamic longitudinal approach to better observe the ongoing relationships between consumers and their possessions (Epp & Price, 2010; Hui, 2012; Karanika & Hogg, 2012; Kleine & Baker, 2004; Love & Sheldon, 1998; Myers, 1985). Nevertheless, the literature on special possessions tends to neglect such a dynamic longitudinal approach (Karanika & Hogg, 2012). There are still gaps in understanding how the relationships between consumers and their possessions evolve over time, as well as the factors that influence such an evolution.

In addition to a dynamic perspective, a holistic perspective on the relationships between consumers and their possessions is needed. A number of prior studies on possessions' meanings, conducted in consumer research, predominantly focus on the dyadic relationship existing between consumers and their possessions, neglecting a macro-level analysis, or network perspective on this relationship. Some scholars call for a more decentered view of the consumer and expect future research "to progress beyond this one-sided attention to the self-realizing individual" (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p. 386; Moisaner, Peñaloza, & Valtonen, 2009; Thompson, Arnould, & Giesler, 2013).

The present study fills some of these gaps. Much remains to be achieved in understanding the multiple relationships existing between people and things (Belk, 2012). Actually, one needs to think about these relationships differently, looking deeper, more dynamically and holistically. The goal here is to bring a holistic and dynamic perspective to the relationships between consumers and their special possessions. To address such research questions, we examine consumers' tourist possessions through the three phases of their consumption cycle (i.e., acquisition, consumption, and disposal) in a naturalistic interpretive perspective. Referring to Hodder's (2012) concepts of entanglement and entrapment, the findings show that consumers may not only develop enduring relationships with their tourist possessions but also liquid ones, depending on whether they are in entangled or entrapped situations. On the one hand, consumers are in entangled situations when enabling and productive dependences prevail between them, tourist possessions/objects, other possessions/objects, and other people; such an entanglement is more likely to result in enduring relationships with their tourist possessions. On the other hand, consumers may end up in entrapment situations when constraining and limiting dependencies become prevalent, which affects the durability of the relationships with their possessions. Such an entrapment can push consumers away from enduring relationships toward more liquid ones. They are 'liquid' in the sense that they are temporary, more detached, less special to not special at all.

The study here focuses on material tourist souvenirs, that is, all tourist objects that have been purchased, received, or picked up at the vacation destination, intentionally to be souvenirs or markers of experience. In addition to be a significant part of the tourist experience, tourist souvenirs are an interesting context to study for researchers who want to understand the variability in the relationships between consumers and their possessions. Before describing the method used in this research, the next section provides the theoretical framework of entanglement and entrapment. Section three presents the findings and discusses them. Section four concludes with the contributions, directions for future research and the study's managerial implications.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The concept of entanglement has been introduced by Hodder (2012) in archaeology; "entanglement" is "the dialectic of dependence and dependency between humans and things" (p. 89). Through this concept, the author emphasizes that human dependence on things is interwoven with a larger network of other things and humans, or in other words, with a larger network of other dependences and dependencies as Fig. 1 illustrates. Hodder (2012) recognizes the generality of the word "thing" and uses it to refer to a large variety of entities

(e.g., thoughts, clocks, sounds, bodies, institutions, everyday items, etc.). In this research, the terms "objects" and "things" are used interchangeably. As Hodder (2012, p. 7) emphasizes, "We are more likely to use the word object for things that are relatively stable in form—so while we might call a cloud a thing, we might be less likely to call it an object, though it can be an object of study. Anything can be an object of thought. So in many ways the terms 'thing' and 'object' overlap." In the context of this paper, they include material objects or things that one can hold in hands. As for the term "possessions", it refers to any material object or thing that is legally owned or possessed by a person.

As Fig. 1 highlights, Hodder's four sets of dependences and dependencies are: humans-things (HT), things-things (TT), things-humans (TH), and humans-humans (HH).

### 2.1. HT or how humans depend on things

Humans depend on things not only for the latter's utilitarian, practical or hedonistic functions but also for the meanings they convey and specifically, for their role in identity construction or self-development. Referring to the symbolism of consumer goods, Levy (1959, p. 188) underlines that people go beyond the practical considerations of products, also buying them "for what they mean." According to McCracken (1986), the meanings of things derive from the culturally constituted world that comprises cultural categories and principles regarding time, place, space, and people. Furthermore, Richins (1994) identifies two types of meanings: public and private. Public meanings are considered as "subjective meanings assigned to an object by outside observers (non-owners) of the object, that is, by members of society at large" (Richins, 1994, p. 505) whereas private or personal meanings are "the sum of the subjective meanings that an object holds for a particular individual. Such meanings may include elements of the object's public meanings, but the owner's personal history in relation to the object also plays an important role" (p. 506). Moreover, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) assert that "things are cherished not because of the material comfort they provide, but for the information they convey about the owner and his or her ties to others" (p. 239). Things convey information about their owners as well as about the social relationships they induce (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979).

Consumer research also focuses on the meanings attached to special possessions (Ahuvia, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Curasi et al., 2004; Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Humans often attach deep meanings to possessions that may become central or special in their lives (Wallendorf et al., 1988). Examples of special possessions include family photographs, souvenirs, cars, perfumes, or heirlooms (Belk, 1991, 2012). Belk (1991, p. 35–36) presents five characteristics that make things special in consumers' life: unwillingness to sell for market value, willingness to buy with little regard for price, non-substitutability, unwillingness to discard, and feelings of elation or depression due to the object. The meanings attached to special possessions principally stem from symbolic person-, event-, or place-attachments rather than from utilitarian or hedonistic features. Objects can also be considered as special because they are received as gifts or are part of a collection (Belk, 1995; Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, & Holbrook, 1991; Jacobson, 1985). Wallendorf et al. (1988) turn to sociology and anthropology for investigating the process through which deep meanings are given to possessions. They borrow four themes among which two are particularly relevant for this research: the extended-self and the sacred-profane continuum. First, individuals give meanings to possessions that reflect their identity and encompass a part of themselves (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1988a). The "extended-self" helps consumers to transcend their life as human beings and to confer unique and sacred meanings on their possessions. Possessions participate in the definition of who we are: "men and women make order in their selves (i.e., retrieve their identity) by first creating and then interacting with the material world. The nature of such a transaction will determine, to

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