Sustainable disposal and evolving consumer–product relationships

Vlad Demsar, Jan Brace-Govan *

Monash Business School, Monash University, Sir John Monash Drive, Caulfield, Victoria 3145, Australia

ABSTRACT

Increasingly technological waste is linked to environmental degradation. However, sustainable consumerism is made possible by changing not only acquisition and consumption patterns but also the way consumers dispose of technological products. The value of disposal as mechanism to improve environmental sustainability and sustainable consumerism has led to calls for a better understanding of its relation to consumer identity projects. To understand how consumer–product relationships evolve to influence decisions and methods of disposal, a three stage narrative inquiry was employed. Using the high turnover video gaming market, consumer experiences with trade-in through secondary retail outlets is examined. From the analysis, a theoretical model is developed, portraying three distinct consumer–product relationships and their influence on the disposal decision and disposal method: self-extension, self-transition and frequent disposal. The paper discusses contributions to disposal literature, nostalgia and identifies practical implications for retailer strategy.

© 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy.

1. Introduction

The problem of technological waste is becoming increasingly prominent in the modern consumer society. The materials that are used to manufacture IT hardware contain hazardous chemicals such as cadmium, lead, and mercury used in manufacturing components such as batteries and wires (Yoshida, 2002). With millions of tonnes of e-waste discarded each year, and only a small percentage being recycled, unsustainable production and consumption increase the average ecological footprint per consumer leading to environmental degradation (Schaefer and Crane, 2005). Nevertheless, environmentally friendly consumer behaviour and sustainable consumerism is made possible by changing not only the patterns through which consumers acquire and consume, but also the patterns through which consumers dispose of products (Pieters, 1991). Although marketing and consumer research have predominantly focused on acquisition and consumption, the value of disposal as a fundamental consumer experience (Ahuvia, 2005) and a manner in which to improve environmentally friendly consumer behaviour and sustainable consumption has led to calls for a better understanding of disposal in relation to consumer identity projects (Türe, 2014).

Recent studies of disposal have focused on facets of acquisition and consumption that influence disposal such as identity construction, life transitions, meaning attachment, nostalgia and autobiographies as well as the distancing involved in disposition and the value derived from possessions during disposal (for example, see Bradford, 2009; Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005). However, this has meant that studies are often situated in contexts either where the possession is sentimental and meaningful, or where possessions are mundane and everyday items that hold some meaning (for example see Price et al., 2000; Roster, 2001). Most recently, consumers have been labelled as 'keepers' or 'discarders' based on a study of motherhood (Phillips and Sego, 2011). However, this does not provide an understanding of how the consumer arrives at that point or whether this changes as they progress through life stages. An opportunity exists to further develop extant theory around disposal by investigating how the consumer–product relationship evolves over time, in relation to a product where such a relationship is fast and fleeting due to technological obsolescence and where a second-hand market offering for sustainable disposal exists. Consequently, we ask: *how does the consumer–product relationship evolve to influence the decision to dispose, and the specific method of disposal selected?* To address the research question, disposal is studied in the context of video gaming products.

The video game category is economically significant with several of the 'big middle' retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy and GameStop in the US and JB Hi-Fi, EB Games, Target, Kmart and Big W in Australia (Gretz and Batsuroy, 2013). The category remains in a phase of substantial growth, with year on year revenue predicted to grow by 9.4% to US$91.5bn by 2015 (*Global Games Market Report, 2015*). Secondly, it is highly competitive, with high investment costs and multinationals Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft, occupying a commanding market share. Lastly, constant technological innovation has led to short product life cycles (Cadin and Guérin, 2006) with ample opportunities for consumers to dispose of used products in various ways (Gretz and Batsuroy, 2013). Hence, most video game retailers not only offer a market for new products, but also a secondary

market for used products. This secondary channel provides an option for consumers to upgrade their products and recoup their funds; provides retailers with repeat purchase, resale of the same product to multiple customers and an additional revenue stream; and provides a manner in which retailers can encourage consumers to engage in sustainable consumerism.

Interestingly, trade press and industry reports suggest video game retailers could make higher margins from used video gaming products than new ones, as more profit is retained by the retailer (Campbell, 2012). For example, in the US, used video gaming products accounted for 27% of sales for major retailer GameStop and contributed 44% of gross profit (Brustein, 2014). However, despite its potential, this secondary market for video gaming products remains underutilised. Only around 5% of video games and consoles are traded-in by consumers (Brand, 2007) and only 11% of consumers purchase used video gaming products from a retailer (Brand, 2011). Yet, despite poor performance, reports show 22% of customers actually prefer to purchase video gaming products second hand (Brand, 2011) and industry studies show that consumers prefer to purchase physical games (as opposed to downloading them) due to their potential trade-in value (_Global Entertainment and Media Outlook: Video Games,_ 2015). Consequently, this study has two main goals (1) to develop a theoretical understanding of the evolving consumer–product relationship and how it influences the consumer's decision to dispose, and the specific method of disposal selected, and (2) to provide practical and strategic implications for retailers so they can improve customer experience, increase profits and encourage sustainable consumerism through second-hand markets.

The structure of this paper begins with a brief orienting review of literature on disposal and the theoretical concepts that may influence disposal decisions and method. To better understand the evolution of the consumer–product relationship in a sustainable consumerism channel, a three-stage narrative inquiry was undertaken and the intersecting methods are described. The findings support the existing view that disposal decisions are emotionally complex and interplay with consumer identity. However, through a chronological ordering of consumer video gaming product disposal stories, this study makes a unique contribution to disposal literature by finding that the consumer–product relationship evolves over time, and can differ substantially at different life stages. These distinct and evolving consumer–product relationships are represented in three idealised vignettes: (1) self-extension, (2) self-transition and (3) frequent disposal. Each vignette brings together consumer stories to reveal what influences the decision to dispose and the method of disposal at different stages. This provides insights for potential retailer strategies aiming to improve customer experiences, profits, and encourage sustainable consumerism via secondary markets.

2. Literature review

2.1. Disposal

Disposal was originally imagined as the end point of a linear consumption process (Jacoby et al., 1977). However, due to the relationships consumers create with possessions, when disposal occurs, consumers engage in physical and emotional detachment from possessions (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005; Young, 1991) so they can distance themselves not only from the item, but also from a previous identity or an undesired self (Roster, 2001). Distancing behaviour can be storage without use, neglect, concealment, and objects being described as less important (Roster, 2001). These distancing behaviours (or divestment rituals) relinquish control over the product and erase personal meaning by symbolically severing emotional and psychological ties, thereby making it easier to let go of possessions (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005; Roster, 2001). Some

can transfer meaning by setting high prices to ensure appreciation of value or storytelling to pass on the symbolic properties of the object. When consumers reflect on disposal decisions, some experience a sense of release, increased opportunities and regained control through emotional closure (Roster, 2001), while others experience regret, guilt and 'loss of self' (Belk, 1988).

Examining how mothers' dispose of children's possessions uncovered that family members tend develop disposal identities such as keeper and discarder (Phillips and Sego, 2011). Cherrier and Ponner (2010) suggest that those who are classified as keepers connect both events and people to objects and therefore disposal becomes difficult. Türe (2014) finds consumers use disposition to enhance the value they obtain from their objects. She demonstrates how consumers turn possessions into gifts, sacrifices or commodities through which they create linking value by forming new relations and strengthening their social connections and spiritual value by increasing happiness and commitment to faith. Value is also found in the reflective manner in which consumers dispose or resist disposing possessions, as well as the recommodification of possessions for gaining monetary value.

Although these studies shed light on the complexities and challenges in disposal of both special and mundane possessions, they tend to either categorise consumer identity into predispositions such as 'keeper' or 'discarder' which then determines how the consumer engages in disposal (Phillips and Sego, 2011) or they treat disposal as a phenomenon that occurs at a specific point in time and in relation to other people to derive value for the disposers own identity (Türe, 2014). But how does a consumer become a keeper or a discarder? Is this constant or does it change over time? Because this distinction is less clear, investigating the evolving relationship of a consumer and object and its influence on disposal has potential to provide an understanding of how consumer disposal experiences change through the challenges and complexities of each consumer life stage, rather than simply classifying consumers based on their behaviour in relation to a specific object. In addition, contemporary technological cycles mean it is important to understand how consumers form (and dissolve) relationships with products that have fast and constant obsolescence cycles, such as video gaming, because the relationship between the consumer and object appears more temporary and fleeting.

2.2. Meaning, identity, nostalgia and autobiographical memory

To form relationships, possessions are psychologically appropriated into the identity of the consumer by becoming a part of the extended self through a sense of control over the object (Belk, 1988). Consumers then cultivate and give meaning to possessions (McCracken, 1986), resulting in identity building through people, places, experiences, beliefs, ideas and objects of possession (Belk, 1988). Attachment to possessions in its extreme form is termed 'singularity' and is defined as an unwillingness to dispose possessions for any value, meaning singular irreplaceable possessions become 'never sell' objects (Belk, 1991). These sacred possessions are also a form of identity building through uniqueness (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981) as they represent the consumer's identity and regulate boundaries of extended self by defining and conveying 'what we are' and 'what we are not' (Belk, 1988). Thus, possessions produce tension between self-continuity and self-change (Kleine and Baker, 2004) allowing for adaption and coping with change, as individuals keep or dispose possessions during life transitions (Lastovicka and Fernandez, 2005). Possessions have been identified as carrying autobiographical and narrative value where attached meanings produce story-telling stimulus as possessions link consumers to life events, time, search, self-discovery, growth and achievement (Kleine and Baker, 2004).