

The psychology of stuff and things

Christian Jarrett on our lifelong relationship with objects

a man's Self is the sum total of all that he can call his

William James (*The Principles of Psychology*, 1890)

Stuff everywhere. Bags, books, clothes, cars, toys, jewellery, furniture, iPads. If we're relatively affluent, we'll consider a lot of it ours. More than mere tools, luxuries or junk, our possessions become extensions of the self. We use them to signal to ourselves, and others, who we want to be and where we want to belong. And long after we're gone, they become our legacy. Some might even say our essence lives on in what once we made or owned.

Childhood and adolescence

Our relationship with stuff starts early. The idea that we can own something, possess it as if a part of ourselves, is one that children grasp by the age of two. And by six, they exhibit the 'endowment effect', placing extra value on an object simply by virtue of it being, or having been, theirs. Although children understand ownership from a very young age, they think about it in a more simplistic way than adults. A study by Ori Friedman and Karen Neary in 2008 showed that aged between two and four, kids make the assumption that whoever is first in possession of the object is the owner, regardless of whether they later give it away.

With ownership comes envy. When youngsters play with friends, they soon

discover other people's toys they'd like to get their hands on. Or they experience the injustice of being forced to share what they had assumed was theirs alone. In his 1932 book *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Jean Piaget observed that even babies express jealousy over objects, giving signs of 'violent rage' when a toy is taken from them and given to another. When Batya Licht and her colleagues in 2008 filmed 22-month-olds playing with their peers in day-care, nearly a quarter of all sources of conflict were over possessions – where the 'child either defended his or her objects from another child, or wanted to take an object from another child'.

Most children have an unusually intense relationship with a specific 'attachment object', usually a favourite blanket or a soft toy. In an intriguing study by Bruce Hood and Paul Bloom, the majority of three- to six-year-old children preferred to take home their original attachment object, as opposed to a duplicate made by a 'copying machine'. To the prospect of taking a copy, 'the most common response was horror,' says Nathalia Gjersoe, who helped run the studies. 'A few very sweet and obedient children said okay but then burst into tears.' Four of the children even refused for their attachment toy or object to be copied in the first place. That's despite the fact they were happy enough to take a copy of an experimenter's toy. It's as if the children believed their special object had a unique essence, a form of magical

thinking that re-appears in adulthood in our treatment of heirlooms, celebrity memorabilia and artwork.

Some experts refer to children's attachment objects as 'transitional objects' because it is believed they aid the transition to independence. Consistent with this, there's evidence that children make less use of such objects if their mothers practise so-called 'attachment parenting', involving co-sleeping and feeding on cue (Green et al., 2004). There are also cross-cultural findings showing that fewer children have attachment objects in Tokyo, where children more often sleep in the same bed or bedroom with their parents, than in New York, where co-sleeping is less common (Hobara, 2003).

As children mature into teens, we see possessions starting to act as a crutch for the self. In 2007, Lan Chaplin and her colleagues interviewed participants aged between eight and 18 and found that 'materialism' (identified by choosing material goods in answer to 'What makes me happy?') peaked at middle adolescence, just when self-esteem tended to be lowest. In a follow-up, materialism was reduced in teens who were given flattering feedback from peers to boost their self-esteem. 'Giving children or adolescents a sense of self-worth and accomplishment seems to be quite an effective antidote to the development of materialism,' the researchers said (see box 'Is materialism all bad?').

Through adolescence, possessions increasingly reflect who people are, or at least how they would like to see themselves. In his seminal paper 'Possessions and the extended self' Russell Belk quotes from novelist Alison Lurie's book *The Language of Clothes*, in which she observes: '...when adolescent girls exchange clothing they share not only friendship, but also identities – they become soulmates.' Similarly, in interviews with teens, Ruthie Segev at Jerusalem College of Technology found evidence that selecting and buying gifts for their friends helps adolescents achieve

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Is materialism all bad?

The prevailing view in psychology is that materialism is bad for our well-being. Research by Tim Kasser (at Knox College) and others has revealed an association between holding materialist values and being more depressed and selfish, and having poorer relationships. Kasser has previously called for a revolution in Western culture, shifting us from a thing-centred to a person-centred society. Other research by Leaf Van Boven, Thomas Gilovich and colleagues has shown that the purchase of experiences leaves people happier than buying material products. In another study of theirs, materialistic people were liked less than people who appeared more interested in experiences.

How can we square this literature with the idea of things being part of our 'extended selves', a vital receptacle for our memories and identities? A clue comes from the theorising of a group led by L.J. Shrum at the University of Texas at San Antonio. They propose that materialism isn't bad *per se*, it depends on people's buying motives. To the extent that acquisitions are motivated by intrinsic goals such as affiliation, belonging, pride and self-reward, they predict that materialism will improve well-being. Even when it comes to signalling identity to others, they predict no adverse effects of materialism if the signal is true to the self.

'We are not suggesting that materialism has no detrimental effects,' says Shrum. 'We are just arguing that it should not be considered wholly detrimental a priori, or by definition, but dependent on the underlying motives.' He and others are planning research to test these ideas but there's already some evidence they might be on to something. The 1998 paper 'The American dream revisited: Is it what you want or why you want it that matters?' showed that financial and material aspirations were linked to positive well-being when the motives underlying those aspirations were 'self-determining', for example based on the desire for fun or freedom (see also Srivastava et al., 2001).

a sense of identity independent from their parents, and that the mutual exchange of the same or similar gifts between friends helps them to create a feeling of overlapping identities.

In the transition from adolescence to adulthood, it's the first car that often becomes the ultimate symbol of a person's emerging identity. Interviews with car owners conducted by Graham Fraine and colleagues in 2007 found that young drivers, aged 18 to 25, were particularly likely to make the effort to personalise

their cars with stickers, unusual number plates and seat covers, as if marking out their territory. Earlier research conducted in the 1980s made the complementary finding that the more young men saw their cars as extensions of themselves, the more trouble they took to wash, wax and care for them (Bloch, 1982).

Adulthood

As our lives unfold, our things embody our sense of self-hood and identity still

further, becoming external receptacles for our memories, relationships and travels. 'My house is not "just a thing,"' wrote Karen Lollar in 2010. 'The house is not merely a possession or a structure of unfeeling walls. It is an extension of my physical body and my sense of self that reflects who I was, am, and want to be.'

How much we see our things as an extension of ourselves may depend in part in how confident we feel about who we are. When Kimberly Morrison and Camille Johnson led European Americans

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to feel uncertain about themselves using false feedback on a personality questionnaire (telling them: 'the consistency of your responses is not high enough to construct a clear picture of who you are'), they responded by rating their belongings as particularly self-expressive – as saying something about who they are. The same result didn't apply to Asian Americans or other US participants with a collectivist mentality, perhaps because they are less concerned by threats to their sense of self.

In a follow-up, those participants scoring highly in individualism (as opposed to collectivism), who wrote about an object that reflected their self-concept, subsequently scored particularly high on a measure of self-certainty. It's as if reflecting on our things restores a fragile ego. The results could help explain some of the behaviour we associate with a mid-life crisis, such as when the angst-ridden fifty-something finds solace in a new Porsche. A related line of research by Derek Rucker and Adam Galinsky at the Kellogg School of Management showed that participants who felt powerless (induced by recalling a time when someone had control over them) were more willing to pay for a silk tie and other high-status products.

From a neural perspective, this absorption of objects into self-identity may be more than mere metaphor. In 2010, Kyungmi Kim and Marcia Johnson scanned participants' brains as they allocated objects to a container marked as 'mine', imagining that they were going to own them, or to a container marked with someone else's name. Extra activity was observed in the medial prefrontal cortex (MPC) in response to the sight of 'owned' items, compared with control items allocated to others. The same area of MPC was activated when participants rated how much various adjectives described their own personality.

'Areas of the brain that are known to be involved in thinking about the self also appear to be involved when we create associations between external things and ourselves through ownership,' says Kim.

Signals

As well as shoring up our sense of identity, our possessions also allow us to signal something about ourselves to other people. In a romantic context, there's evidence for men using the purchase of showy items – known as 'conspicuous consumption' – as a display of status and availability to women. A study led by Jill Sundie showed this was specifically the case for men interested in casual liaisons, and moreover, that women interested in casual sex were attracted to these overt displays of costly consumption.

Conspicuous consumption can also convey status and importance outside of romantic contexts. A study at Tilburg University showed that people wearing a luxury branded shirt (Tommy Hilfiger or Lacoste) were perceived as wealthier and higher status (than people wearing a non-branded or non-luxury shirt); more successful at getting passers-by to complete a questionnaire; more likely to be given a job; and more successful at soliciting money for a charity (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Crucially, these effects were only present when it was clear that the wearer of the luxury shirt actually owned that shirt. 'Insofar as luxury displays advertise nothing but wealth or possession in general, the ensuing benefits, particularly financial ones, can ... be considered perverse,' the researchers said.

Like a uniform, our possession of specific objects and brands can also signal our membership of social groups, both to others and to ourselves. The success of the Apple brand has been attributed in part to people's desire to show that they belong to a consumer tribe with connotations of 'coolness'. Increasingly it seems people will do whatever it takes, be that queuing for hours or paying premium prices, in demonstration of their brand loyalty and membership. 'Consumer culture theorists definitely find a strengthening of the phenomenon,' says Robert Kozinets (York University, Toronto), co-editor of *Consumer Tribes*. 'They tend to posit, with psychologists like Philip Cushman and sociologists like Robert Putnam, that as people find less satisfaction and community in traditional sources like family, country



Fans described how important the wearing of their team colours was to their identity

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and religion, they turn instead to alternate sources in the marketplace.’

The use of possessions to convey group membership is most obvious when it comes to sports fans. Christian Derbaix and Alain Decrop explored this in interviews with 30 fans from major football teams across Belgium, France and Spain, some of whom owned dozens of items of club paraphernalia. The fans described how important the wearing of their team colours was to their identity, as a way to gain acceptance from other fans, and to their feeling part of the community. ‘Believe me’, said an RC Lens fan, ‘when I say that the one who doesn’t have his/her scarf looks a little bit silly ... [B]randishing the scarf means “I exhibit my club and raise it to the top... I’m just honouring it”. For me, the scarf means everything!’

Loss and disposal

As our belongings accumulate, becoming more infused with our identities, so their preciousness increases. People whose things are destroyed in a disaster are traumatised, almost as if grieving the loss of their identities. Photographs from the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which struck the US East coast last year, show people standing bereft, staring in shock and bewilderment at all they’ve lost. Reflecting on the fire that took her home, Lollar says it was like ‘a form of death’. Alexandra Kovach, who also lost her home in a fire, wrote in *The Washington Post* in 2007: ‘It isn’t just a house. It’s not the contents, or the walls, but the true feeling of that home – and all that it represents. Our homes are our foundations, retaining in their walls our memories and all the experiences that happen within them.’ Victims of burglaries and vandalism report feeling violated, the psychological impact of loss greater than the financial burden.

Yet there are many times when people wilfully dispose of things. This often happens at a key juncture, such as when leaving student life behind, moving home, or during divorce, and can be experienced as a chance for a new start. Old



Hoarding

There are people so reluctant to dispose of their belongings that it becomes a serious problem. In extreme cases, mountains of clutter accumulate posing a fire hazard and making free movement around the home impossible. In 2011 Channel 4 told the story of Richard Wallace, an extreme hoarder who had accumulated 60 tonnes of rubbish in his garden and whose kitchen was only accessible by crawling on all fours through a narrow tunnel of junk. Awareness of problematic hoarding is growing and ‘Hoarding Disorder’ will be included as a new condition in the next edition of US psychiatry’s diagnostic code, DSM-5, due for publication this year.

Part of the problem with making such a diagnosis is distinguishing hoarding from benign collecting. A British study published in 2012 compared a group of 29 people who met the proposed diagnostic criteria for hoarding disorder with 20 collectors (Nordsletten et al., 2012). Although both groups shared a reluctance to dispose of their belongings, the hoarders were less discriminate, more impulsive, and more extreme in their accumulations, all of which caused them problems with work and relationships. Hoarders were also more likely to have one or more other psychiatric diagnoses and to be taking psychiatric medication. Previous research suggests that hoarding behaviour is associated with a distinct way of thinking about possessions, including wanting to sustain control over them and feeling an exaggerated sense of responsibility for them (Steketee et al., 2003).

belongings are shed like a carapace, fostering the emergence of a new identity. In the film *Fight Club*, the troubled character Tyler Durden sees the conflagration of his flat as liberating. ‘It’s only after you’ve lost everything that you’re free to do anything,’ he says.

Another time for a symbolic clear-out occurs when parents throw out the baby clothes and toys belonging to their children. Based on in-depth interviews with 13 mothers, Barbara Phillips and Trina Segó distinguished between

‘keepers’ and ‘discarders’ (preferring these terms to the labels ‘packrat’, ‘hoarder’ and ‘purger’ that others have used). Keepers struggled to dispose of their children’s belongings because of their emotional meaning, and they often employed delaying tactics to keep things as long as possible (see ‘Hoarding’). Discarders, by contrast, felt weaker ties to their children’s things. Intriguingly, both groups experienced guilt around their decisions – keepers because they felt a cultural pressure to be organised, and

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discarders because they felt there was an expectation for mothers to protect and preserve their children's identities.

Later life and beyond

Older people don't just form bonds with their specific belongings, they seem to have an affection for brands from their youth too. Usually this manifests in a taste for music, books, films and other entertainment from yesteryear, but the same has been shown for fashions and hairstyles, it has been hinted at for perfumes, and in a study published in 2003 by Robert Schindler and Morris Holbrook, it was found that it also extends to the car.

Dozens of participants aged 16 to 92 rated their preference for the appearance of 80 cars, ranging from the 1915 Dodge Model 30-35 to the 1994 Chrysler Concorde. Among men, but not women, there was a clear preference for cars that dated from the participants' youth (peaking around age 26). This was particularly the case for men who were more nostalgic and who believed that things were better in the old days. What other examples might there be? 'Children of both sexes tend to have strong feelings about foods they like as they grow up,' says Schindler. 'Although we haven't studied food, I would expect both men and women to have a lifetime fondness for foods they enjoyed during their youth.'

As with human relationships, the attachments to our things deepen with the passage of time. Elderly people are often surrounded by possessions that have followed them through good times and bad, across continents and back. In 2000, Linda Price at the University of Arizona and her colleagues interviewed 80 older people about their decisions regarding these 'special possessions'. A common theme was the way cherished objects come to represent particular memories. 'I can look at anything [in this house] and remember special occasions,' recalled Diane, aged 70. 'It's almost like a history of our life.'

These possessions can be a particular comfort for older people who have to leave their homes and enter supervised residential care. In interviews with 20 such people in New Zealand, Jane Kroger and Vivienne Adair reported that cherished possessions often provided a vital link to memories, relationships and former selves, helping foster a sense of continuity. 'I love having this plate to keep me company,' one woman, aged 86, said of a ceramic plate that reminded her of her mother.



Older people don't just form bonds with their specific belongings, they seem to have an affection for brands from their youth too

After a person dies, many of their most meaningful possessions become family heirlooms, seen by those left behind as for ever containing the lost person's essence. This idea is also seen in the behaviours that follow the death of a celebrity. In a process that Belk calls 'sacralisation', possessions owned by a deceased star can acquire astonishing value overnight, both sentimental and monetary. This is often true even for exceedingly mundane items such as President Kennedy's tape measure, auctioned for \$48,875 in 1996. A study by George Newman and colleagues in 2011 provided a clue about the beliefs underlying these effects. They showed that people place more value on celebrity-owned items, the more physical contact the celebrity had with the object, as if their essence somehow contaminated the item through use. A related phenomenon is seen in consumer behaviour after a creative star dies, with the mass consumption of their music, books or films or other associated items. Consider how Steve Jobs' death in 2011 was followed by mass demand for tops in his trademark black turtle-neck style.

The future

Our relationship with our stuff is in the midst of great change. Dusty music and literary collections are being rehoused in the digital cloud. Where once we expressed our identity through fashion preferences and props, today we can

cultivate an online identity with a carefully constructed homepage. We no longer have to purchase an item to associate ourselves with it, we can simply tell the world via Twitter or Facebook about our preferences. The self has become extended, almost literally, into technology, with Google acting like a memory prosthetic. In short, our relationship with our things, possessions and brands remains as important as ever, it's just the nature of the relationship is changing.

Researchers and people in general are gradually adjusting. The psychology of our stuff is becoming more interdisciplinary, with new generations building on the established research conducted by consumer psychologists. For her thesis completed this year at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Amber Cushing – an information scientist – interviewed people aged 18 to 67, finding that the younger participants readily saw their digital possessions as extensions of themselves, much as older generations see their physical things.

Twenty-five years after he published his seminal work on objects and the 'extended self', Russell Belk has composed an update: 'The extended self in a digital world,' currently under review. 'The possibilities for self extensions have never been so extensive,' he says.

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